

Apolitical Band Gets Call to Conscience

Country Trio Turns Angst to Good Measure with New Mainstream Act

March 20, 2007

Back in 2003, the Dixie Chicks were performing sound checks across the Atlantic as American troops advanced on Iraq. Little did they know that the war was about to open up on another front.

On the afternoon before their concert in London, the biggest U.K. anti-war protest in history drew over a million people out in the streets to condemn the invasion.

The adrenalin was still flowing thick when the musicians appeared on stage that night. Between songs, lead vocalist Natalie Maines, 28, added her sentiments to the debate.

"Just so you know," she told the audience, "we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas."

The fans went wild.

Back in the U.S., the world of country music also reacted. And it wasn't pretty.

Who are these girls, anyway?

At the time, most Americans outside the red states had barely heard of the Dixie Chicks. Martie Maguire and her sister Emily Robison started the group in 1989. With their square dance dresses and Dollie Parton hairdos, in the beginning they looked like something straight out of the Grand Ol'



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Robison, Maines and Maguire talk to the press in **Shut Up and Sing!**

Opry.

Maguire played the fiddle while Robison twanged on her banjo and slide guitar. Lead vocalist Natalie Maines, the daughter of steel guitar legend Lloyd Maines, joined up in the mid nineties and the band developed a more contemporary sound.

Nowadays, Maines is the driving force behind the band. Born in 1974, not long after the death of Jim Morrison, her angst-filled vocals and grasp of political undercurrents suggest fascinating parallels with the former rock icon. Maines has two kids, an actor husband, lives in Los Angeles, and has no drug habit that we know of.

With five children between them, Robison and Maguire still call the Lone-Star state their home.

However, in 2003, the trio was not known for taking sides in

partisan politics. During those patriotic times when America was waging war against Osama bin Laden, the Dixie Chicks were called upon to sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl. "Country music sort of puts their musicians in a box," Barbara Kopple, the veteran documentary filmmaker, says of the band in a recent interview with the news show Democracy Now. "They're expected to be very conservative in their leanings, and these were three all-American girls that nobody ever expected this from."

Kopple followed the band for three years in the course of making her new film, "Shut Up and Sing". (See sidebar.)

When the Associated Press picked up the presidential slight from the London *Guardian* and sent it across the wire, it didn't

continued



Role Model to Die For. Natalie Maines, the Dixie Chicks' lead vocalist, started the whole controversy with an anti-war remark and dig at President Bush.

take long for American conservatives to react.

The G.O.P. nerve center in Washington immediately sent out talking points. Soon Pat Buchanan was calling the Chicks "bimbos" on national television. Bill O'Reilly of Fox fame said he thought the women "needed to be slapped around".

Then a web-based group calling itself Free Republic organized a boycott. Around the country, radio stations were flooded with calls demanding that songs by the Chicks be taken off the air. According to the callers, Maines and the others had turned their back on the troops.

Ironically, at the time, the song topping the charts was the Dixie Chicks' *Travelin' Soldier*. The ballad pays tribute to an American serviceman killed in the Vietnam War. Not exactly a rallying call to arms, but it sold well enough to become the top country song soon after its release.

Within a couple weeks of the boycott, the song had plummeted into obscurity. It didn't hurt that Free Republic got help in its boycott campaign from two major broadcast networks. Executives from Cox and Cumulus ordered

deejays at their 270 local affiliates to pull all Dixie Chicks play until further notice.

All this time the band was on the other side of the world fulfilling their tour obligations. Between gigs in Dublin, Munich and Sidney, Maines issued an apology to the President and reassured fans that her support for the troops hadn't flagged.

Free Republic was having none of that. When the girls returned to start the domestic leg of their tour, hired guns from the radio stations met them at the gates. Local TV news cameras were rolling as angry fans tossed Dixie Chicks CD's into garbage barrels.

In June, Natalie Maines received a note saying she would be assassinated on July 6, 2003. The Dixie Chicks were scheduled to perform that night in Dallas.

Vindication

If you watched the Grammys in February, you already know how this tale turns out. No strangers to that award show, all three of the Dixie Chicks' previous albums won top honors in the country category. This year the women counted their blessings to

have been nominated at all.

Even though their latest studio release, "Taking the Long Way" reached number one on both the Billboard and country music charts within hours of hitting store shelves, ticket sales for the 2006 tour had tanked. There was talk of canceling shows. And the country radio boycott continued.

Like Dante's hero, however, the girls would rise up from the ashes. They not only picked up best album again in the country category, they won for best record, song and album of the year overall. In fact, they captured the top prize in all five categories for which they were nominated.

It was an incredible rebound after taking such a tumble.

And they did it by straying far from the country western genre when they revamped their act in 2005. For the first time, they wrote all their own songs. The new CD taps into that edgy strain of back-in-your-face commentary popularized by Alanis Morissette and the Cranberries a decade ago.

The band even sent manager Simon Renshaw to testify at a Senate hearing on broadcast censorship. According to Kopple, "What's so wonderful is that the Dixie Chicks are in charge of every single thing that goes on in their world. They are totally strategic. And they are so against media conglomeration."

In the end, the arch-conservatives correctly assessed the danger of one crass remark made by an assertive female with a guitar in hand and a contract with Sony. And like most hair-brained conspiracies hatched by the fringe right in recent years, this one had backfired big time.