

Gender, Politics, and Country Music in the Chicks' 2020 Album, *Gaslighter*

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Abstract

After a 14-year hiatus, the Chicks—formerly known as the Dixie Chicks—released their fifth studio album, *Gaslighter*, in July 2020. Famous for their denunciation of President George W. Bush in 2003, the Chicks have continued to challenge normative assumptions about what it means to be country musicians—both politically and musically—and *Gaslighter* is no exception. Drawing on existing scholarship in genre studies, on the Chicks’ previous music, and in music video analysis, this thesis demonstrates how the Chicks participate in the genre of country music through an analysis of *Gaslighter*. I synthesize a wide range of primary sources to explore how the band’s genre has been defined throughout their career, examining the Chicks’ own perception of their genre as well as external methods of categorization such as radio airplay, reactions from fans, and *Billboard* charts. In *Gaslighter*, specifically, I demonstrate how the Chicks simultaneously participate in and subvert traditional gendered themes of country music such as home, marriage, and motherhood, as well as how the album fuses country and pop musical styles. Additionally, I evaluate the Chicks’ allyship towards the Black Lives Matter movement through an analysis of their protest music video, “March March,” and by examining their decision to remove the problematic term, “Dixie,” from their band name. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how the Chicks have continued to subvert genre boundaries throughout their career in both the musical and political realms, shaping the genre of country music for the next generation.

Résumé

Après une absence de 14 ans, *the Chicks* – anciennement connues sous le nom *the Dixie Chicks* – sortirent leur cinquième album studio, *Gaslighter*, en juillet 2020. Célèbres pour leurs dénonciations du président Georges W. Bush en 2003, *the Chicks* ont depuis continué de confronter les postulats normatifs concernant ce que signifie être une musicienne *country*, tant sur le plan politique que musical, et *Gaslighter* s’inscrit dans cet volonté contestataire. En s’appuyant sur de précédentes recherches sur les études de genre, sur la musique de *the Chicks* ainsi que sur les analyses de vidéo clips, ce mémoire démontre de quelles manières *the Chicks* participent au genre musical du *country* à travers une analyse de *Gaslighter*. En faisant la synthèse d’un large éventail de sources primaires, j’explore les manières dont le genre musical du groupe a été défini à travers leur carrière, tout en examinant la perception de *the Chicks* à l’égard de leur genre musical ainsi que des méthodes externes de catégorisation, notamment les diffusions de radio, les réactions des fans et les classements dans les palmarès tels que les *Billboard charts*. Dans *Gaslighter*, je démontre comment *the Chicks* participent et renversent simultanément les thèmes traditionnellement genrés de la musique *country* tels que le foyer, le mariage et la maternité, tout en m’attardant sur la manière dont l’album mélange les styles des musiques *country* et populaires. En outre, j’évalue l’alliance de *the Chicks* envers le mouvement *Black Lives Matter* en analysant leur vidéo clip de protestation « March March » et en examinant leur décision de retirer de leur nom le terme problématique, « Dixie ». Ultimement, ce mémoire démontre comment *the Chicks* ont continué à subvertir les frontières de genre tout au long de leur carrière, tant dans le domaine musical que politique, façonnant ainsi le genre musical du *country* pour les générations à venir.

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Introduction

The Chicks, formerly known as the Dixie Chicks, are the best-selling female band of all time in the United States. Comprised since 1995 of lead singer Natalie Maines and instrumental virtuosi sisters Martie Maguire (fiddle, mandolin) and Emily Strayer (banjo, dobro, steel guitar), the country trio has won 13 Grammys, sold over 30 million albums, and sold over \$100 million in concert tickets.¹ The Chicks have challenged normative assumptions about what it means to be country musicians, both musically and politically. Their five studio albums (released in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2006, and 2020) have traversed genres from bluegrass and country to rock and pop, topping both country and mainstream *Billboard* charts. Moreover, the Chicks have been outspoken about their progressive political views within a genre that has been typically tied to conservative politics and has a history of exclusion of women and people of colour. The band is perhaps most well-known for their criticism of President George W. Bush while on foreign soil.

On March 10, 2003, lead singer Natalie Maines made an offhanded comment during a performance that would go on to have irreversible consequences for her and her bandmates' careers. During the opening concert of their Top of the World Tour at Shepherd's Bush Empire in London, England, Maines told the audience, "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."² Maines spoke just days before the US-led invasion of Iraq and amidst widespread anti-war sentiment in London and across the globe; for instance, February 15, 2003 saw the largest anti-war protests since the Vietnam War, with an estimated six to ten million people demonstrating in 60 countries, including an estimated 750,000 to two million protestors

¹ The Chicks, "About — The Chicks," accessed March 2, 2022, <https://thechicks.com/about-1>.

² Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*, 2006, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0811136/>.

in London.³ After performing their hit single, “Travellin’ Soldier,” Natalie sought to assure her audience that she did not agree with the impending war in Iraq, and her statement was met with enthusiastic cheers from the London audience.⁴

In a review of the concert on March 12, Betty Clarke of *The Guardian* quoted Maines’ denunciation of President Bush.⁵ Once the US media and country music industry caught wind of the news, chaos ensued. Country radio stations boycotted the Chicks’ music. Their number one hit single, “Travelin’ Soldier,” plummeted in the charts. Ex-fans destroyed their CDs, running them over with bulldozers. As the Chicks continued their Top of the World Tour in the US that summer, ex-fans protested outside their concerts calling them “traitors,” “communists,” and “anti-American.” Maines even received death threats, which prompted the use of metal detectors and increased security at their concerts. The media didn’t shy away from criticizing the Chicks harshly with misogynistic language including, but not limited to, “bimbos,” “ditzy twits,” and “callow, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around.”⁶

The Chicks responded to the controversy by posing nude on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*’s May 2, 2003 issue with words written in black ink across their bodies; these included the various insults directed towards them (“Saddam’s Angels,” “Dixie Sluts,” and “Traitors”) as well as positive responses to the incident (“Proud Americans,” “Brave,” and “Hero”).⁷ The provocative image demonstrated the Chicks’ unwillingness to back down, asserting agency over the situation and redefining the controversy on their own terms. This unapologetic, defiant stance

³ BBC News Online, “Millions Join Global Anti-War Protests,” February 17, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2765215.stm>.

⁴ Kopple and Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*.

⁵ Betty Clarke, “The Dixie Chicks,” *The Guardian*, March 12, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/mar/12/artsfeatures.popandrock>.

⁶ Kopple and Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*.

⁷ Emily Yahr, “In Entertainment Weekly’s Glory Days, the Chicks Took a Big Risk,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/02/24/chicks-cover-entertainment-weekly/>.

was further expressed in their 2006 album, *Taking the Long Way*, which directly responded to the backlash and paved a new path forward in their career.⁸ The Chicks' 2003 controversy exemplified the country music industry's ties to conservative political views and demonstrated that it was not acceptable for country artists, particularly women, to speak out against the Iraq war or conservative politics in general.

After a 14-year hiatus, the Chicks released their fifth studio album, *Gaslighter*, on July 17, 2020. Like *Taking The Long Way*, *Gaslighter* is a deeply personal album and draws on events from the band members' lives, particularly Maines' recent and complicated divorce. Songs such as "Gaslighter" and "Tights on My Boat," for instance, are clearly directed at Maines' ex-husband, calling out his toxic behaviour with references to the specific circumstances of their falling out. Other songs, including "Young Man" and "Julianna Calm Down," focus on the three band members' identities as mothers, expressing love and support for their children as they navigate life's challenges. Additionally, "March March" stands out for its political outspokenness. This song was released as a single and music video on June 25, 2020—the same day that the band dropped "Dixie" from their name—in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and widespread Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests across the United States.⁹ Originally inspired by the bandmembers' attendance at the 2018 March For Our Lives rally in Washington DC, the song's lyrics highlight issues of gun violence and school shootings as well as the climate crisis and reproductive rights.¹⁰ The accompanying music video includes footage from various social protest movements throughout US history, including the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s

⁸ Jada Watson and Lori Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks Are 'Not Ready to Make Nice,'" *Popular Music* 29, no. 3 (2010): 325–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40926939>.

⁹ Ben Sisario, "The Dixie Chicks Change Their Name, Dropping the 'Dixie,'" *The New York Times*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/arts/music/dixie-chicks-change-name.html>.

¹⁰ Apple Music, "Gaslighter by The Chicks," July 17, 2020, <https://music.apple.com/ai/album/gaslighter/1499733036>.

and the BLM protests of summer 2020, among others. Given that country music is so often associated with right-wing political views, the Chicks' unwavering commitment to progressive social and political issues throughout their career is striking.

In this thesis I examine how the Chicks participate in the genre of country music, with a particular focus on politics, gender, and musical style, through an analysis of *Gaslighter*. There has been significant scholarship on music from the Chicks' first four albums, the 2003 controversy, and their collaboration with Beyoncé at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards. Yet, to my knowledge, no academic writing yet exists on *Gaslighter*. An abundance of new primary sources such as interviews with the band members and reviews from critics have emerged alongside the release of *Gaslighter*, providing new insight into how the Chicks define themselves as musicians and how they are perceived by others. Through this thesis, I build upon previous scholarship on the Chicks and synthesize a wide range of new primary source materials to provide an updated scholarly perspective on the impact of the Chicks' career. I consider how the Chicks have evolved as a band from their early days to the present, their continued influence on country music, and their dialogue with US politics. In *Gaslighter*, specifically, I explore how the album engages with themes of female empowerment, Black Lives Matter, and other progressive social movements, as well as its country-pop fusion of musical styles, challenging typical definitions of country music.

This thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the Chicks' career, drawing on David Brackett's scholarship in genre studies as an analytical framework.¹¹ Following a brief overview of country music's historical ties to conservative politics, I examine how the Chicks have defined themselves in relation to country music

¹¹ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), muse.jhu.edu/book/48357.

throughout their career. While the trio proudly identified as country musicians in their early days, the 2003 controversy and subsequent backlash alienated them from the country music industry and the Chicks have distanced themselves from the genre ever since. I then compare and contrast the Chicks' self-identification as a band with external methods of categorizing musical genres, i.e. music industry charts, radio airplay, and responses from fans. I present *Billboard* chart data to demonstrate the Chicks' crossover success in both the country and pop domains throughout their entire career, despite their long-time ban from country radio and contentious relationship with country music fans. I also explore responses to two recent artistic collaborations that illustrate the Chicks' ongoing tension with country music: their collaboration with Beyoncé at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards, which scholars such as Rebekah Hutten and Francesca T. Royster have examined in-depth; and their collaboration with Taylor Swift on a song from her 2019 album, *Lover*.¹²

The remainder of the chapter situates the Chicks' career within the digital era, exploring the roles of streaming and social media in artists' careers. Drawing on quantitative studies conducted by Jada Watson, I draw attention to the exclusionary practices embedded within country radio while also considering the potential of streaming as an alternative path to success for country musicians.¹³ Lastly, I explore the increasing role of social media as a tool for artists

¹² Francesca T. Royster, "Who's Your Daddy?: Beyoncé, the Dixie Chicks, and the Art of Outlaw Protest," in *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Susan Fast and Craig Jennex (New York: Routledge, 2019), 63–75; Rebekah Hutten, "Practices of Genre Surveillance: Hearing Racial Politics in Beyoncé's and The Chicks' 'Daddy Lessons,'" in *Whose Country Music? Genre, Identity and Belonging in 21st-Century Country Music Culture*, ed. Jada Watson and Paula Bishop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).

¹³ Jada Watson, "Country Music Radio Has Ignored Female Artists for Years. And We Have the Data to Prove It.," *NBC News THINK*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/country-music-radio-has-ignored-female-artists-years-we-have-ncna1137571>; Jada Watson, "Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry (2000-2020)" (SongData, 2021), <https://songdata.ca/2021/03/12/redlining-in-country-music/>.

to speak their minds, demonstrating the Chicks' continued influence on the next generation of artists, particularly Taylor Swift, among others.

While Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Chicks' career through the lens of genre studies, Chapter 2 builds on this context by examining how *Gaslighter* serves as a continuation of the Chicks' artistic output. Scholarship by Christian Griffiths, Kimberly P. Bowers, Delia Poey, Jada Watson, and Lori Burns has investigated how the Chicks' previous music simultaneously participates in and subverts traditional gendered themes of country music such as family, marriage, and home.¹⁴ In this chapter I draw on these scholars' frameworks to conduct an analysis of *Gaslighter*, demonstrating how the album continues the Chicks' practice of challenging genre boundaries.

After synthesizing this existing scholarship, I explore the Chicks' creative process in the recording studio, focusing on their growth as songwriters and their collaboration with producer Jack Antonoff. *Gaslighter* is the Chicks' most personal album to date, drawing on events in the band members' lives such as divorce and motherhood, and with nearly all of the songs co-written by the three band members. Through their close working relationship with Antonoff, the Chicks felt comfortable opening up about vulnerable topics in the recording studio. They also experimented with new songwriting strategies, combining Antonoff's synthesized beats with their signature fiddle, banjo, and three-part harmony sound. The chapter then continues with an

¹⁴ Christian Griffiths, "The Dixie Chicks 2001-2003: The Dissonances of Gender and Genre in War Culture," *Media, War & Conflict* 8, no. 2 (2015): 229–43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26000982>; Kimberly P. Bowers, "Taking the Long Way Home: Poetry, Politics, and the Dixie Chicks," in *Singing for Themselves: Essays on Women in Popular Music*, ed. Patricia Spence Rudden (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2007), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1165732>; Delia Poey, "Striking Back without Missing a Beat: Radical Responses to Domestic Violence in Country Music's The Dixie Chicks and Salsa's Celia Cruz," *Studies in Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (2010): 1–15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416152>; Lori Burns and Jada Watson, "Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound: Temporality, Narrative Agency and Embodiment in the Dixie Chicks' Video 'Top of the World,'" *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 4, no. 1 (2010): 3–37, <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/article/387880>; Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice."

analysis of *Gaslighter*, first exploring how the concept of the album functions as a whole and then focusing on a selection of four songs from the album: “Gaslighter,” “For Her,” “Julianna Calm Down,” and “Young Man.” Through my analyses, I explore how the album tackles key topics such as domestic abuse, asserting agency amidst romantic breakups, the importance of community, “rambling,” or forging your own path beyond the home, and combining the personal and political—all from a female perspective. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how the Chicks continue to destabilize the boundaries of country music by expressing themes of female empowerment and how their deeply personal music allows for the emergence of implicit political meanings.

In Chapter 3, I examine the Chicks’ allyship towards Black Lives Matter through a discussion of their name change as well as an in-depth analysis of their protest music video, “March March.” First, I examine the circumstances surrounding the Chicks’ decision to remove the problematic term, “Dixie,” from their name due to its associations with the Confederate South and slavery. While the Chicks should certainly be recognized for this necessary change, I also call attention to valid critiques of the Chicks’ allyship, such as their lateness and reactive approach to activism. Drawing on scholarship by Eric Smialek, I use the term “imperfect allyship” to characterize the Chicks’ relationship to Black Lives Matter, recognizing that allyship is an ongoing learning process and inherently imperfect.¹⁵ To that end, I explore the ways in which the Chicks have demonstrated a commitment to growth as allies, helping to raise awareness about responsible allyship and foster beneficial learning outcomes.

In the second half of the chapter, I demonstrate how “March March” serves as an expression of solidarity for Black Lives Matter, among other social justice causes. Drawing on

¹⁵ Eric Smialek, “Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 99–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1956270>.

scholarship in music video analysis by Diane Railton, Paul Watson, Carol Vernallis, Lori Burns, and Jada Watson, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the video's interconnected lyrical, musical, and visual components.¹⁶ For instance, I explore how the music video uses montage editing to juxtapose images from protest movements past and present as well as how it highlights the power of music and dance as forms of expression within the BLM movement. Additionally, I discuss how "March March," like the rest of *Gaslighter*, combines musical influences from both pop and country and encourages listeners to apply the message of the song to important issues in their own lives. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how "March March" expresses the Chicks' support for BLM, among other activist causes, as well as how the music video continues the Chicks' practice of challenging genre boundaries through both the musical and political realms.

Overall, the goal of this thesis is to explore the Chicks' continued impact on country music through an analysis of *Gaslighter*. I combine primary sources with existing scholarship to investigate how the Chicks engage with important social issues related to gender, race, and politics as well as how they combine country and pop musical influences. Additionally, I situate *Gaslighter* within the Chicks' broader career trajectory, considering how they have evolved as a band since their early days as well as their influence on the next generation of musicians. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how the Chicks have continued to subvert genre boundaries both musically and politically throughout their career, shaping the genre of country music as they participate in it.

¹⁶ Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=767129>; Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Burns and Watson, "Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound"; Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice."

Chapter 1: The Chicks and Country Music

The Chicks have a complicated relationship with country music. Their songs and albums have reached the top of the country *Billboard* charts throughout their career, yet they were banned from country radio in 2003 for expressing their political views. Moreover, their musical style draws upon additional genres outside of mainstream country music, namely, their bluegrass roots and their more recent pop-oriented sound. In order to situate *Gaslighter* within the larger context of the Chicks' previous work, this chapter explores how the Chicks have participated in the genre of country music throughout their career. Drawing on David Brackett's scholarship in genre theory, I use the term "participate" here, rather than "belonging to," to recognize that genres are fluid categories that are constantly evolving and that artists can participate in multiple genres simultaneously. Furthermore, genres are not defined based on a fixed set of musical characteristics, but rather their citationality. That is, musical genres "refer to generic conventions that are constantly being modified by each new text that participates in the genre."¹⁷ Each of the Chicks' five studio albums participates in country music by citing generic conventions while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the genre; chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis examine how this is accomplished in *Gaslighter*, specifically.

The Chicks' musical style is of course not the only component that contributes to defining their genre. The band's public persona and political views—and how these are perceived by others—play an ever-important role in shaping their relationship to country music. Indeed, Brackett notes how musical genres are strongly tied to the group identity of musicians and fans as well as to music industry marketing categories.¹⁸ The country music industry has been historically aligned with conservative politics, yet the Chicks disrupted this connection

¹⁷ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, 13.

¹⁸ Brackett, 18–19, 27–28.

when they spoke out against President Bush and have continued to disrupt the genre ever since. In this chapter I demonstrate how the Chicks have been influential in challenging the country music industry by serving as an example to speak up for what they believe in. I also demonstrate how the 2003 incident and subsequent backlash have continued to impact the Chicks' career to this day, shaping the creation of *Gaslighter* seventeen years later.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the relationship between country music and conservative politics. After providing this context, I examine how the Chicks define themselves in relation to country music and how their sense of identity has evolved from their early days to the present. I then contrast this with how the music industry defines the Chicks' music, exploring their *Billboard* chart history as well as their relationship to country radio and fans. Finally, I examine how the Chicks have helped inspire the next generation of country musicians and how advances in technology (i.e., streaming and social media) have significantly changed the landscape within which they work today.

Country Music and Right-Wing Politics

In order to better understand why the Chicks received such harsh treatment from the country music industry following Natalie Maine's controversial statement in 2003, it is first important to consider the industry's historical and ongoing ties to conservatism, racism, and whiteness. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the history of country music in depth, my goal here is to briefly touch on some key aspects of the country music industry in order to situate the Chicks within the genre.

