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Dixie Chicks 'Not Ready to Make Nice'



AP Photo: The Dixie Chicks ,from left, Emily Robison, Natalie Maines and Martie Maguire are photographed at...

By NEKESA MUMBI MOODY, AP Music Writer

54 minutes ago

NEW YORK - One of the more innocuous explanations given to the Dixie Chicks as to why country radio hasn't been playing their new single, "Not Ready to Make Nice," is because the defiant song doesn't fit in with everything else that's playing on the dial.

Upon hearing that, the Dixie Chicks have only two words to say: "Thank you."

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"I don't even know what's played on country radio, but when they tell me some titles, it cracks me up," laughs lead singer [Natalie Maines](#) , sitting in a swank New York hotel as the group promotes its new album, "Taking the Long Way," out this week.

"Besides, where would we fit on the playlist between 'Honky Tonk Badonkadonk' and 'Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off?'" asks Maines, citing two recent country hits, as the rest of the Chicks — sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison — join in her laughter.

"We don't want to be a square peg," pipes in Robison, while Maines adds: "We'd rather be the square peg on the other side!"

It speaks volumes about how wide the chasm is between the Dixie Chicks and country music when one of the most successful bands in the genre's history is cast as an outsider just three years after having one of its best-selling albums.

"They're in a strange place," says Chris Willman, a senior writer at Entertainment Weekly who has profiled the band for the magazine. "They're the biggest group in country but they aren't heard on country radio."

Of course, the reason for the divide has very little to do with their new musical direction (more California rock than country twang) and everything to do with the bitterness and anger that remains from the fallout over what has become known simply as "the comment."

It happened in 2003, on the eve of the United States' war with [Iraq](#) , when the Texas-based trio was on a European tour to support "Home," their six-million selling, Grammy-winning album. Before a London audience, Maines made the off-the-cuff remark: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

Almost overnight, Maines' comment became fodder for talk-show conservatives, who lambasted her for being unpatriotic. Soon, their music was being boycotted, with radio stations pulling their songs from their playlists. Country fans stopped buying their album, causing it to plummet on the charts.

The swiftness and intensity of the rejection took them by surprise. After all, this was a critically acclaimed group hailed as not only the most successful female group in country music, but in all music — of all time,

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selling 30 million albums.

"I didn't realize there was that much hatred out there," says Maines, softly. "It was kind of a letdown. I kind of lost hope."

Robison notes that prior to Maines' remark, the band was identified more with tart-tongued lyrics and female empowerment than world affairs.

"It feels weird that a band that was so apolitical was thrust into something so political," says Robison.

Though the Chicks were hailed by some as goddesses of free speech — Entertainment Weekly famously featured all three naked on the cover save for strategically placed slurs that had been hurled at them — they still lost millions of fans, and suddenly found they had no home in country music.

Growing up, Maguire found herself defending country music to friends who saw it as a close-minded, conservative genre that had little variety or tolerance for differing opinions.

"I just feel stupid. I was trying to convince people that that stereotype wasn't real ... but it does exist. I thought it was the old school," she says. "Now I wouldn't blame anyone if they didn't want to listen to it."

The Dixie Chicks certainly didn't want to listen to it. As they got ready to make their new album, producing another record geared toward country audiences was the furthest thing from their minds.

"I don't know that we set out to make a rock record," says Maines. "But we definitely didn't set out to make a country record and I definitely had a bad taste in my mouth."

Enter Rick Rubin, the esteemed rock producer who has worked with everyone from legends Johnny Cash and [Neil Diamond](#) to the Beastie Boys and System of a Down. A Chicks admirer since he saw them as ingenues performing at an industry function, Rubin was tapped to produce the new album, and steered the Chicks not only into more of a rock sound, but into a more serious frame of mind.

"I felt like, because of the controversy that they had dealt with, people were taking what they had to say seriously probably for the first time in their career, so they're in a powerful position to talk about serious things," says Rubin.

For the first time, the Chicks wrote the entire album, with the help of veterans like hitmaker [Linda Perry](#), Keb' Mo', [Sheryl Crow](#) and Gary Louris of the Jayhawks.

And while "Not Ready to Make Nice" is an obvious, angry response to their rejection by Nashville, and the song "Lubbock or Leave It" criticizes Maines' hometown as small-minded and judgmental, the album is not just the Chicks' musical response to the fallout. The subject matter is varied, from a song touching on Robison's and Maguire's difficulty conceiving their children to the dementia of an aging loved one.

"It's not about proclamations, it's just about being OK," says Robison. "We're not fighting any battles anymore."

While the notoriety of "the comment" has earned them massive publicity — including the cover of Time magazine — they all know that they've lost some fans forever.

"We're not oblivious," says Robison.

"I think we still have millions of fans," Maines says. "(Just) maybe not 10 million fans."

Still, the women are hopeful that even if they don't get back their old fans, the new ones they gain will make up for it.

"I want (the new album) to be successful to prove to myself that the music matters," says Maines, "and radio and organized far right people can't determine your destiny."

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