



# DIXIE CHICKS



COURTESY SONY MUSIC

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**IN THE WAKE** of all that went down — record and ticket sales, radio play and maybe even stock in the First Amendment — after that little incident in London on March 10, 2003, it's easy to forget that the Dixie Chicks were already considered controversial long before lead singer Natalie Maines' offhanded comment about a certain president. As far back as the mid-'90s, sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison got flak from Dallas critics for "selling out" by replacing original singer Laura Lynch with the brash young fireball Maines — even after the trio's 1998 major-label debut proved to be anything but business-as-usual by Nashville standards. Back then, just the idea of playing banjo on songs intended for mainstream country radio was considered radical — not to mention having the Texas-sized gall to insist on playing that banjo (and fiddle and dobro) yourself rather than bringing in session pros. Millions

of album sales and less than a year later, the Chicks ruffled even more feathers with a giddy revenge fantasy about killing an abusive husband named Earl.

In 2001, the trio — fortified by their status as the best-selling female group in American music history — went head-to-head with Sony Records in a royalties dispute. By the time the matter was settled out of court, the Chicks had walked away with their own Sony imprint and the best record of their career — the stripped-down, acoustic beauty *Home*, recorded in Austin with production duties shared by all three Chicks and Natalie's dad, Lloyd Maines. The 2002 album won three Grammys and sold 6 million copies by the spring of 2003 — and then the proverbial chicken poop hit the fan.

In hindsight, if Maines' infamous quip to a London crowd about being "ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas" seems trivial — especially compared to the alarmist daily rants against the current wartime president by right-wing pundits like Glenn Beck — well, that's because her original comment was innocuous. Though hardly the brainless ditzes that haters and shell-shocked conservative country fans branded them, the Dixie Chicks were never a group with a political agenda. They may have had a No. 1 hit at the time (though not for long) with their cover of Bruce Robison's eloquently poignant "Travelin' Soldier," and Maines' comment may well have had as much to do with her personal concern over the impending war as it did her instinct for reading a crowd (the Brits responded with hearty cheers, not boos); but protesting wars, fighting fascism with guitars à la Woody Guthrie and asserting their own patriotism by exercising free speech had never been the trio's M.O. However, when backed into a corner by radio boycotts, admonishments to "shut up and sing" and at least one documented death threat (in Dallas, of all places), the Chicks didn't cower. Knowing full well that they were quite possibly delivering a death blow to one of the most fairy tale country music careers of the last half century, they took a stand and embraced their unasked-for role as poster women for free speech with the same steely, convention-defying resolve that had characterized their approach to making music from day one.

Released in the summer of 2006, *Taking the Long Way* — and more specifically, its polarizing lead single, "Not Ready to Make Nice" — made it official: the Dixie Chicks had flown the country coup and wouldn't be coming back any time soon, at least not on anyone's terms but their own. Recorded in Los Angeles with famed producer Rick Rubin (Johnny Cash, Red Hot Chili Peppers), it was the first album of their career to feature the Chicks as writers on all of the songs. And if it wasn't quite the flawless masterpiece that *Home* was, it was far and away their most personal statement to date — not to mention their most fierce. The accompanying *Accidents & Accusations* tour may not have been a sold-out blockbuster on the level of the Dixie Chicks' previous two arena runs, but the album sold more than half a million copies in its first week of release and would be certified double platinum by the end of the year. It went on to win all five of the top Grammy awards, including Album of the Year and yes, Country Album of the Year. Predictably, opponents of the group cried "liberal Hollywood" favoritism. But anyone who'd cheered the Chicks on through their public flogging — and recognized the album as the triumph of artistic freedom and personal expression that it truly was — had to echo the most memorable acceptance speech moment of the night: Natalie's sassy, ultra-defiant "Ha ha," gleefully lifted from *The Simpsons*. Last laughs don't get no better than that. — **RICHARD SKANSE**