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POP MUSIC

Lone stars rise on the Left Coast

Isolated after what they call 'the Incident,' the Dixie Chicks looked West, physically and musically.

By Geoff Boucher, Times Staff Writer
May 21, 2006

WARS are rarely won with words, but they usually begin with them. Natalie Maines was on a concert stage in England, more than 5,000 miles away from the cotton fields of Lubbock County, but the Lone Star state heard the hometown girl when she took a poke at President Bush. "Just so you know," the Dixie Chicks singer said, "we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas." That was on March 10, 2003, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, and as the crowd cheered, a concert reviewer for the London Guardian dutifully took down the quote. For Maines, it had been a bit of topical banter, a toss-off comment, but back home it was received as a formal declaration of war. In the 1,168 days since, there has been no cease-fire.

"Most sane people thought it was like a flash and then it was over," Maines said after a recent rehearsal in Los Angeles. "They don't realize how insane it got and how it still is." This week, the Chicks will release an album, "Taking the Long Way," and it is impossible to separate its music and messages from "the Incident," as the band refers to the comments made by Maines at the Shepherds Bush show three years ago. The first single from the album is "Not Ready to Make Nice," a simmering statement of defiance — this time Maines isn't speaking off the cuff.

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*And how in the world can the words that I said
Send somebody so over the edge
That they'd write me a letter
Sayin' that I better shut up and sing
Or my life will be over.*

There were death threats (including a harrowingly specific one in Dallas that authorities took very seriously), and the day-to-day vitriol level was so high that Maines, a lifelong Texan, moved to an L.A. beach house. The music of the Chicks has moved west also; with the new album, the trio of Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire recorded in Los Angeles with producer Rick Rubin, whose career has been defined by rock, hip-hop and the austere Americana of Johnny Cash's twilight albums. Although their music remains grounded in bluegrass banjo and country fiddle, this album is clearly informed with a rock road-song sensibility. It's the sound of boots on big city sidewalks.

The spiky independence of the Chicks has always made for bumpy relations with Nashville. Despite a résumé with cheeky hits such as "Goodbye Earl" and the radio-ready ballad "You Were Mine," the trio was always more Texas maverick than Nashville player or, as Robison said with a sly chuckle, "We weren't going to all the celebrity softball tournaments." And, after the Incident, they instantly went from the peak of country success into a dark banishment. They were yanked from the airwaves and booed at industry award galas. Country famously turned its back on the Chicks in 2003; now they're having their say.

"We never recorded a song because it was going to be a hit, but we definitely would hear a song and think, 'Oh, people are going to like that one,'" Maines said. "This was the exact opposite. We just assume no one is going to like it at this stage. It was all for ourselves. It was the first record we've done where I would have been OK if nobody liked it. That would have destroyed me in the past."

Tighter harmonies

ON a recent afternoon, at a rehearsal studio on Sunset, the Chicks ran through songs from the new album preparing for their Accidents & Accusations Tour, which kicks off in Detroit on July 21 and visits Staples Center on Sept. 14. The three were perched on chairs facing one another, surrounded by a dozen musicians warming up to the new material.

For any visitor, the most striking sound is the one most expected from the Chicks — their harmonies can veer from honey to hickory within a single song and, with the new music, their unified vocals sound more sinewy than sweet.

Robison said "Silent House," about an aging matriarch losing both memories and time, is "a direct nod" to Simon & Garfunkel with its high intersections and harmonies that overlap and cross. That resulted from their time together under fire. "We're closer now. We had to close ranks, it was a natural byproduct of what happened. Everything seems more important now." Robison (who plays guitar, banjo and dobro) and Maguire (fiddle, mandolin) are sisters and, along with two other women, they founded the Chicks in 1989.

The quartet was a purer bluegrass affair, and the Erwin sisters, as they were known then, gave the Chicks the intense players needed for that genre. In 1995, the sisters took the Chicks in a new direction: They brought in a new lead singer who was the daughter of Lloyd Maines, a renowned steel-pedal player who had done sessions with the Chicks.



