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Dixie Chicks exploit their controversy

New on CD

FLINT

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By Doug Pullen
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- Dixie Chicks

"Taking the Long Way" (Columbia)

The Dixie Chicks are damned if they do, damned if they don't. If they act like nothing happened after singer Natalie Maines uttered the anti-Bush shot heard around the world three years ago, then they're soft and sellouts. Write about it, as they do on the excellent new "Taking the Long Way," then they're exploiting it.

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"Taking the Long Way" is what it should be - a poised, emotional, defiant and powerful country-rock record. Like their last album, the intimate and mostly acoustic "Home," the lyrics here are personal and address issues of concern to the group, particularly the fallout, the boycotts and the death threats - and that's just in the single "Not Ready to Make Nice."

But it's not all ranting and raving. The Chicks celebrate the protective cover of a lover with soft-rocker "Easy Silence," sing their children to sleep on the sweet "Lullaby," and come out on the other end with the lilting alt-country of "Voice Inside My Head." They lament a grandmother's Alzheimer's on "Silent House," scold small-town hypocrisy (the blazing rocker "Lubbock or Leave It"), look at infertility from the inside out on "So Hard" and end on an upbeat, gospel-inflected note with "I Hope."

Maines' vocals have never been more convincing, their writing and performances (aided by the likes of Bonnie Raitt, Sheryl Crow and members of the Heartbreakers) never more assured. The move to a more rock-oriented sound, ably navigated by catholic producer Rick Rubin, is a good fit for these songs. They may have been through hell, but "Taking the Long Way" is heaven.

- Doug Pullen


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