

# TIME

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## In the Line of Fire

**They've taken their hits, and now the Dixie Chicks hit back with what may be the best adult pop CD of the year. Er, will anyone buy it?**

By JOSH TYRANGIEL

Natalie Maines is one of those people born middle finger first. As a high school senior in Lubbock, Texas, she'd skip a class a day in an attempt to prove that because she never got caught and some Mexican students did, the system was racist. After Maines joined the Dixie Chicks, and the Dixie Chicks became the biggest-selling female group in music history—with suspiciously little cash to show for it—she and her bandmates told their record label, Sony, they were declaring themselves free agents. (In the high school that is Nashville, this is way worse than skipping class.) Now that she's truly notorious, having told a London audience in 2003, on the eve of the Iraq war, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas," Maines has one regret: the apology she offered George W. Bush at the onset of her infamy. "I apologized for disrespecting the office of the President," says Maines. "But I don't feel that way anymore. I don't feel he is owed any respect whatsoever."

A sizable chunk of their once adoring audience feels the same way about the Dixie Chicks. After Maines' pronouncement, which was vigorously seconded by bandmates Martie Maguire and Emily Robison, the group received death threats and was banned by thousands of country radio stations, many of which still have informal bans in place. The Dixie Chicks have mass appeal—you can't sell 10 million copies of two of your three albums without engaging lots of different people—but country radio is an indispensable part of how they reach people. Programmers say that even now a heartfelt apology could help set things right with listeners, but it's not happening. "If people are going to ask me to apologize based on who I am," says Maines, "I don't know what to do about that. I can't change who I am."

As proof, the first single from the Dixie Chicks' new album, *Taking the Long Way* (out May 23), is called *Not Ready to Make Nice*. It is, as one country radio programmer says, "a four-minute f\_\_\_-you to the format and our listeners. I like the Chicks, and I won't play it." Few other stations are playing *Not Ready to Make Nice*, and while it has done well on iTunes, it's quite possible that in singing about their anger at people who were already livid with them and were once their target audience, the Chicks have written their own ticket to the pop-culture glue factory. "I guess if we really cared, we wouldn't have released that single first," says Maguire. "That was just making people mad. But I don't think it was a mistake."

Whether the Dixie Chicks recover their sales luster or not, the choice of single has turned their album release into a referendum. *Taking the Long Way's* existence is designed to thumb its nose at country's intolerance for ideological hell raising, and buying it or cursing it reveals something about you and your politics—or at least your ability to put a grudge above your listening pleasure. And however you vote, it's tough to deny that by gambling their careers, three Texas women have the biggest balls in American music.

Over lunch in decidedly uncountrified Santa Monica, Calif., where they have lived part time while recording *Long Way*, the Dixie Chicks—in fancy jeans, tank tops and designer sunglasses—seem less like provocateurs than busy moms (they have seven kids in all, ages 1 to 5) amped up by a little free time. In conversation they are loud and unembarrassable, celebrating their lack of boundaries in that escalating, I-can-be-more-blunt-than-you way unique to sisters (which Maguire and Robison are) and women who have shared a tour-bus bathroom. They eagerly discuss the soullessness of Tom Cruise, the creepiness of Charlie Sheen and the price-fixing practices of hair colorists. But sex is the perennial champ, and they are in a constant state of speculation about which of their kids' nannies is most likely to "get some" on tour this summer. "We're all married," says Maguire, "so it's not like we're going to."

One product of their decade together is that the Chicks are loose with pronouns (they use I and we interchangeably) and agree on almost everything, although the ways they agree can be revealing. When the conversation turns to childhood pets and I mention a beloved one-eyed dog, they all make empathetic faces, but Maguire, 36, gets teary, Robison, 33, laughs at her sister's sensitivity, and Maines, 31, says she would have poked around the empty socket "just to check it out." On Iraq, Maguire begins, "The night we sent missiles over ..." while Maines prefers, "When we bombed the s\_\_\_ out of ..."

In the days preceding the March 2003 U.S. invasion, the Dixie Chicks were touring Europe. They don't subscribe to *Foreign Affairs*, but they are daily newspaper readers who back up their positions with a solid understanding of current events. It struck them as natural that in front of a largely antiwar crowd in London, Maines would preface *Travelin' Soldier*, an apolitical ballad about a heartsick Vietnam G.I., with a reference to the world outside the theater. As Maines spoke, though, Robison admits, "I got hot from my head to my toes—just kind of this rush of 'Ohhh, s\_\_\_.' It wasn't that I didn't agree with her 100%; it was just, 'Oh, this is going to stir something up.'"

