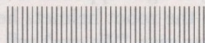


# Goodbye Dixie

*Natalie Maines took on a president, and Nashville cast her out. Ten years later, she's finally ready to move on* By Brian Hiatt

**I**N 1986, WHILE GEORGE W. BUSH WAS BUSY FINDING Jesus and swearing off alcohol, a spunky little blond girl named Natalie Maines was finishing sixth grade in sleepy Lubbock, Texas. At a graduation ceremony, one of her favorite teachers offered a mock prediction: She would be elected president of the United States, then get "kicked out of office for excessive talking." For Maines, who instead grew up to be the Dixie Chicks' lead singer, then the most vilified woman in Dixie, and now, at age 38, a fledgling solo artist, the story proves one thing: "I was born outspoken. It followed me my whole life." ¶ For nearly seven years, though, in the wake of the Chicks' last album, 2006's *Taking the Long Way*, she was uncharacteristically quiet. Instead of recording new music or touring (outside of scattered Chicks dates), Maines was at home: raising two kids while her husband, former *Heroes* star Adrian Pasdar, pursued his acting career; gardening in her lush Brentwood backyard; folding laundry while she listened to Howard Stern on



## FLY AWAY

Maines in New York:  
"I don't need to hear  
cheers to feel validated,"  
she says.







the radio. "People have a very romantic idea of what they'd do if they could sing," she says, displaying no apparent exertion as she trots up a nearly vertical section of a hiking trail in the Santa Monica Mountains, a few minutes from home. "But I'm a mom, and it takes a lot of time." She claims, with a laugh, that she put out her rock-dominated solo debut, *Mother*, largely to get people to stop bugging her to make new music. "I didn't think I had time in my life for this," she says. "I sing all the time. But maybe nobody's hearing it, because I'm singing in my car or in my house or whatever. I don't need the roar of the crowd, and I don't need to hear cheers to feel validated."

Six mornings a week, Maines hikes this vertiginous five-mile-long path, which offers a brutal workout and a *Lord of the Rings*-worthy view that stretches for miles, even on today's cool and overcast spring morning. Maines is as fed up with country music as anyone still in a group called the Dixie Chicks could possibly be, but she still craves the wide-open spaces she used to sing about. Or else she just needs someplace big and quiet to process all that's happened to her. "It's probably good for her mentally, to kind of air her brain out," says her dad, Lloyd Maines, a famed steel guitarist and producer in his own right. "And she looks to me like she's in the best shape of her life." It's almost silent up here, except for the crunch of our feet on the dirt trail, the panting of her dogs, Mabel (a white Labrador) and Banjo (a friendly, dreadlocked puli, a breed introduced to her by *Taking the Long Way* producer Rick Rubin), and my own increasingly labored breathing. "I usually run the second part," Maines says. "But I won't make you do that!"

When fellow hikers pass by, they offer no more than friendly nods – no one recognizes her. Maines has a blunt-force haircut she compares to Rachel Maddow's, and is wearing a blue windbreaker over a sleeveless sweatshirt, a gray tee, running shorts and yellow-and-blue neon running shoes. She looks, at the moment, more like an unusually attractive high school volleyball coach than anyone's idea of a star. "The short hair fits my personality more," she says. "I think maybe, with long hair, it was a role – I was playing dress-up a bit." A few years back, she even buzzed her head. "That was the best. Oh, my God! The best! I hate thinking about clothes. I hate shopping. I haven't gotten a manicure or pedicure in six years. I don't color my hair anymore. I mean, the upkeep on that was time-consuming. I used to be way more blond. But my kids – especially my youngest one – are desperate for me to grow my hair back out."

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT wrote about *Fall Out Boy* in RS 1183.

Her first radical haircut was in junior high. "I was the only cheerleader with a half-shaved head," says Maines with her big, easy laugh. She was popular but rebellious. In racially divided Lubbock, a lot of her friends were black or Hispanic ("The black girls in elementary school liked me because I could sing with them and do the Cabbage Patch"), and she would "absolutely get in a tizzy" when white kids made racist cracks. She started calling herself a hippie, wore Birkenstocks – apparently a shocking statement in late-Eighties West Texas – and tried, without success, to organize an anti-dress-code sit-in.

