

## **Wide Open Exile: Liz Phair, the Dixie Chicks and America's Recent Culture Wars**

**By Caryn Brooks | Nov. 29, 2004**

The Dixie Chicks and Liz Phair. Ever since I started talking about them together, the main reaction I've gotten is, "Why?" When I explain that both acts were embroiled in separate culture wars in 2003, the general response I get is, "Well, yeah the Dixie Chicks got screwed, but what kind of 'culture war' did Liz Phair fight? Didn't she, like, put out a sucky record and try to act all teeny-bopper? And wasn't it extremely embarrassing?"

You could look at it like that, or, you could posit that Liz Phair faced a subculture war, the kind that's been raging in Bohemia even before Allen Ginsberg declared that the best minds of his generation were "poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high." Liz Phair went public with the fact that she wanted to go pop, and wanted to appeal to a mass audience; she hired the Matrix, a trio of hit-making producers, to work on some of her songs. For these actions, she was exiled from Bohemia. Natalie Maines (Dixie Chicks) publicly declared her distaste for the commander-in-chief in concert, uttering that she was, "ashamed that the president of the United States of America is from Texas." For this, her band was banished from much of country radio.

This won't be a discussion of whether or not Liz Phair's record sucked, or of whether or not Natalie's war with Toby Keith was kind of immature (or of whether or not the Chicks' fire-fanning "Fuck you Toby Keith" t-shirt and nude cover in *Entertainment Weekly* were stunts). Those are fun discussions, but that's not what this is about.

This is about time and place and action and reaction. This may be about fans (what happens when the performer you idolize turns out to be something different than you expect?) and it may or may not be about boundaries (who gets to set them, who gets to move them, and are they sometimes fluid). This may be about the glories of war, about how it sometimes it takes a culture war to really find yourself, and how a real war influences culture. There really are no answers, there's only evidence heaped alongside mounting questions.

**Date: July 13, 2003**

**Place: Rose Garden Arena, Portland, Oregon**

**Event: Dixie Chicks' *Top of the World* tour (sold out)**

*Rock the Vote* had tables to sign people up at this concert. I spotted more than a few couples where the man wore a Toby Keith t-shirt, as if to say, "I'm just here with my wife." Or was it that simple? The hardest question lingered: is "Goodbye Earl" – the Dixie Chicks' revenge tale – that far off from Toby Keith's retaliation anthem "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue"? In both songs, there's an aggressor; in both this enemy must be stopped, with force. I don't like "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue," but then again, I'm not supposed to. People like me believe in diplomacy, unless you happen to be a good-for-nothing, abusive husband, and then, according to the Chicks, you deserve some arsenic in your black-eyed peas. Earl needed to die, but a boot in the ass for them foreigners who dare raise a fist to this country? Isn't that a little... *gauche*, in a way that getting rid of an abusive husband just isn't? The contrast reminds me of the Robert Frost poem, "Fire and Ice":

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

You can see how some people might feed off both songs, if they share the same enemies, people who hate abusive husbands *and* marauding foreigners. I have to admit, Toby's "I Love this Bar" is, well, kind of fun. Which is to say, if I can forgive him for roiling the troops against Natalie Maines enough to admit to liking *at least* one of his songs, couldn't a Toby Keith fan forgive Natalie for her criticism of Bush and embrace some of her work? Is it possible that the polarization we think we see in this country is more nuanced than we imagine? Well, I'm not ready to wear a Toby Keith shirt, or even buy one of his records...

Like the majority of secretly dichotomous individuals, I will sneer at his horrific pun "Shock'n Y'all" and gaze in a bemused, superior way at the "I Love this Bar" video, wondering if the cage he sings behind is exactly the right place for him. Yet the rest of the day I might hum the chorus, *Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, I love this bar.*

But on the night of the show I couldn't think too much about Toby Keith: that night belonged to the Dixie Chicks. Natalie Maines came on stage wearing a black t-shirt with "Dare to Be Free" blasted across the front. One thing I couldn't get out of my mind is how odd it is that the Dixie Chicks brouhaha came after Natalie spoke words, rather than in response to her art. There's no "God Save the Queen," no crucifix in piss, no Lenny Bruce bit about Jackie Kennedy hauling ass in question here. The Dixie Chicks' art wasn't deemed obscene; they were.

Flashback to 1915, to wartime England: things are not going well for the Brits. On the day D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* is burned – the entire first printing, burned by the government for being obscene – Winston Churchill resigns in shame from the cabinet after leading a failed military maneuver at Gallipoli. One of the questionable passages in Lawrence's novel details a pregnant woman dancing alone, naked. Poet Richard Aldington commented that the real reason there was an attack on Lawrence was that, "he denounced war...they can say what they like about obscenity."

Shall we hail progress, then, that at least these days the mechanism for culture wars is transparent? Would it have been worse to use the Dixie Chicks' "Traveling Soldier" as an excuse to get rid of them, to claim it was bad for morale? Hooray for a more honest chokehold!

