

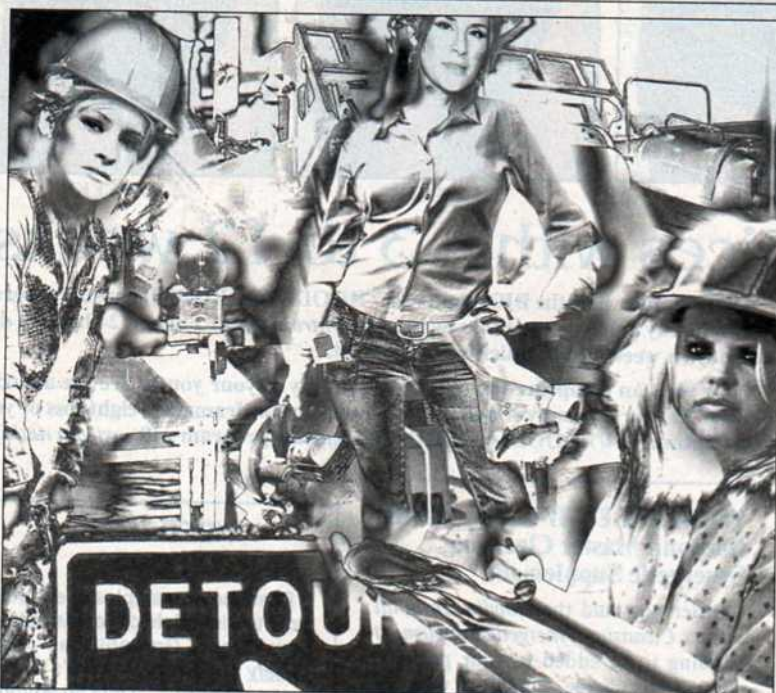


## DIXIE CHICKS *Taking the Long Way*

★★★★

The first two tracks on the Chicks' first studio album in four years ("The Long Way Around" and "Easy Silence") circle warily around the subject of the vitriolic response lead singer Natalie Maines received when she criticized President George W. Bush days before the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003. Thus primed, the third song pounces: "Not Ready to Make Nice" lays into the group's detractors mercilessly, throwing every censorious denunciation back as righteous fury.

That matter attended to, *Taking the Long Way* can reveal its true subjects, country music staples all: the power of love, the value of family and the pain of romantic regret. Among the Chicks' co-writers on these 14 songs are some of pop's finest melodists (including Sheryl Crow, Dan Wilson, Neil Finn and Gary Louris), so it's natural that *Long Way* teems with shimmering melodies. Producer Rick Rubin provides elegant settings that spotlight the mandolin, fiddle and banjo trimmings, as well as the Chicks' increasingly elaborate and lovely harmonies. *Taking the Long Way* confirms that no matter whose feathers the Chicks ruffle, few can deny their artistry.



## DIXIE CHICKS 'Taking the Long Way' (Sony)

★★★

Well, they've certainly taken the long way to power pop. The Dixie Chicks arrived via three independent country-sweetheart CDs (before adding lead singer Natalie Maines), two ultra-successful mainstream country albums, a progressive country CD that broke both the rules and new ground, and a high-profile professional implosion.

### cd review



"Taking the Long Way," the Dixie Chicks' new CD with producer Rick Rubin, is by and large a power-pop experiment with some traditional instrumentation. However you define "country," this isn't it. Famous for helping artists from Johnny Cash to Run DMC to clearly communicate through music, Rubin teamed the Chicks with pop and alt-country cowriters and put them in the studio with a pick-up rock band that includes members of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Tom Petty's Heartbreakers.

The result is an album of contradictions. Is it political? Not at all, yet several of the songs fiercely defend the Chicks' right to be, should they ever decide to put their political convictions on a disc. Is it country? Even in a world where Trace Adkins' rocking "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk" is a country hit, it's easy to say the Chicks have pretty much kissed country goodbye. Is it rock? Not by contemporary rock or pop rock standards, with ample acoustic guitar and occasional

banjo and fiddle fills.

"The Long Way Around" is like the Dixie Chicks' "Ballad of John and Yoko" — a light recap of preceding events. The Chicks get angry on "Not Ready to Make Nice" and tweak the celebrity culture that made them rich and infamous on "Everybody Knows." "Lubbock or Leave It" spans small-town hypocrisy as it builds a head of rock 'n' roll steam before breaking down with tasty banjo and fiddle and the Chicks' rich harmonies.

