

From left: Martie Maguire, Natalie Maines, and Emily Robison

## Pretty, Pissed Off

America's most controversial trio roars back with a slap at the Nashville scene. Nope, the Dixie Chicks aren't apologizing for anything. **BY CHRIS WILLMAN**

**M**any of the nation's country-music radio program directors have heard the upcoming Dixie Chicks album, *Taking the Long Way*. Almost to a person, these programmers agree the May 23 release has "four or five potential smashes" on it. But even more unanimous is the assessment that "Not Ready to Make Nice" is not one of them. So why did the group release a confrontational ballad as its first single—one that was guaranteed to antagonize fence-sitters and flop at radio?

First, some background. "Not Ready" refers directly to 2003, when the Chicks were banished from hundreds of stations after professing shame at sharing a home state with President Bush. (See timeline, right.) The lyrics angrily recall death threats the trio received; the video is even harsher, seeming to cast them as victimized leads in a remake of *The Crucible*. Lon Helton, Nashville bureau chief for *Radio & Records*, notes that "Not Ready" has been added by only 22 stations out of the trade magazine's 120 reporting major-market country outlets. In the adult contemporary format, it's on 4 out of 104 stations; in Hot AC, 7 out of 82. "There's a concern that by playing this single, you hurt your

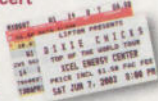
chances to play all the other songs," Helton says. "So some programmers are saying 'Let's pretend the next single is their first one and not polarize the audience by reopening that old wound.'"

"It's a defiant choice, but consistent with their personalities," says RJ Curtis of KZLA in L.A., which has "Not Ready" in medium rotation. Reaction there is "polarized, skewing positive. I'm willing to bet down in San Diego, a military town, it's different." Sure enough, Mike O'Brian of San Diego's KUSS says 40 to 50 percent of the response was, "Keep playing that song and we'll find another station." "Folks in our audience who weren't upset before are now," he says. "They were ready to move past it but say, 'If you're not ready to make nice, we aren't either.'"

Why provoke instead of placate? Sony Records declined to comment, but the most obvious explanation is that the band and label knew it would stiff at radio but be a smash in the world of TV news and talk shows like Bill O'Reilly's. "It does create conversation, and when you haven't had a project in three years," says Curtis, "you're looking for buzz." Which, in this rare instance, might speak much louder than airplay. Or niceties.

## 2003: THE CHICKS BARE ALL

A week after *Home* wins four Grammys, the Chicks break the one-day concert ticket sales record, grossing \$49 million.



MARCH 7

Before Kanye West, there was Natalie Maines: "We're

ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas," she says on stage in London. Also heard: sound of feces hitting fan.



MARCH 10

After CD buyers and radio stations call for a boycott, Maines issues an apology, admitting she was "disrespectful" to Dubya.



MARCH 14

Brett Butler gets loudly booed at the CMT Flameworthy Awards when she attempts to defend the group.



APRIL 7

With airplay and sales nose-diving, the Chicks appear nude on EW's cover with painted insults like "Saddam's Angels," "Dixie Sluts," and "Traitors." Controversy flames. Again. —Raymond Fiore



MAY 2