

The Dixie Chicks Come Clean

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EXCLUSIVE

Country's
Controversial
Superstars
Take On
Their
Critics



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THE DIXIE CHICKS ANSWER THEIR CRITICS: "THIS IS OUR FIRST TIME TO TALK," SAYS NATALIE MAINES. "MY HOPE IS THAT WHEN PEOPLE SEE US AGAIN, THEY'LL REMEMBER THAT WE'RE NOT THE MONSTERS WE'VE BEEN MADE OUT TO BE." BY CHRIS WILLMAN

STARS AND STRIFE

IT'S FOUR WEEKS TO THE DAY SINCE THAT MARCH 10 CONCERT IN LONDON where the Dixie Chicks famously messed with a fellow Texan. Their overseas tour finally concluded, the trio have realigned in Austin to face the music that's been blaring since singer Natalie Maines told her audience—on the brink of wartime—that “we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” And now their manager is about to weigh in with a pretty bad joke. ★ “Let’s make this story far more interesting than it really is,” Simon Renshaw suggests. “The whole thing is a papist conspiracy. This was all about us and Michael Moore figuring out a way to promote the Roman Catholic Church!” ★ “Oh, please,” begs Chicks fiddler Martie Maguire, 33, sensing that even this obvious satire might end up being taken seriously. “We don’t need any more controversy.” ★ A pause. “Well,” Maines reminds everyone, “we *did* just pose naked.” ★ Perhaps you’ve noticed. Earlier in the day, for this magazine’s cover, the Chicks got themselves thoroughly plucked. It was their idea: Though Maguire admits that their publicist doubted the wisdom of being branded with epithets, “we wanted to show the absurdity of the

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WHITE

extreme names people have been calling us. How do you look at the three of us and think, Those are Saddam's Angels?" Adds Maines, 28: "We don't want people to think that we're trying to be provocative. It's not about the nakedness. It's that the clothes got in the way of the labels. We're not defined by who we are anymore. Other people are doing that for us."

If it hadn't been for one London critic—from the left-leaning newspaper *The Guardian*—approvingly quoting Maines' remark, the group might still have the No. 1 country single ("Travelin' Soldier") and a top 10 pop hit ("Landslide"), instead of being all but banished from the nation's airwaves. Within a couple of days of the review showing up on American country websites, radio stations throughout middle America were setting out trash cans to collect disgruntled fans' CDs and, in one Louisiana case, running over them with a tractor. For music fans whose memories run back four decades, it was strangely familiar. In 1966, the uproar resulted when John Lennon, a member of the world's biggest pop band, said that commercially speaking, the Beatles were bigger than Jesus. Now a member of the world's biggest country band had suggested that morally speaking, she was bigger than a President about to commit American troops to war.

À la Lennon, Maines did apologize, admitting on March 14 that "whoever holds that office should be treated with the utmost respect." The angry masses were not mollified. Message boards were flooded with cries of "Natalie Fonda" and far worse. Sales of their current album, *Home*, plummeted from 124,000 the week the story broke to 33,000 a week—the result, Renshaw says, of the group's near-complete absence from radio. The ongoing campaign against the trio (which also includes Martie's sister, banjo player and new mom Emily Robison, 30) has many Americans vowing that the Chicks should do better than just take a hiatus: They should simply end their careers.

Two months ago, imagining the Chicks playing a game of defense was inconceivable. They were uniters,

not dividers, having proved that country music could cross all kinds of boundaries without ever getting watered down as "crossover," attracting rock-weaned urban teenagers and aging rural traditionalists without prejudice. Their major-label debut, *Wide Open Spaces*, was 11 times platinum; the follow-up, *Fly*, platinum 10 times over; despite its current woes, *Home* is a certified 6-million-seller after just nine months. On March 1, they set a one-day concert dollars record, selling \$49 million in tickets for their

