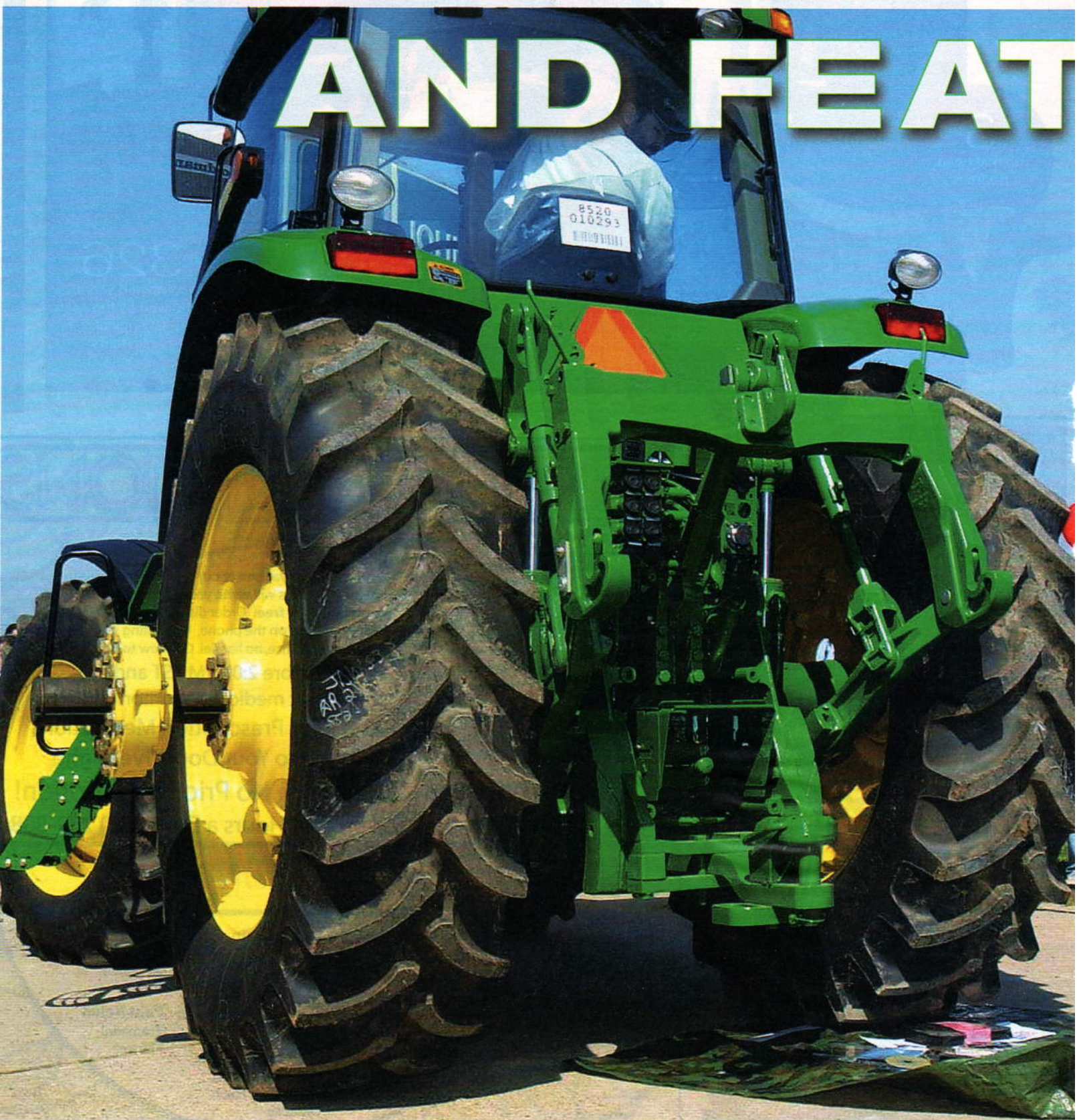


TARRRED

AND FEAT



A Dixie Chick's anti-Bush comment ignites controversy and causes an instant radio and fan backlash. Can the Grammy-winning group recover?

HERE D

Radio DJ K.C. Daniels oversees a "Dixie Chicks Destruction" event in Bossier City, La., inviting listeners like 12-year-old Morgan Gardner (right) to throw their Chicks merchandise under the crushing wheels of an American-made John Deere.



It's funny how 15 little words can have such a big impact. When the speaker is Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines, the place is a packed arena in England, the time is just before a war, and the words are, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas," those little words mean a lot.