The celebrity playbook for navigating a scandal is one word long: repent. But apologies are for lapses of character, not revelations of it, and sensing that they were being asked to apologize for their beliefs as much as their timing, the Chicks decided not to back down. "Natalie knows we could have totally convinced her to apologize," says Maguire. "But the fact is, any one of us could have said what she said." Their demure response to the bans and threats—one of which arrived with the date, time and method of Maines' planned assassination—was to appear nude on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* with slurs (saddam's angels) scrawled on their naked bodies. That did not placate the offended. More fans and friends were lost. Gradually, though, the need for round-the-clock security faded.

Now when they talk about "the Incident," as they unfailingly call it, the Dixie Chicks try to write it off as an absurdity. Maines has powerful gusts of indignation and real disdain for a few right-wing websites and talk-show hosts, but what seems to linger most is disappointment in her pre-controversy self. "I think I'd gotten too comfortable living my life," she says. "I didn't know people thought about us a certain way—that we were Republican and pro-war."

With George Bush the official pinata of the music industry (see chart, above) the Dixie Chicks' ordeal should have cooled by now. "We struggle with that all the time," says Maguire. "Are we picking the scab of something that's already healed? Because we don't know what people are thinking." Radio programmers make it their business to know. "They're still through the floor," says Dale Carter, program director at kfkf in Kansas City, Mo. "There's a technology called the Dial where listeners react to songs, and every time we test the Dixie Chicks ..." Carter makes a noise like a boulder falling from a high cliff. "It's not the music, because we're playing them the hits they used to love. It's something visceral. I've never seen anything like it."

The unwillingness of audiences to forgive the band is inseparable from politics. Market research indicates the average country listener is white, suburban and leans to the right, and they need not lean too far to file away an insult against a wartime

President. Still, as the President's support has eroded and growing numbers of Americans (presumably some country-music fans among them) have come to disapprove of both his performance and the decision to go to war, shouldn't there be a proportional feeling of forgiveness toward the Dixie Chicks?

Country Music Television (CMT) has conducted numerous focus groups on the band. "And they're all a great study in the American psyche," says Brian Philips, the channel's executive vice president. "What comes up over and over again is, 'It would have been one thing if they'd said it on American soil, but it's the fact that they said it in Europe that really sets me off!'" There's an accusation of cowardice in there—although Maines insists, "I said it there 'cause that's where I was"—but if the way Philips draws out the syllables in Europe is to be believed, there's also a more personal grievance, an uneasy cocktail of resentment and abandonment. As Tim McGraw, one of the few vocal Democrats in country, and the only major artist who would speak on the record about the Dixie Chicks, says, "You've got to remember this is a family skirmish, and it's possible there's more than one thing going on."

Country music has never been particularly classy, which is one of its principal charms. Less charming is its defensiveness about its station. Unlike rock fans, most of whom are attracted to the music's integration of styles, some country fans—particularly those who call up radio stations in a lather—take it upon themselves to patrol a wall of genre purity. Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash got passes because they were *sui generis*. Not so Buck Owens, who in 1965, after a few experimental dalliances, took out an advertisement with a career-saving loyalty oath, "Pledge to Country Music," in the *Music City News*, promising, "I Shall Sing No Song That Is Not a Country Song." Even now, acts that other listeners reflexively think of as country, from McGraw to Willie Nelson to Shania Twain, are often disparaged for keeping an eye on the Hot 100, playing noncountry songs or showing a little navel. The message from hard-core listeners is, Stay behind the wall.

Early in their careers, the Dixie Chicks did, and they were beloved for it. Maguire and Robison started the group in their teens (Maguire was then at Southern Methodist University; Robison never finished an application to the Air Force Academy) with two singers in their 30s before eventually replacing them in 1995 with Maines, a Berklee College of Music dropout who, at the time, was attending her third college in three years. After a lot of dues paying, the band took over the country charts. Maines has an immensely powerful voice, but she's also capable of barometric emotional adjustments; she almost never oversings and thus sounds great coming out of stereo speakers. Meanwhile, in a medium that values tradition, Maguire and Robison played the most traditional country instruments, fiddle and banjo, and played them well. It didn't hurt either that all three were lookers.

The Chicks have affection for their early work, and songs like *There's Your Trouble* and *Goodbye Earl* will endure, but Maines describes most of it as "amateurish." They didn't write their hits, and the songs they did write were mostly filler. "I never wrote anything from my point of view," Maines says. "Even if it was something that happened to me, I would write it like it was a character and I was telling someone else's story ... That's not very brave."

