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Dixie Chicks Leave Their Old Country

By J. Freedom du Lac Washington Post Staff Writer Wednesday, May 24, 2006; Page C01

Having decided, over the past three years, that they couldn't possibly go home again, the Dixie Chicks have opted to give themselves an extreme makeover.

Out, for all intents and purposes: Country music.

In: The catchy, breezy stylings of the Southern California soft-rock scene, circa 1975-1977.

Thus, despite its abundance of fiddle parts and the occasional weeping pedal-steel sound, the new Dixie Chicks album, "Taking the Long Way," has much more in common with Fleetwood Mac than Reba McEntire. In fact, the lush, jangly opener, "The Long Way Around," is a dead ringer for "Rumours"-era Fleetwood; elsewhere, the Chicks expertly channel the Eagles, as on the celebrity culture manifesto "Everybody Knows."

This is not a bad thing: "Taking the Long Way" is a tuneful tour de force, overflowing with rich melodies, soaring harmonies and otherwise sharp songcraft.

Still, many country music fans will likely disapprove of the group's new direction. But, then, what else is new?

The Dixie Chicks, of course, were all but excommunicated from the church of country music in 2003, when the best-selling Texas trio had the temerity to pop off about President Bush and the war in Iraq. "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas," lead singer Natalie Maines said onstage in London that year. The remarks riled up the Chicks' red-state base, leading to a bitter backlash that included radio boycotts of the Chicks' 2002 album, "Home," plus all manner of insults, denunciations and even death threats. ("Home" sold



The Dixie Chicks (Emily Robison, left, Natalie Maines and Martie Maguire) have a new album, "Taking the Long Way." (By Jim Cooper -- Associated Press)

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6 million copies -- half the total of the group's 1998 album, "Wide Open Spaces.")

The trio is still smarting from that boot-stomping, and if you've come to "Taking the Long Way" expecting contrition and conciliation, well, you're in the wrong place.

Especially if you're listening to the album's centerpiece single, "Not Ready to Make Nice." The song opens as something of a dirge, with Maines quietly cooing: "Forget? Sounds good/Forgive? I'm not sure I could." It unfolds slowly, almost politely, but there's no mistaking the group's mood once the defiant chorus kicks in: "I'm not ready to make nice, I'm not ready to back down/I'm still mad as hell . . . can't bring myself to do what it is that you think I should."

Take *that*, Toby Keith!

But wait, there's more on what's likely to stand as one of the best songs of 2006.

In an inspired bit of arranging, the second verse is cut short so that Maines can unload in a swelling, lengthy pre-chorus, on which she seethes: "It's a sad, sad story when a mother will teach/Her daughter that she oughta hate a perfect stranger/And how in the world can the words that I said/Send somebody so over the edge/That they'd write me a letter saying that I'd better shut up and sing or my life will be over?"

To be sure, "Taking the Long Way" isn't all about lashing out. The album includes songs about Alzheimer's ("Silent House"), exes ("Favorite Year"), children ("Lullaby") and infertility ("So Hard"). But make no mistake: The Dixie Chicks are hardly biting their tongues here.

"Easy Silence," for instance, is an elegiac love song, but there's a political undercurrent in the lyrics, as Maines sings of being paralyzed by "accusations, messages and misperceptions" and of living in a world in which "anger plays on every station."

And on the chugging, twangy rocker, "Lubbock or Leave It," she takes a swipe at the small-town mentality of the folks back home. Noting that there's a painting of Buddy Holly in the airport in Lubbock, Maines sings, derisively: "I hear they hate me now, just like they hated you/Maybe when I'm dead and gone, I'm gonna get a statue, too." The song is punctuated by the furious Hammond B-3 vamping of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers keyboardist Benmont Tench, who was part of an ad hoc band assembled by producer Rick Rubin. Rubin also convened Heartbreakers guitarist Mike Campbell and Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith for "Taking the Long Way," which was very much a collaborative effort: Maines, Emily Robison and the fiddle whiz Martie Maguire collaborated on the album's 14 songs with more than a half-dozen writers, including Sheryl Crow, Neil Finn, alt-country godhead Gary Louris and Dan Wilson of Semisonic and Trip Shakespeare.

Despite the excess fingerprints, the album holds together exceptionally well -- save for the inclusion of "Bitter End," an ill-fitting Celtic waltz with a chorus ("Farewell to old friends/Let's raise a glass to the bitter end") that seems to have been designed specifically for future pub singalongs. Either that, or a kiss-off party for the Chicks' former fans.

The Dixie Chicks are scheduled to perform at Verizon Center Aug. 4.

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