Back to the show: the concert skipped along, no mention of the unmentionable, then Natalie introduced the song "Truth #2" from the recent *Home* LP, a song written by Patti Griffin. "Here's a song about freedom of speech, and speaking out and having a voice." The huge film screens behind the Chicks are illuminated. This is how it was July 13, 2003 at the Rose Garden Arena. This is just one of many nights on this tour. This is a close approximation to what really happened.

Natalie roared into the first line of the song – "*You don't like the sound of the truth coming from my mouth...*" – and the screen filled with old news footage of great moments of dissent, tinged in sepia tone. Rosa Parks getting arrested, Malcolm X, fist raised in anger; turn of the century suffragettes, ERA marches, anti-Vietnam protesters taking to the streets, pro-choice marches. Gay rights marches. At the end, there were shots of the Dixie Chicks being protested.

I sat there with my friend agape. It's easy to get sucked in by the idea that this is revolution, that Natalie and Company were indoctrinating the masses, the "country music" masses, which clearly needed it. It's easy to get sucked in to this idea, but it's as knee-jerk as wanting to put a boot to the ass of the enemy.

To make this the revolution that I wanted it to be, it had to activate under some premises that may very well be false: that this audience is experiencing this kind of political perspective for the first time, and that they haven't received this message before from the Dixie Chicks. The truth is that, even though I have some preconceptions about the country music audience, I have no way of knowing if they're really as conservative as I imagine. It also must be said that the true haters weren't at this show, so the test sample was flawed: these were people who agreed, accepted or ignored.

But the real idea that must be questioned is that this was new from the Dixie Chicks. This was the first time I'd seen them live. Had there not been a fuss over Natalie's comments in London earlier that spring, what would she have continued to say on tour? And more importantly, what kinds of things had the group already talked about during previous tours? Remember, Earl!

Still, it can't just be me. There was a crackling in the air. Whatever came before it, whatever the actual effects of this sort of political theater might be, there was a sense that night that the Dixie Chicks' commitment was unbending. It felt as though they were coming out, haters-be-damned.

I wondered if somehow the whole awful experience – the banning from radio, the right wing invectives, the crushing of CDs – might have been the best thing. Natalie told an interviewer in August, "There was a point where I felt sick. But now I feel proud and empowered. I'm glad it happened." Dixie Chick Martie Maguire said to an interviewer, "You have to feel like you're about to lose something before you really appreciate it. That's human nature and we've gotten to that point and that's a gift." DH Lawrence – novelist, poet, painter – died of TB at 45 in Italy, poor and without a homeland. One of his sayings lives on: "The upshot was, my paintings must burn that English artists might finally learn."

While reports of a drop off on sales of the DC's *Home* were noted just after the incident, the album sold over 6 million copies. Some in the industry predict that had the controversy not occurred, *Home* would have sold 9 million copies. The true test will be sales of their next album. Maines recently told the *Today* show, "We like making music and we'll continue to do that, whether people buy it or not."

**Date: July 22, 2003**

**Place: The Crystal Ballroom, Portland Oregon**

**Event: Liz Phair's headlining tour**

This was Vh-1 rather than TRL territory. The undercurrent of nervousness Liz Phair has carried as part of her stage presence since the beginning was still there, but seemed reduced. As quip-y and funny and passionate as she comes across in interviews, she has yet to master stage banter in ten years. The reviews and stories have saturated the newsstands. Phair has been candid about her goals and her view of *Liz Phair*: she wanted to go big, she likes that the record has shiny and smooth parts. In 1993, Phair told the *Chicago Tribune*, "I don't know what I want, and I don't know what would be good for me at this point. And the problem is I don't have forever to figure it out."

As of July 2003, Megan O'Rourke has famously accused Phair of committing career suicide in the *New York Times*. That was the clarion call. Soon a backlash against the record gushed forth: Larry Katz wrote in the *Boston Herald*, "*Liz Phair* is a disaster. Its best moments are its unintentionally comic ones." Ana Marie Cox, in the *Chicago Reader*: "The kindest thing I can say about Liz Phair's eponymous new album – her first in nearly five years – is that it's easy to forget...the emptiness of her ambition, both musically and personally...makes me wonder if there was ever any there."

And then came the backlash against the backlash: Joe Helm wrote, in the *Washington Post*, "Fans disappointed by Phair's Matrix connection may find it a sin that's impossible to look past. But in a real sense, her pop turn seems to have freed her from the restrictive expectations of her indie-geek fan base...career suicide, it turns out, just may be Phair's liberation." Robert Christgau, in the *Village Voice*: "*Liz Phair* may not be her best album, but don't bet on it. For sure it's the one I want to hear right now, next month, all year." Gina Arnold in the *East Bay Express*: "If Liz Phair can still shock and appall

people, in what way is she selling out? Liz Phair has presented the world with a conundrum: a commercial record by an edgy artist.”

