Bashing Bush: A Retrospective on the Dixie Chicks

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Introduction:

The Dixie Chicks, an American country music band, were formed in 1989 in Dallas, Texas. The members of the band include Marie Maguire, Emily Robinson, and Natalie Maines (lead singer). The Dixie Chicks' commercial success didn't come until 1998 with their hit songs, "There's Your Trouble" and "Wide Open Spaces." On March 10, 2003 everything they worked for fell apart. Ten days before the invasion of Iraq, Maines unpromptedly told a London audience during the introduction of their song, *Travelin' Soldier*: "Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We (the Dixie Chicks) do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States (George W. Bush) is from Texas."

The Guardian, a British daily newspaper, published a review of the show in which they recall Maines saying: "Just so you know,' says singer Natalie Maines, 'we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas," Betty Clark, the writer of the review, left out the full middle of the quote, which was a vital point of what the Dixie Chicks were trying to say: they don't want the war because of the violence that it will cause. The original comment was well received by the attendees of the concert, but after it was published and made available to the American public, it wasn't as admired as it had been the previous night. Once the comment hit American soil, boycotts erupted, rallys in which CDs were brought and demolished by a bulldozer started transpiring, and death threats were made against the Dixie Chicks. Lipton, a sponsor of the Dixie Chicks, had to renegotiate their deal with them because fans were threatening to boycott the company too. The Dixie Chicks

became a topic for debate (Morris, 2009) due to the fact that they spoke out against George W. Bush and the war when no one else would.

Two days after Maines made the comment, she attempted to make it clear that she felt "the President is ignoring the opinions of many in the U.S. and alienating the rest of the world," but her critics didn't welcome this idea either. On March 14th, she tries to clarify once again that she "love(s) [her] country. [Natalie Maines] (is) a proud American." Still, no one accepted what Maines said because she wasn't giving a full hearted apology (CNN, 2003).

Using newspapers and other primary sources, I will analyze the period in which the Dixie Chicks made their comment. I will also argue that because the Dixie Chicks are an all-*female country band* they came across as "unpatriotic" and that's why they received a lot of backlash for their comment. Discussing major questions like: Didn't the Dixie Chicks have the right to free speech? Why were so many radio stations not playing the Dixie Chicks? Why did they receive so much backlash?

I will divide my analysis of this incident into three chapters, in the first chapter I will talk about the history of country music and the politics surrounding America during the time of the comment. Second, I will talk about the media coverage of events and the feud that Natalie Maines and Toby Keith had, along with tying it into how country music can be misogynistic. In the last chapter, I will talk about where the Dixie Chicks are now,

specifically Natalie Maines, and how she is utilizing social media to interact with her fans, and how the fans are reacting to her using social media.

CHAPTER ONE:

BEFORE:

Largely influenced by blues and western music, country music has a long history. It originated from folk music, in the southern part of the United States. In the 1920's Ralph Peer, a sound recordist, was able to fuse different genres with each other such as jazz, pop, folk, and blue. Some of his earliest work include him recording "hillbilly" and "race" records. Through his work he was able to create two genres that split off of folk music, white "country" and black "blues." In the 1920s, Henry Ford financed musicians, such as Fiddlin' John Carson, who sang about the "country" (farms), and nationalism along with the white working American (Russell, 2007). The beginning of the history of country music is important because it shows how from the beginning country music was predominately made for white people, and the values that white people share.

During the Great Depression, record sales dropped; this caused an increase in the listenership of the radio. "Barn dance" shows, segments that would play country music, started appearing on radio stations and soon spread across the United States. Televisions and films popularized country music in the 30's and 40's, these modes of communications would feature singing cowboys; connecting cowboys with the genre of country music. "I Want To Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," a 1935 country song sung by Patsy Montana, a successful country music star, created a pivotal moment for women in country music because she showed that women could have successful careers in the male dominated

country music industry. Another important moment in the 1930s was when the Communist Parties started using folk music during their labor organizations and meetings (Denisoff 1969). The divide of country music and folk music was largely influenced by politics. Folk music started to be viewed as more progressive, while country still had more of a conservative audience (Rossman, 2004).