Country music was first established as a commercial marketing category in the 1920s under the moniker, "hillbilly" records. The early recorded music industry, headquartered in New

York City, sought to expand beyond the mainstream pop market, creating the categories of “hillbilly” records for white, rural, southern musicians and consumers as well as “race” records for African-American musicians and consumers.¹⁹ These two categories would eventually become the modern-day commercial genres of “country music” and “R&B,” respectively. The separation of “hillbilly” and “race” music into distinct market segments reinforced Jim Crow laws by imposing racial segregation within southern music-making and the music industry at large, establishing an association between hillbilly music and the concept of whiteness. Indeed, as Karl Hagstrom Miller explains, “The emergent musical color line eventually brought the logic of segregation into the realm of sound and style, linking sonic signifiers of race to the corporeal bodies and physical landscapes that Jim Crow already had been trying to contain for several decades.”²⁰ Before the commercialization of southern music, there was a notable amount of interracial musical exchange and collaboration within local communities. However, once the “hillbilly” and “race” market categories were created with strict racial boundaries, an imagined community of white listeners, in opposition to African-Americans, was born. As J. Lester Feder explains, “Records united listeners musically across locales while simultaneously divided listeners by race. For the first time, the color line became a more powerful boundary of southerners’ musical worlds than the county line: whites in a given community were increasingly connected to whites in another community and less connected to their black neighbors.”²¹ The association between hillbilly music and whiteness laid the foundation for the genre’s connection to conservative politics later in the century.

¹⁹ J. Lester Feder, “‘Song of the South’: Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture, 1920–1974” (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 57, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/pqdtglobal/docview/305335746/abstract/DFBFFAA17CB5475APQ/1?accountid=12339>.

²⁰ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 15, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/70600>.

²¹ Feder, “‘Song of the South,’” 52.

By constructing musical categories aligned with a particular race, the industry created imagined communities and homologies associated with each genre. As a result, country music has long since ignored the contributions of African-American musicians and has become aligned with whiteness and right-wing politics. Several scholars have written about this topic in depth including Karl Hagstrom Miller, Diane Pecknold, Erich Nunn, Charles L. Hughes, and J. Lester Feder, among others.²² Ultimately, as Brackett explains, “the idea of consistent homogeneous taste within the audience for either country or race music might appear to be a myth created by northern entrepreneurs and academics with a vested interest in propagating this belief ... however, if this idea were in fact a myth, it nevertheless resonated enough with a sense of reality shared by diverse social groups that it presented itself as the truth”²³ Despite the fact that these marketing categories were mere constructions by the industry, audiences and musicians alike began to identify with the racial and political associations with each genre, echoing broader segregated structures in society at-large.

The relationship between country music and political identity is paradoxical. On the one hand, country music has a history of racial exclusion and has been associated with a demographic that is often conservative politically. On the other hand, country music is not homogenous, and the stereotype that it is the music of conservative “rednecks” and “bigots” is counterproductive. Nadine Hubbs addresses this paradox in her 2014 book by arguing that “Mainstream representations of ‘redneck’ bigotry, which often feature country music, perform the conservative work of erasing privileged whites and institutions from prevailing images of

²² Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/69111>; Erich Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line: Music and Race in the Southern Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/40156>; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/42216>; Feder, ““Song of the South.””

²³ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, 196.

racial and sexual bigotry past and present.”²⁴ Presenting country music as simply the music of bigoted, working-class “rednecks” shifts attention away from people in decision-making positions—i.e., middle- and upper-class white people—who reinforce racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination through institutional systems of power. Thus, according to Hubbs, it is important to understand the larger structures that reinforce conservative views within the country music establishment, rather than focusing on individual fans, many of whom do not fit the stereotype of a “typical” country listener.

That being said, one cannot ignore the prevalence of right-wing views among country fans. As Gabriel Rossman has argued, the Chicks’ radio boycott in March 2003 was spearheaded by conservative grassroots efforts, not only the radio corporations. Using quantitative data to support his claims, he demonstrates that “the Dixie Chick’s boycott was fundamentally driven by the political mobilization of right-wing social movements whose members called and wrote to radio stations.”²⁵ Radio stations across the US primarily refused to play the Chicks’ music in order to appease listeners’ demands, not so much due to their own conservative beliefs. As Rossman concludes, “This analysis has shown no evidence that corporate elites took vengeance against artists who oppose right-wing politics ... Rather, the data suggests that country music has a vengeful audience.”²⁶ Country music fans, therefore, play a significant role in sustaining the right-wing ideologies associated with the genre.

The Chicks’ strained relationship with country music has been heavily shaped by politics. Their exile from the genre after expressing their liberal political stance demonstrates the genre’s

²⁴ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 5, muse.jhu.edu/book/30561.

²⁵ Gabriel Rossman, “The Dixie Chicks Radio Boycott,” in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us about the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 65, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/30974>.

²⁶ Rossman, 69–70.

close ties to conservative views. At the same time, the Chicks are an example of a country band that doesn't fit with the traditional country music stereotypes, and their outspokenness has served as an example to challenge the industry and to allow for more diverse voices to be heard and considered part of the genre. In the next section, I explore how the Chicks identify with country music and how they define their genre.

How the Chicks Defined Their Genre – Before the Incident

Before they achieved commercial success in the country music industry, the Chicks started out as a bluegrass band. Founded in 1989 in Dallas, Texas by sisters Martie Maguire (b. 1969, nee Erwin) and Emily Strayer (b. 1972, nee Erwin) along with Robin Lynn Macy (b. 1958) and Laura Lynch (b. 1958), the Chicks began their career busking on a city street corner in Dallas. Soon after, they began taking gigs at local venues and eventually made their way to regional bluegrass festivals and competitions. They also released three independent albums in 1991, 1992, and 1993. The Chicks used traditional bluegrass instrumentation with Maguire on fiddle and mandolin, Strayer on banjo and dobro, Macy on guitar, and Lynch on upright bass; Macy and Lynch shared the lead singer role.²⁷

The band members had conflicting ideas about their career goals in terms of genre. Maguire and Strayer sought to break into the mainstream country music industry, but Macy wanted to stick to pure bluegrass. The Chicks' first independent album was rooted in bluegrass and western swing styles, and, according to Murphy Hicks Henry, "its content and style could not possibly have been further removed from the Nashville sound of the day," failing to attract

²⁷ Murphy Hicks Henry, "The Dixie Chicks," in *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 361–73, <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/23119>.

the attention of Nashville executives.²⁸ However, this didn't seem to concern Macy. As she stated at the time, "I think we're carving our own niche ... We don't really want to conform to formula country music. We want to do what we feel in our hearts. Whether that will translate to super-stardom, I kind of doubt it. But I think as long as we're making enough money, and we're happy playing the music, who could ask for more?"²⁹ Maguire and Strayer, on the other hand, saw things differently, wanting to grow beyond their bluegrass roots.

The Chicks' second independent album started to drift further away from bluegrass. The album combined multiple styles including "western swing, Irish, folk, rhythm-and-blues, [and] gospel" and included drums, an instrumentation choice not typically found in traditional bluegrass.³⁰ Maguire recognized their departure from the genre, but noted, "we have to make a living and you can't do that playing bluegrass."³¹ After completing this album, Macy left the band, unhappy with the artistic direction they were taking. Now a trio, the band recorded their third independent album in 1993, and "the direction was consistently country."³² The Chicks' transition towards mainstream country alienated them from some fans in the bluegrass community. As Kathleen Tracy explains, "Many of their longtime fans felt that they had sold out—the very thing Robin [Lynn Macy] had so passionately opposed."³³ Maguire and Strayer didn't hide the fact that they wanted to make money, which made them out of place in the genre. Indeed, according to Henry, "Bluegrass music has long had an uneasy relationship to its business side, preferring to pretend that most musicians play for love, not money."³⁴ However, the Chicks

²⁸ Henry, 365; James L. Dickerson, *Dixie Chicks: Down-Home and Backstage* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2000), 20, <http://archive.org/details/dixiechicksdownh00dick>.

²⁹ Kathleen Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 26, <https://archive.org/details/welcometodixiech00trac>.

³⁰ Henry, "The Dixie Chicks," 366.

³¹ Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography*, 37.

³² Henry, "The Dixie Chicks," 367.

³³ Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography*, 45.

³⁴ Henry, "The Dixie Chicks," 368.

had not yet achieved any commercial success in mainstream country, making them out of place in both genres: too country for bluegrass, but too bluegrass for country.

In 1995, the Chicks finally landed a record deal in Nashville with Sony. Soon after, Maguire and Strayer replaced Laura Lynch with Natalie Maines (b. 1974) as lead singer. According to Strayer, “Martie and I started to feel limited creatively. We felt we needed the next caliber of singer.”³⁵ Maguire and Strayer met Maines through her father, Lloyd Maines, a renowned steel guitarist with whom they had worked on their previous two albums. Natalie Maines was not a country singer, a fact she has not tried to hide. In a 2013 interview with Howard Stern, she recalled, “Growing up, when people asked, ‘what kind of music do you listen to,’ I would say, ‘anything but country,’” citing R&B and rock as her favorite genres.³⁶ She credits artists such as “James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, Indigo Girls, Maria McKee and John Travolta” as her musical influences.³⁷ Despite not being a fan of country music, however, Maines recalled that she was inspired by Maguire and Strayer’s instrumental virtuosity, especially as women: “[I] thought that was really special how awesome they are at their instruments. You don’t really see that many females playing like that, especially back then.”³⁸ This is where Maines saw potential for the band to succeed. Although her musical influences came from outside of country music, Maines’ powerful voice was well-suited to the style of mainstream country music and she helped propel the band to success.

In their early days as a mainstream band, the Chicks had to defend their position as country musicians because they continually pushed the boundaries of the genre. In 1999,

³⁵ Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography*, 51.

³⁶ Howard Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” *The Howard Stern Show*, January 4, 2013, https://archive.org/details/Howard_Stern_2013/Stern+2013-01-04+Dave+Attell%2C+Natalie+Maines.mp3.

³⁷ The Chicks, *Wide Open Spaces*, CD (New York: Monument, 1998).

³⁸ Howard Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” *The Howard Stern Show*, SiriusXM, July 20, 2020.

Maguire told *The Tennessean*, “Fans will come up to us and say, ‘I hate country music but I love y’all. Y’all aren’t country.’ And we just giggle under our breath ... We’re a country group. That’s what our expertise is in. I mean, Emily plays a banjo for God’s sake. I play the fiddle. Natalie’s got that undeniable twang that she will never be able to escape with all the speech therapy in the world.”³⁹ It’s interesting to note, however, that Maines’ “undeniable twang” is absent from her 2013 solo album, *Mother*, in which she sings with a more rock-sounding vocal style, sounding nothing like country music. Thus, it’s clear that Maines is very adaptable to different genres and clearly positioned herself with a country vocal style in her early days with the Chicks, despite not coming from a country background. Furthermore, Maines’ twang can even be seen, in some instances, as an exaggerated critique or parody of country music as a genre. For example, as Delia Poey notes, the Chicks’ 2000 song, “Goodbye Earl,” parodies not only the topic of domestic abuse but also parodies country as a genre through exaggerations of country music stereotypes, including a “twangy” vocal style.⁴⁰

The Chicks challenged mainstream country conventions by using bluegrass instrumentation. According to Strayer,

We rode the Nashville-Texas line and kept our signature sound ... We also kept the radio market in mind and I don’t think we compromised anything. We really tried hard not to sound too slick, and it was important to us to play our own instruments. For some reason Nashville sees the banjo as too hokey, too down home ... [the banjo is] bluegrass, it’s hillbilly, and Nashville is trying so hard to be hip that sometimes it leaves behind its roots. So it was fun insisting on the banjo.’⁴¹

Rather than simply abandoning their bluegrass roots in favour of mainstream country, the Chicks sought to infuse mainstream country with bluegrass influences, shaping the genre of country as

³⁹ Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), 496.

⁴⁰ Poey, “Striking Back without Missing a Beat,” 5.

⁴¹ Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography*, 66–69.

they participated in it. However, using their bluegrass instrumentation took a bit of convincing, and they had to fight to include banjo in their recordings. According to Blake Chancy, producer for their first two albums, *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*, “Getting the banjo on country radio literally scared me to death. It hadn’t been on for 10 years. Now all these people are introducing the banjo on the records because it’s accepted, and that’s one hundred percent directly related to Emily.”⁴² The Chicks struck a balance between catering to the preferences of country radio, while also staying true to their artistic vision. As a result, they were able to influence the conventions of the genre. As Maines explained in 1999, “We take pride that we’re bringing back older, traditional sounding things and making it sound more modern.”⁴³ Thus, during this time, the Chicks were proud country musicians, influencing the genre as they participated in it.

How the Chicks Define Their Genre – After the Incident

While the Chicks had to fight to be recognized as country musicians early in their career, the infamous “incident” in 2003 changed the trio’s relationship with and perception of country music, marking a turning point in their career. Their exile from country radio, though detrimental to their career at the time, allowed the Chicks to be more experimental in their musical style. In an interview with the Chicks shortly after the incident, Maines said, “[The backlash] has sort of opened the door for us to do anything musically that we want to do now without feeling any pressures that we have to please, because we don’t really have anyone to answer to as far as radio is concerned.”⁴⁴ The Chick’s early commercial success as a country band was highly dependent on them catering to the tastes of country radio. However, after getting banned from

⁴² Henry, “The Dixie Chicks,” 370.

⁴³ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 496.

⁴⁴ Kopple and Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*.

the format, the Chicks had more freedom to explore other directions in terms of genre. As the Chicks' musical style veered in new directions, the band members began to distance themselves from the genre of country music. Shortly after the controversy, Maguire explained, "we don't feel part of the country music scene any longer, it can't be our home anymore ...we now consider ourselves part of the big rock 'n' roll family."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Chicks' 2006 album, *Taking the Long Way*, can be characterized as country-rock fusion and marked their departure from mainstream country music.⁴⁶

After *Taking the Long Way*, the Chicks took an extended break from making music together. One reason was so that the band members could focus on raising their children, particularly Maines, whose then-husband had an inconsistent work schedule as an actor. Maines wanted to make sure that she was always there for her kids, and didn't want a music career to get in the way of that commitment.⁴⁷ But another significant reason for the extended break was due to Maines' disillusionment with the country music industry. Indeed, she has expressed her disdain for country music in various interviews during the Chicks' hiatus. For example, in a 2013 interview with *TIME*, Maines admits,

Country music is not something I'm dying to get back into ... I never felt like 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 closed-minded and conservative. Here they are accepting me!' ... and I never, you know, tried to hide my politics or my liberalism. But I don't know, I guess people see what they want to see. So it was really sort of a disappointment to me to see that all those stereotypes that I thought of as a child about country music ... they really were, they really are there.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice," 328.

⁴⁶ Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice."

⁴⁷ Melinda Newman, "How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks," *Billboard*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/the-chicks-gaslighter-interview/>.

⁴⁸ Belinda Lescombe, "10 Questions for Natalie Maines," *TIME*, May 10, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0dy_XI5EH0.

Maines joined country music as an outsider, but decided to give it a fair chance. Ultimately, she was ostracized from the industry for being public about her liberal political views, and this has solidified the negative connotations she associates with the genre. Though country music is not homogenous and a diverse range of people listen to country music, the conservative tendencies within the industry really do exist, and Maines experienced that first hand after speaking out against Bush.

Furthermore, one of the aspects of the controversy that was most disappointing to Maines was the fact that people were shocked by her liberal beliefs. As reported in *TIME* by Josh Tyrangiel in 2006, “what seems to linger most is disappointment in her pre-controversy self. ‘I think I’d gotten too comfortable living my life,’ she says. ‘I didn’t know people thought about us a certain way—that we were Republican and pro-war.’”⁴⁹ Before her anti-Bush comment, Maines did not try to hide her liberal beliefs. For example, in response to Toby Keith’s 2002 hyperpatriotic, pro-war song, “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue,” Maines declared, “I hate it. It’s ignorant, and it makes country music sound ignorant.”⁵⁰ Yet, apparently Maines was not transparent enough, and the country industry perceived Maines and the Chicks as being in line with conservative expectations of the genre up until Maines’ controversial comment in March 2003.

Maines displayed a clear schism from the country music industry in 2013 with the release of her solo rock album, *Mother*. As she explained, “I’m putting out a rock record because that’s really me, that’s what I am, that’s what I do.”⁵¹ When asked about her future with the Chicks, she told Howard Stern in 2013, “Honestly, I just don’t feel like it’s the Dixie Chicks’ time. I do feel

⁴⁹ Josh Tyrangiel, “Chicks In the Line of Fire,” *TIME*, May 21, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1196419,00.html>.

⁵⁰ Griffiths, “The Dixie Chicks 2001-2003,” 236.

⁵¹ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” January 4, 2013.

like things were tainted permanently, and so I struggle with going out on five Grammys or going out, you know, petering out.”⁵² Likewise, she told Belinda Lescombe of TIME, “After the Grammys that night, something just felt like the ending of a chapter for me, or the ending of a battle. And I was victorious, and I was walking away.”⁵³ Maines’ feelings of resentment with her experiences as a country artist, and feeling like *Taking the Long Way* marked the end of a chapter for her, had led to rumours that the Chicks had broken up. However, Maines made it clear that they were still together as a band, despite their extended break. As she explains, “I’m still in the Dixie Chicks, we haven’t broken up ... I love the Dixie Chicks. I mean, it’s been the most fun I’ve ever had in my life. It was like winning the lottery.”⁵⁴ Though Maines is fed up with the country music industry, she cherishes her time with the Chicks. And, of course, the Chicks would reunite again to record new music in due time.

When the band came together to record their 2020 album, *Gaslighter*, they were adamant about maintaining their separation from mainstream country music. The release of their new album led to many interview opportunities for the Chicks to share their thoughts about the album, explaining their views on musical style and genre. Maines’ aversion to country music is consistently echoed by her bandmates. When asked if the Chicks still consider themselves to be a part of country music, Strayer replied, “Yeah, I think we’ll always be in that [category] ... [by] people who like to categorize, but I think ... we’re always searching for new sounds and new things to do with our instrumentation, and although we’ll always be banjo, fiddle, three-part harmony, [on] every album we try new things, so that’s just how we see it. I don’t know that we

⁵² Stern.

⁵³ Lescombe, “10 Questions for Natalie Maines.”

⁵⁴ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” January 4, 2013.

really categorize ourself.”⁵⁵ Though the Chicks acknowledge their ties to the country music industry, they resist categorizing themselves in any particular genre so that they don’t limit themselves artistically. They see themselves as being experimental in terms of style and feel that genre categories cannot fully encompass the type of music they create.

