

# The Chicks' Country: Country Music Politics and Belonging in *Gaslighter*

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“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 that the President of the United States is from Texas” (Maines qtd in Kopple and Peck). With those words, spoken by Natalie Maines (lead singer of The Chicks<sup>1</sup>) on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2003, the country music industry had, as Kristine McCusker argues, found a way to “muzzle” the band, “regender... country music” and “shift the genre away from female acts” (39). As country stations removed The Chicks from their playlists, organised for people to dispose of their records, and the band received numerous death threats. Since then, The Chicks have released two albums: *Taking the Long Way* in 2006, and *Gaslighter* in 2020. This paper will focus on the band’s most recent album and explore how reaction to “the incident” (as it came to be referred to) set the stage for the band’s return in 2020 and analyse how *Gaslighter* positions The Chicks in relation to the need to “reckon” with the country music industry and issues of genre identification (Barker).

## Context and Discourse around ‘the incident’

In the aftermath of “the incident”, there was a wealth of discourse about The Chicks, country music, and patriotism. The discourse was generated in various places, beyond Nashville and in many scholarly disciplines, including popular music, international relations and political science, often considering different ideas of patriotism within a geopolitical context (Adolphson 47-63; Burns and Watson 325-350; Griffiths 229-243; Katz 139-160; Pruitt 85-106). As Tracey E.W. Laird summarizes, “Maines’ remark and the fallout over it preoccupied journalists and scholars off and on for more than a decade” and in this discourse, “there was little gray area... they threatened the core American values of deference to the president from one point of view, or exercised the core American value of dissenting free expression from another” (552-3). Jocelyn R. Neal explores the implications of this discourse in relation to country music, as both a genre and an industry, “The broader public interpreted the entire incident as confirmation of country music’s conservative politics, and – far worse- an underlying lack of tolerance for free speech among much of the country audience. Whatever progress country music had made in erasing those negative stereotypes was lost” (476). For some it appeared that this incident all but confirmed that country music was irreparably conformist, conservative, and nationalist; and racist, misogynist and LGBTQ+ phobic (Hubbs *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*). The incident did reveal conservative and sexist dynamics within the industry, but as Nadine Hubbs argues it is important to “separate country music [as an aesthetic genre] from the country music industry” (“Rednecks, Queers and Country Music Now”). This distinction is vital to not concede the genre in its entirety to conservative politics and exclusionary “industry practices” (Watson “A Double-Edged Sword” 56), which could further entrench these and risk the collective development of community and resistance for those most marginalised within country music.

Some of what Neal argues about “the incident” reinforcing a lot of the “negative stereotypes” and perceptions comes across in Natalie Maines’ comments about the incident in an interview with TIME in 2013:

I never felt that I fit into that country genre before I joined it and then when we were so accepted, I thought: oh it’s not what I always thought it was. It’s not close-minded and conservative, here they are accepting me. Well, they thought I was something else, I guess. I never tried to hide my politics or my liberalism, but I guess people see what they want to see. So, it was really sort of a disappointment to me to see that all the stereotypes that I thought of as a child about country music, they really were... *are* there. (Maines “10 Questions”).

It is worth unpacking this a little further. Maines’ experience with the industry is an initial pleasant surprise that she is seemingly accepted as she is and welcomed into the genre. The backlash to her comments then pulls the rug out from under her, and the industry’s conservative misogyny resurfaces. In many ways this individual trajectory