War of words (Wally Skalij / LAT) [click to enlarge](#)

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Three years later, their major-label debut album, "Wide Open Spaces," was a certified hit, yielding three No. 1 singles on the country charts. It was a time of huge success for the female voice in country music as Shania Twain, Faith Hill and others scored crossover success, and the Chicks had a sound that was burnished enough to fit in but also had a musical heft and lyrical irony that set them apart. And they resisted re-tuning to Nashville's careerist rhythms.

"I don't think any of us ever trusted Nashville," Maguire said. "When you're in that town you know everybody is talking about everybody else. Everybody is wishing for the other guy to fail."

The Chicks, by 2003, had shelves full of awards and walls lined with platinum and gold records. The week Maines made her comment on stage at Shepherd's Bush, the group had a new single, "Travelin' Soldier," at No. 1 on the country charts. In one week, the song went from No. 3 on country airplay charts to No. 31, and it continued south from there. Within days, there were CD bonfires and boycotts through the south, like the "Chicken Toss" event in Kansas City, Mo., where copies of the hit album "Home" were heaved into trash bins.

Maines, still in England, was stunned. When she heard that Sony Music, the group's label, felt the need to post guards outside its offices, the singer became physically ill. The Chicks' manager, a Brit named Simon Renshaw, told her it was all a curious cultural spasm, a quirky moment in a country jittery about the looming war. Maines laughed recalling the conversation. "Our manager's famous words: 'Three days, tops.'"

All's fair

THERE was a strange parade of moments after the incident. There was, after a few days, a half-apology by Maines that didn't win over any critics but did elicit groans from some supporters. Then there was the loopy public feud with Toby Keith and a surprisingly specific comment from Bush that the Chicks should remember that "freedom is a two-way street" so the group shouldn't be surprised by fan backlash. The trio eventually responded by agreeing to an interview with Entertainment Weekly (the cover shot showed them nude, covered with competing body-paint slogans such as "Saddam's Angels," "Patriots" and "Dixie Sluts") and also Diane Sawyer.

During the latter, the Chicks appeared a bit agitated by the prim and repetitious interrogation. But a reflective Maines says now that all is fair in prime-time love and war.

"I watch those shows all the time," she said. "And when you watch and they have Whitney Houston on, you want them to talk about crack. Not 'What was it like to work with Kevin Costner?' Sometimes you feel like they are trying to trap you when they ask you the same questions over and over, like a lawyer in court. But we're so honest and we're telling the truth so they can't trap us."

As she said that, Maines was eating dinner at Campanile on La Brea. She and her two bandmates were seated at a table in a rear corner that managed, somehow, to be neither quiet nor tucked away. Actor Don Johnson was sitting a few tables away, but heads were turning most often toward the Chicks. It didn't help matters that a film crew was standing over the table. "I forget how off-putting that can be for people who aren't used to it," Maguire said.

The sisters are tall, long-limbed and, despite their fame and fortune, seem to have a quiet demeanor and marked lack of pretension. Maines is the firebrand, no surprise, and she fixes a pretty intense stare on strangers. All three are married and say the quiet of family life makes the chaos of the past few years even stranger. For the record, all three women remain opposed to the war in Iraq and fervently believe the Bush administration has repeatedly hoodwinked the American public. ("I think most people in this country are still not paying attention to what's going on," Maines says.) And each agrees that the name "Dixie Chicks" will forever be followed in print by some allusion to the night of March 10, 2003.

That's one reason the stakes are high for the documentary, which the band hopes may catch the eye of film festivals. The Chicks had agreed to a straightforward band film; that plan took a sharp right turn in England. The cameras were rolling that night (yes, the infamous quote was captured) and the days after. The Chicks realized as the weeks unfolded that the movie should be as much about a jolting cultural episode as it was about them. They brought in a new director, two-time Oscar winner Barbara Kopple, and raised the documentary ambitions of the endeavor.

"For us, it's important to catch that moment in our country," Maines said. "You go through racism [as a nation] and all the battles everyone fights and you're in school and you think, 'I can't believe they did that.' But history does repeat itself; not that what happens to us is important, but that hatred...."

