



LONE STAR CHICKS

"For us, being an act would be too limiting," says vocalist Laura Lynch, middle, flanked by sisters Martie (left) and Emily Erwin.



*With an eye on Nashville,
Texas's Dixie Chicks sing along
the long road to fame*

IN THE SOMETIMES OVERLY PACKAGED WORLD of country music, the first thing you've got to know about the Dixie Chicks is that they are a band, not an act. This is an important distinction, like the difference between, say, Vince Gill and Billy Ray Cyrus: Gill is a highly accomplished guitar player, songwriter, and singer whose talents will yield a long career, while Billy Ray reportedly used to dance for Chippendales.

"For us, being an act would be too limiting," says Laura Lynch, the Chicks's vocalist, referring to the trio's developing musicianship. Over the din of a brunch crowd at Kathleen's Art Cafe, a sunny, two-room Dallas restaurant, the three members of the band—Lynch, and sisters Martie and Emily Erwin—have settled down for some dishing about where they've been and where they'd like to go. It's a talk they've been having more often lately, as they find themselves inching closer to true success and stardom.

After seven years of touring the Western way—that is, by bus, by dusty back road, to anywhere where they think people might appreciate their sound and kick up their heels a bit—the Dixie Chicks are primed for a breakout. Their three well-received, self-produced albums have the big labels scratching at their door, and stars like Alan Jackson have signed them as an opening act.

Relaxed on straight-backed wooden chairs, waiting for their blue-corn pancakes and iced tea, the Chicks seem at home. Given the time they've spent hanging out in Kathleen's, they almost are. All three wear Wranglers and simple blouses. Later tonight, on stage, it will be mariachi pants and lace shirts with spangles somewhere in the mix. Significantly, none of the three wears a Western hat. But there was a time, not too long ago, when Western hats defined the band.

BY JOHN HASSAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRY SHAPIRO

The Dixie Chicks met in early 1988. Laura was a back-up singer in a band, a divorcée, single mother, and possessor of a résumé that listed a journalism degree from University of Texas, Austin, some sales for Trammel Crow, and a stint as a weekend television news reporter. Absent from the résumé, however, was any extended success in music. So, when Laura, singing one evening at the Hotel Worthington in Fort Worth, spied locally renowned fiddle player Martie Erwin in the audience, she approached her during a break. The two clicked.

A few weeks later, Laura went to Jellystone Park in East Texas to hear Blue Night Express, a teenage band that featured Martie and her banjo-playing sister Emily. "With Martie and Emily, the chemistry was just there," Laura remembers. "We liked the same music and we had fun together. We just laughed and laughed." Soon after, they decided to put a band together. A friend of Laura's, Robin Lynn Macy, rounded out the group.

April of that year, the Dixie Chicks played their first gig—a street corner in Dallas's West End. They made \$400.

In those early days, the band's mode of transport was Mama Erwin's gray Caprice Classic, which, when it wasn't shuttling Martie to classes at Southern Methodist University or Emily off to high school, carried the girls' parents, both educators. One fall afternoon in 1990, the Caprice pulled up in front of Emily's high school just as it let out. A well-connected band manager who was courting the Chicks had arranged a few high-profile bookings for the young band. "We picked up Emmy and drove to Shreveport," recalls Laura. "We opened for Garth Brooks at the Louisiana State Fair that night." Other big-name openings followed, and the group gained experience and confidence. Not that self-confidence, or at least strong will, was ever in short supply. "Back when we were starting out," says Laura. "We went to New York and played on the street in a few places."

"Like Columbus Circle," says Emily, picking at a fruit salad.

"And Washington Square," adds Martie between bites of pancake.

"When we started that day," continues Laura, "we didn't have enough money for a hotel room. At the end of the day, though, we did. We paid the hotel clerk in ones."

In 1990, the band released the first of their three self-produced albums, *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, an engaging effort that reflects the band's at-

With the combined talents of Martie, Laura, and Emily (top photo, from left to right), the band has found a sophisticated country sound that, Martie says, "comes from the heart."





tempts to find a distinct sound. "That album was right on target for who we were then," says Laura. "We loved those songs and we still do."

