

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: DIXIE CHICKS

A candid conversation with the best-selling female group in music history about fickle fans, angry DJs, friendly critics and pissing off President Bush

It is March 10, 2003. The Dixie Chicks—Martie Maguire, Natalie Maines and Emily Robison—are playing an SRO show in London at the height of their astonishing career. The band is the biggest-selling female music group of all time and one of only eight bands in history, on a list that includes the Beatles, the Eagles and Pink Floyd, to have more than one record sell more than 10 million copies. It also happens to be the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and singer Maines, before belting out their current single—ironically enough, a love-lorn GI's lament called "Travelin' Soldier"—quips, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

It was a line heard round the world. Though rock stars from John Lennon to Bono and Bruce Springsteen are well-known for their liberal politics and activism, country musicians and the industry behind them are solidly red-state conservative. The backlash was instant and fierce. The Dixie Chicks were lambasted by radio jocks, denounced by their country-music peers and blacklisted by the same country radio stations that had helped make them stars. At his concerts Toby Keith projected doctored photos showing Maines embracing Saddam Hussein. At organized protests bulldozers buried tens of thousands of Dixie Chicks CDs. There were death threats, and the White House released a simple statement: "Their fans have spoken."

Many people wrote the Dixie Chicks off, and indeed the band could easily have faded from the spotlight. Rather than back down or beg for forgiveness, however, the musicians fought back in ways that further inflamed their original fans. They posed nude on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, their bodies painted with such slogans as "Saddam's Angels." Newly politicized, they were committed participants in the Vote for Change tour leading up to the 2004 presidential election. In interviews they continued to speak out against the war and the president.

Meanwhile, no longer embraced by the country-music establishment, the band changed artistic direction, enlisting master producer Rick Rubin (*Red Hot Chili Peppers*, *Beastie Boys*, *Johnny Cash*) for its newest CD, *Taking the Long Way*. The album's first single, "Not Ready to Make Nice," is a defiant response to the detractors. Though the song was predictably barred from most country radio stations, it sold briskly to a new fan base, and music critics raved. The CD hasn't sold on the scale of the band's earlier releases, but it went double platinum, selling more than 2 million copies by our press time and becoming one of 2006's best-sellers.

The band also went on the road for what it wryly dubbed the *Accidents & Accusations Tour*. Although the shows sold out quickly in some cities, other performances were canceled or post-

poned because of slow ticket sales. But the band was undeterred, continuing to add new dates to coincide with the release of *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*, a documentary by Oscar-winning filmmaker Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, which got good reviews at the Toronto Film Festival. *Variety* said the movie "should win over fans of the Chicks on the fence...and perhaps create a cultural stir as well."

The Texas-based Dixie Chicks have humble roots as an old-school cowgirl-style string band. Sisters Robison (banjo) and Maguire (fiddle) first formed the group with two young female singers backed by a band that sometimes included pedal steel guitar player Lloyd Maines. They took their name from the Little Feat song "Dixie Chicken."

Maines had a daughter named Natalie who was a singer and had briefly attended the Berkeley College of Music. When the vocalists left the group, Natalie joined Robison and Maguire. The combination took them to unprecedented heights in country music. Their back-to-back albums *Wide Open Spaces* (1998) and *Fly* (1999) each topped the charts for months. Their tours broke ticket-sales records, and they racked up numerous Grammy awards. The band's 2002 CD, *Home*, featured a more intimate, acoustic-based sound than the buoyant country pop that had defined them, but it still sold 6 million copies.



ROBISON: "Read the stuff on the Internet: 'Just tell that bitch to shut up.' They don't want to hear mouthy women. A guy would have been an outlaw, the Johnny Cash or Merle Haggard of his generation."



MAINES: "Some people call me brave because of what I said, but I don't think it was brave at all. Brave is Kanye West, after Hurricane Katrina, saying George Bush doesn't care about black people. I'm a coward compared with him."



MAGUIRE: "Maybe I'm a snob, but in my mind, stuff that sells the best usually isn't the best stuff. How many records does Sheryl Crow sell? Not 10 million. Maybe it's snotty to say, but I think the popular stuff is the crappiest."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROSE

Maguire, 37, Maines, 32, and Robison, 34, are all married (or remarried) and mothers of children under the age of five. We sent freelance journalist **Alan Light** to talk to the Chicks as they hit the road with a retinue including three nannies who take care of the women's seven children. Light, who met with them at Atlantic City's Borgata Hotel, Casino & Spa during a stopover on the tour, reports: "The girls are smart, funny and at ease with one another—and truly fearless, too. They casually offer their thoughts on even the most sensitive subjects. Maines is both the focal point and the ringleader, but the other two can give as good as they get."

