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# TROPICAL LIFE XML

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## Taking the Dixie out of the Chicks

The Dixie Chicks could have played it safe and made a traditional album to appease their country audience. But what fun would that be?

BY HOWARD COHEN  
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It has been three years since "The Incident," the term the Dixie Chicks use when discussing the anti-Bush remark lead singer Natalie Maines uttered onstage in London and its fallout: detailed death threats, vandalism, a boycott by country radio, mass gatherings to destroy the group's CDs, the Red Cross' refusal of their \$1 million donation.

It was all due to one line said in frustration days before America went to war in Iraq: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

Heaven knows, as Bush's approval rating continues to fall, as weapons of mass destruction remain as elusive as Osama, as spying on U.S. citizens outrages many, Maines and bandmates Martie Maguire and Emily Robison could have played nice, released a formulaic, proper country album like *Wide Open Spaces*, secure that the country music community and the nation itself would likely return to these fallen Chicks.

"Think back to the exact thing, what it was I said -- which is very nothing," Maines, 31, said in a telephone interview from New York on Memorial Day. In speaking, Maines, who is forthright, unafraid, personable, one comes to the realization that here is the ultimate Child of the '60s -- except for the niggling fact that she was born in Lubbock, Texas, the year Nixon resigned.

The trio could have played it safe, but they went and recorded an album in Los Angeles and Hollywood instead of Nashville, featuring music inspired by '70s California country-rock with producer Rick Rubin (Red Hot Chili Peppers, Neil Diamond, Johnny Cash). The Chicks could have introduced this terrific album with a radio-friendly first single. Instead, they led with a middle-finger-extended track titled *Not Ready to Make Nice*.

*'Cause I'm mad as hell/Can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should.*

But the final act of defiance, the *pice de resistance*, had to be Maines' retraction of her 2003 apology to President Bush for "disrespecting the office of the President." In a May 29 Time magazine cover story, Maines stirred up the proverbial hornet's nest when she said, "I don't feel that way anymore. I don't feel he is owed any respect whatsoever."

And, with that, the fire's fed. Reba McEntire sassed the Chicks while hosting the Academy of Country Music Awards last month -- just like she did in 2003. Country Music Television viewers are once again debating The Incident heatedly on CMT.com's message boards. Music critics who have praised *Taking the Long Way* -- and most reviews have been glowing -- receive e-mail responses from readers blasting them for supporting "the Dixie Pigs."

*Why, Natalie? Why?*

"The question was asked," she says. "I had to be honest. Some people called the apology an apology and all the naysayers said it wasn't an apology and you didn't apologize in the way they wanted you to apologize."

"At the time, had I been a solo artist, I probably wouldn't have said anything at all. Martie and Emily didn't ever ask me to apologize. I just felt so much pressure and so sick to my stomach when everything was going down I needed to show them I would do whatever I can without ... sacrificing my own integrity."

**THAT WAS THEN . . .**

Maines says she meant the mea culpa at the time, "but so much has happened since then, with Katrina, and thousands of people dying. At the time, we didn't know if there were going to be weapons of mass destruction. I was *hoping* there would be weapons of mass destruction. A lot has happened in 3 1/2 years."



THE DIXIE CHICKS: Sisters Martie Maguire, left, and Emily Robison, flank lead singer Natalie Maines.

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Sure enough, attitudes shifted and the Chicks are far from the only major stars to have an issue with the current administration. Kanye West, Green Day, Neil Young, Eminem, Pearl Jam and The Rolling Stones have all made pronouncements, or recorded blistering partisan songs like Young's *Let's Impeach the President* that are far more incendiary.

Those artists never faced the fallout the Dixie Chicks did. Even the nonpartisan American Red Cross wouldn't take their money. Red Cross spokeswoman Julie Whitmer says the organization declined the Chicks' donation three years ago because "the controversy made it impossible to associate with the Dixie Chicks" and would have "violated" the Red Cross' policy of "impartiality" and "neutrality."

But the Chicks core audience was conservative.

"The thing that keeps coming back to me . . . is that it wasn't what she said, it was what she said, where she said it, at the time she said it," says Bob Barnett, program director for WKIS-99.9 FM, South Florida's country music station. "It was really a military thing. People saw this as . . . anti-soldier, anti-military . . . There's a real disconnect there. That's one of the core values of this format."

As a result, *Not Ready to Make Nice* peaked at No. 36 on the country singles chart. The more harmonious follow-up *Everybody Knows* hasn't fared any better so far.

"Last I heard [Bush had] a 29 percent approval rating. The naysayers are the vocal minority and I think that the 29 percent is what country radio is appealing to right now. That's fine -- everyone needs their place to go and to relate to, and that music reflects how they feel right now," Maines says.

