

Dixie Chicks stand their ground

Dixie Chicks: Taking the Long Way

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Dixie Chicks: Taking the Long Way (2006 Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.) Produced by Rick Rubin. \$17.99

The new album by the country music group, the Dixie Chicks, *Taking the Long Way*, appears in the aftermath of a media campaign against the group initiated by Clear Channel, Cox Radio and Cumulus Broadcasting, among others. The campaign was launched after the lead vocalist, Natalie Maines, came out against George W. Bush and the war on Iraq in March 2003.

However, the right-wing campaign has largely flopped, and the well-deserved success of this new album—it jumped to Number 1 on the Billboard charts in both the Country and Pop categories and is one of the most popular downloads on the internet—is a huge embarrassment for all those country music pundits who declared the Dixie Chicks’ careers over.

In the music and lyrics of this record, it is clear that the Dixie Chicks have emerged from the witch-hunt more mature and serious, but they have not lost their bearings. As they always have, they perform music with a deep and sincere empathy for real people in real situations. They sing frankly about real life in all its ups and downs: domestic abuse, infertility, the passing of old friends, motherhood, growing up, struggling to make ends meet, war, and falling in and out of love. And they are the best-selling female group in history for a reason: they have a genuine gift for writing and performing straightforward music for fiddle, banjo, and guitar that is both melodically delightful and memorable.

Though their previous music tended to treat its subject matter in the third person, lyrics in this album are entirely in the first person. Some songs make direct reference to the campaign against them. For instance, the song “Not Ready to Make Nice” crescendos to an angry rejoinder directed against all those who tried to prod them back into line.

I made my bed and I sleep like a baby, with no regrets
and I don’t mind sayin’
It’s a sad sad story when a mother will teach her daughter
that she ought to 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 sayin’ that I’d better shut up
and sing or my life will be over?
I’m not ready to make nice.
I’m not ready to back down.

I’m still mad as hell.

The Dixie Chicks have been on the country music scene since 1989. The core of the group, sisters Martie and Emily Erwin (now Martie Maguire and Emily Robison), hail from Addison, Texas, and were regulars on the Dallas-area folk and bluegrass music scene for years. When they joined with singer Natalie Maines in 1995 to form the Dixie Chicks that we know today, their popularity rapidly grew outside the Dallas area. Their albums *Wide Open Spaces* (1998), *Fly* (1999), *Home* (2002) and an album of live music from their *Top of the World* tour together sold 60 million copies. Sony music took for itself nearly all of the revenues from these sales, but the Chicks were able to win back a portion of this sum through a lawsuit in 2002.

“Backlash”

On March 10, 2003, the Dixie Chicks were performing in London—just a few days before a war was launched that, after three years of carnage and counting, has claimed the lives of more than a hundred thousand Iraqis and more than 2,500 American servicemen and women.

The three women were preparing to play their song “Travelin’ Soldier”—a mournful, haunting ballad of a shy American boy, “two days past eighteen,” who meets a pretty young waitress at a small-town diner moments before he is shipped off to Vietnam. He writes letters to the girl from the front, and the two fall in love in correspondence. After waiting longingly for him to return, the girl hears the boy’s name read from a list of war dead.

Maines, preparing the audience for the song, identified a parallel between the invasion and occupation of Vietnam and the impending war in Iraq. The song took on a new significance; American boys just like the one in the song were at that moment saying their farewells to hometown sweethearts at airports and army bases across the US—some for the last time.

The song struck a chord with the largely antiwar crowd in London, as British troops were simultaneously being mustered for deployment abroad.

Maines, a native of Lubbock, Texas, remarked, “Just so you

know, we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas."

Denunciations of the presidential office by major figures in the entertainment industry are not entirely uncommon. However, the American country music industry, including the country music radio stations, is controlled by some of the most fanatical right-wing political forces in the United States. Lou Dobbs, Rush Limbaugh, Laura Schlessinger, Jay Sekulow, Pat Robertson, and Michael Savage all have talk shows aired on country music radio stations. For one of the most popular American country music groups of all time to disparage the president was simply too embarrassing to these elements.

