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The Dixie Chicks: America Catches Up With Them

By JON PARELES

THE DIXIE CHICKS call it "the Incident": the anti-Bush remark that Natalie Maines, their lead singer, made onstage in London in 2003. "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas," said Ms. Maines, a Texan herself.

It led to a partisan firestorm, a radio boycott, death threats and, now, to an album that's anything but repentant: "Taking the Long Way" (Open Wide/Monument/ Columbia). The Dixie Chicks — Ms. Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire — were the top-selling country group of the late 1990's and early 2000's. After country's gatekeepers disowned them over politics, they decided to keep their politics and let country music fend for itself.

The Incident is very much at the center of "Taking the Long Way." The album could have been "way safe and scared," Ms. Maines said. "We could have pandered." They didn't. The new songs are filled with reactions, direct and oblique, to the Incident. There are no apologies.

"We had to make this album," Ms. Maines said. "We could not have gotten past any of this without making this album. Even if nobody ever heard it."

The Dixie Chicks were in New York this month to make media appearances and to perform at the party for this year's Time 100, the magazine's list of influential people, which includes them. Sitting around a dinner table in a Chelsea loft that Ms. Maines owns but hasn't used much — a former gallery with artist friends' paintings parked on the brick walls — the three Dixie Chicks dug into takeout Italian food and sipped red wine. "I've thought about all this way too much," Ms. Maines said.

"Taking the Long Way," due out on Tuesday, is the first Dixie Chicks album on which group members collaborated in writing all the songs. The first single, "Not Ready to Make Nice," declares, "I'm not ready to back down/I'm still mad as hell," and starts with a tolling guitar more suitable for a Metallica dirge than a honky-tonk serenade. The Dixie Chicks and their manager insisted to their record company that "we need to approach everything like not one radio station is going to play one single song," Ms. Maines said. Asked about country radio, she said, "Do you really think we're going to make an album for you and trust the future of our career to people who turned on us in a day?"

Instead the album wraps gleaming California rock around its raw emotions. Although there's plenty of country in the music, "Taking the Long Way" reaches not for the lucrative yet

insular country airwaves but for an adult pop mainstream. Meanwhile the core country audience may not be so hostile anymore. The album arrives at a time when approval for President Bush has dropped to as low as 29 percent, in a recent Harris Interactive poll.

On Amazon.com, preorders recently placed "Taking the Long Way" at No. 5 in a Top 10 that also includes albums with antiwar songs by [Bruce Springsteen](#), [Neil Young](#), [Paul Simon](#) and Pearl Jam.

For those who expect knee-jerk Republicanism from country singers, the Dixie Chicks never fit the stereotype to begin with. "I always knew people thought that about us, and it bugged me," Ms. Maines said. "Because I knew who we were, and I knew who I've been my whole life. So to me it was such a relief for people to know."

The Incident occurred on March 10, 2003, 10 days before the United States invaded Iraq. "It felt pretty trite to me to be doing a show on what was supposed to be the eve before war," Ms. Maines said, "and not say anything about it. At that stage too everyone in Europe, or everyone outside of the U.S., talked about the U.S. like we all thought one way. So it was important for me to let them know that you can't group us all into one."

Her remark was reported in Britain and quickly picked up. Right-wing blogs and talk shows vilified the Dixie Chicks as unpatriotic and worse, and the Incident reached the nightly news. On March 12 a Web site statement from Ms. Maines said: "I feel the president is ignoring the opinion of many in the U.S. and alienating the rest of the world. My comments were made in frustration, and one of the privileges of being an American is you are free to voice your own point of view." On March 14, 2003, she apologized to President Bush for being "disrespectful" to his office, but added, "I just want to see every possible alternative exhausted before children and American soldiers' lives are lost."

