

Local Heroes

Can the Dixie Chicks make it in the big time?

By Renee Clark

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Since their first performance in 1989 on a West End street corner, the Dixie Chicks have had both stunning success and an equally stunning lack of it.

Their agenda is no different from any struggling band's: Develop a sound. Get a local audience. Get national attention. Simply stated, and simply hard to do. But they may be close.

In 1991, Dallas' Dixie Chicks sold more than 12,000 copies of their first album, *Thank Heavens For Dale Evans*. They were seen on the local news and on *60 Minutes*. They played Garrison Keillor's radio show, Riders In The Sky's radio show and the Texas Heritage Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. They played New York and Nashville. They did a commercial for McDonald's (which didn't air in the Dallas market) and had one of their songs played as background music on the hot new TV series *Northern Exposure*.

Also in 1991, they moved away from bluegrass by adding a drummer, University of North Texas graduate Tom Van Schuik, and signed with a

Nashville booking agency, Buddy Lee Attractions. In doing so, they became the first band ever signed to that agency without a contract or a manager.

As mistresses of their own image, the Dixie Chicks have achieved local and regional fame.

“I think the Dixie Chicks are great,” says singer Emmylou Harris. “Anyone who calls their album *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans* is all right with me. Their music is good and refreshing; I think it would be wonderful to hear them on the radio.”

But so far they have failed to attract the kind of music-industry attention they need to reach that next level of radio exposure and a national audience.

That’s the task for 1992. The band started out by recording a new album they hope will have more mainstream appeal. *The Little Ol’ Cowgirl* should be out in April.

The Little Ol’ Cowgirl was made in a way entirely suited to their manager-less, label-less position: They went back to Dallas’ Sumet-Bernet Sound Studios. Like the first album, this isn’t backed by a record company. It will be sold as the first album was, available in a few record stores and at their shows and through mail-order.

On the cover is a child dressed as a cowgirl, playing alone. The band will be pictured on the back, standing at a distance, watching the little girl dream.

The Dixie Chicks got started in 1989, when guitarist and singer Robin Macy, bassist and singer Laura Lynch, banjo player and bassist Emily Erwin and fiddle player Martie Erwin decided on a lark to play for tips in the West End. They realized right away that people liked their sound.

“When we made up the name, we were playing on the street corner for maybe 50 bucks at a time,” Martie Erwin says. “People were saying, ‘What’s your name?’ Then once we did get legitimate gigs we couldn’t think of a better name.”

The rhythm of Western swing, the acoustic virtuosity of bluegrass picking and what Robin calls “group female harmony” form the basis of the Dixie Chicks’ sound. “It’s an acoustic, nostalgic Western cowgirl sound,” Martie adds. “Not that every song has to be *Happy Trails*. But as a way to categorize it -- cowgirl music.”

At 19, Emily Erwin is the youngest Dixie Chicks. She is also the shyest. Born in the North but raised in Dallas, Emily took up banjo because her family was “into bluegrass.” She enjoyed her teenage years playing with the teen bluegrass group, Blue Night Express. But when that group broke up, she says, “I never expected to get back into a band, because I wanted to study hard and get into the Air Force Academy and become a pilot.”

Her sister, Martie, 22, says, “I wasn’t the ‘smart’ one in the family, so my parents supported me in music.” She had more musical training than anyone else in the band -- three years as a musical-therapy major at SMU. She is credited with many of the band’s musical arrangements.

The Erwins, who also sing harmony, are not related to Cafe Noir member Randy Erwin.

Laura Lynch, 33, describes her childhood on a cattle ranch near Dell City in far West Texas as idyllic. She attended the University of Texas, then ended up in El Paso doing TV news. After a baby, a divorce, and a move to Houston, Laura took guitar lessons and went to bluegrass festivals, including one in Nacogdoches in the late '80s, where she met Robin Macy.

Laura had worked in Houston as a stockbroker and for real estate developer

Trammell Crow, but she left the business world to join the Texas Rangers bluegrass band, touring Japan before joining the Dixie Chicks.

Robin Macy, also 33, spent her teenage years in Missouri playing professionally in a folk duet with her younger sister. Robin flirted with politics and law in college but then focused on math. After moving to Dallas in 1981, she worked in musical theater and eventually joined the bluegrass band, Danger In The Air. She played the bluegrass festival circuit when she wasn't teaching math at St. Mark's School for Boys. She left teaching when it became apparent that the Dixie Chicks might make it.

“In a sense they have already ‘made it,’ ” says David Card, owner of Poor David's Pub. “Very few acts can go in a few years from working for the cover charge to \$2,500 plus per show. ... They have a good chance if they're properly managed (and make) the right choices along the way in terms of music, booking and people. I don't know what those choices are, but the road to musical success is littered with people who made the wrong choices.”

In performance the Dixie Chicks radiate enthusiasm, but track-by-track recording can be alienating, frustrating and lonely. It's not a group activity; it's a one-at-a-time exercise in frustration.

The work is tedious and exacting, and requires a lively attitude. But in the beginning the Chicks are up for this; Emily Erwin has even brought a mini-trampoline so the women can get their blood moving. During downtime, they make business phone calls and sew shiny beads and sequins to their Western shirts and skirts.

By the third week of recording, the band is working on vocal tracks and there isn't enough brown, tweedy-looking carpet on the walls and floor to soak up the tension in Studio B. No beads and sequins, and the trampoline hasn't been here

since the first week. Robin's eyes are slightly ringed with fatigue, tension and smudged mascara. She admits to having shed a few tears over her lead vocals.

Because *The Little Ol' Country Girl* is the vehicle the Chicks' hopes ride on, expectations are high. So much depends on this record. The women struggle to keep their goal in sight as they labor over the many little choices that will lead to success -- or won't.

"I hope our fans won't be disappointed (in *The Little Ol' Country Girl*)," says Martie. "It's got drums on every track; it's no longer bluegrass, but we have to make a living and you can't do that playing bluegrass."

"They make people happy, they're so pretty and so good," says Ed Bernet, owner of Sumet-Bernet Studios and the Dixie Chicks' former booking agent. "Pretty from a man's point of view isn't a negative. If they weren't pretty they'd still be good, but being young, pretty and talented is an unbeatable combination."

The Dixie Chicks have been criticized for presenting -- even of cultivating -- an image of four beautiful women who happen to have talent. Will this keep them from making it?

Their response is: Don't take us so seriously.

"Our name should be associated with who we are, rather than standing by itself," says Emily. Martie adds, "We couldn't change it now. ... I worry about our image for new people, (that) they'll hear the name, and they won't get it like our other fans got it. It's not supposed to be taken seriously."

"I think we're carving our own niche," says Robin. "We don't really want to conform to formula country music. We want to do what we feel in our hearts."

Whether that will translate to super-stardom, I kind of doubt it. But I think as long as we're making enough money, and we're happy playing the music, who could ask for more?"

All four women feel the make-or-break pressure 1992 brings. "We all have the same goal," Martie says.

"They're already more than a local success," says Steve Harmon, KPLX- FM disc jockey. "They fill all the houses they play. What they're doing is so different, it's not mainstream anything. It's fun to watch. But for national success, they'll need a couple of lucky breaks and a couple of lucky songs."