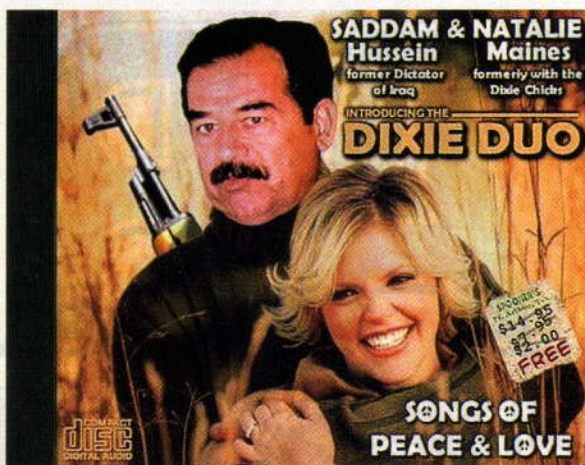
upcoming U.S. tour. They are, quite simply, the most important act in the contemporary history of country. "They singularly revived the music," says Brian Philips, general manager of cable channel CMT. "The thought of country music ever carrying on without them is just unthinkable."

In the face of all this, the Chicks are about to go barefoot—but not, as some might hope, so that they can walk across broken glass in further search of penance and forgiveness. They're sitting down at a Japanese restaurant to break their Stateside silence for the first time. Groveling will not be on the menu.

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY You've never been an especially politically active group before now, so in what context did your comment about President Bush even come up?

NATALIE MAINES It was before "Travelin' Soldier." In every show that we did over there, we always sent that or "More Love" out to the soldiers. That's my biggest beef with this, that people have taken my frustration with the President [and confused it] with not supporting the troops. We have nothing but support for them. That is human life.... When I saw [rescued soldier Jessica Lynch's] parents on TV, it made me really emotional to think they might think we're not happy for them and that we don't support their daughter.

MARTIE MAGUIRE When Natalie was introducing "Travelin' Soldier," she said how it's not pro-war or a peace song, it's just a straight-down-the-middle, what-happens-in-war song. And right after Natalie said what she said, Emily got on the mike and said, "But you know we support the troops 100 percent," so that there wouldn't



THEM'S FIGHTIN' WORDS A mock CD cover pulled from the Internet (top) and Maines at the London concert where she did some Bush whacking



"I HOPE PEOPLE DON'T LOOK AT [THIS COVER] AND GO, 'OH, ISN'T THAT NICE. THEY'RE TRYING TO GET MORE ATTENTION,'" SAYS MAINES. "TRUST ME—WE NEVER WANTED THIS MUCH ATTENTION."

FIRST PAGE: STYLING: MARJAN MALAKPOUR/MARGARET MALDONADO AGENCY; MAGUIRE'S T-SHIRT: HANES; VINTAGE JEANS AND SILVER BRACELET: JILL PLATTNER; MAINES' T-SHIRT: JUDY COUTURE; JEANS: DOLCE & GABBANA; NECKLACE: GUCCI; ROBISON'S TANK TOP BY COSTUME NATIONAL; LEVINS' EARRINGS: SUSAN ROSEN; STACK RING: JEANINE PAYER; NECKLACE AND RING: CHROME HEARTS; NEW YORK: THIS PAGE: BOTTOM: SUZANNE/ALL ACTION/REXNA

be any misunderstanding. How convenient for the press to pick up what they want to pick up.

After the show, we went to a party, and the American ambassador to Britain, who had been at the concert, was there. He didn't say anything and he wanted a picture with us, so he must not have been offended. That's actually the doctored picture of us that's on the Internet. Saddam Hussein's head has been put on the American ambassador to England's body. How bizarre.

EW Once the backlash started, what sort of emotions did you go through?

MAINES It's sort of felt like how people say it is when someone dies, how you go through every stage—angry, disappointed, confused. [*Quietly*] Some days I just feel proud.

EW Travis Tritt called your remarks "cowardly" and suggested you wouldn't have said what you did in front of an American crowd.