At the Time 100 party a few days before this interview, the Dixie Chicks performed "Not Ready to Make Nice." Afterward Ms. Maines recounted, the Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly — who has regularly denounced her, and whom she pointedly calls "despicable" — rushed over to greet them. "It's like, 'Just want to say that was great!' " Ms. Maines said. " 'I really like that new song.' "

"And I go, 'But two million tops, right?' And he goes, 'What?' And I said, 'I saw your show when you said we wouldn't sell more than two million, tops.' And he was like, 'Oh, ah, well, two million's pretty good these days, right?' And I was just like, 'Right, yeah. You were saying it in a positive way.' "

Ms. Robison interrupted, laughing. "That's what you call a no-spin zone."

"So then he was just backtracking," Ms. Maines continued. "He says: 'We really respect what you did. And we really respect that you stand up for yourself and blah blah blah. We just wish you would say it over here.' And I said, 'I'll say it over here.' "

The complaint that she criticized the president on foreign soil has been a talk-radio talking point. Ms. Maines dismisses it. "It wasn't like we played 20 shows in America and I was saving up this comment for London," she said. "I was in London when the war was about to start. That's where I said it. I would have said it anywhere, because I didn't think that it was a bad thing to say or a controversial thing to say."

(The next day on "The O'Reilly Factor," Mr. O'Reilly acknowledged that Ms. Maines had "chided" him. He mentioned the radio boycott but did not endorse it. "Not Ready to Make Nice" is "a pretty good song," he said. "There's no reason not to play it.")

Ms. Maines's free speech was costly. Country radio stations were bombarded with calls demanding that the Dixie Chicks be dropped from playlists. Within days, songs from the Chicks' 2002 album, "Home," virtually disappeared from American airwaves. They had the No. 1 country single that week with "Travelin' Soldier," which mourns a soldier killed in Vietnam; it plummeted to No. 63.

The Dixie Chicks' two previous albums, "Wide Open Spaces" (1998) and "Fly" (1999), had each been certified "diamond" for shipping more than 10 million copies in the United States. Without airplay, "Home" stalled that March at six million.

"I understand everybody was in a place of fear, and everybody's nerves were on edge, and mothers were sending their sons and daughters off to war, and tensions were high," Ms. Maguire said. "But you know when it continues and continues and people are still mad about it, I think back to those words and think: How is that bad, what she said? It's so harmless. It's so nothing."

The United States concerts on the Dixie Chicks' tour were already sold out. Promoters offered refunds, although there were more requests for new tickets than there were returns. Protesters showed up outside concerts; others burned Dixie Chicks albums.

"We have video footage of this lady at one of the shows protesting, holding her 2-year-old son," Ms. Maines said. The woman commanded her son to shout along with an angry chant. "And I was just like, that's it right there. That's the moment that it's taught. She just taught her 2-year-old how to hate. And that broke my heart."

The band received death threats, including at least one, in Dallas, that the [F.B.I.](#) considered credible. A newspaper printed Ms. Maines's home address in Austin, Tex., and she ended up moving first outside the city and then to Los Angeles. On the American tour a handful of boos were drowned out by fervent cheers. Suddenly there was more at stake than toe-tapping tunes.

In a way there always had been. The Dixie Chicks were never a typical country act. They got started in Texas, not Nashville. And their music is built around a country rarity: female instrumentalists. Ms. Robison plays fiddle, and Ms. Maguire plays banjo; they are sisters,

and they helped found the Dixie Chicks as a bluegrass band in Dallas in 1989. After Ms. Maines replaced the group's lead singer in 1995, the Dixie Chicks became a voice of assertive, irreverent femininity in mainstream country. They also brought the sound of the banjo, once considered "too country," back to country radio.

While the Dixie Chicks' music was never confrontational, each album grew bolder. In the upbeat "Goodbye Earl," a hit from "Fly," an abused wife murders her husband and gets away with it. The album "Home" — made in Austin and produced by the Dixie Chicks themselves along with Lloyd Maines, Natalie's father — deliberately set aside the slick, electric sound of current country for a largely acoustic, bluegrass-rooted production and some haunted songs.