Another reason why the Chicks continue to resist the category of country music for their new album is due to political reasons, specifically, the limitations of country radio. Strayer explains that although she and her bandmates have worked with people within the country music industry with very progressive views, “radio caters to a certain type of listener,” i.e., a conservative audience.⁵⁶ Country music artists and fans are much more diverse outside of the confines of country radio. Thus, the Chicks’ aversion to the country genre label is less musical and has much more to do with political identity and the country music establishment. Maines goes on to say, “We don’t really think about any industry or category honestly ... we do our thing and let the business people worry about the business ... we just do our thing.”⁵⁷

The Chicks’ relationship to country music has evolved significantly throughout their career. In their early days, before Maines joined the band, the Chicks struggled to become noticed by mainstream country music, due to their bluegrass sound. They fused country elements into their bluegrass albums and alienated some bluegrass fans along the way. But once they made it as country artists, they still maintained elements of their bluegrass style, pushing the boundaries of country music. The Chicks defended their position as country artists and appealed to the tastes of country radio to make it big. However, after their exile from country radio in 2003, the Chicks’ perception of their genre shifted drastically. They resisted the country music

⁵⁵ Tom Power, “The Chicks Explain Why They Removed ‘Dixie’ from Their Name,” *Q on CBC*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY3fXabGv-E>.

⁵⁶ Power.

⁵⁷ Power.

category and created albums in 2006 and 2020 that can be described as country-rock and country-pop, respectively. Thus, the Chicks have always bended genre categories throughout their career, though this took on a new urgency after the fallout from the “incident.” In the following section, I contrast the Chicks’ perception of their genre with how the music industry categorizes them. Musical genres are fluid categories, and oftentimes the way a band categorizes themselves may or may not align with music industry marketing categories and charts.

The Chicks’ Relationship to Country Radio, Charts, and Fans

The Chicks’ *Billboard* chart history, radio airplay, and other metrics can provide significant insight into how their musical genre is defined by the music industry. In this section, I aim to show how industry categorizations either contradict or align with the Chicks’ perception of their genre. Early on in their career as mainstream country artists, the Chicks’ singles and albums consistently topped the country charts. For example, their very first single, “I Can Love You Better,” peaked at number 7 on the country charts in 1998, and their next three singles peaked at number 1.⁵⁸ This is very much in line with how the Chicks perceived their genre at that time—they were proudly country musicians, but at the same time, they challenged the boundaries of the genre. While they were able to remain consistently within country during these early years, they also had considerable crossover success; their second and third albums, *Fly* and *Home*, “debuted at number one on both the country and pop album charts.”⁵⁹

Country radio embraced the Chicks during their early years up until the 2003 controversy. This was crucial because, as John Spong explains, “Unlike other genres, country

⁵⁸ John Spong, “Chicks in the Wilderness,” *Texas Monthly*, March 11, 2013, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/chicks-in-the-wilderness/>.

⁵⁹ Spong.

music has no path to commercial success other than through radio play.”⁶⁰ The Chicks pushed the boundaries of the genre, but not too much that it would clash with the expectations of country radio. This helped them achieve significant success, selling 28 million copies of their first three records in the five-year period before the controversy.⁶¹ After the controversy, the Chicks’ music was essentially banned from country radio. Their hit single, “Travelin’ Soldier,” which was number 7 on the country charts at the time, completely plummeted off the charts. Without the support of country radio, the Chicks’ career drastically changed. As Spong explained in 2013, “in the ten years since Natalie spoke those words, none of those [first three] records has sold even one million more copies.”⁶² After the controversy, the Chicks’ music continued to drift further away from the style of country music, and they continued to be outspoken about their political views, so their relationship to country radio—and thus the country music industry at large—was never the same.

The Chicks’ 2006 album, *Taking the Long Way*, was not played on country radio. One single from the album, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” directly responded to the backlash they experienced after the controversy, and it elicited strong responses from country listeners and radio hosts.⁶³ As Josh Tyrangiel reported in *TIME* in 2006, “[‘Not Ready to Make Nice’] is, as one country radio programmer says, ‘a four-minute f___-you to the format and our listeners. I like the Chicks, and I won’t play it.’”⁶⁴ While Tyrangiel claims that “Programmers say that even now a heartfelt apology could help set things right with listeners,” the Chicks refuse to back down and remained unapologetically defiant, as expressed in this single. As Tyrangiel continues,

⁶⁰ Spong.

⁶¹ Spong.

⁶² Spong.

⁶³ Watson and Burns, “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice.”

⁶⁴ Tyrangiel, “Chicks In the Line of Fire.”

Whether the Dixie Chicks recover their sales luster or not, the choice of single has turned their album release into a referendum. Taking the Long Way's existence is designed to thumb its nose at country's intolerance for ideological hell raising, and buying it or cursing it reveals something about you and your politics—or at least your ability to put a grudge above your listening pleasure.⁶⁵

Indeed, the Chicks had clearly established themselves in the political realm. As Maines recalled in a 2013 interview with Howard Stern, “At that point we were a political band, whether we wanted to be or not ... And you felt that energy at shows. People were there not just because they liked your music but because they felt like they were supporting you, and they were there for you.”⁶⁶ The Chicks' clear association with progressive political views had become an important component of their identity, and this has remained true up to the present day. Indeed, politics would become an important part of their next album, *Gaslighter*.

The Chicks' newfound identification as a political band marked a turning point in their fan base. Their 2003 Top of the World Tour was virtually sold out, but that was because the tickets went on sale before the incident. As one pair of (ex-)fans proclaimed outside of their show in Greenville, South Carolina, “We did buy the tickets *before* they said these things. We couldn't get our money back so that's why we're here.”⁶⁷ The Chicks' 2006 Accidents and Accusations Tour, to promote *Taking The Long Way*, was a different story. Maines recalled that when tickets went on sale, “I naively thought all those same people would come again ... It was not good.”⁶⁸ By that point, the Chicks had alienated many of their country fans, so they had immense difficulty attracting audiences. As Spong explains, “Except for a few shows in the Northeast and Canada, sales were abysmal. Though the Chicks scrambled to add 10 Canadian

⁶⁵ Tyrangiel.

⁶⁶ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” January 4, 2013.

⁶⁷ Kopple and Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*.

⁶⁸ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” January 4, 2013.

dates, they had to reschedule 12 in America and cancel 14 altogether.”⁶⁹ When asked why the tickets for this tour didn’t sell, Maines explained, “I think ultimately because our biggest fanbase was a country audience ... and they just weren’t there. And I don’t trust it [country music] anymore ... I just feel like I don’t want to put my fate in country music’s hands. I’m not going to. I’m too stubborn.”⁷⁰ The Chicks no longer felt like they had a home in country music, and this sentiment was reflected by their fans, or lack thereof. However, the Chicks were now in the process of carving out a new fan base, one that they knew would accept them for who they are, liberal politics and all. As Maguire explains, “I’d rather have a smaller following of really cool people who get it ... who will grow with us as we grow and are fans for life, than people that have us in their five-disc changer with Reba McEntire and Toby Keith. We don’t want those kinds of fans. They limit what you can do.”⁷¹ Though album sales for *Taking the Long Way* “didn’t come close to matching those of the three previous albums,”⁷² the Chicks didn’t care—they wanted to make music without regards to catering to country radio or other industry standards, and they knew that real fans would appreciate their music. And, despite their banishment from country radio, the album peaked at number one on both the pop and country charts.⁷³

In the years to follow, the Chicks continued to be at odds with the country music industry. For example, the Chicks’ collaboration with Beyoncé in their performance of “Daddy Lessons” at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards led to controversy. Scholars Francesca T. Royster and Rebekah Hutten have noted how this performance pushed the boundaries of

⁶⁹ Spong, “Chicks in the Wilderness.”

⁷⁰ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” January 4, 2013.

⁷¹ Tyrangiel, “Chicks In the Line of Fire.”

⁷² Spong, “Chicks in the Wilderness.”

⁷³ Spong.

country music and resulted in negative responses from conservative country fans.⁷⁴ Their collaboration challenged the erasure of African-American country musicians and contributed to the history of inter-racial collaboration amongst country musicians. Hutten uses the phrase “genre surveillance” to describe the backlash they faced; responses from country fans on social media denigrated their performance and revealed an intolerance for country performers who don’t align with white, conservative identities. Beyoncé’s public support of Black Lives Matter and the Chicks’ public criticism of President Bush and the Iraq War were not considered to be acceptable within “real” country music. Despite the song’s clear use of musical and thematic country idioms, their performance at the CMAs was considered a disgrace to the genre by many. As Hutten explains, “These reactions indicate how genre surveillance does not necessarily rely on musical sounds in policing who can participate in some genres, but rather on imagined connections between certain sounds and certain identities.”⁷⁵ Beyoncé’s and the Chicks’ outspoken political views, and, in the case of Beyoncé, her identity as a Black woman, prevent them from being accepted into the genre of country music, no matter how “country” they sound.

The fallout from the Chicks’ 2003 controversy continued to negatively impact their relationship with the country music industry, particularly country radio fans, in 2019. The Chicks collaborated with Taylor Swift on “Soon You’ll Get Better,” a heartfelt song about her mother’s battle with cancer from Swift’s album, *Lover*. The song, which features the Chicks on backing vocals, banjo, and fiddle, was aired on some country radio stations, despite the fact that “Swift’s label is not promoting the song to country radio.”⁷⁶ As reported by Elias Leight of *Rolling Stone*,

⁷⁴ Royster, “Who’s Your Daddy?”

⁷⁵ Hutten, “Practices of Genre Surveillance: Hearing Racial Politics in Beyoncé’s and The Chicks’ ‘Daddy Lessons,’” 20.

⁷⁶ Elias Leight, “The Dixie Chicks Return to Country Radio, Prompting Angry Calls,” *Rolling Stone*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/taylor-swift-the-dixie-chicks-country-radio-881632/>.

“country radio played ‘Soon You’ll Get Better’ 36 times in *Lover*’s debut week, and seven more times the week after.”⁷⁷ Country radio stations in cities such as Houston, Texas and Portland, Oregon promoted the song, yet they faced angry reactions from some country fans. According to Johnny Chiang of KKBQ in Houston, “After just four plays of the song, we had several complaints from listeners ... They weren’t complaining about the song—they were complaining about the Dixie Chicks.”⁷⁸ The Chicks’ supporting role in the song is so subtle that most listeners likely would not even notice they were on the recording if radio broadcasters had not shared this information. In Portland, country radio station KWJJ received many positive responses to the song on their Facebook page, though one person commented, “I guess it would be better if Taylor wasn’t ramming her politics down my throat.”⁷⁹ (Swift publicly endorsed Democratic candidates in the 2018 election and has been outspoken about her liberal political views ever since.⁸⁰) The reaction to “Soon You’ll Get Better” further demonstrates the fact that country fans’ hatred of the Chicks is much more about their association with liberals politics and the legacy of Maines’ 2003 comment, rather than the actual sound of the music.

When the Chicks released their new album’s first single, “Gaslighter,” in March 2020, country radio decided to give them another chance, despite the negative reactions to “Soon You’ll Get Better” the year before. As reported by Leight in *Rolling Stone* on March 6, 2020, the song “has earned nearly 750 spins in less than 48 hours, reaching around three million people ... Nearly all of those plays came from the country format.”⁸¹ Radio conglomerate iHeartMedia

⁷⁷ Leight.

⁷⁸ Leight.

⁷⁹ Leight.

⁸⁰ CBS News, “Taylor Swift’s Political Instagram Post Appears to Spur Voter Registration,” October 9, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/taylor-swift-political-instagram-post-appears-to-spur-voter-registration-today-2018-10-09/>.

⁸¹ Elias Leight, “Country Radio Might Finally Be Ready to Forgive the Dixie Chicks,” *Rolling Stone*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/dixie-chicks-gaslighter-song-country-radio-962602/>.

spearheaded the promotion of the song, with its stations encompassing the vast majority of the song's airplay on March 6th. Country radio took a significant risk airing the Chicks, having been unwelcome on the format since 2003. But many broadcasters insist that it's time to leave Maines' comment in the past. Leight interviewed several country radio hosts about their decision to include "Gaslighter" on their playlists. For instance, Casey Carter of WNOE in New Orleans asserts, "I think it's time to let go. I would like to think that after 17 years, people go back to hearing the music and not what [Natalie Maines] had to say that one time." Some radio hosts were a bit nervous to test the waters, including Jim Dorman of KZSN in Wichita, Kansas, yet responses to the Chicks on country radio have been generally positive. Dorman reveals that "We've had calls on it ['Gaslighter']; they're loving it," and he insists that "we're going to continue to play the song." Likewise, according to Dan Zuko of WCOL in Columbus, Ohio, "I haven't seen a single negative piece of feedback ... They have a passionate fanbase. It would be crazy to ignore that." The Chicks have a loyal fanbase, and country radio stations are beginning to realize that they have many listeners who are receptive to the Chicks' music. That being said, not all country stations fully embraced the Chicks' new single. For example, Nate Deaton of KRTY in San Jose, CA explains that the station continues to play some of the Chicks' earlier hits, but that "['Gaslighter'] just didn't fit the sound we were looking for."⁸² The Chicks' new pop-oriented sound is perhaps too far from mainstream country in the opinion of some listeners. Nevertheless, the revival of the Chicks' music on country radio marks an effort for country radio to reconcile their previous hostile position towards the Chicks that was held for the past 17 years, and it demonstrates that the volatile relationship that country fans have towards the Chicks has begun to dissipate.

⁸² Newman, "How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks."

Though “Gaslighter” only made it to #36 on the Billboard Country Airplay chart, the single, along with the rest of the album, has achieved considerable success in the country realm while also crossing over to the mainstream. *Gaslighter* peaked at #1 on three major *Billboard* album charts simultaneously: Top Album Sales (mainstream), Top Country Albums, and Americana/Folk Albums. The album also reached #4, #2, and #3 on Tastemaker Albums, Vinyl Albums, and Billboard 200 charts, respectively. Furthermore, singles from the album achieved significant success in digital song sales. On the Billboard Country Digital Song Sales chart, “Gaslighter,” “March March,” “Sleep at Night,” and “Julliana Calm Down” peaked at #1, #2, #8, and #15, respectively. On this chart’s mainstream counterpart, “Gaslighter,” “March March,” and “Sleep at Night” made it to #4, #5, and #24, respectively.⁸³ Despite the fact that the Chicks no longer consider themselves country artists, their success on the country charts with *Gaslighter* clearly aligns them in country and contradicts their own generic identity. At the same time, *Gaslighter* has successfully crossed over into the mainstream, just as the Chicks’ previous albums have done. This achievement supports the Chicks’ insistence that they cannot be categorized as one particular genre and demonstrates that they are participating in multiple genres simultaneously. As Erika Alfredson of Columbia Records states, “The beauty of The Chicks is that they don’t belong in just one place or one space.”⁸⁴

The Shifting Landscape from Radio to Streaming

The Chicks have created *Gaslighter* in a very different world from their previous albums, due to the significant time gap. Since their 2006 album, the music industry has been transformed

⁸³ Academic Rights Press, “MusicID: The Premier Aggregator of Global Music Industry Data,” accessed April 15, 2022, <https://musicidhub.com/>.

⁸⁴ Newman, “How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks.”

by streaming, and society at large has been transformed by social media. While the Chicks may have feared that their time to shine has passed, they are happy to find that they still have a significant fan base and that the emergence of *Gaslighter* has been extremely well received. Furthermore, the Chicks' outspokenness has helped inspire the next generation of women country artists, such as Taylor Swift. *Gaslighter* is the culmination of the Chicks' influential career thus far. In the final two sections of this chapter, I examine how the Chicks navigate the current terrain of the music industry and I situate their new music within the context of the digital era.

The Chicks' ban from country radio in 2003 occurred as women country musicians' airtime on country radio began to decline. A 2019 study conducted by Jada Watson "revealed a 66 percent decline in the number of songs by women on the Yearend Airplay reports between 2000 and 2018, as well as significant disparity in the total spins (plays) accorded to songs by men and women—increasing from a 2 to 1 ratio in 2000 to 9.7 to 1 in 2018."⁸⁵ Watson further notes that when women country artists are played on radio, they are often played in the middle of the night when few people are tuning in, so any perceived inclusion of women musicians is still done in a discriminatory manner. Thus, the exclusion of women from country radio over the past two decades is a systemic issue. This issue was perfectly illuminated in 2015 by radio consultant Keith Hill, who was quoted in an article in *Country Aircheck*, creating a controversy known as "#TomatoGate" or "#SaladGate":

If you want to make ratings in Country radio, take females out ... The reason is mainstream Country radio generates more quarter hours from female listeners at the rate of 70 to 75%, and women like male artists ... Trust me, I play great female records and we've got some right now; they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Watson, "Country Music Radio Has Ignored Female Artists for Years. And We Have the Data to Prove It."

⁸⁶ Russ Penuell, "On Music And Scheduling," *Country Air Check*, May 26, 2015, 8.

The country music industry has also systemically excluded BIPOC artists from country radio. According to a 2021 report by Watson, “Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry (2000-2020),” BIPOC musicians represented only 1.5% of artists played on country radio, BIPOC women represent only 0.4%, and Black LGBTQ+ artists represent only 0.05%.⁸⁷ As demonstrated through the discussion of Beyoncé’s “Daddy Lessons” above, country musicians of colour struggled to be recognized in the industry. Lil Nas X’s 2019 single, “Old Town Road,” was removed from the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart because it supposedly failed to “embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version.”⁸⁸ Mickey Guyton’s 2015 single, “Better Than You Left Me,” was dropped from country radio because, as she posted on Twitter in 2019, “I was told that country radio didn’t want to play 2 ballads by 2 females at the same time. So they played one girl and quit playing mine. It was heartbreaking.”⁸⁹ Country musicians who don’t fit the standard white, male expectations of the genre have not been given adequate opportunities to succeed in the country music industry.

With the advent of streaming and other ways of accessing music digitally, country music has the potential to become more inclusive, providing another path for artists to break into the industry outside of traditional routes. Yet, radio still plays a significant role in boosting country artists’ careers. As Watson explains, “Airplay and chart activity is crucial exposure for artists — especially new artists, as it is linked to other opportunities, including label and publishing deals, touring and festival opportunities, award nominations, fan clubs, merchandising and more.”⁹⁰ For new artists, Emily Yahr notes the importance of cultivating relationships with country radio

⁸⁷ Watson, “Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry (2000-2020).”

⁸⁸ Elias Leight, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind,” *Rolling Stone*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>.

⁸⁹ Watson, “Country Music Radio Has Ignored Female Artists for Years. And We Have the Data to Prove It.”