Maines is, by nature, an extrovert and a slyly funny woman, but she said that has changed after the threats and insults and ceaseless chatter that painted her as the Tokyo Rose of Texas. At dinner with her old pals, she laughed and cracked wise, mocking her own wine expertise (she put an ear into the glass of red wine and said she could hear the ocean), Maguire's placement of sunglasses on her head ("You look, um, ridiculous"). But she turned serious when asked what she has lost in the wake of the incident.

**No silicone.
 Just simplification.**

"I've lost my optimism and my hope in humanity," she said. "I'm not being funny. I try to find it. I hate it. It wasn't all gone after what happened to us, but then after the last election ... it was gone.... I keep waiting because I'm open to it."

Country radio, as a whole, has been cold to the new music. The single was the most downloaded country song on iTunes when it was released, but it's nowhere near the Top 20 at radio. R.J. Curtis, operations manager at KZLA-FM (93.9), the country leader in L.A., said the Chicks are great for his station but not for military towns or the Bible Belt. "It's not as heated as it was before, but there are parts of the country where they will not be played on the radio."

*

Finding themselves

WITH the new album, the trio wrote more songs than on any previous album, and it shows. In addition to "Not Ready to Make Nice," there's "The Long Way Around" (one of six songs written with Dan Wilson), which tells the tale of the band in a classic anthem style that has a touch of the forlorn, like Jackson Browne's "Running on Empty," and plenty of four-bus philosophy, à la "Turn the Page" by Bob Seger. There's an amped-up twang that recalls the countrified songbook of the Eagles or early albums by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. In fact, Heartbreakers guitarist Mike Campbell co-wrote and plays on "Lubbock or Leave It," a rollicking sneer of a song that name-checks that northwest Texas town's most famous musician.

*

*Where as you're gettin' on the
plane*

You see Buddy Holly's face

I hear they hate me now

Just like they hated you

Maybe when I'm dead and gone

I'm gonna get a statue too

*

Campbell is not the only visitor from beyond the borders of country music. The Chicks collaborated on songwriting with Sheryl Crow, Linda Perry, Pete Dinklage, Gary Louris of the Jayhawks and Keb' Mo'. Going into the project, Rubin told the Chicks that he wanted music that sounded like "a great rock act making a country album, not a country act making a rock album." To get that sound, the album features the muscular drums of Chad Smith from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, guitar work from John Mayer and keyboard contributions from Benmont Tench of the Heartbreakers.

It may sound like a country band retooling itself with a Sunset Boulevard all-star effort, but the new directions aren't pure career calculation. Some of it was driven by the desire to rock out after "Home" and its exploration of bluegrass and ballads. On one level, the band simply wanted some songs that were fun to play live. But in listening to the music, it's evident that in searching new places the Chicks found themselves.

"It's So Hard When It Doesn't Come Easy" is about a woman's struggle with infertility and the wrenching emotions that come with it; both Robison and Maguire went through that situation themselves, and their pain echoes in the song.

"We learned that it's not a given; you think it's just your God-given right that you are going to be a mom," Robison said. "It does put a strain on a relationship and what you expect a relationship to be."

All three Chicks are mothers now, and they will be taking their brood — seven children younger than 5 — on the road for this tour. They each brought up the benefits of travel and adventure for young children and noted the surprisingly structured life that a tour can offer if that's the band's collective goal. Still, this is a road run that will have metal detectors at every venue and unusual security concerns. If that thought crossed the mind of any of the three mothers, they didn't think to mention it.

The singers said they believe their new album would never have been made without the trial by fire of the past three years. Years ago, all three got tattoos on their ankles: little trails of chicken claw prints. Today all of them are marked in ways less playful and not visible.

"We've always kind of joked that we didn't write great songs because we didn't have any baggage in our lives, we were too normal and fine," said Maines. And how's that going? All three Dixie Chicks exchanged looks and burst out laughing, if not in harmony, then at least in unison. A few heartbeats later, still smiling, Maines added one last thought on the incident: "I'd never take it back."

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