Maines was a pop and R&B fan as a little kid ("I used to kiss my Michael Jackson album – my first interracial relationship!"). "Growing up, I thought I was going to be Madonna," she says. "I wanted to be a pop star. I wanted to dance and sing." Her dad had helped invent what would become alt-country, playing with the Flatlanders, among many others – but she'd flip past those LPs to get to his Carly Simon, James Taylor and Bonnie Raitt albums (also the *Grease* soundtrack, which she memorized). "I had never bought a country album in my life, or even listened to one all the way through," she says.

She graduated high school a year early, and took classes at four different col-

'Because I've done this for 10 years!' But it was great. I was right – that was just the beginning of her learning that I am right!"

With Maines on board, the Chicks signed their first major-label deal, and almost instantly became superstars. The group pushed boundaries – the *Thelma & Louise* feminism of 1999's "Goodbye Earl," a gleeful account of murdering an abusive husband, seriously freaked out the country-music establishment.

Maines found herself called into her label president's office for various sins – telling dirty jokes onstage, leading a club crowd in rounds of shots. She'd respond to challenges by doubling down: After one lyric horrified her record company, she added the line "That's right, I said 'mattress-dancin'." The other Chicks didn't share her rebellious instincts, but they always supported her, even when the controversies turned much uglier. "We know each other," says Maines, "and we love each other."

**F**

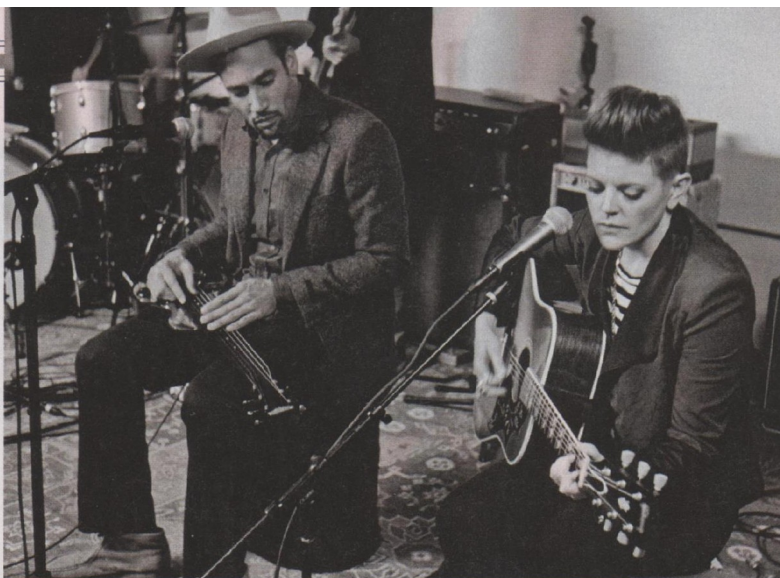
OR ANYONE WHO REALLY knew her, it was no surprise when, on March 10th, 2003, Maines stood onstage in London, on the eve of the Iraq War, and made a casual comment, punctuated with a smile: "Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed

**"I FELT LIKE, 'I WON THE WAR AND NOW I QUIT,'"  
SHE SAYS. "I'M DONE."**

leges – including an indifferent semester at Boston's Berklee College of Music, where she had won a scholarship. Her dad had recorded a four-song demo with her for Berklee, which he passed along to the Dixie Chicks, a small-time bluegrass group he'd played with. "I wasn't pitching Natalie at all," says Lloyd. "I just said casually, 'Hey, this is my girl singing, check it out.'" Within a year, the core Chicks – sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison – had pushed out their original lead singer and come calling for Natalie, even though she had zero professional experience. "They liked the fact that she could sing powerful," says Lloyd, "and not be drowned out by their harmonies. And they liked her look and her attitude." She skipped an econ exam at her college of the moment and went right on the road. "Before the first show, I was like, 'No big deal, we're gonna be great,' and I remember Martie was freaking out," recalls Maines. "And I was like, 'Why are you freaking out?' I'm sure on the inside, she's going,

that the president of the United States is from Texas." For country-radio programmers, and at least a hysterical minority of fans, it was as if she'd French-kissed Saddam Hussein while setting fire to a puppy wrapped in the American flag. An unprecedented boycott and high-tech lynching followed – often overtly sexist, with drown-the-witch overtones: Bill O'Reilly calling them "callow, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around" wasn't even the worst of it. As chronicled in the superb 2006 documentary *Shut Up and Sing*, Maines and her bandmates handled it with strength and grace, touring in the face of death threats, playing with their young kids backstage while protesters screamed and smashed CDs outside the venues. Recorded with the controversy fresh in their minds, the barely-country *Taking the Long Way* turned out to be one of the Chicks' best albums, slapping down their critics while winning five Grammys and selling 2.5 million copies despite near-zero country-radio support.