Many of the songs avoid mention of the "incident." "Easy Silence" is a comfortable love song, and "Lullaby" sings the Chicks' children to sleep. In form and subject matter, "Silent House" is perhaps the closest to a Chicks-style country album cut. But amid the rolling Celtic melody of "Bitter End," the Chicks seem to be waving farewell to a country crowd that has largely abandoned them.

— John Hayes,  
Post-Gazette staff writer



**DIXIE CHICKS****Taking the Long Way**

Producer: *Rick Rubin*  
*Open Wide/Columbia/  
Sony BMG*

Release Date: *May 23*

Once the darlings of country, the Chicks

lost many fans—and the support of country radio—after a 2003 incident in which Natalie Maines made a relatively innocuous comment about President Bush from a London stage. The group has finally re-emerged stronger, more defiant and more creatively ambitious than ever. The first-time pairing with Rubin has resulted in a surprisingly cohesive mix of country and rock tunes, including co-writes with Sheryl Crow and Neil Finn. While many former fans remain critical of the group for its outspoken political views—an apparent no-no in country music—tracks like “The Long Way Around,” “Everybody Knows,” “I Hope” (highlighted by a John Mayer guitar solo) and the chillingly sad “Voice Inside My Head” are sure to earn the group at least some of its fans back.—*PS*



★ CRITIC'S CHOICE

Maguire (left), Maines and Robison display Chick power.

# Dixie Chicks

Taking the Long Way

REVIEWED BY CHUCK ARNOLD

**F**orgive, sounds good/ Forget, I'm not sure I could/ They say time heals everything/ But I'm still waiting." So sings frontwoman Natalie Maines on "Not Ready to Make Nice," the defiant first single of the Dixie Chicks' seventh studio disc and first since the backlash from her anti-Bush comments made at a 2003 concert. Indeed, having been blacklisted by some country stations and even having received death threats, the

Chicks are still "mad as hell." You can also hear that newfound edge—call them the Dixie Chicks with Attitude—on the excellent "The Long Way Around": "Moved with the shakers/ Wouldn't kiss all the a---- that they told me to." Yes, this time it's personal: Cowriting all their material for the first time, the Chicks also poignantly address the infertility struggles faced by Emily Robison and Martie Maguire (on "So Hard") and celebrate their kids (on "Lullaby"). With production by Rick Rubin—who has worked with everyone from Run-DMC and Red Hot Chili Peppers to Johnny Cash—and guests like Bonnie Raitt, John Mayer and Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith, they move further away from the sound of the country establishment. ★★★★★

COUNTRY-ROCK

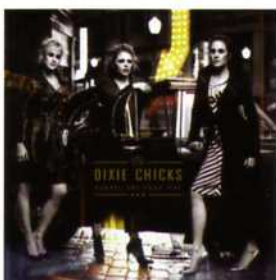
▶ **DOWNLOAD THIS:** "The Long Way Around"

# REVIEWS

## DIXIE CHICKS

### *Taking the Long Way*

OPEN WIDE/COLUMBIA



Even if Natalie Maines had never said a bad word about the president — or, had she merely minded her patriotic manners while on foreign

soil and saved her free-speechin' for a concert in the good ol' U.S. of A. (which, according to her conservative critics, apparently would have been A-OK) — somehow or other, the Dixie Chicks still would have had to find a way to make a clean break from the world of country radio that done made them famous. Not for the sake of controversy, but for artistic growth. Go back and listen to *Home*; how the hell do you improve on *that* while still using the same box of crayons? You can't. So the Chicks pulled a U2, and chased their perfect *Joshua Tree* moment with a quickie live album and then came back with a whole new bag of *Achtung Baby!* tricks. That's *Taking the Long Way*; maybe not the Chicks' best album, but far and away their most personal, challenging and inspiring to date. It ain't perfect — "Baby Hold On," for one, shoulda been dropped on its head or left for a B-side — but between the dizzying heights of "The Long Way Around," "Easy Silence," "Lullaby" and the never-gets-old, spine-tingling rush of Natalie's roar through the bridge of "Not Ready to Make Nice," picking on the odd misstep or two seems as petty as, I dunno, bulldozing CDs or something. Speaking of which, for whatever it's worth, bar one anti-war line in the closing peace prayer, "I Hope," the only "politics" the Chicks flaunt here concern their hard-earned disgust for censorship and intolerance. Not that that'll make any difference to those who've either washed their hands of the band completely or simply wish they'd make nice and go back to being the kind of seemingly innocuous girls who only ruffled feathers by playing banjo. Me, I can't wait for them to break out the giant disco ball, and sing like it's the end of the world.

