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## THE DIXIE CHICKS

NATALIE MAINES,  
MARTIE MAGUIRE,  
& EMILY ROBISON

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PELL JAMES  
ELLEN PAGE  
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# THE DIXIE CHICKS MOVE ON

BY STEVE BALTIN

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**“T**he comment,” as Natalie Maines calls it, has been talked about. The band’s politics, the controversy, the outrage, and the death threats have all been highly scrutinized and placed under the media microscope as well. In fact, the only thing that hasn’t been talked about much in regards to the Dixie Chicks of late is the music.

And with Emily Robison, Martie Maguire, and Natalie Maines, it is still the music that comes first. Or to put it in perspective, if not for the fact the Texas trio were the biggest selling female act of all time no one would’ve given a damn that Maines had insulted the president. But well before Maines made that fateful remark in London on the eve of the Iraq war, the Dixie Chicks had established themselves as a

superstar act, one capable not only of selling out arenas around the world, but reaching across genres to meld country with the singer/songwriter movement of the ‘70s.

The Dixie Chicks have perfected that science on *Taking The Long Way*, an album that just debuted at number one with over 526,000 copies sold in its first week. The trio is thrilled with the numbers, but on this, their most personal album to date, the effort was its greatest reward. Working with producer Rick Rubin (Johnny Cash, the Red Hot Chili Peppers), as well as an array of songwriters from former Crowded House leader Neil Finn to Sheryl Crow and Pete Dinklage, the Chicks call to mind the heyday of bands like the Eagles and James Taylor throughout the impassioned 14-song collection.

*Venice* had a chance to speak to Robison and the lively Maines about moving on, parenthood, and the music.









Emily Robison



Martie Maguire



Natalie Maines

**Venice:** You guys are very much in demand these days.

**Emily:** It's good to be busy.

**Natalie:** [laughs] That's a good thing. I live mostly in L.A. and I am here and we are off until Friday, when we go to London.

**What are the L.A. hangouts of choice?**

**Natalie:** We have beach day every Saturday and we play volleyball and just lots of people come over and it's a whole day of that fun. I like being with friends. I like playing games. [laughs] I'm really nerdy. I like charades and I'm pretty obsessed with Yahtzee. I like to go to the movies.

**Back to the album, could you have ever imagined that when you put it out there would be this much interest?**

**Emily:** I don't know. I would always go back and forth between how many fans did we lose versus how many fans could we potentially gain. And I think the last couple of weeks has been very telling as to where people's support lies. I think a lot of people bought the record as a vote to how they feel about things. Hopefully, the music will speak louder than anything else from now on, but I think it has been the main question because we've been gone for two years. But now that the album is out people can start to talk about the music because they've heard the music.

**How exciting is it for you to have music out again after two years?**

**Emily:** That's the best part. You start talking about this music and you start doing interviews about the music, but the most gratifying thing is when it finally gets in people's hands and it finally gets heard because that's your baby. This is what you've been working on for the last year, so it's definitely the most gratifying part of it all and especial-

ly touring. We're going to tour right away, which is new for us to tour right off the bat, so we'll get that instant gratification. To me that's the best part.

**What songs are you most looking forward to doing live?**

**Emily:** The ones that seem to have risen to the top just based on when we do shows where we play five or six songs, whether it be for internet shows, things like that, are of course the single, "Not Ready To Make Nice," "The Long Way Around" has been a staple of the set. "Easy Silence" is one, "Voice Inside My Head" has been a favorite of some people. "Lullaby" has been a favorite. We haven't performed that yet, but that will probably be in there for the tour. "Lubbock Or Leave It" is on that list too. So those have been the favorites. We'll probably play about 80 percent of the album on tour.

My favorite song on the album is "Silent House." I don't know how well it will work in the show necessarily because it's a long song and it's a song that takes a lot of attention to listen to and clue into, but I love that song and love playing that song.

**Natalie:** Well, "Not Ready To Be Nice" because I still can very easily tap into the emotion and the pain that goes along with the song. Often times I'm making a grocery list while I'm singing that one. [laughs] I'm not even thinking about the song sometimes. If I think about it too much I can easily just start bawling right there on stage while I sing it. But I love playing "Lubbock Or Leave It," "Taking The Long Way," and then, lots of times, the new songs we've been playing lately, most of the things where we get to play more than one song it's an acoustic sort of internet show. So I'm just excited to play all of them full band because we haven't really gotten to do that for an audience.

**"Easy Silence" is such a sweet song.**

**Emily:** Kind of political at the same time, but, yes, very sweet.

**I think the mark of great art, though, is stuff that can be interpreted in many different ways.**

**Emily:** If there's one thing that we consciously do when we write, it's that. We try to write so that people can interpret things in their own way and can take things a number of different ways. We don't like to spell things out too much. So I'm glad that people do find their own meaning to songs that we may not even have thought of.