With the emergence of more country music radio stations, country music started to become more accessible to truckers, and as a whole started to grow as a genre. Country music moved its aim from rural whites to the white working class of America (Rossman, 2004). Subgenres like "Outlaw country" grew with singers such as Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, and (later in his career) Johnny Cash. "Country pop" and "country rock" emerged as subgenre around the 1970s, and reached more urban audiences. The use of electric instruments started to be introduced into the industry (Rossman, 2004). The Dixie Chicks fit into the "country pop" and "country rock" subgenre. They use electric instruments and put on shows similar to those of pop stars.

The moment that subgenres started forming was a pivotal moment for country music because there had already been a split in the genre, and there sub-genres caused more of a split, but also united country music because country music no longer had to be one thing, but multiple things that didn't used to be considered country music was now considered country music.

In the 1980's the Federal Communications Commission decided to expand FM radio stations, this allowed for more FM signals to reach more people. Those living in rural and suburban areas of the country would be able to listen to more stations on the radio than they previously had been. Country went from being mainly played on AM radio stations, to being played on predominantly FM radio stations.

The extensive history of country music allows for the genre to have multiple names tied to it, those names include: hillbilly, country western, and old timey; these reflect the values and independence along with the religion and patriotism that the genre embodies. Often connected to the genre is the image of a "cowboy." The cowboy, in the context of country music, has two different meanings associated with it. It can be a compliment to uneducated, rural, white men (Shively, 1992), but it can also be a symbol of the political right, in America and abroad.

The Dixie Chicks music identify with the genre of "country," but their values match those of "folk" singers. The group is progressive in that they are an all female group in a genre that is predominately male. They also shamelessly gave their opinion about the war in public, when no one else would.

The Dixie Chicks made their comment because of the political climate and the events that lead up to the United States going to Iraq. In general, the political climate in America changed directly after the attack of the World Trade Center. The 9/11 attacks were one of

the most documented and broadcasted events that America has ever faced. Although it happened more that 20 years ago, it continues to traumatize people. About four hours after the attacks President Bush declared: “the U.S. government will hunt down and punish those responsible. […] We will show the world that we will pass this test." And the next day President Bush claimed that “America is united” (Campbell, 2001), but was America really united?

Although America seemed to be coming together, it was still fragmented. Despite George Bush’s approval rating going up, and more Americans showing expressions of patriotism, there was still tension. Islamophobia increased, the National Security Agency started eavesdropping on Americans, and the war on terror was about revenge in order to create “a just world” (VandeHei & Eggan 2006). People were responding to the events differently, and radio stations (including those owned by Clear Channel Communications) responded by removing certains songs because they were scared that they would offend/trigger their listeners (Jabarouti & Mangai, 2014).

War Timeline:

February 28, 1991- Gulf War ends

January 20, 2001- George W. Bush elected president

September 11, 2001- 9/11 was blamed on al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden (resident of Afghanistan)

October 7, 2001- US begins military action in Afghanistan

February 25, 2003- US and UK submit a draft resolution to the United Nations saying that Iraq has missed its "final opportunity" to disarm peacefully.

(MARCH 10, 2003- DIXIE CHICKS MAKE THEIR COMMENT)

March 17, 2003- Bush demands Saddam Hussein vacate his office and leave Iraq within two days, or else the US will invade Iraq

March 18, 2003- Protest start to take place against invasion of Iraq

March 20, 2003- Bombs are finally dropped in Baghdad, where it was incorrectly suggested that Saddam Hussein might be hiding-- The Iraq war begins

December 13, 2003- Saddam Hussein captured by US troops in Tikrit, his hometown

December 30, 2006- Saddam Hussein is hanged

2007- Decline of violence

January 20, 2009- George Bush out of office

December 2011- US formally completed a withdraw from the war

The history of country music and the political climate are important when thinking about the Dixie Chicks because it put their comment into perspective. The sensitivity of America reveals the tension that the Dixie Chicks were addressing. The Dixie Chicks were seen as unpatriotic because they were addressing the anxiety of America when no one else would. This "unpatriotism" caused the Dixie Chicks to be blacklisted by the radio stations.

Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996; the purpose of this law is "to let anyone enter any communications business -- to let any communications business compete in any market against any other" (FCC, 2014). The government hoped that by passing this act that prices would stay low, service quality would remain high, and that new

telecommunication technologies would be invented. This law was successful in that it allowed for prices to stay low and allowed for high quality services, but it was unsuccessful in that it made it easier for conglomerates to form because the act reduced the amount of restrictions on media merging (when a person or corporate entity owns multiple media sources) (Swift, 2016).

CHAPTER TWO:

THE EVENT:

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, allowed for conglomerates to form because of the restrictions on media merging. iHeartMedia and Clear Channel Communications (two of the biggest radio conglomerates) banned the Dixie Chicks from their over 1,200 radio stations. Radio stations stopped playing the Dixie Chicks (for a total of six weeks), and the radio host would talk badly about them on live radio and some stations had a trashcan in front of their building so listeners could dispose of their merchandise. They would also encourage their listeners to burn and get rid of any merchandise of the Dixie Chicks that the listener may have, including shirts, CDs, cassettes, and even concert tickets. (Light, 2017). Radio stations might've done this because 1. they would get in trouble if they didn't protest the Dixie Chicks and 2. Because they didn't want to seem like the odd ones out, by supporting the Dixie Chicks. Both iHeartMedia (formally known as Cumulus and Cox) and Clear Channel Communications have organized pro-war demonstrations and have given money to the republican campaign (Rossman, 2004).

Not only did the Dixie Chicks have their first amendment right taken away from them, but the stations had their first amendment right taken away from them too. Some of the hosts of these different radio stations have said that they wanted to play the Dixie Chicks because they didn't believe in the ban, but they weren't able to because they weren't independently owned (Gilbert, 2008).

While looking at newspapers, such as the New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal and Newport News (from Virginia) that covered this event within the month of March in 2003, I noticed a trend that each of these newspapers had a bias against the Dixie Chicks. There are multiple articles written after the Dixie Chicks' comment and five themes are recognizable in them: 1. Defining the Dixie Chicks as "unpatriotic," 2. The silencing of the Dixie Chicks voices, 3. Saying that the Dixie Chicks are weak because of who they are, 4. The criticism that the Dixie Chicks "gave" about soldiers, and finally 5. Criticisms within the genre of country music (Adolphson, 2014).

Since the Dixie Chicks spoke against the war and their president they were seen as unpatriotic, but in reality they weren't speaking against their country, but rather saying that they didn't support the president for wanting to go to war. In no way did the Dixie Chicks criticize the soldiers themselves.

Songs considered to be patriotic about soldiers post-9/11 were created, like Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)." Natalie Maines publicly stated that she hated it because of it's lyrical content, one of those lyrics being "we'll put a boot in your ass." (Gilbert, 2003) Maines said that this song is "ignorant, and it makes country music sound ignorant. It targets an entire culture -- and not just the bad people who did bad things" (Gayle-Thompson, 2018). Starting a feud that would last a few years.

After the Dixie Chicks made their comment about George Bush, Toby Keith responded to them by performing in front of a backdrop that pictured Natalie Maines beside Saddam Hussein and accused the Dixie Chicks of not writing their own music. (History, 2009) In spite of Maines, radio hosts started to play "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" in place of the Dixie Chicks' songs on the radio.

During the Dixie Chicks performance at the Academy of Country Music Awards in 2003, Natalie Maines wore a shirt that said F.U.T.K., on the Dixie Chicks website, they said that the letters stood for "Freedom, United, Together in Kindness," but those letters could also be taken as a slam against Toby Keith. The latter was correct, in 2006 the documentary, *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*, came out and there is footage where Natalie Maines said that her shirt does stand for "Fuck You Toby Keith." Eventually, Keith said he was done with the feud against Natalie Maines after he saw a photo of him and her that said "fight to the death," and he said that that seemed insignificant and that he thought enough was enough (BBC, 2003).

