

Why the CHICKS

ruffle feathers

One minute they're America's darlings, singing 'The Star Spangled Banner' at the Superbowl; the next they're criticising the president and posing naked for a magazine cover. What will the Dixie Chicks do next?

Stuart Husband meets the controversial country trio

Photographs **Sean Cook**



Chicks with pluck, opposite from left: Emily Robison, Natalie Maines and Martie Maguire. Above: at the Superbowl. Top: their naked magazine cover

There are certain moments in a band's life when they finally know they've made it big. For Texan trio the Dixie Chicks, that moment came last year, when it fell upon them to perform the duty of singing 'The Star Spangled Banner' before the start of the Superbowl in California, in front of close

to 70,000 people, and millions more watching at home. 'I was so nervous,' recalls the Chicks' singer, diminutive blonde Natalie Maines, 'that I thought I'd never get the words out.'

'I just imagined I was singing at home to my son,' claims brunette banjo player and guitarist Emily Robison. 'Otherwise I'd have lost my bottle.'

'At least we looked great, though, didn't we?' puts in blond fiddle virtuoso Martie Maguire, Emily's sister. 'I was in Gucci, Natalie wore Dior, Emily went for McQueen.'

Statistically, the Chicks' relative fame had already ceased to be an issue. Their genial, gently subversive brand of Texan country-bluegrass-pop has seen their first two albums with their current line-up – 1998's *Wide Open Spaces* and 1999's *Fly* – sell more than ten million each in the States. In February, their latest – *Home* – scooped four Grammys to add to the four they had won since 1998, and they have finally made inroads in the UK, with a sold-out concert at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire in March and heavy airplay for their soulful version of Stevie Nicks's 'Landslide'.

'It's weird,' concedes 29-year-old Natalie as we watch the sun sink over London from a suite at the top of the Metropolitan Hotel. 'The record company keep coming up with achievements – "the only female group containing two blondes and a brunette who've ever sold this many records, blah blah blah." We don't think like that.'

'We're more concerned that each album is more successful in artistic terms,' says Martie, 33, curled up at the end of the huge sofa. 'That's my definition of "making it".'

'Mind you, we broke the record for first-day ticket sales for our current US tour,' adds Natalie. 'We beat the Rolling Stones. I was, for the first time, a little impressed with myself.'

A more concrete indication of the Chicks' success is inscribed on their bodies – literally. A few years back, when they were still struggling, they decided they'd mark career milestones with a chicken-foot tattoo on their feet (they are the Dixie Chicks, after all). Natalie slips off her Jimmy Choo and holds up her foot; it looks as though a squad of pygmy Rhode Island Reds have been marching across it. 'I've got another ten to add, as there have been ten more landmarks since I last went,' she sighs. Will they carry on until the ➤



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NATALIE



◀ tattoos are snaking neck-wards? 'It might be wise to have them trail off,' says Emily. 'I mean, we're getting a little too mature' – she's 30 – 'for constant visits to the tattoo parlour.'

'We might just start lying,' reckons Natalie. 'Tell people we carried them on to our bottoms – trust us, they're there!' The Chicks explode in laughter.

The key to their appeal lies in their exuberance; their live shows, mixing exquisite harmonies with full-on plucking and sawing from Emily and Martie, are rousing affairs; as people, they're warm, down-to-earth, and occasionally ribald. This attitude, however, has ruffled a few feathers. They're a little full-on for the Nashville establishment, who still like their country women Tammy Wynette-style pliant. The Chicks have received flack for songs such as 'Goodbye Earl', in which two women team up, *Thelma and Louise*-style, to despatch a wife-battering husband, and 'White Trash Wedding', a satirical swipe at the barefoot-'n'-pregnant school of country lament.

'Some people just don't get our humour in the States,' bemoans Natalie. 'But I think a big part of our success is the fact that we're real. We haven't tried to be politically correct. In fact, I've always thought of traditional country, and the people in it, as false and hypocritical.'

'Historically, country music's always attracted an older, conservative audience,' says Emily. 'They don't like it when

someone comes along and rocks the boat. It's still the good ol' boy network in Nashville. But do you know what the biggest industry is there, apart from music?'

'Porn!' retorts Natalie. 'There's more strip clubs and sex shops than anywhere else. At the same time it's the world centre for production of Bibles. It's a pretty phoney town.'

But Natalie's 'realness' made waves beyond Nashville when, just two months after their Superbowl appearance, on stage at the Shepherd's Bush Empire, she introduced the song 'Travellin' Soldier' – which had been receiving heavy airplay during the run-up to the war in Iraq – with the words: 'Just so you know, we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.' The result was seismic; radio stations across the States banned the Chicks from the airwaves, sales of *Home* plummeted from 124,000 to 33,000 a week, and internet message boards were flooded with irate comments, such as 'Natalie Fonda' – and worse. Their CDs were publicly trashed; there was even talk that their careers were over. The Chicks' response? They appeared naked on the cover of a US magazine with slogans such as 'traitors', 'big mouth', and 'Dixie Sluts' written on their bodies. And while Natalie apologised for causing offence, their general tone was unrepentant.

'I was angry, disappointed and confused by the reaction,' says Natalie. 'But some days I just feel proud of what I said. I was frustrated with the president, but we totally supported the troops. I feel patriotic and strong. People think this'll scare us and shut us up, but it's going to do the opposite.'