⁹⁰ Watson.

stations through radio tours, a “Nashville rite of passage” that involves visiting approximately 172 stations in-person to promote their music. As she states, “Even in 2017—an era of YouTube, Spotify and curated playlists—radio is the gatekeeper.”⁹¹ When the Chicks were first starting out, promoting their first single, “I Can Love You Better,” in 1997, they too went on a radio tour, where “they visited 120-some-odd country stations, yucking it up with DJs.”⁹²

The Chicks followed the traditional path to success in Nashville by catering to country radio. Nowadays, they don’t need radio to succeed because they have already built up a following of loyal fans. While the reliance on non-radio paths, such as streaming, is not always feasible for new country artists, *Gaslighter* is well-positioned for success in the digital world since the Chicks have already established themselves. The Chicks recognize how country radio has become so male-dominated since they were banished from the format and how difficult is it for underrepresented groups to succeed in country music. Maines is hopeful that, as the importance of traditional radio begins to decline, new artists will have more opportunities to reach audiences. As she says,

I actually think that [the increased variety in ways to consume music besides radio] levels the playing field a lot more because you’re not dependent on, you know, some guy smoking a cigar behind a desk deciding if you’re going to get played on the radio. And back in the day that was how you made it big, was to be played on the radio. And now there’s so many options and ... I feel like it’s just diversified music so much. You can get your hands on whatever it is you’re looking for and I think that’s awesome.⁹³

Yet, the country music industry has been slow to adapt to streaming. As of 2017, country music “represents about 10 percent of the overall music industry,” but “it makes up only 6 percent of

⁹¹ Emily Yahr, “‘Radio Tour Is Not for the Weak’: Inside the First Step to Country Music Stardom,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/radio-tour-is-not-for-the-weak-inside-the-first-step-to-country-music-stardom/2017/06/14/41feba42-4c60-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html.

⁹² Spong, “Chicks in the Wilderness.”

⁹³ Raisa Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks,” *TIME*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvOZ-VRFgoo>.

the audio streaming share and 4 percent of video streaming,”⁹⁴ according to Eleanor Kennedy of the *Nashville Business Journal*. Some industry professionals, such as Chet Flippo, the country music journalist who told the Chicks to “shut up and sing” back in 2003, fear that streaming poses a significant threat to the survival of country music as a genre.⁹⁵ He claims that, as physical albums become obsolete, genres will disappear and “what has been defined as country will be a free for all.”⁹⁶ That being said, other industry professionals, such as Randy Goodman, CEO of Sony Music Nashville, recognize the need to embrace streaming and other new technologies. As he stated in 2017, “We [country music] either adopt [to streaming] or we die.”⁹⁷ Recent data from the Country Music Association (CMA) has demonstrated this shift towards streaming, with a 2021 internal CMA study revealing that “consumption of the genre grew 11 percent year-over-year from the first half of 2019 to the first half of 2020—entirely because of a 21 percent increase in streaming.”⁹⁸

While country radio remains a dominant force in the industry, and a requirement for most new country artists to pay their dues, artists such as Kacey Musgraves have circumvented this path. Musgraves’ 2018 album, *Golden Hour*, “debuted at No. 1 on the country charts” and won Album of the Year at the CMA Awards without the support of country radio.⁹⁹ Like the Chicks, she is not concerned with seeking the approval of radio, explaining that “I would much rather

⁹⁴ Eleanor Kennedy, “How One of Nashville’s Music Giants Is Embracing the Growth of Streaming,” *Nashville Business Journal*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.bizjournals.com/nashville/news/2017/09/07/how-one-of-nashvilles-music-giants-is-embracing.html>.

⁹⁵ Watson and Burns, “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice,” 332.

⁹⁶ Chet Flippo, “Why the Term ‘Country Music’ May Disappear: Marketers of the Future May Dissolve Music Genre Labels,” in *The Country Music Reader*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 355–56, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1870682>.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, “How One of Nashville’s Music Giants Is Embracing the Growth of Streaming.”

⁹⁸ Natalie Weiner, “Country Music Is Changing, in Spite of Itself,” *Pitchfork*, March 9, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/country-music-is-changing-in-spite-of-itself/>.

⁹⁹ Sarah Shoen, “Kacey Musgraves Proves Mainstream Nashville Wrong with Major C.M.A.s Win,” *Vanity Fair*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/11/kacey-musgraves-cma-win>.

have fewer [fans] that know exactly what I'm about than have this mediocre mass appeal that's watered down."¹⁰⁰ Musgraves credits the Chicks as a source of inspiration for her. She says, "I heard The Dixie Chicks around the house all the time as a kid. Their songs were *so* catchy and I loved the unique way they blended pop and traditional sounds of country music."¹⁰¹ Indeed, Musgrave's album blends "elements of country music that are really intrinsic to my music, like pedal steel, banjo," as well as "electronic elements."¹⁰² She's also outspoken about her liberal politics and is not afraid to sing about topics such as gay rights and smoking marijuana.¹⁰³ The Chicks' legacy of challenging country music both musically and politically has lived on in the present day with younger artists such as Musgraves. With the release of *Gaslighter*, the Chicks continue to participate in and challenge the norms of the genre, and they have achieved success without relying on country radio for support. In the final section of this chapter, I explore how the Chicks have inspired artists such as Taylor Swift, and how social media has impacted artists' abilities to be outspoken about their beliefs.

Influencing the Next Generation, and the Impact of Social Media

The Chicks' legacy has helped inspire the next generation of women country artists, through both their musicianship and their political outspokenness. Even in their early days, the Chicks felt that they were making an impact. As Strayer said in 1998, "Our music and what we

¹⁰⁰ Hilary Hughes, "Billboard Women in Music Innovator Kacey Musgraves on Country's Next Frontier," *Billboard*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/awards/kacey-musgraves-billboard-women-in-music-rule-innovator-interview-8487630/>.

¹⁰¹ Taylor Weatherby, "Carly Pearce, Danielle Bradbery, Kacey Musgraves & More of Today's Country Ladies Share How '90s Female Superstars Inspired Them," *Billboard*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/country/female-country-artists-interviews-shania-twain-influence-8458849/>.

¹⁰² Shoen, "Kacey Musgraves Proves Mainstream Nashville Wrong with Major C.M.A.s Win."

¹⁰³ Kate Mossman, "Kacey Musgraves: From Liberal Misfit to Country's Biggest Star," *The Observer*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/apr/20/kacey-musgraves-liberal-misfit-country-star-nashville-horse-microdosing-ld>.

do, touring and running our own company, hopefully inspires young girls to go out and do whatever *they* want to do.”¹⁰⁴ After the 2003 controversy, however, the Chicks have served as a cautionary tale for other artists; the term, getting “Dixie Chicked,” even became a verb to describe what happened to them.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, as scholars Lesley Pruitt and Claire Katz have argued, the backlash directed at the Chicks was highly gendered and rooted in misogyny, demonstrating that women in particular face additional risks when speaking out about a controversial topic.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the Chicks have served as a source of inspiration for other artists. In 2020, looking back on their career, Maguire says, “Some artists credit us with kind of being the guinea pigs and having to take the heat, just so maybe a little more of that can happen. And I’m proud of that, and I’m glad people like Taylor Swift is [sic] coming into her own and realizing she doesn’t have to mask who she is, especially to her country music fans.”¹⁰⁷

The Chicks’ outspokenness has helped make it possible for other country musicians to speak their minds and break boundaries in country music. Kacey Musgraves, as discussed above, credits the Chicks as a source of inspiration. Miranda Lambert also recognizes the Chicks’ impact, proclaiming, “I want to be the Dixie Chicks for this next generation... To put it simply, I want to write and make music that moves people, to give them freedom to be who they are. I want to kick those doors open.”¹⁰⁸ Taylor Swift, in particular, credits the Chicks as one of her inspirations. As she says,

Early in my life, these three women showed me that female artists can play their own instruments while also putting on a flamboyant spectacle of a live show ... They taught

¹⁰⁴ Tracy, *Welcome to the Dixie Chicks Photo Biography*, 74.

¹⁰⁵ Kopple and Peck, *Shut Up & Sing*.

¹⁰⁶ Lesley Pruitt, “Real Men Kill and a Lady Never Talks Back: Gender Goes to War in Country Music,” *International Journal on World Peace* 24, no. 4 (2007): 85–106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20752803>; Claire Katz, “‘The Eternal Irony of the Community’: Prophecy, Patriotism, and the Dixie Chicks,” *Shofar* 26, no. 4 (2008): 139–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42944908>.

¹⁰⁷ Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks.”

¹⁰⁸ Holly Gleason, “The Weight Is Lifted: Part Two. Miranda Lambert Lets Loose,” July 6, 2018, <https://hitsdailydouble.com/news&id=312470>.

me that creativity, eccentricity, unapologetic boldness and kitsch can all go together authentically. Most importantly, they showed an entire generation of girls that female rage can be a bonding experience between us all the very second we first heard Natalie Maines bellow ‘that Earl had to DIE.’¹⁰⁹

Though Taylor Swift is no longer a country artist, having officially left the genre in 2014 to pursue pop, her roots are in country music and it was via this genre that she initially achieved commercial success.¹¹⁰ The Chicks’ music has been a major influence on her; she recalled that the first song she ever learned to play on guitar was the Chicks’ “Cowboy Take Me Away,” when she performed a cover of the song at a concert in 2011.¹¹¹

The Chicks’ political outspokenness has served as a model for Swift to follow in her own career. In her 2020 Netflix documentary, *Miss Americana*, Swift notes that “Part of the fabric of being a country artist is, ‘don’t force your politics on people. Let people live their lives.’ That is grilled into us.” Country musicians are not supposed to speak their minds, particularly about liberal political views; they are just supposed to “shut up and sing.” As Swift continues, “Throughout my whole career, label executives and publishers would just say, ‘Don’t be like the Dixie Chicks.’ And ... I loved the Dixie Chicks.”¹¹² Despite warnings that speaking out about politics could be dangerous for her personal safety and could negatively impact her career, just as the Chicks experienced in 2003, Swift finally decided to break her silence on politics in 2018. Swift knew the risks but felt that it was most important to be truthful about her beliefs,

¹⁰⁹ Newman, “How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks.”

¹¹⁰ Emily Yahr, “Taylor Swift Announces First Pop Album ‘1989,’ Releases New Single and Music Video,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/08/18/taylor-swift-announces-first-pop-album-1989-releases-new-single-and-music-video/>; Emily Yahr, “How Taylor Swift Really, Truly Said Goodbye to Country Music at the ACM Awards,” *Washington Post*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/04/20/how-taylor-swift-really-truly-said-goodbye-to-country-music-at-the-acm-awards/>.

¹¹¹ Emily Yahr, “Why Taylor Swift’s Collaboration with the Dixie Chicks Is so Significant,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/08/26/why-taylor-swifts-collaboration-with-dixie-chicks-is-so-significant/>.

¹¹² Lana Wilson, *Miss Americana* (Netflix, 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/title/81028336>.

expressing regret that she had not spoken out against Trump in 2016. In an Instagram post on October 7, 2018, ahead of the upcoming election on November 6, Swift publicly endorsed Democratic candidates Phil Bredesen and Jim Cooper for Senate and House of Representatives, respectively, for the state of Tennessee.¹¹³ She condemned Republican Senate candidate Marsha Blackburn, and she spoke out against sexism, racism, and homophobia. She also urged people to register to vote, noting the October 9 deadline in Tennessee. According to vote.org, 65,000 people registered to vote in the 24 hours following Swift's post, demonstrating the impact of her voice.¹¹⁴

The landscape has changed significantly since 2003, with artists like Taylor Swift taking a stand publicly about politics. As Maines says, "I'm really glad we're now allowed to not 'shut up and sing.' We're allowed to have an opinion now."¹¹⁵ The growth of social media, in particular, has played a significant role in providing a space where artists like Swift can feel more empowered to speak up for their beliefs. Maguire says, "It seems like today everybody has a platform. So it's not just artists, everybody can say whatever they want for better or for worse." Though Maguire recognizes that social media comes with many negative aspects, social media has provided an outlet for artists to voice their opinions and reach a wide audience. And, since everyone uses social media, not just celebrities, it's less extreme when artists speak out.

Looking back on Maines' 2003 comment, the severe backlash seems unfathomable in today's context. Casey Carter, a country radio host in New Orleans who promoted "Gaslighter" upon its release, said of Maines' comment, "With celebrities being so outspoken these days on

¹¹³ Taylor Swift, "I'm Writing This Post about the Upcoming Midterm Elections on November 6th, in Which I'll Be Voting in the State of Tennessee.," *Instagram*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BopoXpYnCes/>.

¹¹⁴ Maeve McDermott, "Taylor Swift Inspired 65,000 People to Register to Vote, Says Vote.Org," *USA Today*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2018/10/09/taylor-swift-inspired-65-000-people-register-vote-says-vote-org-tennessee-phil-bredesen-trump/1574916002/>.

¹¹⁵ Bruner, "The Chicks | TIME100 Talks."

Twitter, especially about politics, if she [Natalie Maines] would have said what she said in 2020 as opposed to 2003, would it even mattered? It probably wouldn't have been a headline. It would have been scrolling on to the next thing.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, with everyone sharing their opinion on social media nowadays, it's created an environment where artists can take risks and it's not seen as unusual to share their ideas. Furthermore, Jim Dorman of KZSN in Wichita, Kansas notes the shift in consensus about the Iraq war: “Our country has changed so much in the last 17 years. What [the Dixie Chicks] were against back then, over the years most people have agreed with. At the time the incident happened, a lot of people were not in agreement.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, according to J. Baxter Oliphant of the Pew Research Center, support for the Iraq war among Americans has significantly decreased over the years. In late March 2003, 71% supported and 22% opposed the war, whereas in 2018, 43% agreed with the decision to go to war while 48% believe the war was the wrong decision.¹¹⁸ While views on the war have remained consistently divided based on party lines, with most Republicans in support and most Democrats in opposition, the overall trend has shifted towards greater opposition to the war, and it is perhaps less controversial now to publicly voice opposition to the war, based on these 2018 statistics.

Though it has now been over 20 years since the heyday of the Chicks' career in their pre-controversy days, the Chicks continue to be relevant and make an impact in the music industry. However, Maguire had previously thought that perhaps the Chicks' time had already passed. She recalls attending a Taylor Swift concert in New Jersey with her young children in 2011:

She [Taylor Swift] starts in [talking about The Chicks song] ‘Cowboy, Take Me Away’ and how this song made her want to play country music. I was 40 and feeling over the hill, like, ‘Are we ever going to have a career again?’ Everybody starts singing not only

¹¹⁶ Leight, “Country Radio Might Finally Be Ready to Forgive the Dixie Chicks.”

¹¹⁷ Leight.

¹¹⁸ J. Baxter Oliphant, “The Iraq War Continues to Divide the U.S. Public, 15 Years after It Began,” *Pew Research Center*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/19/iraq-war-continues-to-divide-u-s-public-15-years-after-it-began/>.

the chorus but the verses, and I just started [sobbing]. It was the most amazing moment probably in my entire life. It felt like passing the torch in a way. But the fact that she's continued to give us kudos? It's really important to keep you going and feeling important.¹¹⁹

If Maguire had any doubt that the Chicks were no longer relevant, this concert experience reassured her of their continued impact. Taylor Swift and her fans demonstrated their love for the Chicks and their music; Swift has continued to pay homage to the Chicks in the following years when she invited Maines to perform “Goodbye Earl” with her at a concert in 2015, and through the Chicks’ 2019 collaboration with Swift on “Soon You’ll Get Better.”¹²⁰ Overall, the Chicks have released *Gaslighter* within an environment where they continue to have an impact on other artists, and where the album is well-suited for success due to the evolving music industry. As Melinda Newman of *Billboard* describes it, “As much as the music business has changed with social media and streaming, the industry has in many ways caught up to the band.”¹²¹

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the Chicks’ dynamic relationship to musical genre, with a particular focus on how they have influenced and participated in country music throughout their career. In their early days as a bluegrass band, the Chicks challenged the boundaries of this genre by incorporating musical elements from mainstream country. Conversely, once they transitioned to mainstream country, they pushed generic boundaries by incorporating bluegrass instrumentation. They also challenged the boundaries of country music by achieving success in the mainstream pop charts. During their heyday, the Chicks were proud to be country musicians,

¹¹⁹ Newman, “How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks.”

¹²⁰ Andrew Leahey, “See Taylor Swift Duet With Natalie Maines in L.A.,” *Rolling Stone*, August 25, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/see-natalie-maines-brazen-duet-with-taylor-swift-on-goodbye-earl-53161/>; Yahr, “Why Taylor Swift’s Collaboration with the Dixie Chicks Is so Significant.”

¹²¹ Newman, “How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks.”

vehemently defending their place in the genre. However, in the years following Maines' anti-Bush and anti-Iraq war comment in 2003, the Chicks distanced themselves from the genre of country music. Due to the intense backlash for expressing their liberal political views, the Chicks no longer felt like they had a home in the genre. Their next two albums, *Taking the Long Way* (2006) and *Gaslighter* (2020) stray further away from their country roots by fusing elements of rock and pop into their sound. The Chicks resist categorizing their music into any one particular genre; they see themselves as having an experimental style, participating in multiple genres simultaneously.

Though nowadays the Chicks don't personally identify with any one particular genre, music industry charts, radio stations, and fans still categorize their music. Before the incident, the Chicks' self-identification as a country band aligned with external categorizations: the Chicks were embraced by country radio, topped the country charts, and amassed a large base of country music fans. After the incident, country radio and fans exiled them from the genre, which corresponded to the Chicks' disillusionment with the genre. Even years later, when the Chicks collaborated with Beyoncé and then with Taylor Swift, their inclusion in the genre of country music was met with angry responses from country fans. Thus, the Chicks' resistance to country music is certainly justified, due to the hostile sentiments directed at them from country fans. That being said, the Chicks still managed to top the country charts for both *Taking the Long Way* and *Gaslighter*. This demonstrates that the music industry still considers them to be country musicians, despite the radio ban, resentment from country fans, and the Chicks' own negative feelings about the genre. Furthermore, some country radio stations promoted the release of their single, "Gaslighter," with moderate success, demonstrating the desire of some people in the country industry to welcome the Chicks back into the genre. Ultimately, however, the Chicks'

insistence that they cannot be defined as any one particular genre is reflected in the charts, with *Gaslighter* topping all three of the mainstream pop, Country, and Americana/Folk charts simultaneously.

The Chicks have released *Gaslighter* within an environment quite different from that of their previous albums, due to the prevalence of streaming and social media. The country music industry has been relatively slow to adapt to streaming; the traditional radio format is still the primary force for prompting new artists' careers, and, unfortunately, country radio has systemically excluded women and BIPOC musicians from the format for years. Yet, the Chicks are hopeful that, as streaming continues to become more dominant, country artists from underrepresented groups will have more opportunities to succeed in the genre. Kacey Musgraves' success in country music without radio support is a key example of this progress. Furthermore, social media has expanded the opportunities for artists to speak out about their beliefs. For example, Taylor Swift, who was warned not to be like the Chicks, recently became vocal on social media about her liberal political beliefs. With everyone sharing their views on social media these days, the Chicks are hopeful that more artists can feel encouraged to speak out for what they believe in. The Chicks are proud to have served as an example for younger women country artists, inspiring musicians such as Musgraves and Swift, among others. And they are not done yet—the release of *Gaslighter* in 2020, as I will discuss in the following chapters, continues to shape the genre of country music and inspire the next generation.