**Congratulations, by the way, on your impeccable taste in co-songwriters.**

**Emily:** [laughs] Thanks. Rick Rubin had a lot to do with some of those co-writers, most of those co-writers. He was very instrumental in hooking us up with them and they were big masters; we loved all of them.

**How did getting to work with all these different artists influence you as a musician and what did you learn from them?**

**Natalie:** Ah, so much I don't even know where to begin. But Rick, at every level of the recording process, is a great teacher and he's not trying to teach. He really gets you to shut out any thoughts of what other people would think of something. It's just about creating music. It's the most fun I've ever had in the studio because it was the most experimental we've ever gotten. We've always sort of thought if we laid it down then it had to be on the song. I don't know why we made that rule for ourselves. Probably because we're cheap and didn't want to waste the money. [laughs] So Rick is just like, "Try everything." Amongst the three of us we would debate if on a song



someone should come in and play a certain instrument and then we'd turn to him, "Should they?" And he'd look at us like we were nuts for actually talking about this.

The writers he hooked us up with were Dan Wilson, Gary Louris, and Mike Campbell, and that was awesome. We definitely felt like we have a lot to learn; we were open to that and wanted to learn from these people who are such naturals at it. If something happens to me during the day I don't have to go home and put it in a song, but these writers are like that. They're inspired to write everyday and so you just learn a lot from that process. They all write differently. But the thing I probably learned the most was from Dan and Gary; just being completely open, honest, vulnerable, and not writing something thinking about other people hearing it and judging it. Just write it because you need to write it and really open yourself up. I think we've never been able to achieve that in our songwriting. It was always stories about other people, or a character in a book, and it's so much more fun and the music stays interesting to me longer as far as months go on and the amount of times I sing something when it is personal.

**Emily:** Well, I think the best by-product of being successful is you get to collaborate with people you really admire and you get the opportunity to make a phone call and ask people like Neil Finn if they want to write, and they know who you are. To me that's probably the most gratifying thing about the fame part, if not so much the music part of it. We handpicked Neil, we're huge fans of his, all the way back to Spilt Enz and Crowded House and all that. It's fairly bizarre to sit in a room with someone you admire so much and you listened to in junior high over and over and over again and write a song with him. But at the same time it was very natural because I feel like the people we wrote with, we had a lot of the same musical sensibilities, even though maybe we didn't have the same style. But we were looking for that. We were looking for people who could take us in all different directions, as opposed to just always going to the same patterns that we may write in. I think because of our background we tended to have certain melodies or chord structures we tended to always go back to. So when you write with someone like Gary Louris, who's so good at melodies and things, we'd think, "Oh, we would never think to do that, but I love the way that sounds." So that's the fun part of collaborating, and especially with people who are so good at what they do.

**What I like about the record though is even though there are a lot of different people involved there's a flow to the record and a sense of continuity.**

**Emily:** Well I think that comes from the

three of us being musicians on it and singing on it ourselves. But also it has to do with the studio band being fairly consistent and Rick being consistent. We did want a band feel to the album. We didn't want it to sound like a bunch of singles put together. To me my favorite albums are the ones that from start to finish sound like an album. They sound like a full story and each song is just a chapter in that story. So when you approach it from, "Okay, the studio band is going to be our band for this," I think that helps that continuity you're talking about.

**Since you mention leaving things open ended, what are some of the things in other art forms, such as film or literature, which have influenced you of late?**

**Emily:** Well, a song that was directly influenced by a documentary was "Lubbock Or Leave It," which is Natalie's hometown. It's kind of her story, but we were inspired to write after we saw a documentary called *The Education of Shelby Knox*, which is about a young girl in Lubbock who was trying to get sex education put in the Lubbock independent school district. And it's just her whole fight to do that. She was very religious, from a very conservative family, and did the whole promise ceremony where she gets a ring from her parents and she promises to remain a virgin until she's married and all this stuff. But yet she found it very important to teach sex education because in Lubbock, believe it or not, per capita, it has the most STD's and teenage pregnancies in the United States. Or it did at the time they made the documentary. So it's interesting that this is happening, yet no one wants to educate kids on things. It's just, "Go to church on Sunday and everything will be okay." So I think she was really brave to do that in her hometown and Natalie got very inspired by her and she reminded Natalie of herself in a lot of ways as far as growing up in this small town in Texas, and these are the things you're having to battle in everyday life just trying to be heard.

**Natalie:** I like biographies and history books. Right now what I'm reading is the Bob Dylan book with all the interviews. I love his chronicles, and my manager's just telling me about a book called *The History of Knowledge*. It sounds really interesting. It is what the title says it is: the history of knowledge. It could either be really boring or really interesting. I'll let you know. I'm fascinated how you research that. How do you pinpoint the beginning of knowledge? But that's why I want to read it.