A major campaign was mounted by powerful figures in the country music industry against the Dixie Chicks, and performers Toby Keith and Reba McEntire, among others, were mobilized to denounce them. For a sense of the crudity of these attacks, consider that at Toby Keith concerts, prominently displayed was a doctored photograph featuring Maines with Saddam Hussein.

Country music stations were called upon to remove all Dixie Chicks music from the airwaves, and rabid talk radio hosts denounced the women as traitors and accused them of betraying their fans. One frenzied caller to such a program raged, "I think they should send Natalie [Maines] to Iraq, strap her to a bomb and just drop her over Baghdad." Dixie Chicks Destruction Day was declared across the south, and at sparsely attended rallies, the Chicks' records were bulldozed.

Tremendous resources were thrust into this right-wing witch-hunt by Clear Channel, which owns 60 percent of the country music stations in the country. Clear Channel imposed a ban on Dixie Chicks music on their airwaves, and helped to organize and fund the anti-Dixie Chicks bulldozings. Clear Channel's chairman, L. Lowry Mays, has financial and political ties with the Bush family.

The corporations Cox Radio and Cumulus Broadcasting, which also control a substantial fraction of country music stations in the country, jumped on the bandwagon. Cumulus, which owns 50 stations, immediately demanded that all Dixie Chicks music be censored. Simultaneously, country music "experts" everywhere began categorically declaring that the Chicks had "ruined" their careers.

President Bush even pronounced the Chicks' careers over. "The Dixie Chicks are free to speak their mind," he told Tom Brokaw of NBC. "They can say what they want to say. They shouldn't have their feelings hurt when just because people don't want to buy their records when they want to speak out."

As a result of this campaign, the Dixie Chicks' lives were literally endangered—they received numerous death threats from people driven into a frenzy by the endless attempts to whip up hatred against the artists. On "Larry King Live," Maines recalled the atmosphere during the initial days of the campaign.

"[T]here was a mother holding her two-year-old son outside of a show protesting, and telling our camera, 'Screw 'em, screw 'em!' And then turned to her two-year-old and said, 'Say screw 'em!' And that just made me bawl because I just witnessed someone learned to hate and I didn't know that kind of hatred existed."

Although the right-wing campaign was no doubt able to mobilize

a certain constituency against the Dixie Chicks, there was nothing "grassroots" about it, and by and large the so-called "backlash" has been exaggerated in the media. The Dixie Chicks have always sung straightforwardly and sincerely about real life, real people, and real events—this is what earned these talented musicians their popularity in the first place. For most fans, it came as no surprise that these sensitive, decent artists were shocked by the ignorance, callousness, and bloodthirstiness that characterized the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq.

The Dixie Chicks were initially bewildered by the media frenzy, and fearing that they had offended their fans, issued an apology on their website. However, as it became clear that the "backlash" was being organized by a very narrow section of powerful people in the country music industry, and that the majority of their fans had not deserted them, the Dixie Chicks found their footing and stood their ground. Asked by *Time* magazine last month about her initial apology, Maines said, "I don't feel that way anymore. I don't feel he [Bush] is owed any respect whatsoever."

On "Sixty Minutes" and "Primetime," as well as on other programs during the past three years, the Dixie Chicks have endlessly been prodded for a *mea culpa*. Diane Sawyer began her interview with the musicians by asking stupidly, "Do you feel awful about saying that about the president of the United States?"

To their credit, these Texans held their own. Earlier this week, on "Larry King Live," Emily Robison said that until March 2003, the Dixie Chicks did not think of themselves as a "political band," but King interjected, "You are now." Robison nodded.

"We are now and we will take that role seriously. I think at the time, it's just odd, you know, it was meant as a topical part of the show because we were on the eve of war. Getting up on a soapbox is not, you know, what she intended or what we like to do. But, still, we like to be honest, in the course of doing interviews and everything else, when this is what is happening in the world, I think you have to be honest about it. We don't have to shut up because we happen to be musicians."

The author, who fondly recalls hearing these musicians perform before a small audience at the Texas State Fair in Dallas more than a decade ago, is happy to share a home state with the Dixie Chicks. Besides, after all, George W. Bush was born and raised in Connecticut.



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