



Susan Gibson, singer-writer with Amarillo band The Groobeys, found herself with an unexpected smash hit when Dixie Chicks recorded her *Wide Open Spaces*. Now the group is making headway outside the confines of the Lone Star State.

The Groobeys, four guys and one gal, hail from the panhandle of Texas. Home for the band is Amarillo, which is linked by Highway 27, and some 120 miles due south, to Lubbock, a city drenched in myth and legend as far as the rich musical heritage of Texas is concerned. Amarillo's claim to fame amounts to the birthplace of Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore – and that pretty much wraps it up for the city, until, that is, The Groobeys began performing there in the early 1990s.

The lineup features Susan Gibson, writer of *Wide Open Spaces*, a song that Dixie Chicks took to the top of the country charts in 1998. The trio's six-times platinum album was also titled *Wide Open Spaces*.

Gibson was born 27 years ago in Fribley, Minnesota, but the family moved frequently until finding a permanent home in Amarillo in 1985. The musician in the

Gibson household was Susan's mother who gave private piano lessons. At around 10 years of age, Susan attempted to learn the instrument, recalling, "I didn't read music very well and played by ear a lot."

During her mid-teens Gibson discovered acoustic music, initially through the recordings of Simon & Garfunkel. In her senior year at high school, she began singing with a friend by the name of Bob Merkett who played guitar. They mainly performed at a local restaurant called OHMS covering songs by the Indigo Girls, Michelle Shocked and Mary Chapin Carpenter.

Bob taught Susan the fundamentals of guitar playing and, when her musical partnership with him ended, she teamed up with guitarist Gary Thomason. "I'd play rhythm guitar and he'd play lead stuff on top of it. That was the beginning of me doing something with the music instead of just singing."

Her college studies took her to the University of Montana in Missoula where she studied Forestry. She also worked in local bars as a musician. "I started writing songs when I moved up there. By the time I started playing my own solo gigs, I probably had ten original songs. I don't think there's one of them I still play."

It was while visiting her family for Christmas, 1993 that Susan wrote the lyrics to *Wide Open Spaces*.

"I think I was aware of the freedom that I'd had when I came back and was living with my folks for a month. I wrote the lyrics in a notebook in probably twenty minutes. I'd like to say that I left them for my mum as a poem to explain why I had to move away, but the truth is I forgot they even existed. A couple of weeks later I got a care package from my mum and the lyrics are in there. Within two days of getting the lyrics I had the music for the song. I always got a good response when I



played the song."

While spending time back in Amarillo in late 1995, Susan found herself in the studio performing backing vocals on The Groobeers' first CD, *Flying Machine*. (The band had taken its name from a character in a television cartoon series.) The songs were written by Scott Melott (guitar, keyboard, vocals) and owe more to pop music than the group's current material. The band had been together for a couple of years, working as a college alternative rock band. In addition to Scott, the members were Todd Hall (drums), Michael Devers (bass) and Susan's previous partner, Gary Thomason (guitar).

She returned to Amarillo in 1996. *Flying Machine* had just been released and she accompanied the band on a number of dates. "I had never played in a band before. That was a totally different beast – to have a group of people all doing the same stuff. We played for about six months before they played any of my songs. I was real folksy, and they were more modern sounding.

"At that time we just played in Amarillo and Lubbock. Our sound started evolving as soon as I took a more active part in the band. Initially, I was real wary of making my compositions into big band songs. Eventually, it just became too much fun to even consider leaving the band and going back to Montana."

Never formally invited to join, Susan gradually drifted into The Groobeers' lineup.

"I'm almost six feet tall, so I'm not a demure little girl. I got a lot of response once I joined because of the way I sing. I have a strong female voice. That's the way I am – I'm not very soft spoken."

Although Susan and Scott continued to compose songs individually, they also started to collaborate. With sufficient new material available, the band's thoughts turned to recording another album. They made contact with Lloyd Maines, who agreed to produce them.

The sessions for *Wayside* took place at Austin's Cedar Creek Studio with Jim Whisenhunt's pedal steel added to the lineup. From the opening steel-driven chords of *Comforts Of Home*, it was apparent that pop music had most definitely given way to country licks. By the closing track, *Nashville Suicide*, a Melott composition, the band had well and truly established its alternative country credentials, albeit with some folk/rock oriented songs included in the recipe.

When the band held its album release party at the Nat Ballroom in Amarillo in July, 1997, the opening act was Dixie Chicks. Whisenhunt quit the band the following day. By this time, negotiations were in progress for Dixie Chicks to cut

*Wide Open Spaces*. Lloyd's daughter, Natalie, had joined the Chicks a couple of years earlier.

"Once we gave the Dixie Chicks the song, it was real gut wrenching. I was proud of the song, but also scared for it. The producers didn't want it on the album because it wasn't country enough. Finally the girls went to the producers and said, 'When we play this song live, we get more of a response than any other song we play.' They kind of bulldogged their way into letting them have it on the album."

On the strength of *Wayside* and the exposure given to *Wide Open Spaces*, The

again, cut at Cedar Creek.

Packed with great melodies, *The Groobeers* is a tilt at wider recognition. The songs are there, and the plaudits will undoubtedly come.

Martina McBride recently cut Gibson's *Cloud Nine*, but when her new album, *Emotion*, was released the song failed to make the final selection. "I was honoured that she even recorded it," says Susan.

Of her latest crop of songs, Susan considers the unrecorded *Two Home Towns* to be her best yet. "This *Wide Open Spaces* thing really set the bar high. I have to be conscious not to be disappointed when we



Groobeers began to spread their wings within the boundaries of the Lone Star State. Dance halls such as Gruene Hall and Cibolo Creek became familiar stomping grounds for their fans. When Dixie Chicks picked up a swathe of Grammy, CMA and other awards during the last twelve months, the word about a hit songwriter from Texas soon spread along 16th Avenue. The upshot: Susan and Scott's publishing company, Pie-Eyed Groobee Music, inked a deal with Nashville's Bug Music.

In the summer of last year, Mike Devers became the band's fulltime manager while Bobby Schaffer, an Amarillo player, became the new bass man. In the spring of this year, The Groobeers played the BMI showcase at Austin's SXSW Music Festival. A few months later, they undertook their first tour outside Texas, a month long affair that found them traversing the borders of 13 states.

Their latest self-titled recording was released in early October. The ten tracks include two cuts from *Wayside*, respectively *Wide Open Spaces* and *Not My Man*, a Gibson/Melott co-write. That apart, Susan's singing possesses a newfound confidence, particularly on the rather special opener, *Ahead Of Time*. Produced by Maines, the album was, once

don't get struck by lightning the second time we throw something out there. We did the first time, and we didn't even have to throw it. It came to us."

Susan and Gary spent early October in Oklahoma where they helped The Great Divide record an album of gospel songs. The Groobeers plan to undertake another Stateside tour in the near future, with plans to invade Europe already under consideration – hopefully for next year.

As our conversation drew to a close, Susan summarised the recent twists and turns of her life.

"With music, more so than anything else in my life, I've really learned as I've gone along. Even though The Groobeers were a great band, I didn't know how good they were when I decided to start playing with them. I thought that it was going to be a vehicle to get some more experience doing something else. Where I would be able to do what I like best – which is, play and sing – but with a band.

"It felt like an easy way to learn a whole bunch of different things, all at once, instead of trying to figure it out on my own. It has really accelerated my growth as a musician for sure."

Ain't it the truth. ■