



Shouldn't a told you that: Emily Robison and Martie Maguire stood by Natalie Maines after "the Incident," but they did temporarily take away her Sin Wagon driving privileges.

HELLO, MR. HEARTACHE

For the Dixie Chicks, 2003 brought the best of times, followed by the worst of times, not-so-bad-after-all times, times-used-to-be-a-lot-better times and, finally, times-seem-to-be-looking-up-again times. But what does the future hold?

by Richard Skanse

BEING A DIXIE CHICK THESE days just isn't quite as fun as it used to be. Granted, we can't speak from personal experience, but from a sideline

point-of-view, the only other music giants who had a worse year in 2003 were Michael Jackson and Phil Spector, and the Chicks didn't even (allegedly) molest or kill anyone. To date, Toby Keith has yet to uncover concrete evidence that Natalie Maines was indeed in cahoots with Saddam Hussein — that is, apart from the fake photo of the two of them he showed his concert audiences this summer.

What Maines did do, however, was make a casual comment to a London audience that she was "ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas." That was on March 10, shortly before the fall of Baghdad. Although she quickly issued an apology, calling her statement "disrespectful," the damage was done. First, a handful of radio stations pulled the trio's songs —

"G. Gordon Liddy, Rush Limbaugh and Don Imus all called again to ask about the plane crash. Listen guys this is really getting old. I'm sorry, but no we did not die in a plane crash. But look on the bright side ... we fly all the time."

— NATALIE MAINES IN A SEPT. 24 POST ON THE DIXIE CHICKS' WEB SITE

including their then No. 1 country single, "Travelin' Soldier" — off their playlists and staged public Chicks record bashings. Then, Cumulus Broadcasting officially banned the Dixie Chicks' music from all 42 of its country stations across the country. Sales of the group's third major-label album, *Home* — at the time, already triple platinum since its October release and well on its way to the 10 million mark set by both *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly* — took a steep plummet and then slowed to a trickle. The mere mention of their name was met with boos at the CMT Flameworthy Awards and the Academy of Country Music Awards, and they lost "Vocal Group of the Year" to Rascal Flatts — Rascal Flatts! — at the Country Music Association Awards. Disgruntled former fans, talk radio hosts and people who couldn't name a Dixie Chicks song to save their life took to calling them names like "Dixie Sluts" and "Traitors." They received death threats. And, on top of all that, they even saw their beloved hero Willie Nelson, who three years ago paid the Dixie Chicks the ultimate honor by opening for them on their *Fly* tour, buddy up with their arch nemesis Toby Keith for a hit single. *Et tu, Willie?*

Granted, the year wasn't all bad for Maines and sisters Emily Robison and Martie Maguire. They started the year off with three Grammy wins for *Home*, including Country Album of the Year. On March 1, two weeks before the Incident, the Dixie Chicks landed in the record books with the biggest single-day ticket sales total in music history (\$49 million). All but six of the *Top of the World Tour's* 63 North American dates were sell-outs (51 of the shows sold out on the first day). Fears that a stampede of ticket holders would demand refunds or stage massive protests outside every venue were swiftly put to bed, and the reviews in city after city were glowing. By the time the U.S. leg wrapped up in August, the tour had grossed \$61 million — making it the No. 1 country tour of the year and third highest grossing tour in America, following Billy Joel/Elton John and the Rolling Stones.

But as Maines acknowledged on a Nov. 21 *Today Show* interview, most all of those tickets were sold before the backlash. The real litmus test of whether or not the Dixie Chicks can bounce

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37 back to their pre-March 10, 2003 popularity — back when the entire country music industry was whistling Dixie instead of hissing it — will come the next time they hit the road in support of a new studio album. Or, to a somewhat lesser extent, they can watch how well their brand new double live album, *Top of the World Tour — Live* and the DVD of the same name, both released Nov. 21, sell. (Though to be realistic, a double live album hasn't sold like gangbusters since *Frampton Comes Alive!*)

When it's all said and done though, all the controversy and ticket sales pale in comparison to the biggest news at least one of the Chicks heard all year. On Nov. 2, Maguire announced that she and husband Gareth Maguire (Maines' brother-in-law's brother, incidentally) are expecting twins. Now there's *real* trouble. **X**