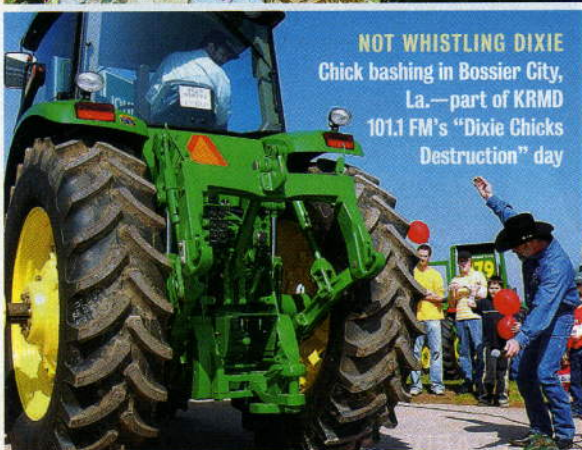
EMILY ROBISON The funny thing about that is, we assumed that whole crowd was expatriates from Texas, because that's who came to the show when we played the same venue four years ago.

MAINES And, for as many times as we've stuck our feet in our mouths, I think I would have said that in the States, thinking that I would have gotten big cheers—and probably have been enlightened otherwise [*laughter*]. But when you feel a certain way, it seems so logical and sensitive and pure to you. When I said it, it didn't feel controversial. I didn't think I was making a big going-against-the-grain statement.

EW There are people still hoping you'll issue another apology—something more deeply felt than they believe the first was.

MAINES The irony is, the people who don't like what I said [in the apology] believe it wasn't written by me, and the people who do like what I said think that I was forced to say it. They're both wrong. I apologized exactly for what I'm sorry for, and I did not apologize for what I'm not sorry for. People say, "Well, she didn't write that." Did it have to sound *stupid* for people to believe that I wrote that?

[Antiwar activists] wanted me to *not* have apologized. But it was so easy for me. At first we were saying "You know, it was light-



"RIGHT AFTER NATALIE SAID WHAT SHE SAID," SAYS MAGUIRE, "EMILY GOT ON THE MIKE AND SAID, 'YOU KNOW WE SUPPORT THE TROOPS 100 PERCENT.' HOW CONVENIENT FOR THE PRESS TO JUST PICK UP WHAT THEY WANT."

hearted"—well, *that* made people mad. I was like, okay, I can see that. I made a joke on foreign soil. I can see how people took offense to that. So I apologized for disrespecting the office of the presidency and the leader of the country. And that is what I wanted to say, and that is what I said, and that is all I will say. The end.

EW Ironically, the Bushes are—or were, anyway—Dixie Chicks fans from way back in your early days.

MAGUIRE Yeah, we used to go sing the national anthem at Rangers games, and they always had their box seats in front, and we'd talk to them....

MAINES Because they're people. If Bush was right here in front of me, I wouldn't degrade him. I have a lot of questions that I would ask, and I wouldn't back down from those. But I wouldn't ask them with a lot of attitude. There's no hatred in my heart.

EW A lot of country-radio people are hoping maybe Martie and Emily are closet conservatives who are slapping some sense into Natalie.

MAGUIRE That would be very convenient, because then maybe it would even everything out and it would go away quicker.

ROBISON My husband [singer-songwriter Charlie Robison] was doing an interview on country radio, and they said, "Well, what are Martie and Emily saying about Natalie? They must be really mad." And he said, "You don't understand. [They have] a bond that I can't get through, that no one can get through." People thinking this would divide us is a wrong assumption.... Natalie's comment came from a place of frustration that we all shared—we were apparently days away from war and still left with a lot of questions.

MAINES When we first heard that people in the States were mad, I

looked at them and said, "Oh, s—, are y'all mad at me?" And Martie just said, "Any one of us could have said that."

MAGUIRE Any one of us could have said it, and I'm glad it was you! [*Laughter*]

EW Do you understand the virulent reaction?

ROBISON I think everyone is afraid [about tensions in the world], and they need to vent it somehow. Not that they aren't truly mad [at us] about something. But what brings something to this level,

especially when we as a group or Natalie have never said anything in this realm before?

MAGUIRE My tour bus driver left me high and dry a month before our tour started. I just couldn't believe he wouldn't drive my bus because of what Natalie said.

MAINES I don't hate people who are for the war. It seems unfathomable that someone would not want to drive us because of our political views. But we're learning more and more that it's not that unfathomable to a large percentage of the population.