Chapter 2: Gaslighter

The Chicks released their first single in 14 years, “Gaslighter,” on March 4, 2020. The track opens with their distinctive three-part-harmony vocals; as Martie Maguire says, “That first 30 seconds of ‘Gaslighter’ is like, ‘They’re back!’ It just felt so quintessentially *us*.”¹²² Despite the long hiatus, the Chicks returned with their signature sound while simultaneously exploring new musical directions with their producer, Jack Antonoff. The Chicks released three more singles, “Julianna Calm Down,” “March March,” and “Sleep at Night,” on April 30, June 25, and July 17, respectively, and released their full album, *Gaslighter*, on July 17, 2020. Amidst a global pandemic and widespread reckoning with racial injustice, the release of the Chicks’ new album is “more timely than ever, touching on protest, uplifting women, and sisterhood,” as Raisa Bruner of *TIME* puts it.¹²³ The album is intensely personal and autobiographical, drawing on the band member’s personal experiences with divorce and their identities as mothers, among other intimate topics. At the same time, the album embodies both implicit and explicit political meanings, thereby encapsulating the famous slogan of second-wave feminism, “the personal is political.”

This type of musical output is not new for the Chicks. Indeed, their previous albums have traversed the personal and political and have challenged the conventional themes of country music along the way. Scholars such as Christian Griffiths, Kimberly P. Bowers, Delia Poey, Jada Watson, and Lori Burns have explored the Chicks’ previous musical output in this light, exploring the thematic content of their songs. This chapter posits *Gaslighter* as a continuation of the Chicks’ previous work, drawing on these scholars’ analytical frameworks as models for my own analysis. Through an examination of specific songs from the album, I demonstrate how

¹²² Newman.

¹²³ Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks.”

Gaslighter simultaneously participates in and subverts traditional themes of country music such as motherhood, family, and home. Specifically, I discuss how *Gaslighter* engages with the issue of domestic abuse, emphasizes the importance of community and uplifting others, and allows for extremely personal topics to speak to broader struggles and political associations.

Thematic Content in the Chicks' Previous Albums

As discussed in Chapter 1, the country music industry has been historically aligned with conservative political views and has systemically privileged the works of white male musicians. Furthermore, country music has historically functioned as an expression of working-class consciousness.¹²⁴ As such, the genre's lyrical themes tend to center on the experiences of everyday life such as personal hardships, family, marriage, and home, among other topics. As noted by Delia Poey, the traditional and conservative values expressed in country music have "promoted strictly prescribed and proscribed gender roles," placing women in the home and defining them by their roles as wives and mothers.¹²⁵ Moreover, due to the male-dominated industry, these themes of family and home have been primarily told from a male perspective, leaving limited spaces for women's voices to be heard. That being said, women musicians have participated in country music throughout the history of the genre. From Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton to Martina McBride and Shania Twain, among many others, women country musicians have created music that gives voice to female perspectives, challenging the genre's patriarchal conventions. As Poey explains, "While having to conform to at least some of the gender-based conventions of the genre, women performers have managed to also, in limited ways, contest

¹²⁴ Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*.

¹²⁵ Poey, "Striking Back without Missing a Beat," 3.

those structures.”¹²⁶ The Chicks participate in a broader feminist practice of challenging gendered themes in country music throughout their repertoire; this section draws on previous scholarship to explore how this is achieved in a selection of songs from the Chicks’ first four albums, in order to better contextualize my discussion of *Gaslighter* later on in the chapter.

One way that the Chicks have challenged gendered constructions of domesticity in their music is through their representation of “the pull between ‘home’ and ‘rambling,’” which Poey notes is “a dominant theme in country music.”¹²⁷ The opposition between these two facets is highly gendered. “Rambling,” or wandering and exploring life beyond the home, is typically reserved for men, while women are expected to remain at home in the domestic sphere. “Rambling” is considered unacceptable for women and “represents abandonment of social responsibilities and conventions.”¹²⁸ The Chicks have confronted this gendered expectation in a number of their songs, taking the theme of rambling and redefining it on their own terms as women. For instance, their early single, “Wide Open Spaces,” tells the story of a young woman venturing out on her own and leaving her childhood home for the first time.¹²⁹ Maines recalls that “the label did not understand putting that song on the record,” but she and her bandmates fought to include it on the album because “we felt like that was our biggest song that would connect the most with ... a female audience.”¹³⁰ They also felt that they personally identified with the theme of the song, since they were young women embarking on the early stages of their professional career. Similarly, “The Long Way Around,” from their 2006 album, encompasses the theme of rambling from a female perspective. As Maines sings in the opening verse, “My

¹²⁶ Poey, 4.

¹²⁷ Poey, 4.

¹²⁸ Poey, 4.

¹²⁹ Chicks, *Wide Open Spaces*.

¹³⁰ Kelleigh Bannen, “The Chicks: Stories Behind Their Country Classics,” *Apple Music*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAX5RbtNKBI>.

friends from high school / Married their high school boyfriends / Moved into houses / In the same ZIP codes where their parents live / But I / I could never follow / No I / I could never follow.”¹³¹ The song demonstrates the Chicks’ aversion to gendered expectations about how to live their lives, emphasizing their non-conformity and rebelliousness. By incorporating the theme of rambling into their music, the Chicks participate in a conventional theme of country music. Yet, they simultaneously defy that convention by representing that theme from a female perspective.

Another way that the Chicks challenge conventional themes of country music is through their portrayal of romantic relationships and heartbreak. Kimberly P. Bowers discusses several songs from the Chicks’ early catalogue that “challenge stereotypical female subjectivity within country music” by putting women in a position of agency amidst romantic break-ups.¹³² For instance, in “Tonight the Heartache’s On Me,” from *Wide Open Spaces*, the protagonist sings about her recent break-up from a cheating ex-lover in a joking manner. Since the protagonist “recognizes her own foolishness for staying with a man she did not trust,” as Bowers explains, “the song avoids the stereotypical victim stance of woman scorned.”¹³³ Likewise, “Let ‘Er Rip,” also from *Wide Open Spaces*, “completely reworks the image of the female victim, dumped by her heartless lover.”¹³⁴ In the song, the protagonist recognizes that her relationship is no longer a good fit and encourages her lover to end things, declaring that she’ll be just fine. Furthermore, “Don’t Waste Your Heart,” from *Fly*, challenges gender roles in a similar manner. The song has a sarcastic tone in which Maines sings about rejecting a potential lover, expressing her disinterest in him. Bowers explains how this song “moved the female subject from the victim position ... to

¹³¹ The Chicks, *Taking the Long Way*, CD (New York: Open Wide/Columbia, 2006).

¹³² Bowers, “Taking the Long Way Home: Poetry, Politics, and the Dixie Chicks,” 129.

¹³³ Bowers, 130.

¹³⁴ Bowers, 130.

the rejecter position, ‘turning the tables’ on stereotypes within country music.”¹³⁵ Throughout this repertoire, the Chicks depict images of women who assert agency over the status of their romantic relationships, confronting traditional gender roles that place women in a submissive position.

An important subset of the theme of agency in romantic relationships is the issue of domestic abuse, which the Chicks have addressed in songs such as “Goodbye Earl” and “Top of the World,” from their albums *Fly* and *Home*, respectively. According to Lori Burns and Jada Watson, “The Dixie Chicks cracked open and examined these [conservative] traditions to reveal the potential for abuse that can hide under the cover of traditional institutions or family values.”¹³⁶ Though domestic abuse is a topic that is not new to country music, male perspectives have tended to dominate in the genre. Nevertheless, the Chicks, among other female country artists, have made strides in shifting the narrative to tell stories about domestic abuse from a female perspective and give agency to survivors. For instance, “Goodbye Earl” is a satirical, tongue-in-cheek song that tells the story of two women, Mary Anne and Wanda, who murder Wanda’s abusive husband, Earl. The song demonstrates that women like Wanda “cannot rely on institutions such as the courts or the police for protection,”¹³⁷ so she takes matters into her own hands, asserting agency over the situation. Though murder may seem like quite a radical solution, Bowers notes that “rebellious thinking is often necessary in order for people, particularly those who have been abused, to rebuild themselves.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, both Poey and Bowers note the importance of community and female friendships in order to heal from abuse. The two women “worked out a plan” together to kill Earl, and afterwards they “bought some

¹³⁵ Bowers, 131.

¹³⁶ Burns and Watson, “Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound,” 4.

¹³⁷ Poey, “Striking Back without Missing a Beat,” 6.

¹³⁸ Bowers, “Taking the Long Way Home: Poetry, Politics, and the Dixie Chicks,” 131.

land / and a roadside stand / Out on Highway 109” to live their lives together, “outside of the control of the patriarchal family structure.”¹³⁹ Thus, this song challenges traditional gender roles by rebelling against an abuser and defying expectations about domesticity.

“Top of the World” also addresses the issue of domestic abuse, though in a much more serious manner. The song and accompanying music video demonstrate the “cyclic generational effects of domestic abuse,” portraying a man who expresses “regret for his actions as a negligent father and husband.”¹⁴⁰ The video depicts four generations of the man’s family—his mother, wife, daughter, and granddaughter—demonstrating how abuse and neglect can be repeated generation after generation. Ultimately, the man’s daughter “is the one who must move forward from the cycle of abuse and guard her own daughter from perpetuating it.”¹⁴¹ In this instance, the Chicks emphasize the importance in breaking the cycle of domestic abuse and creating a better environment for the next generation.

A final way that the Chicks subvert traditional conventions in country music is through the implicit political meanings that emerge in their repertoire. Christian Griffiths argues that the Chicks critique country music through “bricolage strategies,” whereby seemingly apolitical songs about home, family, marriage, and other similar topics achieve political meaning through “the cultural re-contextualisation of their discourses.”¹⁴² For instance, ten days after the 9/11 attacks, numerous artists, including the Chicks, convened for a benefit concert, *America: A Tribute to Heroes*. For this event, as Griffiths explains, “each performer had to enact a *bricolage* process by choosing a song from their own back catalogue ... that would seem to speak directly to the event.” The Chicks chose to perform “I Believe in Love,” an original song that was to be

¹³⁹ The Chicks, *Fly*, CD (New York: Monument, 1999); Poey, “Striking Back without Missing a Beat,” 8.

¹⁴⁰ Burns and Watson, “Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound,” 3, 7.

¹⁴¹ Burns and Watson, 7.

¹⁴² Griffiths, “The Dixie Chicks 2001-2003,” 237.

included on their upcoming 2002 album, *Home*. The song may, at first, seem to be simply a personal, intimate reflection on love. Yet, due to its context within the benefit concert, “a simple evocation of the value of love serves to articulate a collective response to national tragedy.”¹⁴³ Thus, the personal themes of the song simultaneously speak to broader political meanings in society.

Similarly, “Truth No. 2,” also from *Home*, contains implicit political meanings. Though the song was released in 2002, it took on new meanings following Maine’s anti-war comment in 2003. Like “Goodbye Earl” and “Top of the World,” the song confronts the issue of domestic abuse, in which the narrator gains the courage to stand up to an abusive partner, singing “You don’t like the sound of the truth / Coming from my mouth.”¹⁴⁴ Following the backlash to the controversy, Bowers explains that “the ‘you’ of the first line seems to be referring both to the singer’s fictional abusive partner and to the non-fictional people who abuse the Chicks by refusing to play their songs, smashing their CDs, and slapping them with inflammatory titles.”¹⁴⁵ As such, the song gained additional meaning as a broader political statement in support of free speech. The Chicks’ demonstrated this interpretation of the song during their 2003 “Top of the World” Tour, where their performance of the song was accompanied by a video montage of political protest footage from important historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement, among others.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, this song combines the personal and the political by tackling the important issue of domestic abuse while simultaneously reinterpreting the topic in a wider political context.

¹⁴³ Griffiths, 237.

¹⁴⁴ The Chicks, *Home*, CD (New York: Open Wide/Columbia, 2002).

¹⁴⁵ Bowers, “Taking the Long Way Home: Poetry, Politics, and the Dixie Chicks,” 141.

¹⁴⁶ Bowers, 142.

This section has demonstrated the various ways in which the Chicks defy standard definitions of femininity and domesticity within country music. They challenge gendered conventions of “rambling,” portraying female characters that leave home and forge their own path in life outside of conventional expectations. Their songs give voice to female perspectives within romantic relationships, particularly in situations of domestic abuse, giving agency to survivors; they emphasize the importance of rebellious thinking, community, and breaking the cycle of abuse in order to heal. Finally, the Chicks recontextualize domestic themes in their music through implicit political meanings, combining the personal and the political. As Griffiths sums it up: “the group’s use of the conventional ‘feminine’ themes of country music, which include images of motherhood, marriage and domesticity, provides an aesthetic framework for their enacting an ideological critique of country music from within.”¹⁴⁷ Later in this chapter, I demonstrate how the Chicks employ similar strategies in *Gaslighter*. But before delving into analyses of specific songs from the album, the next two sections of this chapter explore the Chicks’ songwriting process for *Gaslighter* as well as how the concept of the album functions as a whole.

The Songwriting Process and Collaboration with Jack Antonoff

The Chicks have grown significantly as songwriters over the course of their career, leading them to create music that has become increasingly personal and autobiographical. In order to further situate *Gaslighter* within the context of the Chicks’ career trajectory, this section explores the band’s creative process and songwriting strategies. Specifically, I examine how their

¹⁴⁷ Griffiths, “The Dixie Chicks 2001-2003,” 229.

relationship with songwriting has grown over the years and how their collaboration with producer Jack Antonoff on *Gaslighter* has shaped their artistic vision.

Early on in their career, the Chicks were not frequent songwriters. Their first album, *Wide Open Spaces*, contained only one original song, “You Were Mine,” co-written by Maguire and Strayer, and their second album, *Fly*, contained five songs co-written by the band members and other songwriters in various combinations. These two albums were produced by Paul Worley and Blake Chancey in Nashville, and the albums were carefully curated with the mainstream country radio market in mind.

For their third album, *Home*, the Chicks went in a new direction. Amidst a dispute with their record label, the Chicks left Nashville to record the album in Austin, Texas without the supervision of any country music label executives. With greater artistic freedom, this album returned to their bluegrass roots with an entirely acoustic sound and absence of drums. The album was produced solely by the three band members in collaboration with Natalie Maines’ father and renowned steel guitarist, Lloyd Maines. As described by John Spong, this album was the Chicks’ “first mature record ... Unchaperoned by label grown-ups, the Chicks had written or selected every song.”¹⁴⁸ Though members of the Chicks were co-writers on only four of the tracks, they curated the entire album. As the name would suggest, the album centers around themes such as home, family, and motherhood.

With the release of their fourth album, *Taking the Long Way*, in 2006, the Chicks established themselves as songwriters. Though they still collaborated with other writers, all three band members co-wrote every song on the album. Maines recalls how this album was very different compared to the previous three. She says, “Our songwriting before that [*Taking the*

¹⁴⁸ Spong, “Chicks in the Wilderness.”

Long Way] had been less personal and more storytelling or telling like a made-up story or somebody else's story. And this time we were going to really tap in to our lives and our experience."¹⁴⁹ Their producer, Rick Rubin, pushed them to be completely honest and vulnerable with this album.¹⁵⁰ The album has political implications, directly responding to the backlash they faced following the incident. Yet, the album also draws on the band members' personal lives, touching on topics such as motherhood and family. Furthermore, the album, which was recorded in Los Angeles, moves further away from mainstream country music, incorporating elements of rock. The Chicks' production and songwriting team helped influence this musical direction; Rubin had previously produced for non-country bands including the Beastie Boys, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Metallica, and all of the songwriters with whom the Chicks collaborated came from outside of mainstream country music.¹⁵¹

14 years later, *Gaslighter* is the Chicks' most personal album to date. Similar to *Taking the Long Way*, all three band members co-wrote nearly every song on the album in collaboration with other songwriters. (The two exceptions are "Everybody Loves You," which is a cover, and "Julianna Calm Down," which credits Maines as a songwriter but not Maguire or Strayer.) As Maines explains, "Our last album [*Taking the Long Way*] was the most personal and autobiographical we've ever been ... And then this one [*Gaslighter*] is 10 times that."¹⁵² *Gaslighter* touches on themes including family and home, like their previous albums, but with a specific focus on the topic of divorce, which all three band members have personally experienced and which Maines went through as they wrote the album. With such a personal topic

¹⁴⁹ Power, "The Chicks Explain Why They Removed 'Dixie' from Their Name."

¹⁵⁰ Power.

¹⁵¹ Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice," 329.

¹⁵² Rania Aniftos, "Natalie Maines on Upcoming Dixie Chicks Album & Her Divorce: 'I Had a Lot to Say,'" *Billboard*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/natalie-maines-upcoming-dixie-chicks-album-divorce-8530656/>.

at hand, finding a producer with whom the Chicks felt comfortable working was of utmost importance.

Gaslighter was produced by Jack Antonoff, who has previously worked with female pop artists such as Taylor Swift, Lana Del Rey, Lorde, and Sia.¹⁵³ Originally, the Chicks had planned to collaborate with a different producer for each song, inspired by a practice found in pop and hip hop. However, as Maines explains, “it was really hard going into writing sessions with new people all the time.”¹⁵⁴ Establishing a strong working relationship with a producer is important for a successful artistic process to unfold, and it was difficult for Maines to continuously open up to new producers and be vulnerable about the intensely personal topics addressed in their songs. Once the Chicks started writing with Antonoff, they knew they wanted to work with him for the whole album. As Maines says, “He’s like a brother. You just feel so comfortable right away.”¹⁵⁵

The Chicks developed a strong collaborative relationship with Antonoff, and, as a result, developed new songwriting strategies that particularly emphasized the “groove” as the foundation of a song. Maines explains that they collaborated with Antonoff by “building a track as you’re writing the lyrics and the melody,”¹⁵⁶ which is something the Chicks had never done before. Maines notes how this has strengthened her songwriting. “It’s so much easier [to write a song] when you have a groove and sort of a track and a beat being built because it just makes you hear a lot more ideas of how phrasing can go and how much more percussive lyrics could be,” she says.¹⁵⁷ Having Antonoff play beats and chords helped inspire the band members to take their music in new directions during their songwriting process. As Maines continues, “him

¹⁵³ Kristin M. Hall Hall, “With New Name and Album, The Chicks’ Voices Ring Loud Again,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/with-new-name-and-album-the-chicks-voices-ring-loud-again/2020/07/13/eebda5b6-c51d-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html.

¹⁵⁴ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Stern.

¹⁵⁶ Stern.

¹⁵⁷ Stern.

playing like a certain chord, a synth chord, with all those different overtones, makes my brain immediately hear melodies I would never have heard with an acoustic guitar. So it just opens up the possibilities and the flow is just so much faster for me.”¹⁵⁸

Maines much prefers this songwriting strategy over their previous method. When writing for *Taking the Long Way*, the band members and other songwriters would sit around with their guitars—and Maguire with her fiddle—and write together in an acoustic setting. Maines says that she found this method of songwriting limiting: “We always sort of went back to the same ... bag of tricks that we always sort of went to for melody and this and that.”¹⁵⁹ They would make a complete acoustic version of the song first, make a demo recording, then bring it to their producer. As Maines explains, Rick Rubin “wanted all the songs written and decided on before we went into the studio.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, on *Taking the Long Way*, the melody and lyrics served as the foundation of the song whereas the groove and beats were added as finishing touches. Working with Antonoff on *Gaslighter*, by contrast, completely reverses this process, beginning with the creation of a strong groove and adding the melody and lyrics on top. Ultimately, *Taking the Long Way* maintained a clear delineation between songwriting and production, while *Gaslighter* blurred the lines between these two processes.

