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WHISTLING DIXIE CHICKS

The strong-minded trio
is unafraid to make noise

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



TOUGH TUNE
Dixie Chicks
(l.-r.) Emily Robison, Natalie Maines, Martie Maguire

★ Suddenly, the Dixie Chicks are everywhere. They appeared on "Oprah" and did a "VH1 Storytellers" concert, and a new documentary about them, "Shut Up & Sing," opened on Friday. They're everywhere,

except at the top of the charts and in sold-out stadiums. Their new album, "Taking the Long Way," has only gone platinum, a far cry from their previous three CDs, which sold 12 million, 10 million and 6 million copies each in the U.S. alone, numbers that made them the best-selling female music group of all time. They've had to cancel some dates on their current tour, and the crowds are smaller.

Still, "It was completely surprising to me to feel the energy in our audience even if it is half the people," says singer-songwriter Natalie Maines. "I think we are experiencing something that no other band has ever experienced. Our fans that are at the show feel like they have a purpose."

The backlash is 'something no band has experienced.'

Why such importance for just attending a music concert? Because of what Maines refers to as "the comment": An onstage remark at a 2003 show in London, during the runup to the Iraq war, in which Texas-born Maines said: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas."

Pretty bland stuff as far as Bush-bashing goes, but in the world of country-pop music, it was shocking. Filmmaker Barbara Kopple (who won an Oscar for 1976's doc "Harlan County, USA" and for 1990's "American Dream") had approached Maines and bandmates Emily Robison and Martie Maguire about following them for a documentary well before Maines' comment sparked fan protests and a blackballing of the group by major radio conglomerates. When the Chicks finally agreed, it came together on the heels of that battle.

What "Shut Up & Sing" ultimately presents is a band whose bond grows stronger even as they receive serious death threats, struggle to respond to vicious attacks without compromising their integrity and watch as their commercial popularity plummets. The result of it all is that the three women have taken control of their music like never before. (At press time, NBC had reportedly refused to air advertisements for the film.)

"What the film shows is a personal transformation, how they grew up from 2003 to 2006," says Kopple. "They got catapulted into the center of a much larger political debate and issues like freedom of speech and opposition to the U.S. in Iraq. The Chicks are very strong. They will not back down. They will stay and fight for what they believe in."

On their new CD, Maines, Robison and Maguire for the first time wrote or co-wrote every track, working with producer Rick Rubin and making the defiant rock tune "Not Ready to Make Nice" their personal theme.

"That's ultimately why we don't have any regrets," says Maines. "We never would've had this record."

"Also, I always felt like a very honest person. It bothered me that apparently so many people thought I believed certain things and thought a certain way because of the kind of music I played.

"I have no goal to regain fans, but it is fun for us and we like the goal of getting new fans. More fans, but different ones." ♦