

Right-wing campaign against US country music group

David Walsh
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An anti-Bush comment by a member of the three-woman Dixie Chicks has spurred ultra-right elements in the US to launch a witch-hunting campaign against the popular country music group.

Natalie Maines, a member of the group and a native of Texas, told the audience at a recent concert in London, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas." Within days a drive was under way to demand that country music radio stations no longer play the Dixie Chicks' music. Numerous stations immediately caved in to the pressure. The music director of WBBN-FM in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for example, told the press, "We've put them to rest for now. I don't really want to call it a ban. We're choosing not to play them."

Kix 96 (WXFL-FM) in Savannah, Georgia followed suit. Disc jockey Bill West told a reporter that the station took the group off the playlist because Maines's comments were "unpatriotic." A local television station cited the comments of one "enraged fan," the owner of a golf course, who was organizing a bonfire to burn the Chicks' music.

A few hundred protesters near Bossier City, Louisiana, used a 33,000-pound tractor March 17 to crush Dixie Chicks CDs and other items. The protesters referred to themselves as backers of President Bush and Barksdale Air Force Base. One of the demonstrators, cited by the press, was a retired chief master sergeant who served 30 years in the Air Force.

No doubt there are politically backward elements genuinely aroused by Maines's comments, but the entire affair has the smell of a right-wing provocation. Indeed, when a reporter in Hattiesburg, Kevin Walters, went out and interviewed people on the street he found a different story. Walters noted, "Around Hattiesburg the mood of listeners and music buffs seemed to favor,

if not exactly Maines, then her right to voice her opinion."

A Rock Hill, South Carolina station, 107 FM, joined the boycott as well. However, a local newspaper reported, "The controversy is having little impact at area stores, managers say. 'I haven't heard one customer mention it,' said Mark Hamlin, assistant store manager at Wal-Mart. 'It's just like normal.'"

Some country music stations managed to resist the pressure. The management of KNCI in Sacramento, California called the demand for a "total ban" of the Dixie Chicks "un-American.... She, as an American, certainly has the right to express her opinion."

Simon Renshaw, the Dixie Chicks' manager, charged in an email to radio stations distributed by Sony Music that the group was the victim of a political witch-hunt, organized by the extreme right FreeRepublic.com. He wrote to the stations, "Your company is being targeted by a radical right-wing online forum. You are being 'Freeped,' which is the codeword for an organized e-mail/telephone effort attempting to solicit a desired response."

The *Cincinnati Enquirer* was the only major newspaper to carry Renshaw's comments, in which he charged that the protest over Maines's comments was being manipulated. He told the radio stations, "This is an extremely active and well-organized group. As always the 'squeaky wheel gets the grease' and these weasels know how to squeak."

Confirming the stage-managed character of the protest, the *Enquirer* noted that "Complaints didn't arrive at WUBE (105.1) until Monday [after the right-wing campaign began]. Only one person called Thursday when the B105 morning show read the story, says Tim Closson, operations manager. 'We broke the story on Thursday, and got very little reaction to it. We

mentioned it again on Friday, and only got a few calls,' he says. The Chicks remain on B105. Closson says he 'seriously considered indefinitely pulling all Dixie Chicks music ... (but) our decision came down to one thing. We believe in the Constitution. We believe in the freedom of speech.'"

To the role of the extreme right one must add the part played by the corporate giants, whose owners either agree with the neo-fascist elements or cave in to them. *Rolling Stone* magazine's web site carried a story March 19 noting that the so-called boycott of the Dixie Chicks was overblown. The piece cited the comments of radio consultant Jaye Albright, who called the controversy "a tempest in a teapot," adding, "Out of some 2,100 country stations in America, maybe five or six boycotted the Chicks, and most of them only for a day or two as a publicity stunt.... It was very underwhelming, almost laughable."

In a telephone conversation Albright elaborated, indicating that "call-out" research (random telephone surveys used to gauge listener reaction to particular songs) in "the very markets in which stations are backing off from playing the Dixie Chicks' music, shows that the group is number one and number two" in popularity. Albright reported that 15-20 percent of those surveyed were "upset" about Maines's comments and supported the boycott of the group's music, nearly 10 percent agreed outright with her comments and another 60-70 percent "can separate her music from her politics," in other words, opposed a ban. The consultant opposed the boycott as an infringement of free speech, calling it "un-American and stupid" and "ironic, considering that the action in Iraq is called Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Albright added, however, that the controversy was no longer a "tempest in a teapot," now that Cox Radio and Cumulus Broadcasting, two large owners of country music stations, had instructed their outlets to drop the Dixie Chicks' music. As many as 30 percent or more of country stations might now ban the group's music. Cumulus, which owns 50 such stations, issued a statement: "Cumulus Broadcasting has decided to temporarily pull all music by the Dixie Chicks on all of its stations across the country until deemed proper by upper management. This decision was made in respect to The President of the United States, Country Music and Country Radio, Country Music Fans and the State

of Texas."

There is virtually no protest heard anywhere in the media or the recording industry against this blatant act of corporate censorship.



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