mirrors that of a collective experience of country music at the time and my own experience as queer listener of country music, for whom 1990s country, including The Chicks has formed the core of my identification as a fan of the genre. Country radio targeted white (Suburban) women as a key demographic in the late 1980s and into the 1990s (Jada Watson qtd in Palmer), which in turn increased the range of stories within the genre that the industry would support (Keel 155-177). There were limitations to this, with few openly LGBTQ+ artists (at least to audiences) within the industry (k.d. lang came as she was releasing outside the country marketing format; and was never fully accepted even earlier in her career; and Chely Wright came out publicly in 2010 (Goldin-Perschbacher 59-62; 87). Despite the important work of the Black Country Music Association developed by “Dr Cleve Francis and Frankie Staton” (Royster 180), the country industry never moved beyond (at best) tokenistic representation of Black artists (Martinez 128-143; Watson 55-70; Williams). 1990s country was far from perfect, but it seemed to open out a promising trajectory for inclusion within the country music industry in terms of representation on country radio and the kinds of narratives this format could support. Marissa R. Moss summarises: “Country music history looks back on this period of the late 1990s and into the very early 2000s as its golden era for women-but also, depending on who you ask, as a blip in the trends or a tidal wave that was cut short by sinister intentions” (11). What should have been the beginning, potentially became its peak, in terms of country radio airplay and representation, especially for women in the country music industry (Watson “Gender” 547-8). This has resulted in an ongoing tension between the industry doubling down on its exclusionary practices (Watson “A Double-Edged Sword” 56; Wilson); whilst, at the same time, acknowledging that country music as an aesthetic genre was (and “always” had been) much more diverse and had demonstrated its “potential” (Martinez 128).

The band’s 2006 album: *Taking The Long Way* wrestles across many of these tensions. It was promoted through more rock/pop-oriented avenues such as Time Magazine (TIME), whilst at the same time charting as a country album and winning in GRAMMY country categories (Recording Academy GRAMMY Awards). Sonically, the album was equally as ambiguous. Maines said that if she was to make another album it would not necessarily have to be another country album, whereas bandmate Martie Maguire was adamant that for her *Taking the Long Way* was a country album (Qtd in Kopple and Peck). Songs, such as “The Long Way Around” and “Not Ready to Make Nice”, directly address the fallout from the incident. Following the album, the band had a hiatus from recording, although band members Martie Maguire and Emily Strayer formed the duo project Court Yard Hounds; Maines released *Mother*, a rock album, in 2013; and the band went on tour in 2016 tour, and notably performed at the Country Music Association Awards in 2016 with Beyonce. By the time The Chicks returned with *Gaslighter* in 2020, the long-term implications of the industry’s response and practices had become clear – prolonged marginalisation of women on country radio and the continued exclusion of Black artists, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people from the industry had persisted (Watson “Gender” 538-560; “A Double-Edged Sword” 55-70). Although after the murder of George Floyd, changing social attitudes within US society and the media landscape towards LGBTQ+ people; and a vocal dissenting academic and journalistic discourse (Edwards) in response to the low airplay of women on country radio (Watson “Gender” 538-9) suggested an appetite for the Chicks as a dissenting voice to be a reckoning (Williams “What Reckoning?”) that country music needed. At least, that is what I was hoping for as a fan (Barker).

## Gaslighter

On *Gaslighter* we do not get this reckoning. Instead, there is a different engagement with genre and belonging. The closest the album gets to this reckoning, is on its lead single (its title track), that has an ambiguous addressee. The gaslighter referred to could be Natalie Maines’ ex-husband, the then-president Trump (Natalie Maines qtd in Hess), or even the country music industry. Band member, Emily Strayer talks about gaslighter meaning a “manipulator”, which could apply in all three cases (Chicks “New Music”). The song assertively presents the band’s return from their hiatus, representing The Chicks solidly as a unit, emphasising Maines’ voice, Maguire’s fiddle, Strayer’s banjo, and their harmonies; for which the band are known. The sound and lyrics exemplify the band’s strength and sense of humour. Initially, this might suggest that the album as a whole might pick up where the Band left off in *Taking the Long Way* – reckoning with their place and the intermixed personal and political dynamics within America and country music (Watson “the Dixie Chicks” 49-75).