Native Texan Natalie's offhand comment was greeted with cheers from the largely anti-war London audience at one of the first shows on the Chicks' Top of the World Tour. Back home, it was a different story. Within a day, the Chicks saw themselves being denounced by country fans, their songs being pulled from radio station playlists and their CDs being destroyed. Word quickly spread about country fans planning demonstrations at various stops of their American tour, which begins May 1 in Greenville, S.C.

"After the story ran, we had so many calls and e-mails that we had to set up a separate phone line just for this topic," says Dave Kelly, program director for WKDF in Nashville. Indeed, radio stations nationwide dealt with a flood of listener outrage.

"Dump that anti-America group," urged one poster to an online message board operated by radio station KMBC in Kansas City. "Obviously this group intends to give aid and comfort to a known killer of the innocent. Let them go give a concert in Baghdad."

The following day, Natalie released a statement responding to the uproar — but it turned out to be an explanation,



not an apology. "We've been overseas for several weeks, and have been reading and following the news accounts of our governments' position," she said. "The anti-American sentiment that has

Story by Chris Neal and Bob Paxman

DIXIE CHICKS

unfolded here is astounding. While we support our troops, there is nothing more frightening than the notion of going to war with Iraq and the prospect of all the innocent lives that will be lost."

By then, the anti-Chicks backlash was in full swing. Natalie's fellow country stars began speaking out against her. "She's come after me before," said Toby Keith, who had wrangled with Natalie last summer over the merits of his hit "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)." "She's got a big mouth."

"I think the comments were made primarily because it was in front of an audience that agreed with [the Chicks]," Travis Tritt told FOX News, referring to the fact that Natalie's statement was made in front of a largely anti-war crowd in a European city. "But I think if you make those statements over there versus over here, it is sort of cowardly, and I think it was a cheap shot."

And Travis was unmoved by Natalie's insistence that she supports America's troops, even if she disagrees with the president. "The last thing in the world that those people need to hear every time they turn on the television or the radio," he said, "is some half-cocked entertainer coming off and making statements against the actions that they're doing under the direction of our commander-in-chief."

"If the Dixie Chicks really wanted to do something to prove just how sorry they are about those statements," added Travis, "they would volunteer to go and perform at some military base."

The quickly boiling controversy offered a special problem for radio programmers —



PHOTO: VILLAGE/GETTY IMAGES

DJ Clarissa Kennedy has been throwing darts at Chicks posters on the studio door at her radio station. Meanwhile, kids stomp on the Grammy-winning group's CDs.



AP PHOTO: THE TIMES, ROBERT RUZ

I would not be surprised to see them booed off stage in the U.S.

— Michael Cruise/KKBQ Houston

many listeners were demanding they stop playing the group with what was, at the time, the nation's No. 1 song, "Travelin' Soldier." Many radio stations yanked the

song from their playlists, and the very next week, airplay of "Soldier" had dropped by 15 percent and it had fallen from the top chart spot.

"The longer this went on, the more I had visions of censorship," says KFKF Kansas City program director Dale Carter, who pulled the Chicks from the air, then quickly changed his mind. "Two wrongs don't make a right! I agree with the 80 percent of our listeners who abhor what Natalie said in London. On the other hand, I believe in the Constitution."

Finally, Natalie offered an apology. "As a concerned American citizen, I apologize to President Bush because my remark was disrespectful," she said in a statement released by the group's publicist. "I feel that whoever holds that office should be treated with the utmost respect."

"While war may remain a viable option, as a mother, I just want to see every possible alternative exhausted before children and American soldiers' lives are lost. I love my

FREQUENT FLAPS

The Dixie Chicks have never shied away from controversy — and sometimes they've happily courted it. Just look at their ruckus-raising record.

★ Natalie incited Toby Keith's ire last year after saying she hated his song "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)."

★ Their hit "Goodbye Earl," about two vengeful women who poison an abusive husband, upset many who felt it advocated murder.

★ The Chicks sued their record label, Sony, in 2001, claiming the company had cheated them out of millions of dollars. Band and label settled last year.

★ Their song "Sin Wagon" drew criticism of its saucy reference to recreational sex ("mattress dancing") and also brought a \$500,000 copyright-infringement suit from the publisher of the gospel hymn "I'll Fly Away," which it references.

country. I am a proud American."

Some found the apology unconvincing — like fan Randy West of Kannapolis, N.C., who is organizing a demonstration to greet the Chicks concert in nearby Greensboro in May. "When they come, Natalie's going to get a huge awakening," he promises. "I'm rallying the troops, and we're going to protest the hotel and the concert venue."