After their own tour ended — it was the top-grossing country music tour of 2003 — the Dixie Chicks joined the Vote for Change concert series supporting [John Kerry](#). They had babies; Ms. Maguire and Ms. Robison both had twins. And they decided to record their next album in Los Angeles. The producer they chose was Rick Rubin, who has made albums with the Beastie Boys, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, [Johnny Cash](#) and Shakira. The Incident had sparked Mr. Rubin's interest.

"After the Incident everyone started taking what they said seriously," Mr. Rubin said by telephone from Los Angeles. "To take a band that's popular not for that reason and give them that power seemed very exciting.

"It's the biggest thing that's ever happened to them, and it rattled them and it changed them," he added. "The pain of it is really lingering. I thought they needed to somehow address what happened in a way that was truthful about how they felt, whatever that was. I just wanted it to be an honest reflection of that, but also told in a way that if you didn't know what happened to them and just heard the songs, you might relate to it anyway."

On previous albums the Dixie Chicks wrote the more lighthearted songs and got serious material from other songwriters. This time, Ms. Maines said, "We knew we had things to write about." Mr. Rubin brought in co-writers including Gary Louris, from the Jayhawks, and Dan Wilson, from Semisonic. "They took the fear out of us," said Ms. Maines. "You know, 'You need to say that because that's the truth and that's the way you feel.' "

The studio band included the Chili Peppers' drummer, Chad Smith, and the guitarist Mike Campbell from Tom Petty's Heartbreakers. Mr. Rubin encouraged the Dixie Chicks to experiment on arrangements. With its layered acoustic guitars and elaborate vocal harmonies, "Taking the Long Way" often has more in common with 1970's Fleetwood Mac than with bluegrass or the Southern-rock electric guitars of the Nashville Music Mafia behind Gretchen Wilson and Big & Rich. ("Home" included the Dixie Chicks' version of Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," which became a hit single.)

"I Like It" evolves from stark acoustic guitar to an ebullient Motown beat, while the gorgeous "Lullaby" uses no drums at all, as vocal harmonies cascade amid gently picked strings.

The Dixie Chicks sound determined not to whine on "Taking the Long Way," and they focus on personal reactions, not protests. The album is a defiant autobiography of their career, and "Not Ready to Make Nice" mentions the death threats after the Incident. But until it does, the song could be about the resentment following any breakup or betrayal.

"Lubbock or Leave It," a fierce country-rocker, describes Ms. Maines's Texas hometown as a hypocritical "fool's paradise" with "more churches than trees," blind to its own problems. But there aren't many other specifics on the album. Without the Dixie Chicks' back story, the songs work as meticulous pop vows of loyalty and determination.

Still, the Incident keeps peeking through the pretty arrangements. The countryish mandolin and pedal steel guitar of "Everybody Knows" carry the confession: "All the things I can't erase from my life/Everybody knows." An affectionate ballad, "Easy Silence," praises a companion who provides a refuge when "Anger plays on every station/Answers only make more questions." In the fiddle-topped waltz "Bitter End," one verse mocks fair-weather supporters: "As long as I'm the shiniest star,/Oh there you are." The album's finale, a gospel-soul anthem called "I Hope," insists, "I don't wanna hear nothin' else/About killin' and that it's God's will."

Three years after the Incident the Dixie Chicks insist that it liberated them. "When, no matter what you do, everybody's going to punch holes in it, then you just go and you do what you want," Ms. Maguire said. "And that's the most freeing place to be."

Ms. Maines added: "It will mean a lot to me if people buy the album just sort of out of protest. The naysayers and the people who were so organized to take us down did a really good job. And they succeeded. So it feels good to let the music win out in the end and say, 'Even your hatred can't stop what people want to listen to.' "

A smiling Ms. Maguire had the last word. "See you at the diamond record party," she said.

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