Maines describes the typical steps in her collaborative process with Antonoff. First, he will ask Maines if she has a particular groove in mind. Maines will try to describe what she’s thinking of, referring to songs by other artists if necessary. For example, she admits that she has been inspired by beats used by Miley Cyrus. Once Antonoff has an idea of Maines’ preference, “he’ll just start tapping on this drum machine ... and then a minute and a half [later] he’s got this

¹⁵⁸ Stern.

¹⁵⁹ Stern.

¹⁶⁰ Stern.

awesome percussive loop, this whole beat's loop.”¹⁶¹ The creation of a solid groove as a foundation allows for Maines' creativity to shine above it. She explains that, in general, she tends to focus on the melody before adding lyrics: “I want to know that we have an awesome melody before we get to words.”¹⁶² That being said, on *Gaslighter*, Maines and her bandmates wanted to ensure that certain words and sentences were included, which is evident from the striking lyrical content of the album. In these cases, Maines and her bandmates would work to create a melody that would fit around the lyrics. Maines had a list of key words in a book—including the word “gaslighter,” among others—that she and her bandmates would draw from when writing their melodies.¹⁶³ Overall, Maines, Maguire, and Strayer developed a strong collaborative relationship with Antonoff that allowed them to explore new musical directions and stretch their creative possibilities.

Gaslighter draws on pop influences, particularly the synthesized beats created by Antonoff. Maguire notes how, in their new style, the fiddle is a bit more subtle. As she explains, “There are a lot of layers in there, and they're not as up-front. And so that is hard for me, because I certainly love a good fiddle solo up in the spotlight. But I definitely am a believer that you do what's right for the song.”¹⁶⁴ Maguire recognizes the importance of prioritizing the overall sound of the album, which leaned in a more pop-sounding direction. That being said, the Chicks signature sound is still very much present in the album. Though it may be more layered within a broader synthesized texture, Antonoff encouraged the band members to highlight their instrumentation. As Kristen M. Hall explains, “Antonoff pushed them to use their core strength,

¹⁶¹ Stern.

¹⁶² Stern.

¹⁶³ Stern.

¹⁶⁴ Jeffrey Brown, “Leaving Dixie behind, the Chicks Get Even More Personal -- and Political,” October 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZifVN8UKDY>.

the three-part harmonies backed by fiddle and banjo, in new ways.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, the Chicks continue to incorporate their bluegrass and country roots in their music while simultaneously crossing over into the pop domain.

The Concept of the Album

The Chicks’ *Gaslighter* participates in, and simultaneously challenges the boundaries of, country music through their musical style, combining their bluegrass instrumentation and influence with synthesized pop beats through their collaboration with Antonoff. Another crucial way the Chicks participate in and challenge the genre of country music is through the thematic content of their songs. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the Chicks’ previous music has drawn on domestic themes of motherhood, marriage, home, and family but with a feminist twist, redefining the genre on their own terms. The remainder of this chapter examines how the Chicks continue this practice throughout *Gaslighter*, in combination with the immensely personal and autobiographical content of their songs. Specifically, I focus on the topic of domestic abuse as a central theme in *Gaslighter*.

Gaslighter’s twelve tracks come together as a whole to depict the emotional journey of going through a divorce. Maines, Maguire, and Strayer have been divorced a total of five times between the three of them, so it’s safe to say they are experts in the matter.¹⁶⁶ The trio members emphasize that there are a wide variety of emotions expressed in the album. As Strayer states, “Even though it’s somewhat of a breakup album, you kind of touch on all aspects of emotion. So

¹⁶⁵ Hall, “With New Name and Album, The Chicks’ Voices Ring Loud Again.”

¹⁶⁶ Ilana Kaplan, “The Chicks Are Ready To Disrupt Country Music (Again),” *Bustle*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.bustle.com/entertainment/the-chicks-gaslighter-country-music-racism-divorce>.

it makes for some really fun songs as well as sad songs.”¹⁶⁷ Likewise, while Maines acknowledges the feelings of pain expressed in the album, she says, “It’s not all pain. There’s other things in there.” She describes the album as “raw” and “cathartic,” and explains that “I was writing it from my perspective as I was going through it [divorce] in real time... It was like therapy for me.”¹⁶⁸

The album is heavily inspired by Maines’s divorce from actor Adrian Pasdar. The most recent divorce of the trio members, Maines filed for divorce in 2017 and the legal process was finalized in 2019; the couple had been married since 2000. Though the legal proceedings were primarily a battle over finances, Ilana Kaplan of the *Los Angeles Times* reports that “Pasdar also attempted to bar Maines (and the Chicks) from releasing new music, alleging there was something in their songs that broke the confidentiality clause in their prenup.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, with its scathing lyrics, *Gaslighter* appears to be clearly directed at Maines’s ex-husband, calling out his toxic behaviour with references to the specific circumstances of their falling out. Yet, Maines adamantly asserts that the album is not *all* about her. She explains that all three band members, along with other songwriters, contributed lyrics based on their own personal experiences. As she tells Howard Stern, “It’s just not true that it’s all about me. But I was the one going through it. I wonder if they’ll play this conversation in court [*laughs*].”¹⁷⁰ Due to the risk of breaking her nondisclosure agreement and other legal implications, Maines can’t speak too much about the personal aspects of the album and prefers to let the lyrics speak for themselves. She continues: “I don’t like to talk too much about what’s personal and what’s not, just because I feel like ...

¹⁶⁷ Zane Lowe, “The Chicks: Creating ‘Gaslighter’ and Working With Jack Antonoff,” *Apple Music*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIJ2Jam-0TE>.

¹⁶⁸ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Ilana Kaplan, “Here’s Everything We’ve Learned about Chicks Singer Natalie Maines’ Ugly Divorce,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-07-22/chicks-dixie-natalie-maines-divorce-gaslighter>.

¹⁷⁰ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

there's not a lot of metaphors on this record, and there's not a lot of flowery poetry. It's pretty in-your-face direct dialogue."¹⁷¹

Whether about Maines' ex-husband or not, the striking lyrical content in the album addresses the emotional fallout after leaving a toxic relationship and an abusive partner. And the deeply personal nature of the lyrics has the power to relate to broader struggles among their audiences. As described by Melinda Newman of *Billboard*, "the album's messages about standing up to deceitful men are resonating deeply at a time when women, thanks to movements like #MeToo and the Women's March, are more comfortable than ever with embracing their anger—something the Chicks have never shied away from"¹⁷² Indeed, this album continues the Chicks' previous musical practice of depicting women characters who assert agency and rebelliousness over failed romantic relationships and amidst situations of domestic abuse. But instead of portraying fictional characters, as they did in their first three albums, *Gaslighter* tells autobiographical stories that have the potential to impart an even more profound impact on listeners.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the Chicks' repertoire has emphasized the importance of community and uplifting others, particularly as a way to heal from domestic abuse. *Gaslighter* effectively encourages community due to its immense relatability for audiences. Zane Lowe of Apple Music, who interviewed the Chicks, tells the trio how he felt a deep emotional connection to the album based on his own experience as a child of divorced parents. He says, "I cannot tell you, as a fan, enough how happy I am to listen to this record and also how heartbreaking I find myself feeling ... and not necessarily because I'm feeling your pain, [but] because it brings back

¹⁷¹ Stern.

¹⁷² Newman, "How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks."

mine. So it's the ultimate gift in that regard."¹⁷³ He describes the album as having a "therapeutic concept" due to the way the album flows through so many different emotions, and he states that "so many of these songs strike such a perfect balance of the personal and the universal."¹⁷⁴ Strayer affirms this sentiment, emphasizing how the Chicks' deeply personal music relates to listeners. As she states, "We found that, almost the more personal you are with a song, the more it relates to more people. Because you think your story might just be your own, but most things that people go through in life are universal to everybody in one way or another."¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Maguire notes that "even when the lyrics get pretty specific, they [listeners] find something in there that they can tether to their own life. That's what we want them to do."¹⁷⁶ The Chicks recognize how the raw vulnerability in their songwriting can have a powerful effect on audiences, helping to build a community of listeners who can personally relate to the emotions expressed in the album.

In the remaining section of this chapter, I explore the Chicks' deeply personal music in more detail by examining the lyrical themes expressed in a selection of songs from *Gaslighter*. The album continues the Chicks' practice of disrupting conventions of country music by embracing domestic themes such as marriage and motherhood from a feminist angle. Specifically, the Chicks confront the issue of domestic abuse by giving agency to survivors, and the songs on the album emphasize community, rebelliousness, and inspiring the next generation as a way to heal. Furthermore, despite the presence of some extremely specific lyrics, the songs' meanings have the potential for a wide range of interpretations, relating to broader experiences

¹⁷³ Lowe, "The Chicks: Creating 'Gaslighter' and Working With Jack Antonoff."

¹⁷⁴ Lowe.

¹⁷⁵ Brown, "Leaving Dixie behind, the Chicks Get Even More Personal -- and Political."

¹⁷⁶ Noel King and Victoria Whitley-Berry, "The Chicks Look Back And Laugh," *Morning Edition*, NPR, July 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892100683/the-chicks-look-back-and-laugh>.

and struggles of their audiences as well as embodying implicit political meanings. The following analyses focus primarily on four tracks: “Gaslighter,” “For Her,” “Julianna Calm Down,” and “Young Man.” “March March,” with its explicit political meanings, will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

Gaslighter

As the opening track, “Gaslighter” sets the tone for the rest of the album. Its rebellious energy blatantly calls out an abuser, presumably Maines’ ex-husband, for being a “gaslighter,” a “denier,” and a “liar.” By choosing the term “gaslighter” for their opening track and album title, the Chicks raise awareness about an important issue. Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse in which an abuser manipulates and deceives a victim until they question their own sanity. As described by Brian Duignan in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the effect of gaslighting is to “gradually undermine the victim’s confidence in his own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance, thereby rendering him pathologically dependent on the gaslighter in his thinking or feelings.”¹⁷⁷ The term originated from a 1938 play, *Gas Light*, and subsequent 1940 and 1944 film adaptations, *Gaslight*, in which a husband tricks his wife into doubting her perception of reality. When the husband dims the gas lights in their house in an attempt to steal hidden jewels, he convinces his wife that the dimming of the lights is a figment of her imagination and that she must be going insane.¹⁷⁸

Though the verb “gaslighting” is a real word, the term that names the abuser, “gaslighter,” is not. Nevertheless, the Chicks adapted this informal use of the word for their

¹⁷⁷ Brian Duignan, “Gaslighting,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gaslighting>.

¹⁷⁸ Duignan.

album, and five days before the release of the single they tweeted their own definition of the term: “a psychological manipulator who seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a group, making them question their own memory, perception or sanity.”¹⁷⁹ Maines says that she learned the word in therapy. “‘We’ve all been in therapy,’ Emily Strayer concurred. ‘We’ve got some gaslighters.’”¹⁸⁰ In “Gaslighter,” the lyrics recognize the harm that psychological abuse can cause, declaring, “You broke me / Yeah I’m broken.” Yet, the narrator also stands up to the abuser and defies his attempts to instill self-doubt, singing, “Tried to say I’m crazy / Babe you know I’m not crazy that’s you.”¹⁸¹ This sentiment is reflected throughout the entire song, as the narrator calls out the gaslighter for his manipulative behaviour and regains control over the situation.

As the first song on the album, “Gaslighter” hints at some of the topics that are explored in more depth later in the album. A line from the chorus, “Repeating all the mistakes of your father,” recognizes the damaging effects of the multigenerational cycle of abuse, a theme that the Chicks have explored in previous songs such as “Top of the World.” The Chicks continue to address this issue on *Gaslighter* in two songs that they wrote for their children, “Young Man” and “Julianna Calm Down,” in which they aim to instill hope and encouragement for their children to forge their own paths in life. Another line from “Gaslighter,” “Save your tired stories for your new someone else,” references Pádar’s infidelity, which is a central topic of the following song on the album, “Sleep at Night,” in which Maines shares, “My husband’s girlfriend’s husband just called me up / How messed up is that.” And the scathing lyrics in

¹⁷⁹ The Chicks, “3.4.20 #GASLIGHTER,” *Twitter*, February 28, 2020, <https://twitter.com/thechicks/status/1233451701362814978>.

¹⁸⁰ Emily Yahr, “The ‘Dixie’ Is Gone. The Chicks Are Forever.,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-chicks-dixie-chicks-new-album-gaslighter/2020/07/15/0d76f626-c544-11ea-b037-f9711f89ee46_story.html.

¹⁸¹ The Chicks, *Gaslighter*, CD (New York: Columbia, 2020).

“Gaslighter,” “Cause boy you know exactly what you did on my boat / And boy that’s exactly why you ain’t comin’ home,” serve as a foreboding for what is to come in the vengeful song directed at Pascar, “Tights On My Boat”; in this song, Maines sings a scorching opening line, “I hope you die peacefully in your sleep / Just kidding I hope it hurts like you hurt me.” This sentiment is reminiscent of the rebelliousness and revengeful thinking found in “Goodbye Earl.”

Additional lyrics in “Gaslighter” make explicit reference to Maines’ split from Pascar. For instance, Maines sings, “We moved to California and we followed your dreams,” and “Hollywood welcomed you with open doors,” which refer to how she moved with Pascar to Los Angeles in support of his acting career. And the line, “Acting all above it when our friends divorced,” likely refers to the divorces of Martie Maguire and Emily Strayer. Indeed, in the seventh track on the album, “My Best Friend’s Weddings,” Maines reminisces about meeting Pascar at Strayer’s first wedding and laments how much has changed since then; towards the end of the song, she celebrates Strayer’s second wedding, singing, “I’ve never seen her look more happy / Guess from ashes we can really grow.” Although Pascar was a major source of inspiration for “Gaslighter” and the album as a whole, the Chicks insist that their music should be interpreted more broadly. As Maguire explains, “Different things happen in our lives, just like everybody else, so when we write a song it’s not necessarily about one person. Maybe one line might be a contribution about somebody that did somebody wrong, but it’s never one thing. It’s not all one bad man.”¹⁸² Indeed, the “bad man” in “Gaslighter” has been interpreted not only as an abusive ex-lover but also as President Donald Trump.

“Gaslighter” embraces “the personal is political” through its implicit political meanings. Although the gaslighting addressed in the song clearly refers to intimate partner abuse, it can also

¹⁸² King and Whitley-Berry, “The Chicks Look Back And Laugh.”

be interpreted more broadly as political gaslighting when considered within its larger societal context. Most notably, the term “gaslighting” has been used widely to describe Trump’s actions as president. From Lauren Duca’s scathing 2016 op-ed in *Teen Vogue*, “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America” to Chris Cillizza’s 2021 *CNN* article, “Donald Trump is Gaslighting Us on the January 6 Riot,” numerous journalists have used the term to call out Trump’s lies and manipulative tactics.¹⁸³ It is thus no coincidence that the Chicks chose to use the term for their album title. Indeed, as Maines explains, “We never thought of any other title for the album, because it really is a buzzword now because of President Trump. It just seemed like the perfect word and captured this time that we’re in.”¹⁸⁴ And despite the fact that the Chicks’ song does not explicitly refer to Trump, Maines made the connection very clear on her personal Instagram page on March 31, 2020, when she posted a video remix of “Gaslighter” denouncing President Trump’s flagrant mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The video juxtaposes clips of Trump spreading lies about the pandemic at press conferences and campaign rallies (e.g., “people think it goes away in April with the heat”) in alternation with short snippets of phrases from the chorus of “Gaslighter” (“gaslighter,” “denier,” and “doing anything to get your ass farther”). The remix ends with a modified visual from the song’s official music video, superimposing images of Vice President Mike Pence and Trump on either side of Maines as she sings, “you liar.” Maines captioned the post with hashtags “#gaslighter #liar #murderer #narcissist.”¹⁸⁵ Through this video remix, Maines recontextualized “Gaslighter,” to reflect current events, enacting a “bricolage”

¹⁸³ Lauren Duca, “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America,” *Teen Vogue*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/donald-trump-is-gaslighting-america>; Chris Cillizza, “Analysis: Donald Trump Is Gaslighting Us on the January 6 Riot,” *CNN*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/17/politics/donald-trump-september-18-january-6/index.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Apple Music, “Gaslighter by The Chicks.”

¹⁸⁵ Joseph Hudak, “Natalie Maines Slams Trump’s Coronavirus Response Using His Own Lies,” *Rolling Stone*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/natalie-maines-trump-gaslighter-coronavirus-975727/>; Roz Weston and Graeme O’Neil, “Dixie Chicks’ Trump ‘Gaslighter’ Remix,” *ET Canada*, April 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cGVOIl_uK4.

strategy as defined by Christian Griffiths.¹⁸⁶ Though the Chicks already had Trump in mind when creating the album, the pandemic situation—and Trump’s negligent response to it—further characterized him as a gaslighter and lead to an additional interpretation of the song.

Apart from Trump, a broader political interpretation of “Gaslighter” emerges through the song’s official music video.¹⁸⁷ As Jonathan Bernstein of *Rolling Stone* describes, “The trio’s ‘Gaslighter’ video, with its unsubtle political and historical imagery, uses Maines’ travails as a template for decades of personal and collective national pain.”¹⁸⁸ The video consists of a montage of historical footage, including clips such as Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1964 presidential campaign ad, “Daisy Girl” among other examples of “old school political propaganda,” drawing attention to the phenomenon of political gaslighting.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, however, the video includes more uplifting and empowering imagery such as “old footage of women in the military, hard at work at jobs like riveting and more,” demonstrating the collective strength of women in times of strife.¹⁹⁰ The Chicks themselves also appear on screen, wearing military-inspired outfits and marching together; during some points in the video, their bodies are visually duplicated to appear as an entire army of Chicks, rather than just the three of them. As described by the trio in a news release, the music video serves as “a nod to the female empowerment movement” and “depicts the militant strength of women through the centuries and the unbreakable bond they

¹⁸⁶ Griffiths, “The Dixie Chicks 2001-2003,” 237.

¹⁸⁷ The Chicks and Seanne Farmer, “Gaslighter (Official Video),” March 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbVPcPL30xc>.

¹⁸⁸ Jonathan Bernstein, “You Definitely Need to Hear This New Dixie Chicks Song,” *Rolling Stone*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/dixie-chicks-gaslighter-song-you-need-to-know-962052/>.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Mann, “How the ‘Daisy’ Ad Changed Everything About Political Advertising,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-daisy-ad-changed-everything-about-political-advertising-180958741/>; Justin Kirkland, “The First Dixie Chicks Single in 14 Years Is a Prescient and Powerful Return,” *Esquire*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a31226607/dixie-chicks-gaslighter-video-listen-meaning/>.

