

SPIEGEL ONLINE - July 11, 2006, 04:50 PM

URL: <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/spiegel/0,1518,426213,00.html>

## Interview with a Dixie Chick

# "Let them Hate Us"

**Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks discusses her group's new album and her outspoken criticism of US President George W. Bush, the boycotts, the death threats, their betrayal by Nashville and why the group is "not ready to make nice."**



AP

The Dixie Chicks, from left, Emily Robison, Natalie Maines and Martie Maguire: "They treated us like lepers."

The Dixie Chicks began their careers in the late 1980s as tradition-conscious country darlings. They fiddled Bluegrass numbers and warbled harmless tunes like "I Want To be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." Their career took off in 1995, when singer Natalie Maines joined the band, which was formed by sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robinson. Their album "Wide Open Spaces" sold 12 million copies in the United States alone. But later, they became a lightning rod for controversy, with songs like "Goodbye Earl," a ditty about domestic violence in which an abused wife takes deadly revenge on her no-good husband and gets away with it. But the fun became a nightmare after a Dixie Chicks concert in 2003 in London, where singer Maines told the crowd and the world that she was "ashamed" that President George W. Bush came from her home state of Texas. Some American conservatives claimed that Maines's remarks were equivalent to treason, and the group faced massive

boycotts from country fans and Nashville and death threats.

With the release of "Taking the Long Way," their first album since falling from grace in large parts of America, the group has departed from its country roots. But the group is no less angry, and the album's first single, "Not Ready to Make Nice," is a call to arms. In the song, Maines, 31, sings: "I'm still mad as hell and I can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should." Despite modest radio play, the album still topped the US pop charts and in Germany it is in the top five.

In a recent SPIEGEL interview in Cologne, Maines discussed the boycotts, the drama and why she remains one of Bush's most outspoken critics.

**SPIEGEL:** Ms. Maines, three years ago, at a Dixie Chicks concert in London, you drew an enormous amount of criticism for railing against US President George W. Bush. In the United States, you were boycotted, your records were destroyed and you even received death threats. Now you're back with a new single, "Not Ready to Make Nice." Haven't you taken enough beatings?

**Maines:** This song had to be written because it did us good. And we also took our time on it because it wasn't easy to find the right tone. It wouldn't have been a good song if it sounded like we were scared. Some time had passed, we had more perspective what happened and this album gave us a chance to reflect and take a stance.

**SPIEGEL:** Are people buying your new album, "Taking the Long Way," to make a political statement against Bush?

**Maines:** To me, the statement is more about having the right to freedom of speech in America. We get lots of letters from people who say that I don't agree with what you said, but you have the right to say that and what is happening to you is both horrible and un-American.

**SPIEGEL:** Have you ever regretted making your comments about President Bush?

**Maines:** If they had offered me an opportunity to take it back and make it go away the next day, I probably would have. I would have done it just to have peace for myself, my family and the band. It wasn't anything that I had been planning. I just went off at the concert in London. But when I realized what I had caused, I certainly got scared. It was a turbulent time back then -- nobody knew if (Iraq) really had weapons of mass destruction or not. I just thought it was suspect that they let this evil person (Saddam Hussein) live in peace for years and years and suddenly they couldn't wait another week (to get rid of him). I've always had a big mouth, but it is my legal right to express my opinion.

**SPIEGEL:** If the right to freedom of expression is an untouchable fundamental American right, does that not make your critics the people who are truly unpatriotic?

**Maines:** It seemed like traditional values had been temporarily suspended. I didn't recognize this country, we didn't know what year it was and we didn't know what country we were in. The Republicans and right-wing groups were very organized and they knew exactly what they were doing. It seems like our media is dominated by right-wing media moguls like Rupert Murdoch (Fox News). If you don't share their opinions, they label you as a terrorist or a person who doesn't have any family values. Unfortunately, people in the US who don't have the time to seek out the truth through neutral news sources have a real problem.

**SPIEGEL:** So perhaps the conservatives are the more patriotic ones?

**Maines:** Not in my view. These people may think they are patriotic, but I think they are irresponsible. And this whole episode has fundamentally changed my definition of patriotism. Do I have a flag on my car? No. Do I stand up for my rights as an American? Yes.

