



## The Republican.

### Dixie Chicks back with sizzling disc

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Dixie Chicks, "Taking the Long Way," (Open Wide/Columbia) ¶¶

When Dixie Chicks' singer Natalie Maines verbally ripped President George W. Bush from a stage in London in 2003, it was worth wondering whether her band would still have a career left after the smoke had cleared.

After all, this wasn't like some radical left-wing rocker taking a swipe at the man in charge. This was a country music singer. And country is one musical genre that typically goes hand 'n' hand with God, the flag and apple pie. Plenty of mainstream country music fans, country radio stations and country promoters didn't take kindly to Maines' words, and for awhile it looked like she might end up as her generation's answer to Jane Fonda.

There were boycotts of Dixie Chicks' music and, according to Maines, there were even death threats amid the uproar.

But while Maines and her mates - Emily Robison and Martie Maguire - may have enraged some, they certainly didn't crash. In fact, their 2003 tour grossed \$62 million - the most in one year for any country act in history.

Now comes the group's first studio album since the controversy and here's betting it won't crash either.

"Taking the Long Way," is fully fueled and plenty potent, a crisp mix of country, bluegrass and rock, featuring 14 songs, produced by Rick Rubin and penned by the Chicks and some fine rock writers, including Semisonic's Dan Wilson, Gary Louris of the Jayhawks, Pete Yorn, bluesman Keb' Mo and Sheryl Crow.

To their credit the trio doesn't dismiss "the incident," but they get it over with quickly in the defiant "Not Ready to Make Nice." It's a bold song, with a mad-as-hell sentiment and it's getting a lot of initial attention. But thankfully, the trio doesn't dwell on all that went down in 2003, because that would likely get old in a hurry. Instead, they focus on making the vibrant sounds that have helped them become the biggest selling female group ever, with more than 30 million albums sold.

The set sizzles from the high-energy opening "The Long Way Around," through the gentle ballads "Lullaby" and "Baby Hold On," to the snarling rocker "Lubbock or Leave It," which details Maines' disillusion with her own Texas hometown, complete with the references to the ironic painting of Buddy Holly at the local airport, which locals can reportedly see as they get on a plane.

Instrumentally, the album is typically tasty - check out the strings flowing together on the standout "Voice Inside My Head" - and it doesn't hurt that Rubin enlisted some A-list musicians to complement the trio, including Red Hot Chili Peppers' drummer Chad Smith and two of Tom Petty's Heartbreakers, Benmont Tench and Mike Campbell.

Like Petty, The Dixie Chicks won't back down. The new disc is deeply satisfying and marks a major accomplishment for a crew that held the line when the going got tough. Call them defiant, call them controversial, but never call them quitters.

Susan Cagle, "The Subway Recordings," (Lefthook/Columbia) i

She was discovered singing in subways in New York City, so it makes perfect sense that Susan Cagle's major label debut emanates from the underground.

"The Subway Recordings" consists of six tracks recorded at Times Square Station in New York during rush hour and four songs recorded late in the evening at Grand Central Station. So there's plenty of authentic subway sounds on this live set, but nothing that can undermine the soaring voice of this remarkable singer.

Cagle, who had lived in more than 10 countries by the time she was 14, possesses a powerhouse voice and a flair for jangling pop songs, like the set-opening "Shakespeare," the guitar-chiming "Manhattan Cowboy" and the irresistible "You Know."

At times, there's repetitiveness to the material. And though nothing is bland, Cagle needs to branch out more with her repertoire. But since 2001, she has sold more than 30,000 of her homemade CDs while singing in New York City subways. Listen to this and it all makes perfect sense. The underground never sounded so good.

Fred J. Eaglesmith, "Milly's Cafe," (AML) ii<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

Rough-edged Canadian singer/songwriter Fred Eaglesmith may not have the biggest fan base in the world, but he's certainly got one of the most loyal. That devoted following (known as "Fredheads") has kept him going for more than 25 years into what is now his 16th album, "Milly's Café."

Like many of its predecessors the disc finds Eaglesmith singing songs about simple people, traveling through their everyday lives. And while there's always a touch of sadness in some of Eaglesmith's best work, there seems to be more than the usual on this 10-song (and one hidden bonus track) offering, starting with the weary tale "18 Wheels."