— RICHARD SKANSE





**Dixie Chicks**  
**Taking The Long Way**

Open Wide/Columbia 82876807392

★★★★

*Not as rootsy, but definitely a step forward with lyrical maturity and a commercial stance that could lead to a UK pop breakthrough*

As sure as God made little apples, you can be sure that once a country act graduates from smaller, more intimate venues to filling vast stadia there is a marked change in musical direction as rootsy gives way to rocky. We saw it happen with Shania Twain and Faith Hill and now the Dixie Chicks have undergone a makeover designed to render their distinctive sound more appealing to a mass audience. Ironically, it's been masterminded by producer Rick Rubin, who resurrected the fading careers of the late Johnny Cash and Neil Diamond by stripping their songs back to the bare essentials. He's done quite the opposite for his production stint with the Chicks, bringing in a band that includes Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith, session legend Larry Knechtel and the main men from Tom Petty's Heartbreakers, keyboard player Benmont Tench and guitarist Mike Campbell. Surprise, surprise, the opening track *The Long Way Round* could easily have been borrowed from Petty's FULL MOON FEVER as it bubbles along brightly with the girls chanting lustily over chiming guitar phrases. The Chicks co-wrote all 14 tracks, with Dan Wilson, Pete Yorn and Gary Louris adding their input, and Rubin was suitably impressed, saying: 'By honing

their craft and working with good mentors, they got to be really good songwriters.' Certainly, the lyrics display more maturity than some of the material on previous multi-million sellers like WIDE OPEN SPACES, FLY and their last studio album HOME, from 2002. Natalie's infamous verbal blast at President George Bush for invading Iraq has inspired the first single, *Not Ready To Make Nice*, in which the girls make clear they are 'not ready to back down, still mad as Hell' and deliver an unequivocal statement which is given added dramatic effect by a soaring string section. Powerful stuff and Emily Robison puts it in perspective, declaring: 'The stakes were definitely higher on that song. We knew it was special because it was autobiographical. Once we had it done, it freed us to do the rest of the album without burden.'

Rest assured that this is another fine piece of work, but many country buffs will agree with me that something vital has been lost from the Dixie Chicks' sound. Their exquisite harmonies, usually so prominent, are farther back in the mix than on previous records and the exceptional instrumental skills of Emily, whose banjo, Dobro and lap steel showcases have been a group staple, and the feisty fiddle forays of Martie Maguire are too often submerged in the general Californian rock vibe. The girls themselves, it must be said, seem perfectly happy about the new sound with Emily adding: 'This album was about finding a balance in the different aspects of our lives. But there's something thematic there, too—it's really about being bold.' Natalie agrees, commenting: 'Everything felt more personal this time. I go back to songs we've done in the past and there's more maturity, depth and intelligence on these. They just feel more grown-up.' Nobody will argue with that, for the country-flavoured *Silent House* deals with the pain of an

elderly relative battling against Alzheimer's Disease, while the poignant *So Hard* spotlights the problems of infertility—something that both Martie and Emily have faced in their lives—and their current domestic contentment is reflected in *Baby Hold On* and the gentle *Lullaby*. An unusual highlight is the gospel-based *I Hope*, co-written with Keb' Mo' and featured in last year's telethon for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Natalie's vocals, as you would expect, are supremely confident throughout and appear more controlled in tackling the adult issues raised by some thought-provoking lyrics.

Like any major act, the Dixie Chicks must move forward and they have achieved that ambition with a daring choice of producer and a challenging collection of songs. TAKING THE LONG WAY will undoubtedly emulate its predecessors and effortlessly reach multi-platinum status, but I just pray the girls don't turn their backs completely on the roots music and core country values that first endeared them to their fans. After all, everyone needs some wide open spaces in which to breathe. **BK**