

ON THE ROAD: Country's top stars hit the highway

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JULY 2003



Dixie Chicks

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How the biggest backlash in country music history clipped their wings – and the long road to recovery still ahead.

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THERE'S YOUR TROUBLE

Natalie Maines didn't know how prophetic the opening line of the Dixie Chicks' new single would become. *You don't like the sound of the truth/Coming from my mouth*, she sings on "Truth No. 2." Maines is addressing honesty in a relationship, but it just as easily could be a rejoinder to those who've criticized her for her now-infamous quote – that she was ashamed President Bush was from her home state of Texas.

Made during a London concert in March, Maines' quip triggered a firestorm of controversy unlike any seen in popular music since John Lennon observed in 1966 that The Beatles were "more popular than Jesus." Swamped with calls and letters from angry listeners who found Maines' comment un-American, radio stations across the nation pulled the Chicks' records from their playlists. Among the boycotters was Cumulus Broadcasting, a media network that banished the Chicks from its 42 country stations. Their then-No. 1 single, "Travelin' Soldier," dropped completely from the air-play charts, and sales of their current album, *Home*, took a nosedive.

Maines eventually attempted to clarify her remarks, first in a press release and then with her bandmates in an hourlong televised interview with ABC-TV's Diane Sawyer. Both times, Maines said her statement was "disrespectful." In the ABC interview, she and sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison described themselves as patriotic, proud Americans who supported the troops but had questions about the speed of Bush's decision to go to war.

"I feel regret for, you know, the choice of words – or the non-choice," Maines told

The Dixie Chicks have thrived on sass, attitude and defying conventional wisdom. But this time – as they spark a national debate about patriotism, free speech and the future of country music – have they gone too far?

Sawyer. "Am I sorry that I asked questions and that I don't just follow? No."

Their explanation didn't seem to appease critics. Making matters worse, some who'd initially applauded Maines for her candor later criticized her for caving to industry pressure and popular opinion.

All of which raises a bigger question: What will the controversy cost the Grammy-winning Chicks in the long run? And how will it affect the future of country music, and artists who might otherwise feel inclined to speak their minds?

The Dixie Chicks have never shied from expressing opinions or fighting for what they believe in. After signing with Monument

BY BILL FRISKICS-WARREN