Sad and mellow titles, including the reflective "Rocky," the love-lost lament "Kansas" and the mandolin-backed saga of the downside of the American dream, "Sign on the Wall," dominate the disc.

Even though this doesn't match some of Eaglesmith's best offerings, there are still a couple of classic songs here, particularly the beautiful, harmonica-traced ballad "Thinkin' 'bout Her," and the straight country gem "Mrs. Hank Williams."

For purchasing information on the Internet go to [www.fredeaglesmith.com](http://www.fredeaglesmith.com)

The Heavy Blinkers, "The Night and I Are Still So Young," (Cooking Vinyl) i<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

Hailing from Halifax, Nova Scotia, The Heavy Blinkers are anything but heavy and instead occupy that glistening sunrise of a musical terrain known as orchestral pop. Their music is dreamy, arty, full of harmonies and sweet echoes of the "Pet Sounds" and "Smile" era Beach Boys, Big Star, Burt Bacharach, The Left Banke and other critically beloved acts.

The quintet, powered by chief songwriter Jason Macisaac, worked with 25 other musicians to craft this richly detailed disc, which is the Blinkers' fourth full-length release.

The time machine spins back to the late 1960s and early '70s frequently here, with the piano pop of "Try Telling That To My Baby," set neatly against other intriguing songs, such as the uplifting "He Heard His Song," the jaunty, high-harmony filled "In The Morning" and the electric keyboard, string- and horn-filled standout "Unseasonably Sad."

### Rarities and reissues

Johnny Cash, "Personal File," (Columbia/Legacy) i

Johnny Cash is gone but his legacy rolls on, from last year's acclaimed biopic to boxed sets of classics and now this double disc set of 49 previously unreleased tracks culled from the archives at his "House of Cash" estate in Hendersonville, Tenn.

These are stark songs Cash recorded on his own, backed only by his acoustic guitar, almost all of them taped in the 1970s. There are vintage ballads, some contemporary covers and a series of originals - most of which appear on the faith-filled second disc.

Part of the enjoyment is hearing Cash tell a few stories before the songs, such as how he sang "Far Away Places" at a talent show when he was a kid and got two votes. Musically, there are some significant standouts but they are definitely scattered about this overflowing album. Among the highlights are versions of the Louvin Brothers' "When I Stop Dreaming," Doug Kershaw's "Louisiana Man," John Prine's "Paradise" and a couple of vintage Irish songs, "Galway Bay" and "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen."

Frankly though, there are some pretty strange selections tossed in too, like the extraordinarily maudlin "The Engineer's Dying Child" and the bizarre 1907 epic poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee." And disc two is geared strictly toward those who thoroughly savor Cash's spiritual recordings. He recorded countless during his career and the 24 songs on Disc 2 add to the list, with notable highlights being the originals "Matthews 24 (Is Knocking on the Door)" and "Sanctified."

### DVD spotlight

Kate Bush, "Under Review - An Independent Critical Analysis," (MVD/Sexy Intellectual) ĩ

The latest in a series of documentary DVDs out of England focusing on artists such as The Velvet Underground, Syd Barrett and The Smiths, this 90-minute film is devoted to one of the U.K.'s most enigmatic artists, Kate Bush.

It's well worth noting that the DVD is not authorized by Bush, a fact made clear on the package - and on her Web site - but it's nevertheless likely to appeal to many of her dedicated followers. Yet it's pretty dry, a scholarly attempt at chronicling the singer's career, dominated by interviews with the likes of DJ Paul Gambaccini and journalist Phil Sutcliffe.

Nevertheless there are numerous clips culled from interviews with Bush herself and performance or video excerpts of the reclusive singer delivering some classic tracks, including "Wuthering Heights," "Running Up That Hill," and "Cloudbusting," the latter which features actor Donald Sutherland.

Unfortunately, a lot of that video footage isn't visually up to par, the type of thing which can occur when the rights to the original material aren't available. How they got away with doing all that legally is worth wondering, but this is out there during a time when there is precious little else by Bush available on commercial DVDs. Rating scale: ĩ (poor) to ĩĩĩ (a classic) Reach Kevin O'Hare at [kohare@repub.com](mailto:kohare@repub.com)

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