EW You see comments on message boards like "I hope they eat some of Earl's peas." [The Chicks' hit "Goodbye Earl" was about a wife beater who is fatally poisoned by his spouse.] At least they have a sense of humor. On the other hand, it is a borderline death threat.

MAINES Emily [got] trash dumped in front of her gate, and one of those right-wing talk-show hosts said, "Well, what did they expect?" My answer was: Not that! Didn't expect death threats! Didn't expect to have 24-hour security outside of my house! Violence doesn't cross my mind when I don't like what someone said. So, proud to say I didn't expect that. Don't feel naive for not expecting that.

ROBISON I worried more about how it affected our families. The three of us can create a kind of shell around ourselves. With my father, they had done a cute little hometown story on him in North Carolina right before this happened, and then these horrible, hateful letters started coming in to the school where he teaches, calling my dad a traitor.

MAINES Yeah, be mad at us.... Martie goes, "My grandfather's catching a lot of s--- at the nursing home." We started laughing, and she goes, "He is! It's real!"

ROBISON But he's the most staunch right-wing Republican....

MAINES Yeah, well, hello! He can hang out with my whole family. I joked with my dad, because he's been so pissed off about this—I said, "Hey, Dad, one of the positives is that maybe you're coming over to our side!"

MAGUIRE I'm usually the one that gets scared the most. I'm the worrywart of the band. I remember when they wanted to have "Chicks kick ass" buttons at our merchandise table—I was appalled. [The other two crack up.] "What will parents think when their child comes back with a 'Chicks kick ass' pin?" But [in this], I've surprised myself. I never wavered, ever.

EW In your apology, Natalie, you alluded to how being a mother

affected your position on the war. [Maines has a 2-year-old son, Slade, with her husband, actor Adrian Pasdar.]

MAINES After September 11, that's the first time ever that I felt true fear. It's changed us forever. I remember right after that being scared all the time—[being in New York and] hearing a plane vibrate, like "No!"... I'm completely paranoid. So I think of those little kids over there, just laying in their beds, listening [to the planes]... [Maines begins to cry.] I feel some guilt—we're so lucky to be born here, and you know, why are they born there?

ROBISON When you're a mother, it becomes, What are those mothers thinking? What are the mothers of the troops thinking? Everyone talks about how this war was over quickly and not that many people died. Tell that to the parents of the people coming back in body bags.



STRING QUARTET The group circa 1992 with (from left) Emily, Robin Lynn Macy, Martie, and Laura Lynch; Natalie joined in 1995

"I WANTED TO GET ON THE MESSAGE BOARDS AND TALK RADIO AND REASON WITH THESE PEOPLE!" SAYS MAGUIRE. "LIKE THAT WAS GONNA HAPPEN, WHEN THEY'RE CALLING US THE DIXIE SLUTS."

HOW MUCH WILL THE controversy hurt the Dixie Chicks? Country-music insiders are as divided as the trio's audience. "I think it's a classic example of maybe the Dixie Chicks not knowing their constituency," says Clear Channel Radio programming manager Alan Sledge. "The people who like the Dixie Chicks are also people who most likely voted for President Bush in the last election." CMT's Philips thinks that's an oversimplification, citing a desire expressed by many of his network's viewers to not be painted with one red-state brush. Like many broadcasters, he has a hard time distinguishing what's being whipped up by conservative muckrakers—be it talk radio or right-wing websites like FreeRepublic.com, where DJs' e-mail addresses have been posted—and what is heartfelt fan sentiment. "There's an aspect to this that feels like organized protest. If you look at who's responding and the way they

write, there are a lot who aren't music fans, who are weighing in on this with really old, angry language. But you can't deny that it's hit a nerve with the broader population."

That's evident when a star as big as Vince Gill can't get away with even qualified support for the Chicks. After he suggested at the April 7 Flameworthy Awards that Natalie had been "bashed enough," he too found his patriotism questioned, and was quickly on the phone with reporters affirming his support for the war.

