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THE DIXIE CHICKS

My Country and Western right or wrong

By Steve Johnson

Die-hard fan of pure country music and Tribune Internet critic

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It would be a big overstatement to say the Dixie Chicks, who have a new record and an apparently undersold concert tour, are the most important band in America right now. They are, however, a very good and improving band, and what's happening to them may be the most important story in music.

It's a story about taking a controversy you stumble into and, rather than shrinking from it, turning it into an occasion for artistic growth. It's about the essential hypocrisy of country radio, a business that plays right-wing anthems without a second thought but has to take audience polls before daring to play a new record by one of its most popular artists ever.

It's also another example of the nation's almost untenable political polarization. More than that, it's proof that far more people than you would think still can't handle the idea of a strong-minded woman.

It is easy, if you don't follow country music, to underestimate how huge the Dixie Chicks were before they became, in the eyes of many, aiders and abettors of Al Qaeda. Their first two albums with Natalie Maines as the lead singer, 1998's "Wide Open Spaces" and 1999's "Fly," sold more than 10 million copies each. They are the best-selling female group in any musical genre and have won eight Grammy Awards.

The music is surprisingly good. Fans of pure country, the kind of stuff more likely to come from independent labels in Texas than the giants in Nashville, might have been suspicious of the Chicks on the basis of the cutesy name or the record sales. Big sales figures, every pure country fan knows, are a cause for skepticism, not celebration.

But darned if they weren't actually good records, and each one better than the last. The music had actual country touches to it: real fiddle and banjo, for instance, and a sound more high and lonesome and organic than is the norm for contemporary country hits. Although Maines and instrumentalists/harmony singers Emily Robison and Martie Maguire only wrote the occasional song until 2002's "Home," the cover tunes were exceptionally well chosen.

Then came the March 2003 concert in London, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, when Maines said between songs that she was ashamed to be from the same state as President Bush.

You may have heard about it.

Suddenly the Dixie Chicks weren't just popular musicians but cultural touchstones, inspiring CD bulldozings among other dramatics. Maines apologized for being disrespectful of the presidency, but not for what she said.

Ultimately, though, the best response is in the art, and the band came back last month with "Taking the Long Way," by a huge distance their strongest record yet. Incorporating the driving beats of rock 'n' roll, but with its roots firmly in country, it's produced by Rick Rubin, a veteran L.A. rock producer.

Rather than shy from the Bush controversy, the band takes it on as a theme, almost to a fault. Throughout the record there are hints

of embracing martyrdom, rather than just struggling to make sense of what happened; they are especially prominent in the otherwise potent first single, "Not Ready to Make Nice."

But as Ann Powers wrote in the L.A. Times, "Spunky defiance isn't what makes the trio's new album so moving. Its power lies in harder-to-grasp songs about women facing hardships far more common than a Red State boycott."

That boycott, or the hint of it, is where the hypocrisy comes in. For a few decades, it's been understood that if you want a hit in country music, your best bet is to write what might have been called back in Tammy Wynette's day a "women's lib song."

"Stand by Your Man" is famous, but as the exception to the rule. In hit after hit after hit, the heroine tells off her husband, gets a job, refuses to make dinner one night.

Country radio and the mainstream country music industry, with an audience that's predominantly female, has fallen over itself to support such songs.

Now, the industry has a chance to back strong, outspoken women who have made the industry a ton of money, and in its feminism is proving to be, as they say about fake cowboys, "All hat and no cattle."

Chicago's WUSN-FM 99.5 is playing the Chicks to generally positive reception, station officials have said. WXRT-FM 93.1 is responding to the album's more country-rock leanings and playing some of it.

But stations in the South that used to have the Dixie Chicks in heavy rotation--even with a song like 2002's "Long Time Gone" that took on country radio for ignoring the music's roots--aren't playing the band.

The industry-dominated Academy of Country Music Awards took place the same day the new album was released. In normal circumstances, such huge stars with a new record would get to play a song or two.

Instead, the band's only appearance came in a crack by traditional country artist Reba McEntire, the show's host, about the Dixie Chicks being able to sing despite having their feet in their mouth.

It was only a continuation of a rapper-like war of words between the band and the singer. Maguire told Time magazine that the band now seeks fans "who will grow with us as we grow and are fans for life [rather] than people that have us in their five-disc changer with Reba McEntire and Toby Keith."

They also made waves by insulting ABC's "The View" this year, asking "Would Bruce Springsteen do 'The View'?" It's been interpreted as the Chicks being full of themselves, but their Web site explains that they've taken "What would Bruce Springsteen do?" as a mantra for artistic integrity.

With the band doing little to win back its casual fans or the ones who were turned off by the Bush remarks and with airplay relatively meager, the first single never cracked the top 20; the second, "Everybody Knows," barely made it past No. 50.

It's a shame because there won't be a prettier song on the radio this year than "Easy Silence," the Chicks' ode to the contentment a good relationship can bring.

At the same time, album sales have been strong in the early going. "Taking the Long Way" debuted at No. 1 and held the spot for another week before slipping to No. 2.

In theory the concert tour, like radio play, would boost sales and keep the album chugging through the summer, but ticket sales have reportedly been halted at several venues, suggesting they're not as boisterous as the band might like. Still, the band has rallied before: Even after the anti-Bush remarks (but with many presold tickets), their 2003 tour was the highest grossing country tour to date.

Part of the problem is that the band seems to have taken a what-the-heck attitude toward publicity, un-apologizing for the Bush remarks, for instance.

But there's a virulence in response to them that Bruce Springsteen does not seem to inspire with his very similar politics. Is it because one comes from the more traditionally "patriotic" genre of country, while the other stems from the more traditionally liberal rock?

Perhaps a little, but it's difficult to escape the feeling that the band's sex is the bigger part of it. There's a part of American culture

that just will not stomach "uppity" women: Witness the irrational hatred a Hillary Clinton inspires, far more pronounced than that earned by male politicians with twice the actual power.

And the Dixie Chicks, with all the money they'll ever need and a newfound willingness to stop trying to say marketable things, are ultimately and, now, proudly uppity.

Rather than hate or shun them for it, true music fans ought to give the record a listen and celebrate the fact that such a great record can come out of such convoluted circumstances.

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