



February 10, 2010 - Wednesday

Court Yard Hounds Bio

Strictly speaking, it's only a few feet from stage left or stage right to the center spotlight. But it took Martie Maguire and Emily Robison a couple of decades to move those couple of yards. As the mainstays of the Dixie Chicks since they formed the group in 1989, the sisters have been familiar faces to many millions of fans, yet just a little mysterious in that familiarity, content as they were to cede the lead vocalist position and remain music's most recognizable "sidewomen." Chicks fans couldn't help but hear those ever-present harmonies and wonder if Emily and Martie might ever come out from hiding in plain sight.

That's just what they've done in their newly hatched incarnation as Court Yard Hounds, with a gorgeously assured debut album that has the siblings sounding like they've been fearless frontwomen all their lives. Is this band a side project? They can live with that label. Or something permanent? Yes, that, too.

Robison and Maguire could no sooner take an indefinite vacation from music than they could from being related. So as the mother band's hiatus grew into a longer vacation than anyone originally anticipated, "dormant" began to equal "torment" for these two working musicians. The Dixie Chicks were last seen triumphing at the Grammys in early 2007, winning the exceedingly rare trifecta of album, record, and song of the year for *Taking the Long Way* and its flagship single "Not Ready to Make Nice." Something else they weren't ready to do was make records or tour again, at least for a long while, as it turned out. All three Chicks enjoyed family time away from the media glare—but after a while Maguire and Robison felt refreshed and rarin' to go, which still left them one singer short of a quorum. The usually bold Maines' reticence to put herself through the grind again had the effect of pushing her slightly shyer bandmates out of the nest.

"When Natalie first wanted to take a break," says Maguire, "I remember this real fear in me, like: When are we getting back on the road? This is what I know! What will I do? I don't have a college degree!" she recalls, laughing. Happily, rather than take night classes, they decided to school themselves in how to launch a new band. The Chicks haven't disbanded, but Court Yard Hounds is no mere time-marker of a project. "Sony's looking at this like an artist launch, and we're looking at it like a new chapter in music," Maguire avows. "We definitely are going to tour this and make another record. I know this isn't just a one-time, get-it-off-our-chests, get-these-songs-recorded-and-go-back-to-our-lives thing."

Although Maguire is the lead vocalist on her own solo composition, "Gracefully," the remainder of the tracks feature Robison singing material that arose out of a profoundly transitional period in her professional and personal life. "The first year of our hiatus, I was getting very restless and needed to be creative for my own sanity," says Robison. "And at the same time I was going through my divorce"—from Texas singer/songwriter Charlie Robison—"so it was very fertile ground for writing."

The personal material that Robison was penning pretty well dictated what kind of album they would make. To the extent that anyone even knew the sisters were working on a new project, there were rumors that it might be a back-to-roots album, since they spent their teen years together in a bluegrass band and carried over a certain amount of that influence to the Chicks' country-rock. It's not such a preposterous notion; even Maguire thought it might be fun to revert back to the string-band music of their youth. "I remember one early conversation we had, where I said to Emily, 'Well, do you want to form a bluegrass band?' I was excited about that, because I'd been in my studio, recording a bunch of fiddle tunes from my past. And Emily said, 'No, not exactly. That's not where my head is.'" They both laugh at exactly how far away from that Court Yard Hounds ended up being.

"Even though we played bluegrass," Maguire says, "we listened to way more rock, folk-rock, and alternative music, and of course singer/songwriter stuff. And now I hear a lot of Shawn Colvin in Emily's writing and voice. Because she is my sister and she was going through what she was going through, a lot of these songs brought me to tears. To hear her sing and express herself this way is very vulnerable, I think, and very brave."

Fans know how much Maguire and Robison are willing to reveal through songwriting with their other band, from "You Were Mine," a ballad about their parents' divorce that appeared on the 12-times-platinum *Wide Open Spaces*, to "So Hard," a song from *Home* that addressed the issues of infertility they both struggled with before having their respective children. But the frank emotions of the new album may still come as a surprise from a pair who were previously content to have someone else give voice to their deeper sentiments.