Ahead of the album in July 2020, The Chicks released “March March” on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2020. This coincided with their announcement to remove “Dixie” from their band name (Willman). “March March” was described as a “minimalist protest song” (Shaffer), although the extended instrumental at the end emphasises Maguire’s fiddle and Strayer’s banjo. Notably, the song makes direct political statements against gun violence (“Standin’ with

Emma and our sons and daughters/ Watchin' our youth have to solve our problems"), abortion rights ("Tell the ol' boys in the white bread lobby/ What they can and can't do with their bodies"), and criticism of Trump (echoing the 2018 call "what the hell happened in Helsinki?") (Chicks "March March"; Crone; Cardona). The video includes footage of Black Lives Matter footage and Pride marches. These political statements are also linked back to The Chicks own story, for example in footage of protests about the Iraq war (implicitly referencing Maines' comments). The Chicks make it clear where they stand politically and which side they are on. The closing instrumental goes centre change, reinforcing the band as a unit. Maguire and Strayer supported Maines during "the incident" and so each member of the trio is given time in the spotlight to express anger at the political situation and an urgency to keep fighting for change. This also anchors "March March" within The Chicks' own repertory and suggest that country, as an aesthetic genre, can express and contain these kinds of political statements.

These initial songs would suggest a pointed macro political direction for the band. Yet the album has a slightly different focus. The second track, released as a single with a music video the same day as the album was released: "Sleep at Night" continues some of these, but also signals a subtle change of course. There is a direct address again, that could be addressed at multiple people: "How do you sleep at night?" (Chicks "Sleep at Night"). Yet the lyrics take on a slightly gossipy angle, focusing on personal relationships. "Gaslighter" had this too, in the line: "you know just exactly what you did on my boat". "Sleep at Night" fleshes out these scenarios with more detail. Whereas in the previous song, the listener is intrigued by the statement about what happens on the boat, here the situation is spelled out: "My husband's girlfriend's husband just called me up How messed up is that?" and in the second verse, the lyrics describe how her ex-husband introduced the woman he was having an affair with as a fan who comes to see one of Maines' shows (Chicks "Sleep at Night"). We should not read the song's protagonist as simply Natalie Maines, however these specific lyrics and the promotion around the album, especially interviews and coverage such as the New York Times (Hess) encourage listeners to read this protagonist as Maines and to join the dots between songs. This also removes the overarching album title and theme of gaslighting contextually away from the country music industry. There are political implications in the line about raising "two boys trying to become men" and the struggle of raising the next generation within a volatile and dangerous world (Chicks "Sleep at Night"). This kind of statement is not completely unrelated to country, but it is not pointedly directed at "the incident" or the country music industry. There is an ambivalence towards genre (especially as marketing categories) and to the Nashville based industry, which is increasingly reflected in the rest of the album.

The album has some clear narrative threads throughout, even if these are not completely linear. The intrigue in the opening songs: "Gaslighter" and "Sleep at Night" is picked up again in the middle of the album on "My Best Friend's Weddings" and "Tights On My Boat". "My Best Friend's Weddings" reveals the start of the relationship that ended in divorce, meeting at her "best friend's [first] wedding" and then flashing forward "twenty years" to her best friend's next "wedding" (Chicks "My Best Friend's Weddings"). This temporal "jump" provides a perspective on the whole relationship, but also the lyrics become wonderfully petty - "in twenty years... I'll still be younger than you", keeping with the humour and gossipy quality of "Gaslighter" and "Sleep at Night" (Chicks "My Best Friend's Weddings"). The boat, referred to in "Gaslighter" returns again in "Tights On My Boat". The humour here takes on a more vindictive edge in the opening lines: "I hope you die peacefully in your sleep. Just kidding, I hope it hurts like you hurt me" (Chicks "Tights On My Boat"). As well as the band's trademark humour and wit (Vander Wel 92), these songs delve even deeper. In "My Best Friend's Weddings" there is longing to get beyond the bad relationship and heartbreak through the metaphor of outrunning "wildfire" (Chicks "My Best Friend's Weddings"). In "Tights On My Boat", there is a growing intensity of the melody and Maines' vocal performance in the cry of the repeated "you're gonna get what you get coming", that suggests a deeper yearning for justice that breaks the bounds of the individual situation, although the narrative arc of the album attempts to contain this (Chicks "Tights On My Boat").