¹⁹⁰ Taylor Fields, “Dixie Chicks Return with ‘Gaslighter,’ First New Song in 14 Years,” *iHeart Media*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.iheart.com/content/2020-03-04-dixie-chicks-return-with-gaslighter-first-new-song-in-14-years/>.

create through any of life's unforeseen circumstances.”¹⁹¹ Through the official music video for “Gaslighter,” the Chicks emphasize the power of community and the importance of supporting one another to rise up against gaslighting—whether in a political or personal context.

Overall, the opening track of *Gaslighter* provides a bold, defiant introduction for the entire album. The song explicitly calls out the issue of domestic abuse and centers the perspective of a survivor. Though “Gaslighter” was largely inspired by Maines’ ex-husband, the Chicks contend that they drew upon many influences, wanting audiences to relate to the song’s broader emotional content and make connections to their own lives. Furthermore, the Chicks recognize that gaslighting can also occur beyond the context of romantic relationships, highlighting the presence of the behaviour in the political realm. Though the lyrics don’t explicitly refer to political gaslighting, the Chicks allude to political reinterpretations of the song through their official music video as well as through Maines’ remix video attacking Donald Trump. As an antidote to gaslighting, whether political or otherwise, the Chicks highlight the importance of community and lifting each other up in difficult times. Ultimately, “Gaslighter” continues the Chicks’ previous practice of challenging gendered themes in country music by defiantly standing with survivors, telling stories of relationship struggles and domestic abuse from a female perspective, and allowing for implicit political meanings to emerge in their music.

For Her

“For Her,” the fifth track on the album, continues similar strategies employed in “Gaslighter,” combining the personal and the political and encompassing multiple layers of

¹⁹¹ Emily Yahr, “The Dixie Chicks Release First New Music in 14 Years — a Scathing Anthem Called ‘Gaslighter,’” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/03/04/dixie-chicks-new-song-gaslighter/>.

meaning. The Chicks wrote “For Her” as a love letter to their younger selves, imparting the wisdom and encouragement they wish they had heard earlier in life.¹⁹² The Chicks make this intention clear in the second verse, when Maines sings, “Wish I could go back / And tell my younger self / You’re a fighter / You just don’t know it yet.”¹⁹³ The song makes reference to a key theme of the album—healing from divorce—and questions why a relationship had to end: “Why can’t we be together / Why can’t we love For Her.” The “her” in this phrase is ambiguous—it might refer to the narrator’s disappointment that things did not work out as her younger self had hoped. At the same time, “her” seems to speak to Maguire’s and Strayer’s daughters, recognizing the toll that divorce can take on families and expressing a yearning to stay together for their sake. The lyrics continue with the declaration, “Stand up show love For Her For Her,” which is repeated several times in succession and recurs throughout the entire song. Again, the meaning of “her” is not concrete, referring simultaneously to the narrator herself at a younger age as well as to her daughters. Nevertheless, the message of the repeated passage and the song at-large is clear: to provide encouragement for younger women and girls to stay strong and persevere through life’s struggles. As described by Jason Kane of *PBS NewsHour*, “For Her” is “an empowerment anthem written to their former selves, to their daughters and to women worldwide, urging them to stand up, ‘dig a little bit deeper, and be a whole lot louder.’”¹⁹⁴

“For Her” may, at first, seem to be a simple message of hope for the next generation of women without explicit political associations. Yet, a political reinterpretation of the song emerged on October 16, 2020, when the Chicks released a remix video in remembrance of the

¹⁹² Apple Music, “Gaslighter by The Chicks.”

¹⁹³ Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

¹⁹⁴ Jason Kane, “How Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s Words Wound up in This Chicks Music Video,” *PBS NewsHour*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/how-ruth-bader-ginsburgs-words-wound-up-in-this-chicks-music-video>.

late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who had died one month prior. Before the audio begins, the video displays the following dedication on screen: “Dedicated with love and admiration to the righteous memory of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. March 15, 1933 – September 18, 2020.” Throughout the music video, Maines, Maguire, and Strayer appear in simple attire in front of a dark red background while singing, playing their instruments, or simply looking at the camera. Due to the pandemic, the trio members each recorded their own videos from their home studios and then spliced them together for the remix. Maines’ niece and Maguire’s and Strayer’s daughters are also featured in the video, confirming that the song speaks not only to the trio member’s younger selves but to their daughters and to the next generation of women at-large. Towards the end of the song when Maines starts to hum, a recording of Ginsburg’s voice enters the texture, highlighting a recent quote of hers in support of the #MeToo movement.¹⁹⁵

The idea to include Ginsburg’s voice in the song actually originated with Jack Antonoff, back when the Chicks were recording the album. The trio showed up to the studio one day and heard Ginsburg’s words overlayed in the song as Antonoff experimented in the studio. Maines says that “It was a surprise to us,” but also that “It was awesome.”¹⁹⁶ Ultimately, however, the Chicks decided not to include Ginsburg’s voice on the final recording of the song for the album. Maines admits, “I feel like I wanted it to stay in, but I think people thought it would just, I don’t know, timestamp the album too much or something.”¹⁹⁷ But after Ginsburg’s passing, the Chicks knew they wanted to honour her legacy by bringing her voice back into the song, releasing an updated recording and music video. Looking back, Maines explains how “For Her” became the perfect song in which to include Ginsburg’s voice. She says, “That song definitely makes you

¹⁹⁵ The Chicks, “For Her (Performance),” January 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMLDRXDcpX4>.

¹⁹⁶ Kane, “How Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s Words Wound up in This Chicks Music Video.”

¹⁹⁷ Kane.

think of a powerful, strong woman, strong chick, like RBG.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the song’s theme of female empowerment reflects the strength and perseverance that Ginsburg embodied during her career as she fought tirelessly for women’s rights

The quote that the Chicks chose to incorporate into the remix of “For Her” came from a 2018 event at Columbia University, the first annual “She Opened the Door” Women’s Conference, in which Ginsburg was invited as a guest speaker. In a conversation with Poppy Harlow, a *CNN* anchor and Columbia graduate, Justice Ginsburg told stories from her career and spoke about her thoughts on the #MeToo movement, among other topics. When asked if she had any concern about backlash to the #MeToo movement, Ginsburg replied,

I don’t think that there will be a serious backlash. It [the #MeToo movement] is too widespread. My concern is that it shouldn’t stop with prominent people. People like you [interviewer Poppy Harlow], people in the media. And that it should **protect this new attitude. Should protect the maid who works at a hotel. And I think it is spreading so far. Yes, there will always be adjustments when there’s a transition. But on the whole, it’s amazing to me that for the first time, women are really *listened to*.** Because sexual harassment had often been dismissed as, ‘well, she made it up,’ or, ‘she’s too thin-skinned.’ So I think it’s a very healthy development.¹⁹⁹

Ginsburg emphasizes the significant impact that the #MeToo movement has had on society, insisting that the movement is here to stay. As more and more women continue to speak out against sexual harassment, their stories and concerns are finally validated and taken seriously, encouraging even more women to follow suit. The Chicks’ decision to include an excerpt of this quote (indicated in bold text above) in their remix of “For Her” expands on the song’s meaning, demonstrating the collective power of women to come together to instill change, lift each other up, and allow their voices to be heard. Moreover, the addition of Ginsburg’s words enabled the Chicks to recontextualize the song to make a political statement. In a time when powerful men

¹⁹⁸ Kane.

¹⁹⁹ Poppy Harlow, “Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at She Opened the Door, Columbia University Women’s Conference,” *Columbia Alumni*, February 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQHxxnThDxg>.

like Donald Trump, among many others, are being called out for their sexual misconduct, aligning with the #MeToo movement is inherently political, as is aligning with Ginsburg's liberal views more generally. As such, the Chicks' video remix of "For Her" contributes to broader discourse calling attention to the issue of sexual harassment and serves to empower women to speak up and take action.

Like "Gaslighter," "For Her" effectively combines the personal and the political. The song's lyrics relate to the album's theme of healing from divorce, touching on the importance of standing up for oneself as well as one's daughters amidst such a situation. Politically, the song can be understood as a statement of female empowerment, encouraging women to stay strong and speak out against injustices in society. The Chicks' video remix in honour of Justice Ginsburg demonstrates this meaning, highlighting the issue of sexual harassment that came to light via the #MeToo movement as well as commemorating Ginsburg's significant contribution to women's rights. Through the video, the Chicks enacted a strategy of "bricolage" by taking an existing song and recontextualizing it based on current events, allowing a political interpretation to emerge. Overall, the song's meaning—both in a personal and a political sense—subverts conventional gendered themes in country music by giving agency to women, whether amidst a divorce or when speaking out against sexual harassment as part of a larger social movement. The song demonstrates the collective power of women to support each other amidst life's challenges, emphasizing the importance of community. Finally, "For Her," recognizes the importance of inspiring and uplifting the next generation of women, as the Chicks serve as role models for their daughters. This topic is explicitly expressed in the final two songs discussed in this chapter, which were written by the Chicks specifically for their children, bringing the theme of inspiring the next generation to the forefront.

Julianna Calm Down and Young Man

The ninth and tenth tracks on *Gaslighter*, “Julianna Calm Down” and “Young Man,” were written for the Chicks’ daughters and nieces and for Maines’ sons, respectively. The songs’ deeply personal lyrics speak directly to their children, instilling the values of perseverance and self-expression and empowering them to forge their own paths in life. The songs continue to emphasize the album’s theme of healing from divorce and domestic abuse, with a particular focus on breaking the generational cycle of abuse and creating a better future for their children. Moreover, the songs speak not only to their children but to young people at-large, serving to uplift and inspire the next generation.

“Julianna Calm Down” was co-written by Maines, Antonoff, and songwriter Julia Michaels. Michaels had begun writing the song for herself under the title, “Julia Calm Down.” However, once Antonoff played a recording of the work-in-progress for the Chicks, they knew they wanted to include it on their album (to which Michaels happily agreed).²⁰⁰ Maines changed the title and opening phrase to “Julianna Calm Down,” named after Strayer’s eldest daughter, and continued to rewrite all of the lyrics, calling by name throughout the song Maguire’s three daughters, Harper, Katie, and Eva, Strayer’s younger daughter, Violet, and nieces of the three band members, Juno, Yaya, Berta, Hesper, Amelia, and Naomi. The message of the song “encourages young women to keep their heads held high when struggling through life’s obstacles,” as the Chicks tell their daughters and nieces to “calm down,” to “breathe,” and that “it’ll be okay.”²⁰¹ The chorus is an unapologetic anthem about being true to yourself and staying strong no matter what comes your way: “Just put on put on put on your best shoes / And strut the

²⁰⁰ Newman, “How the Music Industry Finally Caught Up to The Chicks.”

²⁰¹ Hall, “With New Name and Album, The Chicks’ Voices Ring Loud Again.”

fuck around like you've got nothin' to lose / Show off show off show off your best moves / And do it with a smile so that no one knows it's."202

A significant portion of the song refers to an unnamed "he," focusing on how to overcome the pain that this unnamed man has caused, which can be interpreted both in the context of a divorced father leaving his daughters or as a romantic love interest. For instance, the song opens with Maines singing, "Julianna Calm Down / You know he's about to leave but don't panic / Don't give him the satisfaction that you can't handle it." This sentiment is expanded in the third verse, in which Maines' sings, "And Katie Calm Down / You know there'll come a time you think you can't handle it / But dig deep and know that you can handle it."203 These lyrics speak to the Chicks' daughters as they experience the emotional fallout of their parents' divorces, recognizing the difficulties in coping with such a circumstance while encouraging their daughters to stay strong and persevere. At the same time, the lyrics extend beyond the present moment, providing advice to their daughters for the future "about how to withstand the toxic men they'll meet in their lives."204 Like "For Her," the song speaks to the next generation of women about persisting through life's struggles, whether in romantic relationships, when dealing with domestic abuse or sexual harassment, or any other obstacles they may face in their lives. Ultimately, the Chicks hope to take the lessons they've learned from their own life experiences and share them with their daughters and young women at large. As Strayer states, "I did love that idea of taking your own heartbreak and turning it around to teach a younger generation"205

²⁰² Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁰³ Chicks.

²⁰⁴ Dan Solomon, "The Dixie Chicks Urge a Drama-Free Existence on Their New Single, 'Julianna Calm Down,'" *Texas Monthly*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/dixie-chicks-urge-drama-free-existence-new-single-julianna-calm-down/>.

²⁰⁵ Power, "The Chicks Explain Why They Removed 'Dixie' from Their Name."

Similarly, “Young Man” serves to empower the next generation. The song speaks directly to Maines’ two sons, recognizing the significant impact that her divorce has had on their lives. Maines says that “the overall sentiment to that song is that you can form your own path, especially to ... kids with divorced parents.”²⁰⁶ In a conversation with Howard Stern, Maines shares that she learned in therapy how to talk to her sons about her divorce.²⁰⁷ She expresses this in the opening of the song, as Maines sings about gaining the courage to be open and honest with her sons about the situation: “I had no words for you that Saturday / As we both watched our entire worlds change / Your hero fell as you came of age / And I had no words but now I know what to say.”²⁰⁸ Maines learned that the most important thing to tell her sons is that they do not need to carry their parents’ burdens and that they can follow their own paths in life. Throughout the song, this sentiment is reflected in the lyrics, as Maines sings, “You’re of me not mine / Walk your own crooked line,” as well as “And my blues aren’t your blues / You’ll walk in your own shoes.”²⁰⁹

A significant message in this song is about breaking the generational cycle of domestic abuse. As Maines demonstrated in “Gaslighter,” her ex-husband, Adrian Pasdar, is psychologically abusive, and this behaviour can have devastating impacts on not only spouses but children as well. Maines makes it clear to her sons that she wants to help them heal from the abuse and she encourages them to leave behind the negative parts of their father, singing, “Take the best parts of him / As your own life begins / Leave the bad news behind.” This is especially important as her sons, ages 16 and 19 at the time of the song’s release, begin to form their own identities as young adults, which Maines recognizes with lyrics such as, “Your hero fell just as

²⁰⁶ Bannen, “The Chicks.”

²⁰⁷ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁰⁹ Chicks.

you came of age” and “As your own life begins.”²¹⁰ And although the song was written with Maine’s sons in mind, the overall message relates to Maguire and Strayer’s experiences as well, having both been divorced and understanding the struggles faced by children during such a situation. Furthermore, Maguire states how the meaning of the song can be understood even more broadly beyond the context of divorce, emphasizing how important it is for children to define their lives apart from their parents. As she says, “It’s easy to tap into that idea of the pressure you feel that your kids watch everything you go through and they take on a lot of that ... whether it’s divorce or even career-wise ups and downs ... when you [have kids], you realize it’s this really big responsibility to let them know, ‘You’re not me.’”²¹¹ Ultimately, both “Young Man” and “Julianna Calm Down” speak to the Chicks’ children and to young people more broadly, imparting inspiration on the next generation and empowering them to stand strong amidst life’s struggles.

Conclusion

As their first album in 14 years, the Chicks’ *Gaslighter* marks a bold return, continuing the trio’s legacy of genre fusion through both its musical and lyrical content. In collaboration with producer Jack Antonoff, the Chicks developed new songwriting strategies that inspired them to expand their musical horizons, combining their signature sound—fiddle, banjo, and three-part harmony—with Antonoff’s electronic pop grooves. Furthermore, the Chicks’ close working relationship with Antonoff helped them feel comfortable opening up about vulnerable topics in the recording studio, fostering the creation of their most personal album to date. In turn,

²¹⁰ Kaplan, “Here’s Everything We’ve Learned about Chicks Singer Natalie Maines’ Ugly Divorce”; Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²¹¹ Yahr, “The ‘Dixie’ Is Gone. The Chicks Are Forever.”

the deeply personal themes explored on the album—such as divorce and motherhood, among others—have resonated widely with audiences, instilling a sense of community among listeners who can relate the songs to their own emotions and experiences.

Gaslighter continues to subvert traditional gender-based themes of country music—such as home, family, and marriage—as they have done in their earlier music, but this time through an autobiographical lens. The album takes on the topic of divorce as its overarching theme, drawing on the personal experiences of the trio members, particularly Maines’ recent divorce from Pashar. In *Gaslighter*, as in their earlier music, Maines sings about asserting agency amidst a failed romantic relationship, refusing to stay in a submissive, victim position and defining the break-up on her own terms. Furthermore, the album addresses the issue of domestic abuse, drawing inspiration from Maines’ psychologically abusive ex-husband, and explores the range of emotions that are felt while healing from such abuse and from divorce more generally.

Domestic abuse, as told from a female perspective, is a topic that the Chicks have addressed previously in songs such as “Goodbye Earl,” “Top of the World,” and “Truth No. 2.” *Gaslighter* can be understood as a continuation of the sub-topics explored in these earlier songs. For instance, their 2020 album expresses a rebellious character in songs such as “Gaslighter” and “Tights on My Boat” and emphasizes the importance of community as a way to heal in songs such as “For Her,” depicting similar attitudes found in “Goodbye Earl.” Additionally, as in “Top of the World,” *Gaslighter* recognizes how domestic abuse has the tendency to repeat itself through a multi-generational cycle, and the Chicks vow to break that cycle through songs written specifically for their children, “Julianna Calm Down” and “Young Man.” Moreover, the Chicks enact bricolage strategies in songs such as “Gaslighter” and “For Her,” recontextualizing the songs based on current events to evoke implicit political meanings; as in “Truth No. 2,” these

two songs were reinterpreted to refer not only to intimate partner abuse or sexual harassment on an individual level, but also to abuse and harassment on a larger scale within the political realm and society at-large, combining the personal and the political.

Lastly, *Gaslighter* evokes the conventional country music theme of “rambling,” or exploring life beyond the confines of the home, but from a female perspective. The album’s unapologetic and empowering message about healing from divorce defies gendered expectations of traditional marriage structures as Maines asserts her independence from her ex-husband and creates a new path for the future. Moreover, *Gaslighter*’s message of hope for the Chicks’ children and for the next generation more broadly encourages young people, particularly young women, to “ramble” and form their own paths in life unfettered by societal expectations. *Gaslighter*’s theme of rambling marks a continuation from their previous music, expanding on the sentiment explored in songs such as “Wide Open Spaces” and “The Long Way Around.” This theme of rambling is further expressed in the Chicks’ political protest song, “March March,” which will be discussed in its entirety in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: March March

Ever since their denunciation of President Bush in 2003, the Chicks have been outspoken about their liberal political beliefs, and *Gaslighter* is no exception. Though the album centres primarily on the topic of divorce and other personal themes, the Chicks effectively meld together the personal and the political through implicit political meanings that emerge in various songs. Additionally, one song on the album stands out for its overt political meanings. “March March,” was released as a single and music video on June 25, 2020, the same day that the Chicks dropped “Dixie” from their name in response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests across the United States.²¹² As a protest song and video, “March March,” touches on a range of political issues including BLM, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, women’s rights, gun control/school shootings, and the climate crisis. Though the song may seem out of place within an album that otherwise focuses on the topic of divorce, “March March” continues to express the personal themes of the album whilst simultaneously conveying a strong political message.