Rather than start off with a barnburner of an opener, it was Maguire's suggestion that listeners be eased into the album with the subdued "Skyline," which describes the inspiration Robison found just gazing at the view of San Antonio from her loft during a dark time. The song opens with just an acoustic guitar and Robison at her most tender, before a few soft drum rolls and Maguire's lulling fiddle lead the ballad from the bitter into the sweet. Things then kick into higher gear—but, tellingly, stay in Texas—with "The Coast," a good-times anthem that contentedly celebrates neither the east nor west but the south coast. There's also a Texas theme to "See You in the Spring," Robison's duet with Jakob Dylan, the wry tale of a star-crossed couple from the northernmost and southernmost parts of the country who find their biggest obstacle is accepting each other's climate change. Faster-paced songs range from the self-doubting feminine levity of "Then Again" to the fiery outrage of "Ain't No Son," a rocker sung from the myopic point of view of an angry, unaccepting father. Romantic themes veer between the bitter and sweet: "Fairytale" speaks to romantic enchantment, while there's no happily-ever-after in sight in the breakup songs "April's Love" and "It Didn't Make a Sound."

The initial impetus behind Robison's writing was to contribute to a future Chicks project, but upon realizing that the group's hiatus had no clear end in sight, she started trying to write for other artists and movie projects. One problem with that: The demos felt too deeply personal to give away—especially in light of the barrage of emails she would get from Maguire after each new demo, warning, "You better not pitch this or I'm going to kill you."

At last, the eureka moment: Although Robison had never considered singing lead before—not even in the late '80s and early '90s, when the Chicks cycled through two other singers before finding Maines—there was a sudden acceptance of the fact that maybe the last 20 years of pure harmonizing could be taken to the next level. Yet egolessness had been so self-ingrained into Robison and Maguire that laying aside that humility still involved a process of discovery.

In Texas roots circles, the sisters had been well-known since they were pre-teen prodigies. Spurred on by their musically supportive parents, who would drive them from festival to festival, Martie joined her first band, the Blue Night Express, at 12, and a couple years later, Emily signed on, when she was 10. For all the instrumental training they had, though, there were no such formal lessons when it came to their sisterly harmonizing, which came from observing a lot of acts they saw on the bluegrass circuit, and, most probably, from something in the blood.

"There was always comfort in the power of numbers," Maguire says. "Emily and I have that kind of personality where we're happy to support and happy to not be the center of attention. I remember my mom dragging us into the living room to play for company. It's a different story than you hear from a lot of lead singers, who say 'Oh, I used to get up on the table when I was 2 and belt out songs!' We were very reluctant, at a young age. So with this album it was nice to discover that we had this other side to us that came pretty easily. Every day our confidence grew."

Adds Robison: "It can be intimidating when you sing with someone with the power that Natalie has. Martie and I have always been harmony singers, so you take your place in the mix. It was a huge learning curve for both of us—because Martie sings lead on one song, too—to figure out what your voice is, after you've sung so long just trying to blend. It really takes a lot of work, and there's still a lot of work to be done, playing live, to find that voice. But I felt like I could interpret the songs because they meant something to me. It wasn't like I was just trying to just sing any song. It was something very personal."

After Robison worked on a good chunk of the material with guitarist Martin Strayer, they settled in with co-producer Jim Scott at Maguire's studio in May 2009, coming back for a second and final round of recording in October. "It was amazingly quick compared to how long Chicks records usually take," laughs Maguire. "I loved every song Emily had written. You can't create a sound when you don't have the songs." There remained, though, a slight degree of uncertainty about whether this would be for public consumption: "We knew we would know if there was a record there. And if there wasn't, we had confidence that we would be honest enough with ourselves to say, 'That was a great exercise, but that's not getting packaged.'"