With protests supposedly in the works at several venues, the Chicks' tour, which begins May 1 in Greenville, S.C., will reveal a lot about whether the trio has begun to weather this storm. But

the real test—given that most of the tour dates were sold out prior to the crisis—will be the next album. *Home* certainly reached a huge pop audience, which may hold less of a lasting grudge than, say, your average Charlie Daniels supporter. They may need all the rockers they can get. The simple truth is that the Chicks' careers as country-radio hitmakers may be over. Blake Shelton, whose "The Baby" recently topped the charts, just shakes his head sadly: "I wish it had never happened. They're our top act and we depend on them to drive people into the stores. If they're not selling records, what are the rest of us gonna do?"

But there's a surprisingly c'est-la-vie attitude toward crisis management in the Chicks' camp at this weary point. Says Renshaw: "There's a lot of feeling out there that 'these girls got too big for their britches. They've gone Hollywood with that 'Landslide' pop song. Now we can slap some sense back into them, and they'll be nice and humble and respectful and do everything we want.' Some other clients I've had *would* be running around going 'How can we get back into country radio's good graces? Is there an ass *anywhere* I could kiss?' That ain't them."

EW There's a long tradition of Texas stars having an uneasy relationship with the Nashville establishment: Steve Earle or Lyle Lovett, or the '70s "outlaws," Willie and Waylon—they almost all eventually drop out or become disenfranchised.

MAINES It's not their music, it's them.

ROBISON Their music *is* them, though.

MAINES Yeah, but I'm just saying, Lyle Lovett deserves to be played on the radio 100 percent. But his personality and politics—whatever they are—might not fit in. That could be where we wind up. And I'm okay with that.

EW Now you're being targeted for a boycott, based primarily on one sentence, versus an Eddie Vedder who impales Bush masks on microphone stands, or even a Martin Sheen, who is an active anti-war protester. No one is trying to get *West Wing* taken off the air.

MAGUIRE Some people have said it's because we're women. I don't necessarily believe that. It's all about being country-music artists. And [country radio not playing our music] is proving that it *is* about country music. We feel let down by our industry.

MAINES Because we sit there and wave the country-music flag all the time.

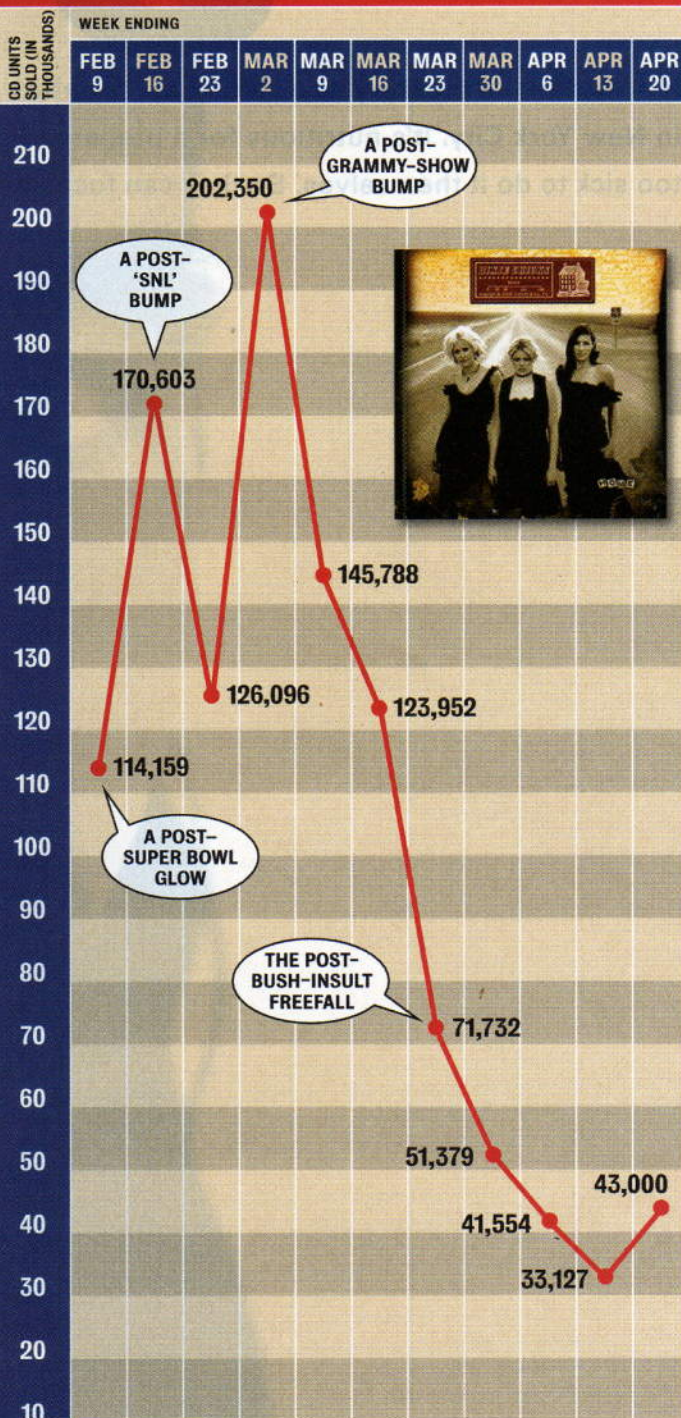
EW People at the radio trades are saying that it was startling to see programmers turn on a group that had done more than anyone in recent years to bring people to the format. But it's not quite so surprising when you see the eagerness to spank Faith Hill and Shania Twain for their stylistic pop infractions.