The good ol' boys were probably rubbing their hands with glee at the Chicks' misfortunes, but Natalie insists that, up to now at least, their feistiness hasn't held them back. 'I think being female's actually helped us,' she argues, 'because people have tended to underestimate us and just let us get on with things' – but their world-conquering status was preceded by a protracted period of dues-paying. Martie and Emily were brought up in Dallas, Texas, where their parents were teachers. Both musical prodigies, the girls busked street corners in spangly cowgirl garb as teenagers. 'We collected \$375 in our first hour,' recalls Emily, 'so we thought, hmm, perhaps we ought to go with this.'

They formed the Dixie Chicks in 1989, recruiting Robin Macy (guitar), and bassist-singer Laura Lynch. They

**New country living,
clockwise from top left:
Emily, Natalie and Martie**

played rodeos, bar mitzvahs and funerals. 'We were doing western-swing kind of stuff, but we weren't really getting anywhere,' recalls Emily. The crunch came in late 1995, when Emily and Martie parted company with the other members and hired Natalie, a native of Lubbock, Texas, and a 'born better' who had perfect pitch at the age of six and told her teacher she was going to be a 'big, famous singer' (she's also the daughter of steel guitar player Lloyd Maines, who has played on many of the Chicks' recordings). *Rolling Stone* magazine described her voice as that of 'a honky-tonk rose who's seen it all but hasn't given up on love'. 'My only condition on joining the band,' she grins, 'was that they had to ditch the cowgirl drag.'

'She galvanised us,' says Martie. 'To me, the Dixie Chicks is two different groups; pre- and post-Natalie.' Initially, however, the change made little material difference; the group was still paying its bills by trawling round Texas's perpetual convention/hog roast/hoedown circuit. 'We did all these corporate conferences,' shudders Natalie, 'huge rooms filled with hay bales and checkered tablecloths.'

'Everyone would go, "Can you play 'Stand By Your Man?"'" sighs Emily.

Didn't they ever feel like giving up? 'Things happen at the right time,' says Natalie. 'The point where we felt we couldn't take it any more was when things finally started happening for us. So we didn't have to.'

Despite – or perhaps because of – their exposure to the worst excesses of their home state, it's still the Chicks' preferred roosting-place. *Home* was produced by Natalie's dad and recorded largely in her living room. It has a more intimate, stripped-down feel than their previous albums. They've also written three of the songs. 'We'd like to write more,' concedes Martie, 'but only if they're as good as those of Stevie Nicks or Patty Griffin. We prefer to take great songs and make them our own. Having said that, this album is the most us we've been on record so far. It's as naked as we're going to get – aside from certain magazine covers.'

The Chicks' spirit of camaraderie has only been strengthened by their recent travails – but then, they are one big family. Of course, Martie and Emily always were, but Natalie is now firmly en-bosomed in an almost eerie way, to whit (stay alert here): Natalie and Martie became close when they were going through the separate break-ups of their first marriages; meanwhile, Emily was planning her wedding to musician Charlie Robison. At that wedding, Natalie met actor Adrian Pasdar, one of the groomsmen, whom she married in June 2000; they have a two-year-old son, Slade. Martie met her second husband Gareth Maguire when he was best man for his brother Shane, who married Natalie's sister Kim in August 2000.

Thus, as Natalie says, 'Martie is my sister's sister-in-law, and we're both aunts to her baby.' Meanwhile, Emily went through several artificial inseminations and fertility treatments in order to conceive (she gave birth to her son Gus last November). Natalie and Martie live 20 minutes away from each other in Austin, while Emily lives two hours

south in Medina, on a 1,200-acre working ranch with eight horses and 75 head of cattle.

'And you know the spookiest thing?' says Natalie. 'Martie and I have apartments across the street from each other in New York, which we chose independently. So even if the band breaks up, we're stuck with each other.'

Before their recent hiccup, it was a moot point as to whether the Chicks could get any bigger. Now they're waiting to see if their outspokenness will do them any lasting damage. 'Will we bounce back?' asks Emily. 'Will we ever get played on country radio again? Will we get booed off stage? I don't know. But we won't be cowed... The three of us can create a shell around ourselves. We've gotten death threats from the lunatic fringe, but we can ride it out.'

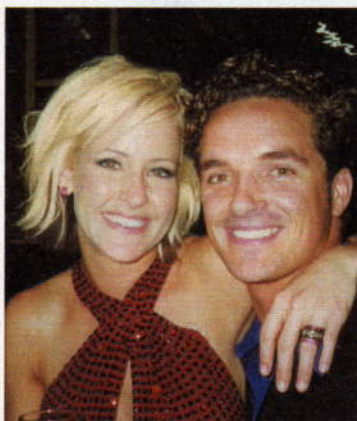
However, they have their extracurricular ambitions, should the worst-case scenarios come to pass. Natalie: 'I'd like to act at some point. An Oscar would be nice...'

Martie: 'I'd like to produce music. I'd love to take painting classes. I want to learn to cook. And I'm yearning for a kid. I'm the old lady of the group, so I shouldn't be the last one.'

Emily: 'I want to expand the ranch and have tons of kids. I've always wanted to adopt as well.' She pauses. 'Basically, I want to take over the world.'

'I thought we already did that,' says Natalie, and the Dixie Chicks, defiant to the end, throw back their heads and holler like good ol' girls. **N**

Home by the Dixie Chicks is available on Columbia. Their UK tour starts on 10 September, tel: 0870 400 0688 or visit www.cclive.co.uk/dixiechicks



Hatches and matches, clockwise from left: Martie with husband Gareth Maguire; Natalie with son Slade, two; Emily (in Vera Wang dress) marries Charlie Robison, May 1999; performing at this year's Grammys

