

Anti-War and Pro-Free Speech: How *Not Ready to Make Nice* Became Country Music's Anthem for Speaking Your Mind No Matter the Cost

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This story is part of American Anthem, a yearlong series on songs that rouse, unite, celebrate and call to action. Find more at [NPR.org/Anthem](https://www.npr.org/Anthem).

I don't usually like country music. The pro-America, right-wing rhetoric in many country songs is something I am not a fan of. But there are some country songs I make an exception for. You see, my mom is from southern Missouri, and she would often play

country music, and she had a particular fondness for what I like to call “female rage” country songs.

One such song is “Not Ready to Make Nice” by the Chicks ([originally called the Dixie Chicks, the band renamed itself in 2020 in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the inherent racism in the word “dixie”](#)). The instant I hear the familiar, opening guitar chords, I am transported back in time. Suddenly I am 10 years old again, sitting in the backseat of my mom’s SUV, listening to her shout out the lyrics along with lead singer Natalie Maines. She looks back at me through the rear-view mirror, her eyes filled with tenderness and a heedfulness that only comes with age. “You know Ally,” she begins “You should never be afraid to speak up for what is right. But as a woman in this world, some people won’t want to hear what you have to say.”

At the time, her message went over my head. What 10-year-old can fully understand the misogyny my mom was warning me of? Today, however, especially after learning about the reason the song was created, I understand more than ever. Now, when I hear *Not Ready to Make Nice*, the powerful lyrics and commanding vocals give me chills.

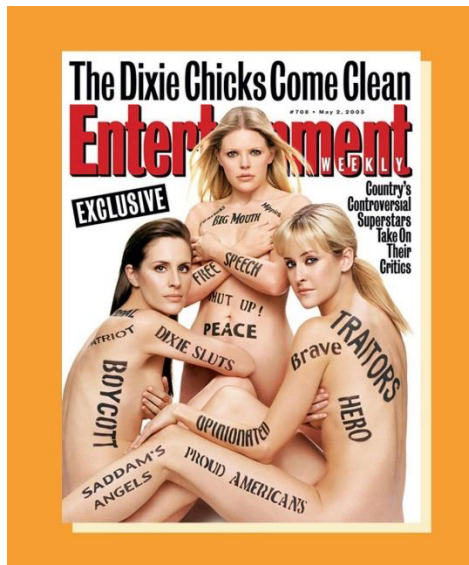
The Chicks were a country girl group who gained popularity in the late 90’s and early 2000’s. They were also one of the first groups to be “canceled” (before cancel culture was really a thing) due to their anti-war statements.

“We don’t want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.” These were the inflammatory words spoken by the Chicks lead singer, Natalie Maines, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, while on stage at a London concert.

While today, Bush and the war in Afghanistan and Iraq are not looked back on favorably, ([by 2018, 53% of Americans say the US failed to achieve its goals in Iraq](#)), at the time these were not popular opinions, ([President Bush had an approval rating of nearly 75% at the beginning of 2003](#)), particularly among the Chicks country fan base.

In response to these statements, the Chicks top song at the time, *Travelin’ Soldier*, fell 42% on the country music charts in the following week. The group members were labeled as “traitors” to country music, and their music was taken off multiple US radio stations. People began to destroy their CDs, burning them and crushing them with tractors. One radio station even set up trash cans outside their station for people to come by and throw away their CDs. Additionally, people began calling into radio stations saying things like “I wish they would just shut up and sing” and “They should strap her (Natalie Maines) to a bomb and drop her over Baghdad.”

Due to their statements, the group also began receiving death threats. In 2003, lead singer Natalie Maines received a threat saying she would be shot dead at her upcoming concert in Dallas, Texas. Rather than canceling the show, the Chicks went on to play the concert with added security, refusing to be threatened into silence.