## ROCK CHICK

Maines recording *Mother* with her L.A. neighbor, Ben Harper (above), who just wanted "to hear her voice soar again," he says. Left: Maines (center) with the Dixie Chicks at the CMA Awards, Nashville, 1998.

But the backlash left inevitable scars. "I joke that I have PTSD, but there's probably truth in that joke," Maines says, blue eyes shining. "It all put an ugly light on people that I was kind of happily naive to. But when I was going through it, I really didn't feel like it was affecting me. I was in fight mode and battle mode, and I felt, you know, I was right, and free to say what I want to say." She went into therapy in the past few years. "Not just stuff with the controversy, but I think I've always been sort of a person that just pushes the feelings down, and then they do eventually come back up. So I didn't have tools to know how to deal with them or acknowledge them. I always like to pretend everything's OK. I'm a shyer person now, less trusting."

Backstage at the Grammys in early 2007, after the Chicks topped off their night by winning Album of the Year, Maines found that she couldn't stop crying. "It was really freaking me out, actually," she says. "'Cause I couldn't control it. I kept saying, 'I don't know why I'm crying, it's not because Grammys mean so much to me!' Looking back, I realize now my subconscious knew that was an ending of a chapter for me. And, like, the ending of a battle. I just felt, like, 'OK. I fucking won the war and now I quit.'" She laughs. "I'm tired, and I'm sick of all you people, and I'm not putting myself out there for you to judge. I'm done."

ONE MORNING LAST YEAR, Maines called her manager, Simon Renshaw, and asked him to meet her at an address in Santa Monica. When he showed up, it turned out to be a studio owned by Ben Harper. "Sit down," Maines told Renshaw, a genial Brit who's been managing her and the Chicks since she joined. "I want to play you something." Until that moment, Renshaw had no idea that Maines was making music. "She just went and did it on her own, the way she wanted to do it," he says.

She did have to be coaxed a bit. Harper lives not far from Maines, and they became closer friends after their kids had started playing together – they also had a mutual friend in Eddie Vedder, who bonded with Maines through her activism for the now-freed West Memphis Three. A fan of her huge, emotive voice, Harper made a deceptively casual offer of studio time. They began recording, with Maines cutting sessions short to help her kids with homework. An album began to take shape, one that reveals her to be on par with the likes of Adele, Kelly Clarkson and Beyoncé as a pure singer. "I think she recognized my genuine enthusiasm, just to hear her voice soar again," says Harper. "I'm not a producer – I'm a songwriting steel-guitar player. There ain't but probably three people left alive I'm gonna stop my life for to produce with, and she's one of them."

Maines wasn't feeling up for a lot of songwriting, so the album is mostly covers (though she did co-write the oceanic album closer, "Take It on Faith" and a couple of others). "I really just wanted this to be fun," she says, "and there were so many songs I've always wanted to sing. And that could go on forever. I could have a hundred covers albums." Songwriters range from Jeff Buckley (she successfully takes on his slippery vocal showpiece "Lover, You Should've Come Over") to Vedder.

On the title track, from Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, Maines mines new melodic, emotional and political depths from a familiar tune. "I think it's great," says Roger Waters, who wrote the song. "I get goosebumps just talking about it." He's pleased to hear that Maines was inspired to cover it after hearing his rendition on his current *Wall* tour – which Waters follows with a speech about the "slippery slope to tyranny." "How cool is that?" he says. "More power to her." *Mother* is proving to be a big hit in the rock-legend demography: Maines has gotten word that Eric Clapton loves it and gave a copy to George Harrison's widow, Olivia.

Harper and Maines never discussed genre: "The words 'rock,' or 'country,' or 'soul' ... none of that ever came up," says Harper. But as co-producer, Maines knew exactly what she wanted it all to sound like, even singing melodies for guitar solos and bass lines – and she was quite certain that she never wanted to make anything resembling a country album again. "I can't listen to our second album," she says, referring to the Chicks' 1999 breakthrough, *Fly*. "Because I was really, like, embracing country and really waving that country flag. My accent is so out of control on that album. I'm like, 'Who is that?'"