The final three songs on the album resolve this arc. In "Young Man", the song's protagonist expresses her hope that her son can carve his own path away from the breakdown of his parents' relationship ("my blues aren't your blues") (Chicks "Young Man"). "Hope It's Something Good" wishes the ex-husband well, but without romanticising his behaviour through rose-tinted glasses. The closing song, "Set Me Free", asks for the divorce papers to be signed as a way for the protagonist to move on from the anger and resentment, and forward with the rest of her life. The closing three songs emphasise bringing closure to Natalie Maines' persona protagonist's narrative arc over any wider political or country music industry pointed critique. Yet there are many country elements in the album. There is something particular in the resignation and sadness in the closing song, perhaps relating to what Malone has described country music's "compassion" (Malone and Laird 350) that resonates with listeners. Although perhaps arranged differently, the fiddle and banjo are prominent in key dramatic and narrative moments. The scale of the album focusing more on the personal lives of the songs' characters, reflects Malone's argument that "country

song lyrics... concern themselves with the petty details of human existence” (Malone and Laird 348). Although songs like “March March” demonstrate that country music can also contain explicit political statements. All of this supports the case that *Gaslighter* is rooted in country. They may not be directing rebuttal at the Nashville based country industry, but The Chicks rework country narrative tropes and aesthetics in a way to show what the genre can sound like and express.

## Conclusion

With *Gaslighter*, there is a sense that, for The Chicks, “the incident” is behind them. It is part of their past that has changed their career, but it is not foregrounded as the defining part of their music. There is a clearer break from the country music industry. In discussing Beyoncé’s performance with The Chicks at the CMA Awards in 2016 and concluding her chapter on how country is being defined in the twenty-first century, Tracey E. W. Laird argues: “Neither the recording academy nor any other media entity gets to decide what is and what is not country music. Nor can anyone predict the means through which potential fans might find their way to country music in the twenty-first century. No gatekeeper guards the center because there is no center” (572). Without country radio support, *Gaslighter* still charted as a country album suggesting a challenge to the country music industry and its gatekeeping, that The Chicks can draw on country if not to contain their music, but to utilise its aesthetics (see also Barker, Elliott and Longstaff 275).

There are some important caveats around The Chicks’ ability to participate aesthetically within (or adjacent to) country (Moss 74). *Gaslighter* was still able to chart as country, and not blocked in the way many Black artists in country have historically and continue to be. Beyoncé and Lil Nas X were both blocked from being nominated for awards and charting as country. Further, The Chicks’ platform and fanbase was built initially through country radio and these industry gatekeepers, with the discourse around “the Incident” building a, perhaps smaller, but loyal audience. The Chicks’ situation is different to other artists who are starting out within the industry, and perhaps have to navigate these gatekeepers more. As Andrea Williams argues the Nashville based industry is worth “\$10 billion” and many people are excluded from accessing this resource (as both artists and industry professionals) (“Taking Stock of 2021”). It is important not to gloss over this, but it is also important not to give too much definitional power to the Nashville country music industry. The reception of *Gaslighter* suggests that pop markets and listeners (who have never been and should not be completely separated from country) are also responsive to country aesthetics and affective languages. Perhaps, the greatest significance is the maintaining of this “progressive” and critical “discourse” in and around country (academics, journalists and fans) (Edwards); and an awareness of being prepared to leave the country format and assessing participation within that industry on more pragmatic terms, rather than romanticising or idealising its institutions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The band were previously known as the Dixie Chicks ahead of their name change in 2020. In this paper, I will be referring to the them by their current name, ‘The Chicks’.

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