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Hangin' with the Chicks

USD law professor's cool gig: touring and blogging for a controversial trio

By John Wilkens
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Everybody needs a title, and Junichi Semitsu's is management assistant. He jokes that it sounds much better than "creepy Asian guy who keeps following the Dixie Chicks around with a notepad."

That's what Semitsu, a 32-year-old law professor at the University of San Diego, is getting paid to do this year: Hang out with the controversial band, jot down thoughts and impressions, and post them on the Internet.

He's an "embedded blogger," apparently the first of its kind. Many musicians blog, and record companies sometimes send their own publicists on tour with bands, but Semitsu is an independent contractor with an all-access pass and the freedom to write pretty much whatever he wants.

It is, he admits, "one of the coolest jobs in the universe."

He was there when the Chicks were interviewed for "60 Minutes," when they appeared on the David Letterman show, when they opened for the Eagles at a concert in England. (He wrote about mistaking Don Henley for a groundskeeper.)

He's watched them rehearse in a Texas warehouse; watched them sign autographs in New York; watched them gather for a pre-performance hygiene check ("where each of the Chicks inspects each other's nostrils and teeth to make sure that everything is free and clear").

The term "embedded" hints at journalists who travel with the military in Iraq, and although he knows he's not getting shot at, Semitsu thinks the label is appropriate. In the world of popular music, nobody's been under siege like the Dixie Chicks have for the past three years, ever since "The Incident."

That was when lead singer Natalie Maines told a London concert audience, "Just so you know, we're



MSN photos
"Embedded blogger" Junichi Semitsu said the Dixie Chicks don't talk much about the controversy. "They are excited about their new music, ready to move on."

ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Her remark triggered protests and death threats. Country radio, which made them wealthy and famous, turned its back.

When it came time to market the band's first post-firestorm album, the recently released “Taking the Long Way,” Columbia Records executives knew they'd have to try something different. They partnered with MSN on a Web site, dixiechicks.msn.com.

“We weren't sure what kind of support we'd get from radio,” said Samantha Saturn, vice president of digital media marketing for Sony BMG, Columbia's parent company. “The Dixie Chicks wanted to find an exciting new way to connect with their fans, involve them in the new music, the tour, their lives.” (In its first month, the album went platinum.)

Cameron Death, senior business development manager at MSN, said a blog was included as a way to give people “a real and authentic look at life with the Dixie Chicks, something beyond just spin or press releases.”

The first choice for a blogger was a music journalist from Seattle, but when she met with the band, the chemistry reportedly wasn't right. Then MSN executives trolled the Internet and came across poplicks.com, a blog Semitsu writes with a friend.

“He had a tone and an angle that was similar to how the Chicks approach life,” said Death (pronounced Death). “There was a healthy dose of sarcasm, a great sense of humor and great honesty.”

Semitsu was born in Fresno, grew up in Hanford and earned a bachelor's degree in economics and a law degree at U.C. Berkeley. He was a civil lawyer for 59 weeks, didn't like it, and then found a passion for teaching. He instructs first-year students at USD.

When MSN contacted him in early February and asked for more writing samples, he thought it was a form letter. He wasn't even sure he wanted to apply. Although he knew the band's music – as a wedding DJ he occasionally played their songs – he was more into hip-hop than country.

Besides, he was getting married in a month. He was busy. But he'd always been intrigued by what happened to the Dixie Chicks. Why did they become a lightning rod while other entertainers who made more scathing comments about the president escaped boycotts?

“I knew as they were touring lots of controversy would come up, and I wanted to be in the middle of it,” he said. So he sent some samples, and three days before his wedding, he was hired to do the blog.

“At that point, I hadn't met anyone – no one from MSN, no one from the Dixie Chicks,” he said. “I thought it was odd. What band in the world would hire someone without finding out whether he has body odor?”

When he got back from his honeymoon, MSN flew him to Texas to meet the band. Even then he figured it might be an elaborate practical joke. He didn't believe it was real until he walked into a warehouse in Austin and saw Emily Robison, one of the Chicks, and she greeted him by name.

■ ■ ■

He's not always sure what his role is. Journalist? Fan club president? Radio-contest winner? He doesn't want to bite the hand that feeds him, but he doesn't want to give it a manicure, either.

So far, the blog has been a mixture of lengthy ruminations (what “60 Minutes” left on the cutting-room floor, what fake names the Chicks use when they check into hotels) and snippets (Maines likes Sudoku, Martie Maguire hates coffee).

He said he e-mails his dispatches to band members before they are posted so they can be screened for privacy (the Chicks' seven kids are mostly off-limits) and business-confidentiality concerns. He thinks that's a fair trade for the access he's been granted.

"They've groaned a few times at my observations, but they haven't edited me for content." He said Maines still ribs him about the time he wrote that she's always late for appointments.

Similarly, MSN copy edits the pieces, but with a light hand. Semitsu said he can remember only one instance when the Web site's editors trimmed something, "an innuendo that went too far."

Samantha Saturn, from Sony BMG, said the Chicks felt strongly about having an independent voice along for their bumpy ride, and they like Semitsu and his writing. Judging from his blog, he enjoys their company, too.

Because of the political whirlwind that surrounds the band, people automatically assume that the three women spend all their time talking about either "The Incident" or current events, Semitsu said. But that's not the case.

"They have strong beliefs, and they are very well read, but most of the time they are talking about what they did last night, or their families, or gossiping about celebrities, just like everybody else. It's just that when they do express a political opinion now, it's blasted around the world, and often contorted."

When he's with the band, he prefers not to be introduced as a blogger, because he's afraid people will be too guarded and prevent him from getting a true picture of what's happening.

The Chicks figured out a way around that by giving him the title of management assistant, which has since been abbreviated in a fashion not suitable for a family newspaper. (If you must know, it's the first three letters of each word.)

He said the title has meant an expansion of duties. Once when the Chicks were getting ready to perform, Robison removed gum from her mouth to throw it away but there was no trash can nearby. Semitsu offered his open hand. ("Hello, eBay," he wrote.)

Another time, on their way to the concert with the Eagles, Robison had him carry a bra for her. "They like to have some fun with me," he said.

Semitsu, who lives in Dana Point, is back in California for a few weeks, working his way through a backlog of material to post on the blog and spending time with his wife, Dima. He said he's grateful for her trust. "Not many wives would let their husbands go off right after the honeymoon to hang out with three other women," he said.

He'll rejoin those women soon for rehearsals and then the early stages of the "Accidents and Accusations" tour, which opens July 21 in Detroit. In the fall, he'll be juggling the blog with his teaching.

If there are protesters outside the shows, Semitsu hopes to watch them in action, maybe interview them. The Chicks have told him funny stories about earlier demonstrations, like the lady who carried a toilet seat as a symbol of where she believed the band's career was headed.




CRISSY PASCUAL
/ Union-Tribune
USD professor Junichi Semitsu first
thought the offer to be the Dixie Chicks'
blogger might be a prank.

If she's right, at least one guy with a notepad will be there to record the flushing.

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