When the Bush controversy hit, Maines was stunned. "I always thought they accepted us in spite of the fact that we were different," she says. "It shocked me and kind of grossed me out that people thought I would be a conservative right-winger, that I'd be a redneck. But at that time, people didn't ask us things like, 'What do you think of gay marriage?' If they had, they would have learned how liberal I was. But I was so confused by who people thought I was and what I had been putting out there."

Afterward, she started acting out. "There was a part of me that was like, 'Oh, this isn't OK? Fuck that.' I didn't know the cat was in the bag, but it felt so good that the cat was out of the bag. Then I definitely just went, 'Oh, really? You don't like that? Well, how about this? Not only do I not like this president, I love gay people! And I'm pro-legalization of marijuana and all drugs! Yeah, let me blow your mind.'"

She's totally out of touch with her former genre – when Brad Paisley and LL Cool J's ill-conceived [Cont. on 88]



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#### NATALIE MAINES

[Cont. from 65] "Accidental Racist" comes up, she's unaware that Paisley had written pro-Obama and pro-immigration songs: She'd assumed he was a Toby Keith-style right-winger. Either way, she really hates the song. "It just sounds like an out-of-touch white guy making an observation that I feel like we all made in junior high or high school," Maines says. "And then for LL Cool J to go along with that? It's very bizarre."

That brings up a larger complaint. "I just didn't like how blatant country music was," she says, laughing again. "Nothing seemed poetic or subtle. Nothing could be interpreted two different ways! It's all very spelled out. James Taylor can write 'Fire and Rain' and tell you it's about a mental institution, this and that – and you listen to it, and you're trying to decipher it all. And, you know, a country song would be like [*sings twangily*], 'I'm in a mental institution!'"

MAINES HASN'T seen her two bandmates since last July, when they played a private charity show in Greenwich, Connecticut. They exchange texts regularly, but she hasn't met Robison's new baby. The Dixie Chicks' last public performance was a year earlier, at an Austin benefit for wildfire victims. Everyone around Maines says their brief performance at the show – which featured acts from Willie Nelson to George Strait to the Avett Brothers – was a triumph, but that's not how Maines remembers it. She's fixated on the fact that the tickets didn't quite sell out. "I feel like we are tainted," she says. "I don't know if we put a tour up, if people would come." (Renshaw says he's quite confident they would.) She's open to more tours, though not precisely enthusiastic about it. "It's not where my passion is," she says. "But I don't dislike it, either."

Maguire and Robison have long wanted to make another Dixie Chicks album, and

Maines admits she may be breaking their hearts a little. "That was a lot of what I had to work out in therapy, too, because you do become this unit and you do feel an obligation," she says. "There's not being inspired, but there's also just not having the life to facilitate that right now. We have nine kids between the three of us. You know, Martie and Emily probably have more time to themselves – whereas I don't. And I can't go to Texas and make a record. I don't think they can uproot and come here to make a record." She's not sure they could agree on a musical direction either.

Still in her hiking outfit, Maines is sitting in the bright dining room of Farmshop, a farm-to-table restaurant in the faux-rustic Brentwood Country Mart, where her neighbors – Ben Affleck, Reese Witherspoon – are frequently spotted by paparazzi. The photographers usually leave her alone, and today she even has to wait a bit for a table. She's just glad that, unlike when she lived in Texas – which she and her family left for good eight years ago – she doesn't have to worry about someone spitting in her food. "I was afraid to go places, afraid of what people were thinking about me," she says. "In L.A., I just felt I was among my people."

When we finally get a table, Maines sips coffee and starts talking – about Taylor Swift's ability to walk the line between country and pop ("Let's see what they do to her – how she is in 10 years"), about Bruno Mars ("I love his voice – is he gay, straight?"), about turning down a crappy opening slot on a package tour she won't name ("It doesn't have to be about the money, but I want it to at least be fun"). Then she starts dissing music's biggest awards show: "When the Oscars are more edgy than the Grammys, it's pathetic. It's just a big commercial. No side boob? I mean, oh, my God." She almost stops herself. "I'll get myself banned from every genre of music," she says, offering a wicked smile. Then she keeps right on going. **RS**