Toby Keith tried to portray Natalie Maines as weak and someone who isn't smart enough to write her own songs. Toby Keith's music fits into the subgenre of bro country, which naturally demeans women by referring to them as "girls" and "darling," this is harmful. This subgenre appeals to young, white men and since they're absorbing this while they're still learning about the world, it might stick with them forever. Women being reduced to their body and what their body has to offer promotes rape culture. Although we do have

advocates against rape culture, we also have people like Keith who promote bro country, and all someone needs is one moment of validations to feel validated for the actions they commit, especially in a Trump era. Misogyny has a long history with country music. It's prevalent in old songs and new songs and it doesn't seem like it's going to go away soon. This type of hate integrates with the fans of country and makes it harder on women to enter country music as a woman because that's not what fans want to hear. The lyric content plays a huge role in this and so do music videos. Women in bro country music videos are oversexualized. For example, in Toby Keith's "Who's Your Daddy?" he talks about how he has the money and can give the women anything she wants, because he has the money and she has the looks, and you see a half naked woman prancing around this sugar daddies house after she gets dropped off by her boyfriend. This video shows that the woman is only there for the money and the company, implying that women need someone and that they also will do anything to get money without working.

The Dixie Chicks could be sexualized because they are all women, and their name may come off as weak to some. Dixie being a word to describe the Confederate States of America. Racist, southern, slaves, and Chicks. A chick is a little chicken, innocent and unknowing. The name is alluding to a type of "southern girlhood," and someone who isn't strong because they're just a girl (chick). There are so many different stereotypes that can come from a name like the "Dixie Chicks," such as the weakness of women and domesticity. The Dixie Chicks are the opposite of what their name meant, which makes them unique

because they weren't putting their standards lower because of their name. They showed strength and some could argue that they even represented strength for young girls.

Keith isn't the only person who spoke out against the Dixie Chicks. In 2006, MadTV (season 12, episode 3) parodied the Dixie Chicks music video, "Not Ready to Make Nice." They talked about how the Dixie Chicks (mainly Natalie Maines) wouldn't apologize. MadTV is similar to bro country culture in that it caters to the young, white male, but it also caters to the Fox News Network audience, since it is on the Fox network. Comedy shows like MadTV may be poking fun at the Dixie Chicks, but as with Toby Keith it is harmful. This particular segment makes Natalie Maines look like a crazy person, and although it came out years after the controversy, and when people were just starting to get over it because they realized that Natalie Maines was right, and that the United States shouldn't have gone to war, it's harmful to her as a person because she ends up still being the bud of the joke. It makes her look dumb and weak for not wanting to give in and apologize, but in fact she was strong by not giving in.

In April of 2003, Diane Sawyer tried to forcibly make the Dixie Chicks issue a public apology, but they refused. During the interview on Primetime television, the Dixie Chicks kept reiterating what they believed, which is that they were against the war. Diane Sawyer tried to be persuasive, in a way that could've been seen as manipulative to get the Dixie Chicks to make a public apology. Much like the radio blacklisting of the Dixie Chicks, this

seemed to be very inappropriate. It was taking away the time that the Dixie Chicks had to explain themselves on public television (Randall, 2003).

After the Dixie Chicks comment, Bush responded with "the Dixie Chicks are free to speak their mind. They can say what they want to say" (History, 2009).

