



Artist: Dixie Chicks

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Dixie Chicks embrace Bush controversy

By JANE STEVENSON - Toronto Sun



NEW YORK -- Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines says she has no expectations about how the Texas trio's new disc, *Taking The Long Way*, will fare commercially.

The Chicks' pop-leaning new collection hit stores yesterday preceded by the slow-tempo but defiant first single, *Not Ready To Make Nice*.

The new song directly deals with "the incident," when Maines commented to a London audience in 2003 just 10 days before the Iraq invasion that the band was ashamed that U.S. President George Bush also hailed from Texas.



"It's scary but exciting at the same time," said Maines, 31, sipping red wine while settled on a couch in a tiny dressing room at Sony Studios in midtown Manhattan last week.

"Things are kind of new and exciting as with the first record (1998's major label debut, *Wide Open Spaces*), just the not-knowing what's going to happen.

"We really haven't had any sort of insight as to how big the audience is going to be or who the audience is, 'cause on the last tour it was sold out before I made my comment. So it's exciting but questionable."

In the major country music backlash that followed Maines' remarks, radio stations boycotted Dixie Chicks music, fans destroyed their albums -- including their latest at the time, 2002's bluegrass-laden *Home* -- and there were even death threats against Maines.

"I was more disappointed than afraid," said Maines. "I was scared of not selling records. It was frustrating when people would say, 'We want to know why they're whining about not getting free speech, we're using our free speech by not buying their records.'" I was like, "We're not whining about you not buying our records, we are standing up for the fact that someone questioning the president shouldn't have death threats and shouldn't have corporate bans. I mean, what year is this? It was insane.

"I didn't realize there was that sort of hatred 'cause I'm not surrounded by that. I didn't grow up like that. I don't think I've ever hated anybody. So it was just really sad and disappointing all along the way... It's hard to live all of that and come out an optimistic person."

On the positive side, the Chicks' 2003 tour raked in \$62 million -- the biggest one-year gross for a country music act in history.

So how does the best-selling girl group of all time, whose first two major label albums of contemporary country (*Wide Open Spaces* and 1999's *Fly*) have both sold 10 million copies worldwide, follow this whole brouhaha?

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Most significantly, they changed up their sound on *Taking The Long Way*, working with rock-rap producer Rick Rubin (Johnny Cash, Neil Diamond, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Run-DMC), rock musicians including two Heartbreakers and the Chili Peppers' drummer Chad Smith in the studio, and a variety of songwriting collaborators including Sheryl Crow and Crowded House's Neil Finn.

"I don't want to surround myself or be a part of what (country music) represents right now," said Maines. "We're in a place where we get to pick our peers. That was the only conscious thing -- we knew we wanted to make the album outside of Texas or Nashville."

Maines said while they lost the support of country music radio and fans following "the incident," they also gained new ones.

"A lot of people hated us," she said. "Our album dropped off the charts and our single that was No. 1 was 63 the next week. But, I think we also, or I hope, we gained fans. I know a lot of people just on a personal level were aware of us and liked us, so I hope that they are proactive in getting the CD and sort of having a voice. It would just feel good to have the music matter."

Maines said of the 147 country stations in the U.S. that report their playlists only 20 were playing the new single, *Not Ready To Play Nice*.

"We planned for radio to not play us," she said. "It didn't catch us by surprise. We were talking to our label, just about a marketing plan, a strategy. We told everyone they really needed to think differently. We said, 'You need to plan a new sort of strategy.'"

Whatever the strategy -- perhaps embracing the 2003 controversy? -- the Chicks are getting plenty of press including appearing on the cover of this week's *TIME* with the headline, "Radical Chicks."

Their just-announced roadtrip, which will visit Toronto's Air Canada Centre on Oct. 28, is called the *Accidents & Accusations Tour*.

As for whether the political decks have been cleared for the Chicks' re-entry into the music scene -- given Bush-bashing albums by Green Day, Pearl Jam and Neil Young -- Maines agreed it's a different time.

"I think if I said what I said now it wouldn't even be on the radar, no one would care," she said. "It was definitely where everyone was at, at that time, with all the fear and we were all supporting (Bush) no matter what. But I think all the people who have come out with protest songs, Pearl Jam, and everyone, they are more expected to. We were an easy target for the right to focus on because we were women in country music and they used us as an example."

Fortunately, for Maines and her fellow Chicks -- banjo player Emily Robison and fiddler Martie Maguire -- whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

"It made me a more confident, secure person," said Maines. "It made us tighter as a band and friends. And my bond with my parents and my sister grew, because you're all fighting the same fight and standing up for the same thing."

"And in deciding not to apologize for the sake of trying to make more money or whatever. I only had one son at the time and I had to think about him. And in 10 years, when he knows what happened, or reads it in an article, or sees it on some Biography or something, I would not want the example to be, 'And Mommy apologized and made it all go away, even though she didn't believe that.' So definitely, he was considered, and the kind of person I want him to be."

Dixie Chicks documentary

Don't be surprised if the Dixie Chicks turn up at the Toronto International Film Festival in September.

The group has been filmed by Oscar-winning documentarian Barbara Kopple (Harlan County, U.S.A.) for the last three years, basically in the aftermath of lead singer Natalie Maines' infamous negative comments about George Bush.

Word is that if the as-yet-untitled documentary is finished in time, the goal would be to premiere it in Toronto.

"If it's in there, we'd be there, for sure," Maines told the Toronto Sun.

The singer says the whole process began when the Chicks started documenting themselves, starting with their performance of the national anthem at the Super Bowl and their subsequent tour in 2003.

Fortuitously, a camera crew was even around when Maines made her Bush remarks to a London audience.

"It was a different crew, but they just happened to be out when the incident happened, so we have that all on film," Maines told the Sun.

"So Barbara Kopple heard about all of it, I guess, and wanted to make a documentary."

In truth, the Chicks had a mutual friend in Cecilia Peck, daughter of the late actor Gregory Peck, who works with Kopple.

"We knew we wanted to do something with the footage but nothing self-promotional, not make a movie about ourselves," said Maines.

"So we were trying to find a director who was interested in our story and (wanted to) just tell it their way.

"We don't want to be involved in the process or the story-telling or the editing, at all."

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