**SPIEGEL:** Is that why you continue, unperturbed, to give interviews that are critical of Bush?

**Maines:** Well, these days there's no danger in that, anyway. Recently, the far-right tried to take me on again over a statement I made to *Time* magazine about not having respect for the president. But their campaign didn't work this time. It's not news that I don't like the president and everyone who was going to hate us already does. You know, we definitely lost fans forever, but we also gained some new ones.

**SPIEGEL:** Still, the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that you had to cancel half of your US tour because of poor ticket sales.

**Maines:** That was everywhere, but it isn't true. Unfortunately, everyone believed it. The truth is that our last tour sold out in a day and sales on this one are taking a bit longer.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you take special security precautions at your concerts?

**Maines:** Yes, it's sad. We have metal detectors at the entrance, just like at an airport. But we wouldn't feel safe up on stage without them. We are very vulnerable.

**SPIEGEL:** Is it true that you come from a Republican family?

**Maines:** Sort of. My parents are the exception, but most in my family are Republicans. But that was never a problem. A lot of members of my family probably don't share my political views, but the nasty and hurtful personal attacks against me angered them. They know who I am, they love me and they stood up for me. Unfortunately, there are crazy people out there who have enough time on their hands to spend their entire days hating us and who go on to the Internet to try to get other people to do the same.

**SPIEGEL:** You're acting very casually about all this now, but you have also been the recipient of death threats. How do you deal with that?

**Maines:** It made me choke up when I read the death threat to myself. But I wasn't scared -- no more so than any other day. We already knew there were people out there who were just nuts. At that point, I already had 24-hour security outside my house. But it was really troubling that other people in my family, including my parents, had to suffer with me. One politician in South Carolina wasted the state's time by proposing a bill in the legislature demanding that the Dixie Chicks play a free concert to ask for the forgiveness of soldiers and their families in the state. Just imagine, the nonsense actually passed. And that wasn't the worst of the lunacy.

**SPIEGEL:** How much worse did it get?

**Maines:** Look at what happened with the Red Cross. We tried to donate \$1 million to them and they wouldn't take it. We were treated like lepers. We received a letter from them saying it wasn't possible to accept our money. One mustn't forget, of course, that the acting president of the United States is also an honorary chairman of the American Red Cross.

**SPIEGEL:** Have these incidents changed your perception of America?

**Maines:** They did -- at least temporarily. I realized that my country and its people were different than I thought they were. I was disappointed and, at the time, I didn't have much hope that things would change. But after the disaster caused by hurricane Katrina, a lot of people woke up and started seeing that things clearly weren't going right in our country. The images of Katrina on our television screens were as unbelievable as Sept. 11, but this time it was something we had done to ourselves. People also started to ask themselves what the point of the Iraq war had been.

**SPIEGEL:** What was especially startling about the outrage over your comments is the fact that cultural and political criticism has had a long tradition in country music. During the 1960s, Johnny Cash created controversy for his support of American Indians. And country super star Garth Brooks even made gay rights an issue in one of his songs.

**Maines:** I always kept thinking about that. When it first emerged, country music was very rebellious. But today, most country singers are automatically conservative. We never fit into this image and it's a relief for us that that has all been settled now.

**SPIEGEL:** There's hardly any link to country music left in your new album. Are you abandoning your previous audience for good?

**Maines:** Well, I think they turned their backs on us. They dropped us like a hot potato the day after this happened, even after we had a seven year relationship with them -- at least the ones in the US. But this didn't happen anywhere else. We weren't going to make an album that catered to them; we didn't trust them. We were stars in this scene for years and we loyally followed the unwritten rules of

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the country radio world. We catered to country first and we never tried to cross over. We kept our distance from the traditional pop radio stations because that kind of ingratiation never went down well in Nashville. We felt totally betrayed by the country music industry. And none of the country radio stations are playing our new single "Not Ready to Make Nice." Instead they asked our label for an alternative single -- a request that we, of course, turned down.



**SPIEGEL:** During the last election, countless musicians and artists took part in the campaign against Bush. But those efforts didn't make much of a difference. Was that disillusioning?

**Maines:** I don't think we ever thought that we could have that much of an impact. Still, it was still important to try. We have to create an alternative voice to counter the media concentration of people like Rupert Murdoch.

**SPIEGEL:** Will Hillary Clinton become the next president?

**Maines:** It would be crazy for the Democrats to make her their candidate. I don't think the country is ready to vote for a woman in the White House.

*The interview was conducted by Christoph Dallach and Matthias Matussek.*