

“Wide Open Spaces”--The Chicks (1998)

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Essay by Kristine McCusker (guest post)*



The Chicks, c. 1998

When The Chicks¹ released the album, “Wide Open Spaces” (Monument Records, a Sony imprint) in 1998, critics and fans alike applauded Natalie Maines’s punk rock, yet still country twang; the Erwin sisters, Martie and Emily’s stellar musicianship; and the group’s exquisite harmonies. The Chicks also promised their fans a party, broadcast from stages that invited them to join in on the fun and music. Sales and Grammys soon followed, with “Wide Open Spaces” certified 13x platinum by the Recording Industry of America Association (RIAA) and Grammy wins for Best Country Album and Best Country Performance by a Duo or Group. Their country music peers recognized them at that year’s awards ceremony as well, with the trio winning the Country Music Association’s Horizon Award for Best New Artist as well as Vocal Group of the Year.

But what audiences and critics missed was The Chicks’ ability to curate and interpret an older country sound and render it melodic, meaningful and modern for a 1990s audience. What sounded new and exciting to fans really was consistent with the earlier heyday of country music, the barn dance radio days of the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, the band recognized that the word “country” represented multiple subgenres and “Wide Open Spaces” provided an eclectic and exciting mix of songs to acknowledge that. The Chicks’ timing was also excellent: the 1990s, as compact discs were replacing records, was considered a country women’s decade, with Trisha Yearwood, Jo Dee Messina, Mary-Chapin Carpenter, Faith Hill and, especially, Shania Twain dominating the charts. Their curatorial bent is what makes “Wide Open Spaces” a great choice for the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

¹ This essay refers to the group by their current name, The Chicks, out of deference to and respect for their decision to drop the word “Dixie” from their name in 2020.

Earlier iterations of The Chicks, which also included the Erwins, focused on a more bluegrass sound, for example, with the album and song “Thank Heavens for Dale Evans” (Dale Evans was cowboy singers Roy Rogers’ wife and a popular country singer in her own right). The album included a cover of Patsy Montana’s “I Wanna Be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” (1935), credited by some as the first million-selling country music song sung by a woman. Montana (nee Rubye Blevins) sang that if she was a cowboy’s sweetheart, she, too, could learn to rope and ride across the plains and the desert. Reforming the band to include fellow Texan Maines, the trio signed a contract with Monument Records which released “Wide Open Spaces” in 1998. Long-time Nashville recording executives Paul Worley and Blake Chancey co-produced most of the album and a raft of Nashville insiders and outsiders penned songs for the album. Simon Renshaw, who was once rock band ZZ Top’s manager, became their first manager.

Audiences perceived The Chicks at first as a novelty act: here were three women who didn’t need a backup (usually male) band, but instead played their own instruments and did so well. No one remembered their barn dance predecessors, the Coon Creek Girls, who also played their own instruments. In the 1990s, the Chicks’ musical skills made them seem more authentic in light of other women who seemed to be steering country music away from George Jones and Hank Williams and more toward Adult Contemporary sounds. Martie Erwin (now Maguire) won fiddle contests, like barn dance banjoist and fiddler Lily May Ledford, and Maguire’s sister Emily (now Strayer) was (and is) a multi-instrumentalist, although she primarily plays the banjo. Maines is no musical slouch either, having earned a full vocal scholarship to the Berklee College of Music (she left college before completing the degree).

The Chicks are polymaths who recognize the heterogeneous sounds country music has produced over time. “Wide Open Spaces” is thus littered with a mixture of classic country themes and sounds--heartache and melancholy, for example--alongside new approaches to country music. The most obvious theme was the desire to escape to wide open spaces, typically in the West, for self-discovery, the theme that roots the entire album. That desire to ramble and roam was modernized to match their mainly suburban audience’s desire to escape their own monotonous lives. Barn dance radio’s original audiences in the ‘30s and ‘40s were escaping an American plagued by depression and war. Indeed, this theme of wide-open spaces that allowed worthy individuals to live freely and independently was what gave country music its 1950s moniker, Country and Western music. What the band does not do is mimic the barn dance tendency to claim women as passive sentimental mothers, content to sit on rustic porches, rocking babies and singing mournful tunes. The Chicks may have claimed they needed wide open spaces, but beer, sex and fun needed to be included, too.

Essential to any country band’s bona fides is the claims to a pedigree, meaning who they claim as their musical ancestors. “Wide Open Spaces” has its own unique claims to pedigree that included songs, songwriters and producers. The lead song, “Wide Open Spaces” was written by Susan Gibson, a relative unknown in Nashville, but blues musician Bonnie Raitt provided the final cut, “Give it Up or Let Me Go.” Bob Morrison, who wrote the movie “Urban Cowboy’s” theme “Lookin’ for Love,” co-wrote, “Tonight the Heartache’s on Me.” Long-time Nashville songwriters like Rodney Foster, Tia Sellers and Mark Selby provided other cuts. In a nod to the folk-rock sound of the Eagles, JD Souther provided “I’ll Take Care of You.” The Chicks also included cowpunk in the song list, via “Am I the Only One (Who’s Every Felt This Way),”

written by Maria McKee, the former Lone Justice lead singer. Billy Sherrill, Tammy Wynette's co-writer and producer, produced the Raitt song, "Give it Up."

Whether the audience or Nashville country industry executives recognized The Chicks' curatorial skills is beside the point. The eclectic mix of songs, The Chicks' pedigree, their desire to rejuvenate past themes makes this album, and their ensuing others, classic examples of what good country music was ... and is. Thus, "Wide Open Spaces" is an excellent the choice for the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress.

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*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.