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# 'We had a song at No 1. The next day it was at No 70'

Caroline Sullivan hears from the Dixie Chicks on what happened when they spoke out against the Iraq war

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Natalie Maines has a little cluster of black teardrops tattooed on her lower leg, trickling from her ankle down to her foot. Dixie Chicks' poised lead singer seems neither the tattooing nor the crying kind, but it's conceivable the tears symbolise the upheaval caused by a remark she made in 2003 on a London stage, when she told the audience at Shepherd's Bush Empire that she was "ashamed" George Bush was from her home state of Texas.



America's sweethearts no more ... Dixie Chicks on the cover of Entertainment Weekly. Photo: AP

A video camera and Dictaphone accompany them to every interview these days, a precaution against being misquoted. Interviewers are also asked to sign a film-release form, as they may end up in a documentary that's being made about the Chicks' everyday lives, which have got a lot more complicated since March 10 2003.

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It was the eve of the Iraq war, and Maines's comment that night echoed the opinions of many other musicians. It wasn't even reported in most newspaper reviews of the gig but the Guardian mentioned it, and when middle America got wind of what Maines had said, the reaction was extraordinary. The golden girls of country, who'd sold more than 28m albums and won eight Grammys, were ostracised. Radio stations banned their records, some urging listeners to purge their homes of Chicks albums. Maines received death threats, rattling her enough that she moved from Austin to Los Angeles with her husband and kids. Perhaps most hurtfully of all, almost none of their country peers spoke up in their defence.

In London on a hot June afternoon, Martie Maguire - violinist, oldest Chick and sister of banjo player Emily Robison - is still bewildered by the rage they unbottled. "Nobody I know understands how this happened. If people had just had a few protests and not bought our albums, I could understand it, but it just snowballed. If people think you can't have a voice, and keep our political leaders in check ..." She tucks her feet beneath her. "It brought out the ugly side of people."

And it brought out a side of Dixie Chicks the band themselves hadn't known existed. Although the three were brought up in liberal Texas households in Dallas and Lubbock - in high school, Maines protested against the racism dished out to Mexican pupils - as a band they were supremely uncontroversial. Two months before Shepherd's Bush, they were even asked to sing the Star-Spangled Banner at the Superbowl. Which was why, says Maines - a dead ringer for Charlene Tilton, who

played Lucy Ewing in Dallas - her comment roused such wrath. "It was unexpected from us, so we were the perfect group to use as an example."

Prior to Shepherd's Bush, even the most conservative American would have had to dig deep to uncover anything offensive about the Chicks. Admittedly, they had a naughty streak - they once surprised fans by announcing their love of "mattress dancing" on a tune called Sin Wagon. But they weren't applecart-upsetting types.

Robison elaborates: "Here comes this band, who are marching along with the same thought processes [as the largely Republican country audience], supposedly." Maguire cuts in: "We were people breaking rank from inside. Radio turned against us in a day. We had a song [Travelin' Soldier, about a Vietnam-era romance] that was No 1, and the next day, it was, like, No 70." The others nod. Robison adds: "It was disheartening to me when country music became such a cliché of what people think it is."

Shortly after Shepherd's Bush, Maines, unnerved by what they had unleashed, offered a half-hearted apology for "disrespecting the office of the President". But having had a taste of rebellion, the Chicks found they liked it. Soon they appeared naked on the cover of the US magazine Entertainment Weekly, their bodies covered with redneck-baiting slogans: "Saddam's Angels" and "Dixie Sluts". In 2004, they played alongside the likes of REM and Pearl Jam on the Vote For Change tour. Robison, though, believes Vote For Change was hampered from the start, given that American politics "puts the wrong [candidates] out. Last time, it was like voting between a turd sandwich and, I don't know, something else."

Maguire believes the experience has changed them in positive ways. "I'm way more informed now. I used to think I didn't have to read the papers every day and have opinions about politics." Then I ask a question that provokes contemptuous chortles: do they have any fellow Texas feeling at all for Bush? "I don't want the president to be a good ol' boy. I want him to be someone I'm in awe of, not my nextdoor neighbour," Robison says. Maines is characteristically blunt. "You want him to score higher than you in the SATs."

With Bush's stature nowhere near what it was before the war started, the Chicks have now released Taking the Long Way, their first album since the furore. "Someone at Time magazine said was it a marketing ploy to put out the album when his approval ratings were so low,"

Maines smiles. It wasn't - releases are planned months in advance, but it hasn't hurt them. Nor has it hurt that some of America's rock royalty have taken the same stance - Pearl Jam's anti-Bush song Worldwide Suicide was No 1 on radio playlists, for example. Nevertheless, they have again roused the ire of the right.

The first single, Not Ready to Make Nice, has Maines singing that she's "not ready to back down/ I'm still mad as hell," and she sounds it. Despite being one of iTunes's most downloaded songs the week it came out in America, the single received a frigid welcome on the radio. A vice-president at the huge Clear Channel network accused the Chicks of "arrogance and disrespect", to Maguire's disgust. "What's arrogant about [responding to] a death threat? I couldn't sing it for the first hundred times without crying."

"They can't see past their own anger to listen to what the song's about. For us, it's very sad and emotional. It's not a big F-U," Maines says.

With some radio programmers suggesting the band have "burned their bridges" with the song, do they feel as if they are putting their career on the line for the sake of their principles? "Who burned the bridges?" Maines asks. "They dropped our songs and had CD-smashing parties." Maguire adds: "And we don't want that kind of fan anyway. We don't want to cater to that mentality."

Vengeance, at any rate, seems to be theirs. Taking the Long Way went into the American chart at No 1, selling half a million copies in seven days. By the end of week two, sales had reached 800,000 - most of them, according to the sales-tracking service Soundscan, in the Chicks' traditional heartland of the south and midwest. The trio are "pleasantly surprised", given that stations such as KFKF in Kansas City, Missouri, have reported that their popularity is "still through the floor" as a result of "continued negative feedback".

After years as America's sweethearts, Dixie Chicks are probably rather thrilled by their notoriety. That much is apparent from their website's braggardly description of them: "Superstars, renegades, innovators, heroes, villains, and moms."

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