

## Dixies show they're still not chicken



Political ... the Dixie Chicks respond to controversy.

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### **Their new album takes a strong stand, Jane Rocca writes.**

WHEN Natalie Maines, the frontwoman of the Dixie Chicks, told a London audience while touring Europe in 2003 that they were ashamed President George Bush was from their home state of Texas, the band didn't expect those words to cut wounds as deep as they did in the conservative country music scene.

Within days of that show, some of their US fans smashed CDs in disgust, station program directors in the Bible Belt stopped playing Dixie Chicks music, and protesters turned up at their shows holding "Support Bush" signs.

Maines, 31, who made the comment 10 days before the US invasion of Iraq, received a death threat that resulted in her relocating from Texas to Los Angeles.

Now, three years since 2002's *Home* album and the subsequent political controversy, the three-piece band - Maines, banjo player Emily Robison, 33, and her fiddler sister Martie Maguire, 36 - aren't sorry for their actions or words. Their new album, *Taking The Long Way*, is the country band's tart response to the chaos that engulfed their lives after that fateful London gig.

Sitting in the Sony studios in New York's Upper West Side while on a media campaign to promote the new album, Austin-based Maguire, the petite blonde and oldest member of the group, said she was surprised at America's response to the Dixie Chicks' outspokenness.

"You know, not even the Red Cross was interested in taking \$1 million in donation for charity

from us," Maguire says. "We got a nice letter saying, thanks, but no thanks. Every tour cycle we donate money to a charity and we had wanted to put our money where our mouth was. When they turned down our money it made me so sad this could run so deep. You feel like all of a sudden you're poison."

The first single from the band's seventh studio album is titled *Not Ready To Make Nice*; the song is the band's response to being so publicly alienated.

"The song erupted such emotions in me, playing it for a friend or for my husband was so emotional," Maguire says. "I realised I had been so wounded by the experience and it was hitting some place deep that made me want to cry. Natalie and Emily said the same feeling overcame them."

The new album, which opened at No. 2 on the Australian charts, is tough and unapologetic with elements of classic rock fused with hints of country. Other musicians who appear on the album and helped co-write songs include Sheryl Crowe, Neil Finn, Keb' Mo' and Pete Yorn. It was produced by Rick Rubin, of Red Hot Chili Peppers fame.

"It was nice to feel that we had nothing to lose by writing this record," Maguire says. "We could talk about it, or not talk about it," she says, referring to Maines's anti-Bush statement. "And either way people would say we were trying to brush it under the carpet or we should have apologised in the first place."

But despite any controversy, there's no denying the strength of the band's global fan base. In 2003, the Dixie Chicks amassed the biggest one-year gross for a country music act, a whopping \$US62 million (about \$80 million) and the band has sold more than 30 million albums worldwide since 1998.

Their new release may reach new fans. "I just want people with an open mind to buy this record," Maguire says.

"I don't have any expectations in terms of sales. I don't think about that side of things. We weren't a political band but in some ways we are now. We want to say more because we feel a responsibility."

During their self-imposed exile after the Bush controversy, the Dixie Chicks took time out to have more children: Maines has Beckett, Jackson and Slade, Robison has twins Julianna and Henry and another child, Gus, while Maguire has twins Kathleen and Eva.

"We work differently in the studio [as] mums," Maguire says. "We come in at 10am and I wanted to be home at 6pm to take care of my kids."

"We are very hands-on controlling people. It was nice to relinquish some power to someone you can trust. Rick [Rubin, producer] took pressure off us so we could be mums."

Maguire says the Dixie Chicks have nothing to lose by releasing *Taking The Long Way*. But this record is about more than just defending themselves. They also sing about infertility, small-town small-mindedness and Hurricane Katrina.

"We didn't know if our record was ever going to be bought again and while making this we didn't know where we stood," Maguire says. "We thought, 'This might make people mad but we're going to write it' - and here we are."

*Taking the Long Way* is available nationally through Columbia/Sony BMG.

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