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Chicks moving on after 'the incident'

Updated 5/22/2006 1:59 PM ET

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By Elysa Gardner, USA TODAY



Enlarge By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Out front: The Dixie Chicks — Martie Maguire, left, Natalie Maines and Emily Robison — have an album out Tuesday, *Taking the Long Way*. Three years after the band was criticized for a political comment, Maines says, "We're not hiding."

NEW YORK — As the Dixie Chicks dig into room-service lunch in a Midtown hotel suite, lead singer Natalie Maines' very friendly, extremely hairy dog, Banjo, lounges under the table, hoping to catch either a scrap or a nap.

There also is an enormous elephant in the room. And yes, he is a Republican.

It has been more than three years since "the incident," as all three Chicks still call it: when Maines stood on a London stage and, piqued by news that President Bush was about to launch a war in Iraq, told the audience that she and her bandmates were "ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas."

In the days and months that followed, the Texan trio, which had enjoyed 14 top-10 country singles and three multiplatinum albums between 1997 and 2003, found itself shunned by radio and subject to everything from angry, sometimes threatening missives to record-smashing protests.

Maines, 31, and sisters Emily Robison, 33, and Martie Maguire, 36, now have a message for their critics, in the form of a new album, out Tuesday. Produced by rock darling Rick Rubin, who has helped revitalize the careers of icons from Johnny Cash to Neil Diamond, *Taking the Long Way* is the first Dixie Chicks album on which every song is co-written by the band members, with collaborators such as Sheryl Crow, Neil Finn and Tom Petty cohort Mike Campbell.

"We had a lot more to say this time," Maines says. "And we felt like we had nothing to lose. We've always been very honest. But before, we often did it through a veil of humor, in interviews or in songs. This is the first time we've been sort of serious. We're not hiding."

Though *Long Way's* lyrics aren't overtly political, they are deeply, and at times defiantly, personal. "How in the world can the words that I said/Send somebody so over the edge/That they'd write me a letter/Sayin' that I better shut up and sing/Or my life will be over?" Maines asks on the first single, *Not Ready to Make Nice*.

Robison notes, "I have a good friend who's somewhere between a Democrat and a Republican, but definitely more to the right. He e-mailed me the other day, and he was like, 'Did you plan to put your album out when (Bush)'s approval ratings were at 29%?' "

Robison's buddy may have been citing one of the lower of several dipping figures reported in recent polls. But even if, as he suggests, *Long Way* is greeted by a country more sympathetic to Maines' criticism, how country music will receive it could be another question.

On Friday, an article in *Billboard Radio Monitor* noted that *Not Ready* peaked at No. 36 on the publication's country airplay chart, and that a follow-up track, *Everybody Knows*, dropped from No. 48 to No. 50 after just four weeks.

A number of program directors were quoted expressing doubts about the Chicks' future, and specifically questioning the choice of a kickoff single that one executive, Clear Channel regional vice president Steve Gramzay, described as showing "arrogance and disrespect."

Dale Carter, program director of Kansas City's (Mo.) KFKF-FM, who was not featured in the *Radio Monitor* story, recalls that when the Dixie Chicks backlash started in 2003, "We were the only one of three country music stations here that continued to play all the Dixie Chicks music. That was until we got research back indicating our audience didn't want us to play it, and we have continued to get that negative feedback."

But Carter adds that when the trio announced plans last week for a national tour starting July 21, with Kansas City among its stops, "We went on the air and talked about them. And ironically, people in our audience said it was time to take the Dixie Chicks 'out of the penalty box.' A lot of them used that exact term."

Lingering hostility

Carter plans to conduct new studies to determine whether listeners might be ready to embrace the Chicks again, but he and other insiders remain skeptical.

"There's still more anti-pathy toward the group out there, among randomly selected country listeners, than can be explained away as the concerted efforts of a few disgruntled people," says Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming at Edison Media Research. "I've seen a few markets recently where the Chicks look very healthy in music research, but they're the exceptions."

The ambivalence is, it seems, mutual. "I don't think you can speak your mind in country music right now," Maguire says.

"I don't care if they play us, I don't care if they don't," Maines says flatly. "I don't listen to country (radio). But then, I don't listen to any music. I listen to Howard Stern."

If Maines' outspokenness has caused discord within the group, the Chicks are keeping it to themselves. Asked if there was any tension with Robison and Maguire as a result of the Bush-bashing brouhaha, Maines jokes, "I never blamed them!"

Maguire says, more soberly, "One day we'd be laughing about it, baffled that it was even an issue. Then we'd read something that would make us really emotional, angry and sad. A lot of times I felt that Natalie should just not give interviews, because everything she said got twisted. What Emily and I say, too, gets used against her.

"But we never argued about whether Natalie should apologize or not," Maguire adds. "That was whatever she wanted to do, and

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