By the end of 2003, her single “Why Can’t I” hit #34 on the *Village Voice* Pazz and Jop critics’ poll, and the album *Liz Phair* scored 38th place, selling a little over 300,000 copies since its June release. In comparison, her debut *Exile in Guyville* has sold a little over 400,000 copies in ten years. The recent release hasn’t hit the mark that Capitol records execs expected. Phair toured seemingly non-stop into 2004.

Almost forty years to the week I watched Liz Phair in Portland, one of the mythological artistic controversies of modern times occurred: Bob Dylan played Newport Folk Festival and revealed his new, electronic sound. While there are debates about what did or did not happen in response – some say there were boos, others say not – it is clear that this was a critical moment in music history. Robert Shelton reported in the *New York Times* dated August 1, 1965, “Bob Dylan...introduced very unpersuasively his new fusion of folk and rock ‘n’ roll. ‘Bring back Cousin Emmy’ shouted a young festival-goer as Dylan’s electric band played. ‘More,’ shouted hundreds of others.”

The front page of the *New York Times* that same day featured headlines such as “US Due to Revise its Vietnam Setup for Combat Role,” “Greek Government Insists it is Still a Legal Regime,” “5 Negroes Beaten in Rights Picketing in Americus, GA” “200 Parade in Times Square to Protest US Role in Vietnamese War” and, finally, “Soviet Trackmen Lead US By Point.”

*Sing Out!*, the folk music magazine, quickly editorialized about Dylan, “He has given up his companions for the companionship of the Charts.” In March 1965, before the Newport Festival, Shelton wrote a piece for the *Times* titled “Beatles Backlash Spurs Modern Blues,” and noted that the success of the boys from across the pond was instigating imitators in the states. He noted, “Members of a folk group formed three years ago called the Kingsmen let their hair grow, added \$3,000 worth of electronic equipment, switched to modern blues arrangements and renamed themselves The Sell-Outs.”

A month after Newport, Shelton covered a Dylan show at the Forest Hills Music Festival. When Dylan came out with his electric band, Shelton reported, “The young audience’s displeasure was manifested at the end of most of the numbers, by booing and shouts of ‘we want the old Dylan.’ The young star plowed valiantly on, with the sort of coolness he has rarely displayed on stage.”

At the end of July 2003, Liz Phair told the *Cleveland Scene*, “This record is way, way more honest than *Guyville*. In its situations, in its emotions. Writing *Guyville*, was more of an intellectual process for me, whereas these songs are very much about who I am right now – what I want, what I need, what I fear.”

These two subculture wars – Dylan and Phair – seem to have much in common, and maybe even something in common with the Dixie Chicks event. From today’s vantage point, plugging into the Matrix may seem far removed from plugging into the amp, but if you look back in time, you can see some striking similarities. In the mid-1960s, the Beatles were seen as a frothy cute boy band and folk music was considered serious, artistic and political. By choosing to go electric, Dylan wasn’t seen by some of his critics as expanding his artistic repertoire, he was seen as exploiting a path already paved in gold by the Beatles. He was accused of betraying his fans. Likewise, the present-day pop music platform is seen as fun, but wholly corporate and in direct response to the indie scene that birthed Phair in the early 90s. Phair has been branded a shallow opportunist by some, and others can’t consider that toying with production values and different producers may actually be an artistic response, similar to going electric.

What may tie all of this together is the political climate, and its effect on these kinds of responses. In both 1965 and 2003, our country was involved in shoddy wars with vague purposes. Both periods were marked by a sense of helplessness and unrest by American citizens, over the state of domestic and international affairs. In times of turmoil, it’s easy to see how radical change from a performer – a bastion of comfort – might throw fans into a tizzy.

Last week I saw Liz Phair's video playing at *H&M* clothing store. Bob Dylan currently has a new starring role, in a *Victoria's Secret* lingerie ad. When NPR's *Morning Edition* asked Austin Scaggs, *Rolling Stone*'s Associate Editor, to comment on Dylan's new escapade, Scaggs remarked, "He's like a chameleon, you know, you can't pin him down. And I think trying to pin him down and assume that he shouldn't be doing things like this, I think it's a little unfair." Some disagreed and Bob was thoroughly teased. "I guess everyone has his price. Even Bob Dylan," cried [blogcritics.org](http://blogcritics.org).

The murky area of commerce and art was even more present in discussions of media conglomeration in 2003, and concerns about the growing power of these mega corporations often took center stage. It's easy to see how some people would view with mistrust Phair's foray into this world of big business, and see it as endangering their own status quo – yet again they are forced to give up something to the insatiable maw. In fact, the Dixie Chicks were banned from country radio by at least one of these conglomerates, but since the Dixie Chicks' *Top of the World* tour was produced by Clear Channel, where does that put them? Quoth Avril Lavigne, "Why'd you have to go and make things so complicated?"

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