

DIXIE LAND

The Dixie Chicks fly the Texan coop to bring their raunchy country music to Australia

When celebrating milestones, country music's Dixie Chicks know how to make a moment last. Shortly after the 1998 release of the Dallas-based trio's debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*, lead singer Natalie Maines had a wild idea: she and her bandmates, Martie Seidel and Emily Robison, who are sisters, would commemorate each gold record and No. 1 hit with a tiny chicken's foot tattooed on an ankle. "We said, 'Yeah, sure,' thinking it was way down the line," says Robison. "Then five months later we were going gold and we said, 'Oh, no! We're getting a tattoo!'"

Wide Open Spaces went platinum and is still in the US Country Top 10, and their recent follow-up, *Fly*, also winged it to the top of the US charts (and made the Australian Top 20). Last month at Nashville's Country Music Association Awards the glam-happy, barnstorming trio won single of the year with "Wide Open Spaces," as well as best music video and top vocal group, and now they're touring their harmonies with attitude *Down Under*. "What the girls are trying to do is bring people *back* to country," says the band's manager, Simon Renshaw. "Natalie had a great line about it, which was they'd rather be the rock queens of country than the lame queens of rock."

It is the group's genre-bending that has normally too-hip-for-country teens saddling up. A growing posse of young female fans are decking themselves in "Chicks Rule" T-shirts and waving "I Want to Be a Dixie Chick" signs. Raunchy and outrageous they may be, but the Spice Girls of country they're not. "People show up thinking, 'They're cute and I kind of like that one song they do,'" says lead singer Maines, 24. "I just love watching them react when Martie [the fiddle and mandolin player] and [guitarist and banjo player] Emily rip into a bluegrass instrumental."

Growing up in Dallas, the two youngest of teachers Paul and Barbara Erwin's three

"Other musicians would die for what we've got now," says Robison (left) with Maines (centre) and Seidel.



JONATHAN EXLEY/SCOPE FEATURES





"The music is the core of it all," says Seidel (right, onstage in London this year).

BRIAN RABIC/REXUSAUTRAL

daughters, Emily and Martie were fed a balanced musical diet. "I felt that they should know how to play an instrument," says Barbara, 54, who split with Paul in 1989. "We took them to the symphony and bribed them to sit still by promising we would take them out to breakfast afterward."

As their mother monitored practice sessions with an egg timer, the girls grudgingly mastered a variety of instruments, from violin to guitar. "I'd hear kids outside playing kickball and I hated that I was inside," says Robison, 26. "Now, of course, I'm grateful for it." By 1984, the girls were performing in Blue Night Express, a bluegrass troupe that toured Texas. When it disbanded in 1989, they joined two singer friends and began performing on footpaths in Dallas's business district, raking in more than \$100 a day.

Christening themselves Dixie Chicks after a Little Feat song, they piled their hair high and dressed for excess in denim and sequins. After Robison graduated from the Greenhill School and Seidel dropped in and out of several universities, the foursome hit the road in a Dodge van. "It would be a hundred degrees with make-up melting down our faces," recalls Seidel, 29. "And



"We've worked our whole lives for this," says Robison (right, at the Academy of Country Music Awards in May).

ROBERT HEPLER/EVERETT COLLECTION/HEADPRESS

there's one of us in each seat trying to pull on our little cowgirl suits and boots. Ugh!"

Undeterred, the Dixie Chicks whistled right along, recording three moderately received albums and playing at political rallies for George Bush and Bill Clinton. But one singer left in 1992, followed by the second vocalist three years later, leaving the sisters without a voice. "Neither of us wanted to

be a lead singer; that would have scared us to death," says Seidel.

Enter Maines, from Buddy Holly's home town of Lubbock, Texas, a drop-out from Boston's Berklee School of Music whose father, Lloyd, had played steel guitar on two of the Dixie Chicks' albums. Invited to join, Maines recalls, "I told them yes before I even thought it over. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wasn't going to wear those cowgirl clothes." Robison says the three are now best friends. "Because her dad was on the road her whole life, we knew Natalie understood the lifestyle. But I'm amazed how well we get along for having walked into it pretty blindly." And the bond strengthened with the making of *Fly* when Maines confided to her partners that she was leaving her husband, bassist Michael Tarabay; a week into recording the album. "It shed a new light on the whole project," says Seidel, who is married to pharmaceutical sales rep Ted Seidel. "There'd be a phrase in almost every song where I'd get choked up and have a hard time singing, because I'd be thinking of Natalie about to go through that. And then there were songs like 'Cowboy Take Me Away' where I was thinking about Emily about to get married." Recording *Fly* represented "the height of [the group's] bonding."

Emily Erwin took songwriter Charlie Robison's name after they exchanged vows in May and the nuptials also provided Maines with a new squeeze after her separation from Tarabay in January. "I wasn't looking for love, but I found love, at Emily's wedding," Maines says. "Someone who treats me right for once. I had very low expectations of love and life, and now they're back up."

And with harmony reigning within the group and their love-lives, the cheerfully childless threesome continue to put some rambunctious twang into the pop charts and are obviously enjoying breaking new ground. How do they do it? Maintains manager Renshaw: "They are *such* girls."

■ JEREMY HELLIGAR AND CHRIS WILLMAN

■ CHRIS ROSE IN DALLAS