"For the most part, that record was made when we were in our bluegrass stage and we're more of a country band now," says Martie. "It's not relevant to talk about a different style of music when our fans relate to us now as a country band."

In addition to sounding differently than they do now, the Chicks looked different—their Stetson stage. "I owned, and still do own, a lot of Western, cowgirl-type clothes," says Laura. "I could dress the band, and Emmy and Martie would pick up or make stuff to expand the wardrobe. It just sort of went along with the music we were playing at the time. It worked fine as a way to get started." Unfortunately, the first album's sometimes kitschy lyrics, performed by four striking women in over-the-top Western get-ups, lent the group a gimmicky feel—"sort of like Bette Midler in chaps," as one critic described them.

The Chicks toned down the cowgirl feel on their next release, even though they called it *Little Ol' Cowgirl*. The band was experimenting stylistically, and the record featured, along with the bluegrass, an Irish medley, a good dose of Western swing, straight country, some soul, and some jazz. With all these musical interests pulling in different directions, something had to give. It turned out to be the band itself. Martie, Emily, and Laura wanted to expand their range but Robin wanted to stay in folk and bluegrass mode. She left the band after *Cowgirl's* release.

As they moved away from bluegrass, the remaining Chicks began to polish their appearance, adopting a more natural Western feel. "We've made a gradual move away from the cowgirlish stuff," says Laura. "We've got a more sophisticated look now, with each of us emerging as individuals." The refinements have drawn notice. "They're perfect for the gala fund-raisers that I do, like the Cattle Baron's Ball," says Gary Osier, a Dallas-based promoter. "The Chicks are as visually pleasing as they are musically. They look and sound so professional. They really have a clue about how to sell themselves."

Despite their growing reputation around Dallas, the reality of any young Western band is that careers, and livings, are made on the road. For three young women, touring country fairs and sawdusted clubs can be a trial. "It's incredibly difficult," says Laura. "A hotel, a city, a day. Sometimes you just have to think of things to be thankful for to keep you going." Not long ago, Laura had a heart-to-heart talk with her 13-year-old daughter, Asia. "I was wondering if it was worth it. I asked my daughter if she wanted me to stop. I was missing her too much, being on the

CRITIC'S BOX

Fortunately for the Dixie Chicks, their transformation from a mainly bluegrass band to mainstream country has been more successful than they could have hoped. The only difficulty for listeners, and a slight one at that, is finding their three self-produced albums. Almost certainly, their fourth will be on a major label. For now, try your local record store or write the Dixie Chicks, 1450 Preston Forest Square, Suite 212, Dallas, TX 75230.

THANK HEAVENS FOR DALE EVANS

(Crystal Clear Sound, 1990) 🍷½ (Out of a possible five)

The band's first album is extremely sound musically and carries every indication that, had they chosen, they could have continued on successfully as a pure bluegrass band. Standards like *Rider* and *Brilliance* are given spirited renditions, and there are plenty of colorful, unaffected tributes to Western life. There's even a wonderful cover of Sam Cooke's *Bring It in Home to Me*. However, the gimmicky title, the too-cute cover art, and some of the songs lend the record a naive quality that doesn't always wear well. The band struggles with Patsy Montana's *Cowboy's Sweetheart*. Still, the instrumentals and harmony vocals more than hint at better things to come.

LITTLE OL' COWGIRL (Crystal Clear Sound, 1992) 🍷🍷🍷

Despite the smorgasbord of styles (a little country, some Western, touches of swing, Irish, bluegrass, soul, and jazz), the Chicks make stunning advances. Laura Lynch and now ex-band member Robin Lynn Macy split the lead vocals; Laura's are wonderful and Robin's, well, have a grating nasal quality that's an acquired taste. Aside from Mary Chapin Carpenter's *A Road Is Just a Road*, Robin's efforts are forgettable. The rest of the album is markedly better, whether an instrumental like *Beatin' Around the Bush* or one of Laura's winners like *She'll Find Better Things To Do*. The best material shows the Chicks to be lively, inventive, and heartfelt. Maybe intentionally, they say farewell to their rookie period on the last track, a well-done but out-of-place ode to female preparedness, *Pink Toenails*. A lot of great music, but a mixed-up musical personality.