MAGUIRE And [Faith] is the top female superstar in the format. Alienate Shania. Alienate Faith. Alienate us. You're driving away the top artists in your format. How can that be good?

MAINES And why does the format have to be so narrowly defined?... I have always been honest about not listening to country when I was younger. It wasn't even the music. Especially as a teenager, you're looking for people who ask questions, who have a nerve, and country always seemed really safe. Then when I became a country musician, it broke down a lot of the misconceptions I had, because I thought, hey, these people are

THE END OF A COUNTRY CAREER?

Since Natalie Maines bashed Bush, sales of the Chicks' *'Home'* have gone south. The question now: Can the group bounce back?





GOLDEN TOUCH The Dixie Chicks accept their Best Country Album Grammy on Feb. 23

“PEOPLE NEED TO PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE: WE ARE A COUNTRY-MUSIC GROUP. YES, SOMETHING WAS SAID. BUT WE’RE NOT MAKING FOREIGN POLICY HERE.”—EMILY ROBISON

really accepting of me, and I don’t fit into this genre. Nobody ever seemed to have a problem with that. So it’s just disappointing that now they do.

EW Within the country community, you’re being pitted against more traditional, flag-waving stars Toby Keith (who gets a big cheer on tour projecting a doctored image of Natalie and Saddam) and Darryl Worley—with those two winning in a landslide.

MAINES I don’t agree with what Toby Keith says, at all. But I *like* that he speaks up. It may be the safe side of speaking up, because he knows that everyone in the genre is going to agree with him [*laughs*]. But everyone has the right to say something, and he does. I respect that more than people who say nothing.

EW You haven’t had a lot of support from other country stars.

MAINES It took a while, and we were disappointed by that. But we heard that Faith Hill finally spoke up at the Flame-worthy Awards.... We were starting to think, This is gonna be really hard to show up at award shows...

ROBISON Where we’re not nominated anymore! [*Laughter*]

MAINES Yeah, we probably won’t be

showing up.... People make assumptions, how if you play one type of music, you’re a certain way. But we surprised [the rock] audience as much as the country audience. They never in a million years thought that we wouldn’t want to go to war. [*Pause*] Did I say “we”? Do I need to say “I”? [*Laughter*]

EW Will you address these issues from the stage when you tour?

MAINES You know, if we don’t get a lot of boos... If I say anything, it’ll just be a thank-you—just for being fans.

EW Any thoughts on how this will ultimately play out?

ROBISON I think it will go down in history as a sign of the times. Will we bounce back? Will we end up not on country radio? I don’t know. But I do think it’s a sign of everyone’s just being scared right now—scared to speak up, scared to question. But our country’s based on asking questions. *Especially* in a time of war. *Especially* when people’s lives are at stake.

MAINES I feel patriotic—and strong. We will continue to be who we are. People think this’ll scare us and shut us up, and it’s gonna do the opposite. They just served themselves a huge headache. [*Laughter*] But that’s not a threat! ■