After it was clear that self-veto power wouldn't be necessary, the last element to come into play was a band name. Court Yard Hounds came from a novel Robison was reading called *City of Thieves*, by David Benioff. There's a fictional book-within-the-book called *The Courtyard Hound*, but Emily points out that the specific impetus was "a quote in there about how inspiration comes and goes. The idea is that there are seasons of talent, and that at some point it's gonna leave you, so you have to make the most of it when you are inspired." It's not difficult to see why that thought took root, with Maguire and Robison not wanting to let their own gifts lay fallow for another year, or even month.

It was a deliberate decision to fly under the media and rumor-mill radar while the recording was in process. "One reason I felt like we needed to not let the cat out of the bag too soon," says Robison, "is that every time I would tell someone about the project, they'd say, 'Well, who are you going to get as the lead singer?' I would just kind of kick the dirt and go 'Well... we're gonna try our hand at it.' Until you have the music and you can play it for people, it was hard to explain what we were trying to do. It was important for us to get the music done first so that we had that confidence."

As Dixie Chicks, Maguire and Robison have grown used to having their private lives and thoughts put up for public scrutiny. Some Court Yard Hounds listeners may be eager to put every lyric up to a magnifying glass... and it's not necessarily a completely misguided impulse, given that the sisters have penned obviously deeply felt songs before, even when Natalie was singing them. It's no secret that Robison's divorce sparked a good part of the material, but the sisters do discourage anyone from reading the album as a diary. "Everyone from our manager to our publicist already thinks it's completely autobiographical, that everything's so true and personal," says Robison. "And it IS personal. But not everything is my life, even though people are gonna think it is. It's better just to say that maybe 70% of it's true, but I'm not gonna tell you which parts." She laughs. "Keep 'em guessing!"

How to classify Court Yard Hounds on the career spectrum? Baby band? Superstar vanity project? It's neither, but Maguire and Robison admit it's tough to determine exactly where they fit in as they scale down considerably from the arena level. "It's like you're a new band, yet you're not," Emily says. "So it's trying to walk that line of, okay, we have certain standards for ourselves, but we don't have the payroll yet to pay for this or that. It is exciting, being able to step back and really get in the trenches. It's a lot of work, but at the same time, we've never really been afraid of proving ourselves and working hard. The only difference now from when we first started out is that we have families and it is important to keep that balance."

And, possibly, a balance with that certain other band, down the line. "I think the elephant in the room for people is always 'Well, what's going on with the Chicks?' When that presents itself, we'll figure out how to marry the two," says Robison. "Natalie will be the first one to tell you that she's very supportive; she just doesn't want to be in the studio and going through the whole process right now. Martie and I love to work and create and be making something, so being off was difficult for us. Just to be able to fulfill that and not have to dismantle the Dixie Chicks—why can't we do both? We're going to push to make it a complete entity and have fun with it."

When fans see Maguire and Robison from now on, whether they're at side or center stage, it'll be with a greater sense of the individual personalities of the sisters who've seemed ubiquitous, yet just a little elusive for so many years. Their easy smiles and rapport with fans from the front rows to the rafters have gotten them pegged as "the friendly ones," but the material on Court Yard Hounds proves them as complex as they are approachable.

"People do want to figure out: which one are you?" says Robison, of their traditional personas in the Chicks. "Martie's 'the nice one that smiles,' I'm 'the quiet one,' and Natalie's 'the feisty one.' And when you shake things up and make them see you in a different light, it kind of confuses people. So truly, as much as the song 'Then Again' is about me never wanting to shake things up, with age, I've come to this point where I just don't care what people think as much."

And not only was it worth the wait, this flowering simply had to wait. "I don't think I could have done this five or ten years ago with Martie," Emily affirms. "I would have been too timid, too shy, too 'Oh no, I can't do that.' Now, I think, if some people don't like it, that's fine." No lap dogs here: Court Yard Hounds are ready to get out and work it. "Even if we have just 10 percent of the people who reacted to us before, or only new fans, whatever it is...we can make something of that."

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