SHOULDN'T A TOLD YOU THAT

(Crystal Clear Sound, 1993) 🍷🍷🍷🍷

No confusion here. Filled with solid musicianship and great singing, this record is a revelation. From the stylish, professional portraits on the booklet, to the sure choice of songs and arrangements, the Dixie Chicks have arrived. By avoiding easy references to role models or cultural icons, they are forced to sing about what they feel. No longer youthful and dreamy, the band now grapples with love, lust, and longing. With Laura's solid lead vocals and the Erwin sisters' harmonies, the Chicks attain a sound that compares favorably to that of Dolly, Linda, and Emmylou on *Trio*. The title track is a jaunty, hook-filled look at temptation and human weakness. *Whistles and Bells* is a classic country shuffle. *There Goes My Dream* could be the best thing they've recorded—unless that honor goes to *I'm Falling Again*. Martie Erwin takes the lead vocal on *I Wasn't Looking For You*, with excellent results. A more consistent and appealing album would be very hard to find.



Banjo-strumming Emily joined the band while still in high school.

road." Asia put her mom at ease. "She told me to keep going, saying it was cool to have the only mom who went on the road singing and playing music for a living." When Laura tours, Asia stays with her dad, who remains friendly with his ex-wife. When not touring, Laura might be found in her garden or renovating the late-'20s vintage house she recently bought—a small concession to life beyond the band.

The Erwins, too, have their private pursuits. Martie is a fitness buff and can usually be found at a gym or spending time with her fiancé, Ted Seidel, a sandpaper salesman. Emily lives alone with her golden retriever, Katie, and often travels to Nashville to see her beau, country-singer Heath Wright.

The future, however, lies on the road, and the band has no illusions about that fact. "We don't want to be known as a local act," says Emily. "We already travel all over the country." Adds Martie: "We don't have a regular gig and we don't want one. We do big events in Dallas, arts festivals, or something the city might put on for the Fourth of July. We'll also open up for people that come through town or play our own night at Billy Bob's in Fort Worth. But mostly, we're out on the road."

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There are signs that the tough travel schedule is paying off—most significantly a trip to Europe last year where the Dixie Chicks played 11 sold-out shows in Zurich, Brussels, Paris, and Monte Carlo. “It was a blast,” says Emily. “They bought everything we brought. All the shows were packed. A lot of homesick Texans over there.”

Further proof that the Chicks have a feel for what people want to hear was last year’s *Rhythm, Country and Blues* project, in which country and R&B artists were paired on songs from both genres. Though the Chicks weren’t part of that album, they’ve been covering Sam Cooke and Ray Charles standards since their first release. Laura smiles and says, “We heard that album and said, ‘Already did it.’”

So, when it comes to the Dixie Chicks, maybe Nashville has the catching up to do. “I think there has been a delayed reaction to us,” says Martie. “People tend to think of you the way you were on your last record.” Laura also thinks the industry “is watching to see if there’s any longevity to us, this Texas-based band that is not in the heart of Nashville. Also, no one in Nashville can say they created us, and sometimes I think Nashville wants that control. We’ve made it on our own.”

Having made it on their own terms, the band looks forward to their next phase of development. “Our biggest goal is to record more music that we’ve written,” says Martie, “because it comes from the heart.” With Martie strong on melodies, Laura on words, and Emily a little of both, the songs will be group efforts.

And when those songs have been polished and the clothes agreed upon, the Chicks will take to the road again, seven years into their journey—one that, likely, will end up connected in some way to that town in Tennessee where Western bands are made—even Western bands that live and breathe Texas. “We know we need a lot of the things that Nashville has to offer,” says Emily, as her sister and Laura look out through the restaurant’s large windows to check out the action on a Dallas street. “Right now, though, we are based here, and we’re going to keep doing what we’re doing and be ready when Nashville calls.” 🌮