**What do you get from this album when you hear it?**

**Natalie:** It is the first album we've ever made where I gained so much from making it that it served such a greater purpose for other people to hear it and the success that

it has. This was such a selfish album in just the way we needed to make it to get on with things. It has so many other meanings to me and serves so many other purposes it was the first album that, if nobody had ever heard it, it wouldn't have been a waste or a wash for me because it helped me and meant so much to me in so many different ways beyond the success of it.

**Emily:** I think we're all very proud that we co-wrote everything and for the first time it really is such an autobiographical and personal album that when I listen to it I feel like we have something that is essentially Dixie Chicks. We've always picked songs, and we've written some, but I don't know if we've ever been able to tap into things like we did on this one. And I think a lot of it had to do with what happened two years ago. I think that made us open ourselves; one thing led to another and then we're onto another subject that we never thought that we would be talking about. I feel like this is so much more a portrait of us than any album has ever been.

**How gratifying has the response been then?**

**Emily:** It's very gratifying. I think anytime you have that sort of approval through record sales it kind of validates you to a certain extent. Right when we finished the record I felt like that could've been it and we would've been happy we made the music. But it's always icing on the cake when people identify with it. And I think the fact that we're trying to be open and honest and not sugarcoat things...we kind of feel like we're in a place of nothing to lose. We can't make people any more mad or happy for us than they've already been. It's like people are so polarized at the moment we kind of feel like we're an open book and it's very freeing.

**Natalie:** We've always cared what critics thought about our records. I'm always curious and hopeful that they like it. I definitely have loved the response to this record. And then as far as the thrill of getting to work with all these great people, I think before the comment was made I personally wouldn't have had the self-confidence to ask any of these people to write. I definitely always felt because we were in country music people had preconceived ideas about us. I always felt like people probably had no clue that I was more like them than [they] thought. So it really gave me a lot more confidence to talk to other people. I mean, I called up Neil Finn and asked if he wanted to have breakfast and talk about writing. And he's someone I wish we could've written with more. Unfortunately, he lives on the other side of the world.

**What are the kids' favorite tracks on the record?**

**Natalie:** Well, Slade, my oldest, always









wants to hear "Lullaby" 'cause he knows it was written for him as far as what I was writing it about. And so he always says, "Mom, play the song about me." So I play that. And then they always like the rocking ones. And then Beckett, my youngest, because of the video, he's obsessed with "Not Ready To Make Nice." Seeing the video is the first time he really knew that that's what I did. I haven't really worked since I've had him and I don't sing a lot around the house. So he had no clue that that's what mom did and he was fascinated with music and instruments so he kind of looked at me...he looks at the TV mesmerized, not saying a word, and then he'd go, "More, more," and just try to push 'play' on the DVD player and just played it over and over. That's the quietest I've ever heard him be. And he looked at me like, "Wow." He was impressed for the first time. He doesn't know any of the old songs. I don't listen to my own music really so I think the tour will get him more familiar with our music.

**What was the first album you bought?**

**Natalie:** The first album I ever bought was Andy Gibb. [laughs] But it wasn't deep, I wasn't connected to it anyway. Probably the first lyrical album or lyrics that I was just obsessed with and felt this passion and connection with was Lenny Kravitz, the *Let Love Rule* album. When we were younger it was all about melody and beat for me. So it was all about Michael Jackson and Madonna and that sort of thing. I didn't pay attention to lyrics. I was way more interested in melody and feel so if I didn't know the words on the second time I heard it, 'cause I never would shut up, I always wanted to sing along, I would just make up whatever words. So it was probably Lenny Kravitz and then I totally got into all of the '60s and '70s sort of folk rock protest kind of music. And I listened to James Taylor my whole life. I would say he is probably the soundtrack to my life. Every year of my life I can relate some James Taylor song to it as far as a memory or whatever.

**So then what did it mean for you to get to tour with him?**

**Natalie:** Oh my god, it was so awesome. The first time we played with him was the CMT "Crossroads" show where we did his songs and he does ours and I was just [cracks up]...my dad was playing with us and James Taylor was the only music my family could agree on as far as family vacations. We didn't have all that technology that kids have today. We all had to listen to the same thing together. And so just looking over at my dad and seeing him I just knew he was as in awe as I was that the three of us were sharing a stage together.

**Emily:** As far as traveling and working with James Taylor and being on each other's songs and doing a set with him, he's been a huge influence to all of us, and what I loved about the whole thing was more that it lived up to all of our expectations. Sometimes when you meet people that you are fans of I don't always want to meet them because I'm afraid they're going to let me down and the bubble's going to burst, but James Taylor just surpassed every expectation we ever had of just how real and genuine and nice he would be, and just a great teacher. ▼