Chicks manager Simon Renshaw was skeptical about the true degree of the outcry against his Grammy-winning trio. He countered that the Chicks were victims of a conspiracy that was intentionally spreading false reports of Chicks-bashing and fanning the flames of hostility against the group. "Why does an artist exercising her rights of free speech create such a firestorm of media attention, and why are the 'fans' responding the way they are?" he wondered. "Sure, these are difficult times — but the response from the fans seems far too extreme."

Simon suggested that much of the protest had actually been manufactured by organized right-wing groups and talk-radio hosts gunning for any celebrity who spoke out against the war.

"We got hammered with calls and e-mails," says KPLX Dallas program director Paul Williams, who did not pull the Chicks' songs from his station. "The difficulty for us was, who are these e-mails really from? Are they really our listeners, or are they people who don't listen to our station and are being incited by media and talk radio? Very frustrating."

It remains to be seen whether Natalie's remarks will have any long-term effect on the Chicks' popularity. It came after over 800,000 tickets had already been sold for their upcoming American tour, and after six million copies of their latest CD, *Home*, had already been snapped up. Michael Cruise, program director at KKBQ in Houston, predicts that the group's state-side popularity is at an end for now.

"I think this album's dead," he declares. "I would not be surprised to see them booed offstage their first shows in the U.S. I think they may have to address this when they hit Texas. These people are not liked right now in Texas."

"I think the Chicks will probably come out of this OK, once the dust settles," figures WKDF's Dave Kelly, who cut back his station's Chicks airplay. "It will be interesting, though, to see how they're treated when they start their U.S. tour. If there's a backlash, they're going to have to address this all over again."



ALL A-FLUTTER

Readers flooded our mailbox with letters responding to Natalie's Bush-bashing comment. Here's a sampling.

Natalie Maines may not like President Bush or agree with his views, but she shouldn't have stood before a foreign country and made the remarks that she did. I will bet you there are lots of Texans who are ashamed of her right now.

— **MRS. J.D. NEAL**
Lake Charles, La.

I applaud Natalie! Do those who want to boycott the Dixie Chicks and destroy their CDs have a problem with freedom of speech? It seems they are saying we should have freedom of speech but not exercise it. Well, I say: Good for you, Natalie. Destroy my CDs? Not a chance.

— **BILL LAJAUNIE**, *West Los Angeles*

They wait until they leave the country, blurt out their seditious excrement on the eve of war, then whimper that it's free speech, as if that justifies the foulness of their treason. I am so sick of these entertainers who have taken so much from this land, and who then turn around and mindlessly rend it like wild dogs.

— **GLENDA THOMAS**, *Cando, N.D.*

I believe it is President Bush who should say he is ashamed to be from the same state as Maines. But unlike her, he has manners, respect, courtesy and the common sense to know when to keep his "freedom of speech" to himself.

— **DEBRA SPRADLIN**, *Farmland, Ind.*

I am so sick of people bitching about the Dixie Chicks for what they believe in! What a shame to call the nation the "land of the free" when someone can't express her own opinions of others.

— **ANNIE PLANTE**
Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada

I'm embarrassed and ashamed that Natalie Maines is from Texas. She and Tom Daschle should be exiled to France.

— **CRESSA JENNINGS**
Sheffield, Texas

The comment that Natalie made about the president has been blown way out of proportion. Natalie has apologized and that's all she can do. She made a mistake at a very bad time but she won't be the last to do it. It's time to forgive and forget and get behind our troops.

— **SCOTT WETTERICH**, *Cincinnati*

She has opened her big mouth one too many times. I feel sorry for Emily and Martie.

— **RON JENSEN**, *Portland, Ore.*

Maines cannot say she is for our troops, but is against their commander-in-chief. The troops and their commander are inseparable. As we are on the verge of war, a disruption to the morale of the soldiers cannot be tolerated.

— **RALPH OLIVER**, *Colorado Springs*

The Chicks may be ashamed of President Bush but I am ashamed of their fans and the stations that are boycotting the group. The Chicks are exercising their right to free speech. The fans and stations are engaging in economic terrorism. No one in this country should be forced to keep silent from fear of retribution. That is what separates us from totalitarian countries. Americans have a long history of mocking, criticizing and even hating their presidents. That right keeps our country strong and out of the hands of dictators. Many people in this country are not convinced that war is the right answer and do not think Bush has proven why we should invade Iraq or that Iraq is connected to 9/11. My fellow country fans should be true Americans by upholding our Constitutional freedoms rather than blindly insisting that we all love our country by unquestioningly following the president. There would not be an America if we had unquestioningly followed the king in 1776.

— **REBECCA KIRKMAN**
Morristown, N.J.