Instead of apologizing for exercising their freedom of speech (to appease their angry, predominantly right-wing, country music fan base), the Chicks doubled down on their anti-Bush, anti-war stance. In response to the controversy, the Chicks posed on the cover of Entertainment Weekly. They posed nude, covered only by the words they had been called written on their bodies. Phrases like “Big Mouth” “Traitors” “Saddam’s Angels” and “Dixie Sluts” were literally written all over them. By doing this, the band took the negative words hurled at them in rage, and wore them like a badge of honor, further showing that they were not going to apologize.

In the three years between the statement they made and the release of their next album, the Chicks continued to voice criticism for the president at the time and questioned why the war in Iraq was even happening. In the documentary, *Shut Up and Sing*, which follows the band's controversy around their anti-war stance, lead singer Natalie Maines states that the controversy had “opened the door to do whatever we want musically now” because they no longer had to worry about pleasing country music radio. One of the other members of the band, Martie Maguire, continued by saying about their upcoming album “This album is our therapy now” and that they are continuing to say what they want to say. In 2006, they released their seventh studio album, *Taking the Long Way*, featuring the song [*Not Ready to Make Nice*](#).

Opening with the lyrics “*Forgive, sounds good, Forget, I'm not sure I could, They say time heals everything, But I'm still waiting,*” Natalie Maines makes it clear that she is not ready to forgive and forget the threats of violence she received for simply speaking her mind. Later in the song, she launches into the chorus, singing, “*I'm not ready to make nice, I'm not ready to back down, I'm still mad as hell, and I don't have time, To go 'round and 'round and 'round, It's too late to make it right, I probably wouldn't if I could, 'Cause I'm mad as hell, Can't bring myself to do what it is, You think I should*” With this chorus, Maines is refusing to apologize for her anti-war beliefs, saying even if she could go back in time and take back what she said, she wouldn't do it.

As the music swells and the song builds up to the bridge, Natalie Maines belts out the powerful lyrics “*I made my bed, and I sleep like a baby, With no regrets, and I don't mind saying, It's a sad, sad story, When a mother will teach her daughter, That she ought to hate a perfect stranger, And how in the world, Can the words that I said, Send somebody so over the edge, That they'd write me a letter, Saying that I better, Shut up and sing, Or my life will be over?*” These lyrics distill the song down to its core meaning and make it clear that despite the threats they received, the Chicks will not be silenced.

When making those anti-Bush statements back in 2003, the Chicks, whether they intended to or not, became advocates for free speech and anti-war. *Not Ready to Make Nice* is exactly what the title suggests, an anthem for refusing to back down from your

firmly held beliefs, no matter how heavy the backlash may be. The song is simultaneously an anti-war protest song, while also being a song in which the group refuses to apologize for speaking their mind.

And four years later, they won a Grammy for it. By 2007, [Bush's approval rating had dropped significantly, to just under 40%](#). It was clear to the American public that there were no weapons of mass destruction, and many people were coming around to what Natalie Maines had said all along—the war in Iraq was not justified.

With *Not Ready to Make Nice*, the Chicks got their redemption arc. At the 2007 Grammys, the Chicks won best country album for their album *Taking the Long Way*. They also won best song for *Not Ready to Make Nice*. [That night they also gave a performance of the song. As Natalie Maines belts out the powerful lyrics during the bridge, she gets a standing ovation from the crowd.](#) Those who would have never had the courage to speak out the way Natalie Maines did in 2003, were now standing up and cheering at her courage only four years later. The song cannot get more anthemic than that.

To understand how this song is still used as an anthem today, look no further than the comments section on their Grammy performance. One user commented “One of the few songs that gives me chills every time I hear it. Beautiful”, while yet another responded “This song absolutely still holds up today. If I'm angry about something, I listen to this song to fuel my rage. It's a great song.” For me, this song has become a personal anthem of sorts. The song not only empowers me to stand up for my beliefs, but it also reminds me of my mom, her strength and ability to speak her mind.

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