

“That’s interesting”

Dixie Chicks sweep Grammy Awards

Tom Carter
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In another sign that the wind is starting to blow in a new direction, the Dixie Chicks collected five awards in Sunday’s Grammy award ceremony, one in each of the categories in which they had been nominated, including best country album, record of the year and song of the year for their 2006 album “Taking the Long Way.”

“That’s interesting,” remarked Natalie Maines, the group’s lead vocalist, as she accepted the award for best country album to a standing ovation.

Receiving five Grammys in a single night is one thing. The Dixie Chicks, outspoken opponents of the war in Iraq and official establishment patriotism, won these five in the face of a broad and deliberate campaign by the most powerful forces in the country music industry to destroy their careers and limit the circulation of their music.

Maines, true to form, did not miss the opportunity to thumb her nose at her enemies. “Hah—hah,” she sang from the podium.

In March of 2003, at a performance in London, the Dixie Chicks made clear their opposition to the imminent invasion of Iraq. With over 60 million records sold, the Texan trio was already one of the most popular country music groups in history, famous for composing and performing distinctive melodies for guitar, fiddle, and banjo as well as for frank, sincere lyrics.

In a break between songs at that performance, Maines felt compelled to preface a song about the tragedy of a young soldier’s death in Vietnam with some commentary on the present situation. “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas,” remarked Maines, herself a native of Lubbock, Texas.

These comments were met with a massive and

fanatical offensive in the American media initiated by Clear Channel, Cox Radio and Cumulus Broadcasting, which together control an overwhelming majority of US country music radio stations. Dixie Chicks music was banned from the radio airwaves, while talk show hosts on the same stations rabidly denounced the women as “traitors.” “Dixie Chicks Destruction Day” was declared, and small rallies were staged at which the artists’ albums were bulldozed.

Country music celebrities Reba McEntire and Toby Keith were tapped to attack the Dixie Chicks, and on nightly news specials, country music “experts” were called in to explain how they had “ruined” their careers.

President George W. Bush felt obligated to join in. “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 just because people don’t want to buy their records when they want to speak out.”

Of course, this well-funded and coordinated operation had its initial effects. Some very backward people were indeed whipped into a patriotic frenzy by the media bombardment, although it was consistently reported in the media that the sentiments of these few were representative of the American population as a whole. The Dixie Chicks actually began receiving death threats from the most hysterical of these. Simultaneously, ticket sales for their future performances fell precipitously—in no small part due to the radio boycott.

The Dixie Chicks were clearly surprised and overwhelmed by the ferocity of the response at first, and quickly released an apology addressed to their fans. However, as it became clear that by and large ordinary people were not responsible, and that the backlash was being engineered at the highest levels of the country

music industry, they found their footing and have since refused to back down.

Although interviewers have since endlessly attempted to obtain from the artists some sign of regret, some admission of guilt, or some assertion of patriotism, nothing of the kind has been forthcoming. Asked by *Time* magazine in May of 2006 about the initial apology, Maines said, “I don’t feel that way anymore. I don’t feel he [Bush] is owed any respect whatsoever.”

“I don’t understand the necessity for patriotism,” she said in a June 2006 interview with the *Telegraph*. “Why do you have to be a patriot? About what? This land is our land? Why? You can like where you live and like your life, but as for loving the whole country . . . I don’t see why people care about patriotism.”

The album “Taking the Long Way” was released in 2006, and contains a number of songs that make reference to the campaign against them. Of these, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” which won the Grammy for best song, is the most direct.

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’ five Grammys are a slap in the face of the right-wing radio station owners and the country music establishment, whose “backlash” has now fallen flat. Moreover, the award success vindicates the stand taken by Maines and her bandmates. There’s more than enough spinelessness to go around in the film and music business in America. A willingness to stick one’s neck out; to sacrifice, temporarily or even permanently, a portion of one’s fame and celebrity; to swim against the current—these are qualities that ought to be encouraged. It was pleasant to see them appreciated and rewarded Sunday night.



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