Since the Dixie Chicks were from Texas, their heart was close to the Texas Rangers (a baseball team that the Bush family owned), sometimes they would sing the national anthem at these games. On some occasions they would sit next to the Bush family and talk to them. They never said anything bad about the Bush family to their faces, in fact they thought that they were nice people (Gilbert, 2003). This is a distinction between the private and the public. In private, the Dixie Chicks actually knew Bush and his family and would interact with his wife, etc.., but in the public atmosphere the Dixie Chicks didn't give off the persona that they knew President Bush personally. It seemed as though he was far away and they weren't connected at all, even when Bush commented back to the Dixie Chicks he didn't mention that he knew them. This is an interesting correlation with the private and public sphere of radio too. You can listen to the radio in your private household, and call into the radio without anyone knowing that it's you in the privacy of your house, but it is heard publically somewhere. The radio enables this type of anonymity while still being very public. Although radio used to be a primary avenue for anonymity, today we have social media as a way to create anonymity. The media doesn't give off the perception that the Dixie Chicks knew the Bush's. If they did give off this perception than radio stations and

fans who stopped supporting the Dixie Chicks probably wouldn't have protested them because they would have seen that the Dixie Chicks did in fact like the Bush's, and they were purely talking about being against the war, not just the president.

CHAPTER THREE:
TODAY

The Dixie Chicks have been through a lot, from being number one on the charts, to making a comment in the heat of the moment, to being blacklisted on the radio, to rising back up and fighting their way back to success. The story of the Dixie Chicks isn't over. They're still striving.

After everything that had happened, the Dixie Chicks came back in 2015 and announced that they were going to tour the following year. At first, it was only going to be a European tour, but later it was decided that they would also perform in the United States; this was the first time that the Dixie Chicks headlined a North American tour in 10 years. Not only did they do this tour in 2016, but they also performed the song "Daddy Lessons," with Beyonce later in the year and it was published on various digital platforms the day after they performed it (McDermott, 2016).

During their European part of their tour, the Dixie Chicks displayed graphics on the background with caricatures of people who were running for president in the election (of

2016) during their song “ready to run,” and when they played “Goodbye Earl,” a song about a woman killing her abusive man, they displayed a photo of Donald Trump in devil horns, along with other abusive men in the slideshow background (Light, 2017). Natalie Maines has shown disapproval for Donald Trump as president, even before he was elected. On January 23, 2016, Maines (@1NatalieMaines) tweeted: “As long as Donald Trump’s decisions for America are as solid as his decisions about his hair, we’re in good shape” (Cowling, 2018), this tweet has since been deleted. On the same day, Maines tweeted “just so you know….I’m ashamed Ted Cruz is from America;).” The user under @LMcKelveyAuthor replied to this tweet saying “maybe you should quit the political commentary and stick to what you USED to do well...singing,” Natalie Maines replied by saying “The Amazing thing about me is I can do both:).” Although this was a more negative reaction, this tweet did receive some praise, @webchyk replied by saying “Give ‘em hell, Natalie!” and @sirbach replied by saying “as a resident of Dallas, Texas, I say amen Natalie!”

Social media is a way for Natalie Maines to directly interact with her fans. On social media she is able to speak her truth. Maines’ doesn’t really use twitter as much as she used to. Her twitter bio is: “Hey now. Pretty much only doing Instagram now.,” and then has a link to her instagram. The interactions on Instagram seem more wholesome than the interactions that Maines had on twitter. Maines posts a lot of pictures of dogs and old photos of the Dixie Chicks, and she does have a few political images on her instagram. The political images seem to get more of a “hateful” response as opposed to the old photos of the Chicks and the

photos of the dogs. Maines doesn't interact with fans as much on Instagram as she did on Twitter.

Maines has also expressed support for gay marriage, being pro-choice, and has said that she's more liberal than people would believe. In recent years, she's also talked about how she believes in gun restrictions.

In 2018, the Chicks signed with a new management label, Monotone/LBI Entertainment, due to the fact that their manager, Simon Renshaw, retired after managing the band for over 20 years. Also in 2018, Natalie Maines teased audiences by posting photos on her Instagram that hinted that the Dixie Chicks were in studio together (Halperin & Trakin, 2018).

After all this drama, the Dixie Chicks are still a band, and when people look back on this crucial point in time, they actually agree with what the Dixie Chicks said.

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