This is what talented musicians are supposed to do: aspire to get better, braver. But at each step of their evolution, from their feud with Sony (ungrateful!) to the bluegrass album, *Home* (not country enough!), and then, of course, the Incident, the genre's wrath hovered like a jealous boyfriend. "Their old audience feels a little betrayed, a little left behind maybe," says cmt's Philips. That may explain why, as the Chicks and country began their breakup, country fans ran into the arms of brilliant redneck instigator Toby Keith, who displayed a doctored photo of Maines and Saddam Hussein at his concerts.

It also explains why the Dixie Chicks have made such a point of saying good riddance. "I'd rather have a smaller following of really cool people who get it," says Maguire, "who will grow with us as we grow and are fans for life, than people that have us in their five-disc changer with Reba McEntire and Toby

Keith. We don't want those kinds of fans. They limit what you can do." When the group gathered in early 2004 to talk about a new album, none of the three sounded nearly that confident. "You could tell this thing had strengthened them personally but shaken them artistically," says producer Rick Rubin, famous for his work with the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Beastie Boys and on Johnny Cash's haunting American series. "What turned me on, though, was that even though people were divided over what they said, people cared what they said, and that's a very strong position for an artist to be in. For the first time the girls, these cute little girls, had a platform."

Rubin took on the project with the hope—he's way too Zen to make demands—that for the first time in their careers the Dixie Chicks would write all their songs, by themselves and about themselves. As writers they admit they're prone to laziness, like people at a gym who need a personal trainer to force them to concentrate. Gary Louris of the Jayhawks, blues artist Keb' Mo' and Dan Wilson of Semisonic were brought in to co-write and supply discipline, and the band hunkered down in Los Angeles, where Rubin lives, to begin the long and unglamorous work of crafting songs.

Most of the material that emerged over nearly two years of writing was about marriage and kids and modern life as the Dixie Chicks and lots of other people live it. Oblique references to the controversy made their way into a few songs, so Wilson suggested they write one that addressed the issue head on. "Natalie said, 'Does that mean we'd have to forgive the people that were so evil to us?' And I said, 'Maybe it does,'" Wilson recalls. "And with a little wave of her hand, she said, 'Nooooope.' Then the next morning that phrase 'I'm not ready to make nice' appeared."

The song builds to a massive crescendo under lyrics ("It's too late to make it right/ I probably wouldn't if I could/ 'Cause I'm mad as hell/ Can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should") that are explicitly clear. Those who loathe the Dixie Chicks will never get to the end, while those who love them will listen once, say Yeah! and probably not need to go back. It works better as a referendum than as a pop song, but as Robison says, "We wrote it for ourselves, for therapy. Whether or not other people think it was important enough to say, we think it was." Says cmt's Philips: "I hope the audience lets them get this out of their system, because it would be the musical crime of the century if people don't hear this album all the way through."

That's a bit much, but you probably won't hear a better adult pop album this year. Musically, *Taking the Long Way* is full of swaggering country-tinged rock hooks—like a peak Eagles record, except without the misogyny and drug references and the advice to *Take It Easy*. Instead the songs aspire to do what the best pop always does, function as a smart expression of its creators' lives while remaining accessible to its listeners'. There are allusions to the recent past—on the jubilant opener *The Long Way Around* ("It's been two long years now/ Since the top of the world came crashing down") and the breakup song *Everybody Knows* ("I swore they'd never see me cry/ You'd never see me cry")—but they're only obvious if you look for them. Bitter End is a sing-along about fair-weather friends (the group fell out with a few lefty rockers who, amazingly, felt cheated of the nation's opprobrium) and even *Lullaby* is the rare song about kids well crafted enough that the childless could mistake it for a love song. And as things begin to sag a bit in Long Way's final third, the album delivers a knockout, *So Hard*, the first pop song in memory about infertility (Maguire and Robison conceived by in vitro fertilization) and also the catchiest, most complicated love song on the record.

Will anybody buy it? The Dixie Chicks talk about Long Way as the end of their commercial salad days, but they're shrewd enough to know that only suckers choose between art and commerce. "I'm not ready to fly coach," jokes Maguire, and indeed *Taking the Long Way* could easily sub as the title for their marketing plan. They'll tour starting in July and flog the record on a few select talk shows. "Natalie's new motto is, 'What Would Bruce Springsteen do?'" says Robison, laughing. "Not that we're of that caliber, but 'Would Bruce Springsteen do *The View*?'" They're not doing *The View*.

Maines says she's not looking for more battles, but she won't shy away from any either. "Everything was so nice and fine and happy for us for the longest time," she says of their pre-Incident days. "It was awesome to feel those feelings again that I felt in high school: to be angry, to be sure that you're right and that the things you do matter. You don't realize that you're not feeling those feelings until you do. And then you realize how much more interesting life is."

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