#### GAINING SUPPORT

But thanks to other outlets and a media frenzy -- that Time cover, segments on *60 Minutes*, *Larry King Live*, *Good Morning America* and Howard Stern's Sirius Satellite Radio program, country radio may not be as important. Buying the Dixie Chicks CD, for some, amounts to a political statement.

"People who have liked what I said or have liked that we stood up for ourselves, it has given them the fire to go and buy the album," Maines says.

*Taking the Long Way*, the group's seventh album, debuts this week at No. 1 on Billboard's pop and country albums charts with 526,000 copies sold. Only two other albums have had better openings this year -- Rascal Flatts' *Me and My Gang* and Tool's *10,000 Days*.

Not all country outlets are anti-Chicks, either.

CMT has played the Dixie Chicks' videos since late 1997's *I Can Love You Better*, from their breakout CD, *Wide Open Spaces*, says spokeswoman Amanda Murphy. The striking *Not Ready to Make Nice* clip "has been among our Top 10 streaming videos on our website since its April 1 debut." Reaction has been "mixed" Murphy says.

Locally, WKIS (Kiss Country) "didn't let people force us to take them off the air," Barnett says, calling South Florida a "Chick-friendly market." The station is giving away tickets to the group's Oct. 7 concert in Sunrise. Still, its new singles are not enjoying the rotation lavished on current hits by Dierks Bentley, Jason Aldean or Rascal Flatts. Toby Keith, whose video for *A Little Too Late* shows a woman being terrorized, remains a radio staple.

One has to wonder: Had the Dixie Chicks been men, would there have been such an uproar? The Chicks clearly upset the good ol' boy mentality that likes to see its women looking pretty, acting subservient and keeping their mouths shut.

Regardless, the music has been overshadowed by the politics. "The music is completely lost in the shuffle and that's sad because this is an act that doesn't need this propaganda," Barnett says. "They are brilliant artists. Under the old way of looking at the Chicks, there would be five or six No. 1 songs [on *Taking the Long Way*]. The music is the sideshow now -- the politics and promotional game is now mainstage."

That's too bad, because *Taking the Long Way* is an often striking album, the first solid Grammy contender to come out this year. Though overlong, with a comparatively weaker third act, the album is not all about The Incident.

For instance, the ballad *Silent House* is a touching reflection on Maines' grandmother, who is suffering from Alzheimer's.

*And I will try to connect / All the pieces you left / I will carry it on.*

"It wasn't necessarily a sad song to write. It was very healing," Maines says. "Even though she will never know the song or understand any of it, it's good for my family and for my granddad. I love that there is something out there that will live forever that is about her."

*So Hard* deals with the problems Maguire and Robison encountered trying to conceive children. The three Chicks have seven "peeps" in all, ages 1 to 5, to whom *Taking the Long Way* is dedicated.

*It felt like a given / Something a woman's born to do / A natural ambition / To see a reflection of me and you.*

Rubin, who was out of the country and couldn't comment for this article, took on the project because the Chicks were in a unique position thanks to The Incident.

When the slick *Wide Open Spaces* introduced the current incarnation of the Dixie Chicks -- prior to Maines' joining, the group was a Dallas-based traditional country quartet and released three regional albums -- "no one took us seriously and I could see that," Maines says. "I think [Rick] was intrigued to come on board because he felt because of what happened people would listen to what we say or take us more seriously."

But Rubin issued a challenge: The three Chicks would have to have a hand in composing every track on the album.

**'SCARY AT FIRST'**

"It was scary at first," Maines says, laughing at her initial thought. "Oh my God, this record will never come out! It was hard to imagine writing 14 songs that we really liked enough to choose over other people's. Once you finally are able to open up and be vulnerable and honest, people would send songs to us to listen to and I couldn't listen to them. I was just in a place where I couldn't connect to someone else. I was relating so much to our own words."

Though there will always be country on a Dixie Chicks project -- Robison plays banjo and Maguire violin, after all -- the album's resulting tour will put the emphasis on electric instrumentation, a classic pop/rock approach without grandstanding, gimmicky Madonna-styled visuals on video screens to detract from the music.

"I think we have a very clear vision of who we are," Maines says.

Unrepentant. Fearless. Unbeaten.

"I feel the things I'm over, I'm over. The things I'm not over, I don't know if I ever will be over," Maines says in reflecting on the long road to *Taking the Long Way*. The Incident 'made us feel a lot of things we never felt and it gave us a lot to say. I remember Eminem saying, 'What am I going to write about if everyone likes me?' I'm sort of in that same place. I love writing our own songs but you gotta feel all the emotions we were feeling and all that has happened to us.

"My worry is, how we will achieve an album better than this one? But it's a good problem to have in your head."

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