"While their kids went to the pool and hung out in the playroom next to the band's dressing room, the trio—in jeans and flip-flops, with no makeup—sprawled across the suite's sofas for a lengthy discussion of music, marriage and their unlikely role as the world's most notorious band."

PLAYBOY: Natalie, when you went onstage that night in London, did you think you were about to rip into the president of the U.S.?

NATALIE MAINES: I don't even remember. We had talked beforehand about how lame it felt to be doing shows on the eve of a war. I needed to acknowledge that we weren't oblivious to what was going on in the world, just not to feel shallow. But I never liked to get serious onstage. I felt pressure to entertain, and people aren't at your show to feel down. Now, when I watch the clip of my saying it, I see I'm trying to keep it light-hearted but still acknowledge that I'm not some flighty blonde. But no, I hadn't planned out what I was going to say.

PLAYBOY: Emily and Martie, what was your reaction?

EMILY ROBISON: I had a physical reaction, like when you slip in the lunchroom and wait to see who saw you. Heat from the head all the way down, that's what I felt. It was the president, you know? It was kind of like the feeling you'd get when you were called into the principal's office.

MARTIE MAGUIRE: I didn't even remember her saying it. A couple of days later, when the news started coming back really bad, I thought, I could easily have said it. I would talk onstage too sometimes. To me it was just more patter.

ROBISON: We were playing a gig once in New Mexico at a time when a mystery illness was going around out there. Native Americans were dying in the des-

ert, and they hadn't yet figured out that the disease was coming from deer urine. We were interviewed on the six o'clock news, and someone said, "You're the only band that would come here. Aren't you scared?" Martie said, "Well, only 12 people have died." [laughter]

MAGUIRE: That was just stupid, not controversial.

PLAYBOY: When did it become apparent to you that the Bush comment wasn't going to slip by unnoticed?

MAINES: When the AP picked it up. I knew we would be used to draw attention away from the things that were going on. I knew the far right and the religious right were capable of sabotage, so I wasn't surprised by any of that. Our manager said, "It'll blow over in three days tops," but right then I



"We never felt cool by any means. Shania was the hot one, and Faith was the beautiful one. And we were like, 'Well, we have talent.'" —Natalie Maines

said, "You're wrong." Still, there were daily shocks.

PLAYBOY: Such as?

MAINES: The Red Cross not taking our money. It went way beyond people not wanting to buy our record or play us on the radio.

MAGUIRE: I couldn't believe people would bulldoze music.

PLAYBOY: Were you afraid of the fallout?

MAGUIRE: I wrote it off as being from stupid people—and you've got to ignore that kind of ignorance. But then I thought, Wait, the media is using *this* as their lead story? There's a war going on! What are they trying to cover up? It just made me sick. And it made me think, Well, I guess we must be pretty big. Nobody ever informed us we were this big, but we must be for people to be talking about what the lead singer of a country band said in a smoky little club.

PLAYBOY: Rock stars such as Bono and Neil Young have openly opposed the war. Was the difference that you were country stars?

ROBISON: To me, one of the big things we learned was how country radio could eat its own so quickly. There's the whole struggle between pop and country and who's going to cross over; they thought they were losing Faith Hill and Shania Twain. At the time, we felt we were sticking in there and waving the country flag, but everything turned so quickly. It put country music on the front page, and the radio people were kind of enjoying the limelight. They were doing it for their own purposes—not out of principle against what we said but because it was good entertainment.

MAINES: Country music was being talked about outside country music—that never happens. They loved that the words *country radio* were on CNN.

They fed it, I think, innocently, not knowing how serious it was.

ROBISON: Yes. It got out of control. They fed the fire, and then it was too late to pull back. They did a disservice to themselves; a lot of people wanted us to remain a part of country music for the genre's sake. They shot themselves in the foot.

MAINES: At the Country Music Association Awards show, Vince Gill said of us, whether you agree with them or not, they've got the right to say what they want. Then he started getting all this flack. It was a lesson in keeping your mouth shut. But we got lots of letters and support from actors and rock musicians. Rosie O'Donnell sent champagne. I

always felt more of a connection with those people anyway.

PLAYBOY: Were you surprised when Howard Stern came around and supported you?

MAINES: I was very emotional and happy when he did. He hadn't been nice to us, but he apologized because he was a Republican at the time and fell for all the links between Iraq and 9/11. He's very honest about admitting that now. I love it when people admit they were wrong. He wasn't apologizing for what he said; he was apologizing for being completely wrong.

PLAYBOY: You've generated more controversy of late. In New York you dedicated the song "White Trash Wedding" to Mel Gibson a few days after his arrest. Was that one planned?

MAINES: No, I didn't plan to say anything about him. It never crossed my mind until I said it.