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, I explore the Chicks’ allyship towards marginalized groups with which they don’t personally identify, primarily the Black Lives Matter movement. Using the band’s name change as a point of departure, I consider how their identities as white, cisgender, heterosexual women shape their political activism and how their allyship is perceived by others. Drawing on Eric Smialek’s 2021 article on Taylor Swift’s allyship towards the LGBTQ+ community, I argue for a nuanced examination of the Chicks’ political activism,

²¹² The Chicks and Seanne Farmer, “March March,” June 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwBjF_VVFvE.

recognizing that allyship is often imperfect and an ongoing learning process; public critiques of such allyship can have meaningful educational outcomes for both artists and audiences alike.²¹³

Second, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the Chicks' music video, "March March." Drawing on scholarship in music video analysis, such as Jada Watson's and Lori Burns' 2010 analyses of the Chicks' "Top of the World" and "Not Ready to Make Nice" videos, I explore how the interconnected musical, lyrical, and visual components of "March March" come together to inform the meaning of the song.²¹⁴ Ultimately, I examine how the music video functions as an expression of the Chicks' allyship and political activism as well as how the track fits in with the rest of the album.

Name Change, Political Activism, and Imperfect Allyship

After using the name "Dixie Chicks" for over 30 years, the Chicks finally dropped "Dixie" from their name in 2020 due to the term's racist connotations, specifically its connections to the Confederate South and the legacy of slavery. The band had hastily chosen the name back in 1989, before Maines joined the group during their early days as a bluegrass band. When they started their career busking on the streets of Dallas, onlookers kept asking them for their band name, but they hadn't chosen one yet. The group made a last-minute decision to call themselves the "Dixie Chickens" after hearing Little Feat's 1973 song, "Dixie Chicken," on the radio. Soon after, they shortened their name to the "Dixie Chicks."²¹⁵ When Maines joined the band in 1995, Maguire and Strayer considered changing their name; it seemed like a perfect opportunity to re-brand themselves as they gained a new lead singer and transitioned into

²¹³ Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?"

²¹⁴ Burns and Watson, "Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound"; Watson and Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice."

²¹⁵ King and Whitley-Berry, "The Chicks Look Back And Laugh."

mainstream country music. Additionally, according to Maines, her bandmates “always hated” the name.²¹⁶ However, Maines insisted on keeping “Dixie Chicks,” asserting that the name was “catchy” and “memorable.”²¹⁷ Thus, while Maines was not responsible for choosing the name in the first place, she played a key role in maintaining that identity as the band first achieved commercial success.

Looking back, the Chicks say they started to feel uneasy with their name following the 2003 incident. After criticizing President Bush and the war in Iraq, their outspoken liberal political views shocked many in the country music world, and having the word “Dixie” in their name falsely aligned them with the genre’s conservative-leaning politics. As Maines recalls, “I just remember feeling so gross that people thought, because of the genre of radio we were played on, that we wouldn’t be pro-choice and want peace and love and not war. So I just wanted to distance myself from that whole scene and the word ‘Dixie’ just started feeling really gross.”²¹⁸ Despite their discomfort with the name, however, the Chicks waited another 17 years to officially drop “Dixie” due to concerns about rebranding as well as unawareness about the extent of the term’s harmful connotations. As Maines tells Raisa Bruner of *TIME*, “Nobody was asking us to do it [change our name]. Nobody ever had a problem with the word ‘Dixie.’ Everybody always had a problem with the word ‘Chicks.’ And so, it just seemed like, why change something when you’ve had all of this success and it’s a brand, when people aren’t even asking you to.”²¹⁹ The Chicks tried to address their uneasiness with “Dixie” more subtly through the use of “DCX” for their tours and merchandise; for instance, the abbreviation is printed on their 2006 CD, *Taking the Long Way*, and was used in the official title for their 2016 tour and subsequent

²¹⁶ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

²¹⁷ King and Whitley-Berry, “The Chicks Look Back And Laugh.”

²¹⁸ King and Whitley-Berry.

²¹⁹ Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks.”

live album, “DCX MMXVI.”²²⁰ They even referred to themselves informally as simply “The Chicks.” However, neither moniker fully caught on with their fans or the media.²²¹

After the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 and resulting widespread Black Lives Matter protests, the Chicks began to realize just how harmful their name truly was and knew they needed to make an official change as soon as possible. Maines says the final deciding moment for her was when NASCAR, with its largely right-wing fanbase, banned the Dixie flag, another name for the Confederate flag, on June 10, 2020.²²² Similarly, Strayer said she “came across a Confederate flag on Instagram labeled ‘The Dixie Swastika,’ and she thought: ‘I don’t want to have anything to do with that.’”²²³ After they made their decision as a band, it took another two-weeks to “get their legal ducks in a row,” as Maines puts it, in order to ensure that their new name was available to use.²²⁴ Luckily, the only other music group called “The Chicks” was a folk duo in New Zealand who happily agreed to share the name.²²⁵ On June 25, 2020, the Chicks officially changed their name on social media and released their single and corresponding music video, “March March,” which features footage from the 2020 BLM protests as well as other political marches throughout US history.

One could simply stop here and praise the Chicks for demonstrating support for the Black Lives Matter movement by changing their problematic name and releasing a protest song. Yet, it’s important to critically examine their allyship from a more nuanced lens. Drawing on Eric

²²⁰ Chicks, *Taking the Long Way*; The Chicks, *DCX MMXVI*, CD (New York: Columbia, 2017).

²²¹ King and Whitley-Berry, “The Chicks Look Back And Laugh.”

²²² Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks”; Liz Clarke and Des Bieler, “NASCAR Bans Display of Confederate Flag at All Events and Properties,” *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/06/10/nascar-ban-display-confederate-flag-all-events-properties/>.

²²³ Amanda Hess, “The Chicks Are Done Caring What People Think,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/arts/music/dixie-chicks-gaslighter.html>.

²²⁴ Bruner, “The Chicks | TIME100 Talks.”

²²⁵ Minyvonne Burke, “The Dixie Chicks Change Name to The Chicks: ‘We Want to Meet This Moment,’” *NBC News*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/dixie-chicks-change-name-chicks-we-want-meet-moment-n1232135>.

Smialek's 2021 article, "Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism," I propose that the Chicks' political activism must be understood as a form of "imperfect allyship," recognizing the group's flaws in advocating for marginalized groups with which they don't identify. In his article, Smialek discusses Swift's imperfect allyship towards the LGBTQ+ community, hoping to "arrive at a tempered assessment of Taylor Swift's allyship that recognises the public good she has done, while acknowledging the ways in which advocacy like hers can benefit from criticism within the community she wishes to support."²²⁶ I aim to examine the Chicks' allyship towards the BLM movement, and, to a lesser extent, the LGBTQ+ community, in a similar manner. Although the Chicks' allyship can be seen as ultimately beneficial, examining legitimate concerns with their activism provides an opportunity—for the band members themselves as well as fans and other allies—to learn from past mistakes and continuously strive to do better.

The Chicks have been subject to criticism for their lateness in changing their name, raising questions regarding their intent and genuineness as allies towards BLM. On June 17, 2020, one week before the Chicks announced their name change, Jeremy Helligar published an opinion piece in *Variety* calling on the Chicks to remove "Dixie" from their name, citing the term's racist origins. According to Helligar, "'Dixie,' for the record, is the epitome of white America, a celebration of a Southern tradition that is indivisible from Black slaves and those grand plantations where they were forced to toil for free ... for many Black people, it conjures a time and a place of bondage."²²⁷ Though the Chicks may have been unaware of the term's problematic history when they first started their career, the fact that they held on to the name for

²²⁶ Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?," 101.

²²⁷ Jeremy Helligar, "After Lady Antebellum, Is It Time for the Dixie Chicks to Rethink Their Name?," *Variety*, June 17, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/opinion/dixie-chicks-name-rethink-lady-antebellum-1234636972/>.

years even after they began to recognize their own discomfort with “Dixie” raises concerns. Helligar draws attention to the incongruity between the Chicks’ progressive political views that they made public in 2003 while simultaneously maintaining a name aligned with racist, right-wing views. As he explains, “The grand irony of the hoopla that ensued was that as she [Natalie Maines] stood on stage declaring herself a non-fan of George W. Bush, the Republican president, she and her bandmates, sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Strayer, were performing under a moniker that, in some ways, represents up-with-whiteness more flagrantly than Bush ... ever did.”²²⁸ Ultimately, Helligar calls upon the Chicks to recognize the harmful connotations of their name and to be a part of the conversation surrounding racial injustice, saying that “their silence has been deafening.”²²⁹

Of course, the Chicks did eventually break their silence on BLM and change their harmful name, as Helligar had hoped. Yet, Natalie Weiner of *Pitchfork* continued to draw attention to problematic aspects of the Chicks’ allyship in an album review of *Gaslighter* published on July 22, 2020. In the article, Weiner criticizes the Chicks for their reactive approach to speaking out against racial injustice:

‘March March,’ [is] a performative protest song that name-checks a laundry list of contemporary issues including gun violence, global warming, and underfunded public schools without convincingly engaging with any of them. Notably absent from its concerns is systemic racism, a possible oversight that the group attempted to address with a video spotlighting the names of Black people killed by police and otherwise, released amid protests following the death of George Floyd. And though Maines told the New York Times the group had ‘wanted to change it years and years and years ago,’ the Chicks only dropped ‘Dixie’ from their name mid-album rollout, after those same protests prompted new conversations around Confederate monuments and symbolism.²³⁰

²²⁸ Helligar.

²²⁹ Helligar.

²³⁰ Natalie Weiner, “The Chicks: Gaslighter,” *Pitchfork*, July 22, 2020, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/the-chicks-gaslighter/>.

Indeed, the lyrics of “March March,” which were inspired by the Chicks’ participation in the 2018 March For Our Lives demonstration, refer only to such issues that might personally affect the band members and their families—namely, gun violence in schools, the climate crisis, and reproductive rights—and fail to engage with the Black Lives Matter movement or LGBTQ+ rights despite the fact that these communities have had their rights under attack and have been protesting for years. It wasn’t until the Chicks added the music video component that “March March” explicitly expressed their allyship for BLM as well as the LGBTQ+ community. Since external, societal pressures were key factors influencing the Chicks’ decision to change their name and release this music video, it’s not unfounded for Weiner to suggest that the Chicks’ allyship is “performative” or ungenune. As Maguire even admitted, “If Black Lives Matter and George Floyd’s murder hadn’t happened, we might’ve waited another couple of years [to change our name].”²³¹

The Chicks weren’t the only musicians to change a problematic band name in response to the murder of George Floyd and widespread BLM protests of 2020. The country trio formerly known as Lady Antebellum changed their name to Lady A on June 11, 2020, just two weeks prior to the Chicks’ name change. As part of a long social media post announcing the news, the band stated, “When we set out together almost 14 years ago, we named our band after the southern ‘antebellum’ style home where we took our first photos ... we are regretful and embarrassed to say that we did not take into account the associations that weigh down this word referring to the period of history before the Civil War, which includes slavery.”²³²

²³¹ Laura Barton, “The Chicks: ‘If George Floyd’s Murder Hadn’t Happened, We Might’ve Waited a Couple of Years to Change Our Name,’” *The Independent*, July 18, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-chicks-interview-gaslighter-new-album-trump-george-floyd-bush-a9636596.html>.

²³² Lady A (@ladya), “Dear Fans, As a Band, We Have Strived for Our Music to Be a Refuge...Inclusive of All.,” *Instagram*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTJB4Dg3WM/>.

Unfortunately, however, the name “Lady A” already belonged to a Black female blues singer, also known as Anita White, who had been using the name for over 20 years.²³³ Helligar notes the irony of the situation, stating, “They drop a word representing everything that’s been taken from Black people and end up taking something else from a Black person.”²³⁴ White expressed her disappointment with the band in an Instagram post, writing “@ladyantebellumofficial How can you say Black Lives Matter and put your knee on the neck of another Black artist? I’m not mad. I am however not giving up my name, my brand I worked hard for.”²³⁵ Ultimately, however, the trio refused to choose a different name and filed a lawsuit against White for the rights to her name.²³⁶

The Chicks, of course, avoided such a situation with their name change, ensuring to receive permission from the New Zealand duo before announcing their new name. Additionally, Lady A announced their new name with a lengthy, insincere social media post saying they have been “awakened” to racial injustices, that they are committed to “making the necessary changes to practice antiracism,” and that they plan to “take action.”²³⁷ Yet, their conflict with Anita White and insistence on stealing her name has proven otherwise, demonstrating that they did not live up to their promise to “be better allies.”²³⁸ By contrast, the Chicks quietly changed the names on their social media accounts, released their “March March” music video, and posted a simple

²³³ Ethan Millman and Amy X. Wang, “Lady Antebellum Is Now ‘Lady A.’ But So Is a Veteran Blues Singer,” *Rolling Stone*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/news/lady-antebellum-lady-a-country-blues-1013919/>.

²³⁴ Helligar, “After Lady Antebellum, Is It Time for the Dixie Chicks to Rethink Their Name?”

²³⁵ Lady A (@ladya_bluesdiva), “@ladyantebellumofficial How Can You Say Black Lives Matter and Put Your Knee on the Neck of Another Black Artist?,” *Instagram*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBV4fZjH42x/>.

²³⁶ Ethan Millman, “Country Trio Lady A Sues Seattle Musician in Name Dispute,” *Rolling Stone*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/news/lady-a-sues-black-singer-name-1025965/>.

²³⁷ Lady A (@ladya), “Dear Fans, As a Band, We Have Strived for Our Music to Be a Refuge...Inclusive of All.”

²³⁸ Lady A (@ladya).

statement on their website: “We want to meet this moment.”²³⁹ As Maines tells Howard Stern, “We didn’t want to make a big deal about it [changing our name]. We didn’t do a press release. We just changed all the social medias. We just did it. Because this moment isn’t about us. This moment is about something so much bigger.”²⁴⁰ Unlike Lady A, the Chicks recognized the importance of stepping back and decentering their voices amidst the fight for racial justice.

Though the Chicks approached their name change much more tactfully than Lady A, their lateness in making the change is nevertheless subject to similar critiques. As Anita White said of the band Lady A, “If it [changing their name] mattered, it would have mattered to them before. It shouldn’t have taken George Floyd to die for them to realize that their name had a slave reference to it,” a criticism that can similarly be applied to the Chicks as well.²⁴¹ While their unofficial use of monikers such as “DCX” and “the Chicks” over the years is proof that the band felt uncomfortable with their name, their discomfort wasn’t enough to make a real change. It wasn’t until they were faced with external societal pressures that the Chicks truly recognized the harmful impact of their name and took action. While there is no excuse for the Chicks’ past wrongdoings, despite their good intentions, it is also important to recognize the ways in which the Chicks continue to learn from their mistakes and strive to do better, as allyship is inherently imperfect and an ongoing learning process. In the remainder of this chapter section, I explore how the Chicks have responded to these criticisms about their allyship and have demonstrated a commitment to growth as well as the ultimately positive impact of their allyship despite their lateness.

²³⁹ Emily Yahr, “Dixie Chicks Drop Dixie, Change Name to The Chicks: ‘We Want to Meet This Moment,’” *Washington Post*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/06/25/dixie-chicks-change-name-chicks/>.

²⁴⁰ Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

²⁴¹ Millman and Wang, “Lady Antebellum Is Now ‘Lady A.’ But So Is a Veteran Blues Singer.”

When the Chicks decided to change their name and create their “March March” video in support of BLM, they recognized that they had a lot to learn in order to become better allies. As such, the bandmembers consulted with movement leaders from BLM and other activist groups for advice on their name change and new music video because, as Maines says, “we wanted to do more listening than acting or speaking.”²⁴² For example, Maines met with LGBTQ+ organizer and activist Michael Skolnik who provided advice on images to include in their music video. As Maines recalls, “He mentioned the (Black) trans march in Brooklyn (in June). He was like, ‘That was a huge march, so you should put that one in.’”²⁴³ Maines also became involved in Harness, a non-profit organization whose goal is to “advance racial justice, gender justice and civic justice” and advises artists on how to leverage their platforms for social activism.²⁴⁴ Maines says she attended many Zoom calls with the organization, presumably referring to their program called Harness Salons, which “provide an intimate space for artists and activists to gather, learn about timely social issues and make commitments to taking action.”²⁴⁵ Maines explains how these conversations have been invaluable experiences for her “to listen and not talk, and learn. Learn directly from the source.”²⁴⁶ The Chicks have embraced the opportunity to further educate themselves about systemic racism and other inequalities in society. They have demonstrated the importance of stepping back, decentering their voices, and learning directly from leaders and activists with marginalized identities. By doing the important work to recognize their past

²⁴² Stern, “Interview with Natalie Maines,” July 20, 2020.

²⁴³ Chris Azzopardi, “The Chicks’ Natalie Maines Talks Queer Creators Behind Trio’s Comeback LP, LGBTQ Activism & Advice For Lady A,” *Pride Source*, July 24, 2020, <https://pridesource.com/article/the-chicks-natalie-maines-talks-queer-creators-behind-trios-comeback-lp-lgbtq-activism-advice-for-country-trio-lady-a/>.

²⁴⁴ Harness, “About,” accessed August 2, 2022, <https://iwillharness.com/about/>.

²⁴⁵ Harness, “Artist Engagement,” accessed August 2, 2022, <https://iwillharness.com/programs-and-campaigns/artist-engagement/>.

²⁴⁶ Azzopardi, “The Chicks’ Natalie Maines Talks Queer Creators Behind Trio’s Comeback LP, LGBTQ Activism & Advice For Lady A.”

mistakes and challenge previous ways of thinking, they've shown a commitment to growing as allies and to using their platform as artists to promote positive social change.

The Chicks' name change and release of their "March March" video have led to beneficial learning outcomes for not only the Chicks themselves but also for fans, artists, and allies at large. For instance, during an episode of the Kelly Clarkson show on June 6, 2022, in which the Chicks were featured guests, Clarkson commended the Chicks for the educational impact of their name change. She said that prior to their name change, "I had no idea that it [Dixie] meant anything." Their announcement immediately prompted Clarkson to start "googling" and educating herself about the harmful origins of the term. As she told the Chicks, "I thought that was a really cool to educate the public on something, especially at such an important time."²⁴⁷ Indeed, by publicly acknowledging their mistakes, making the necessary changes, and taking the responsibility to educate themselves, the Chicks have served as role models for others to do the same in their own lives, helping to increase awareness and foster important discussions about allyship.

Finally, the Chicks' name change and protest music video have helped impact country music more broadly. Although the trio has distanced themselves from the genre in recent years, they have continued to influence the next generation of country musicians and shape the industry at large. Their public support of BLM has contributed to important conversations about allyship and racial justice—conversations that are especially needed within country music given the industry's history of exclusion of BIPOC musicians and other marginalized groups. As Abigail Covington writes in *Country Queer*, "This is The Chicks in 2020—uncompromising and determined to be on the right side of history despite their industry's insistence on preserving an

²⁴⁷ Joseph C. Terry, "The Chicks Are Excited To Perform With Their Kids On 'Gaslighter' Tour," *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, NBC, June 6, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diB375jt1nk>.

exclusive and whitewashed version of the past.”²⁴⁸ With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter explores how the Chicks’ use their artistic voice to advocate for social change through a close analysis of their music video, “March March.”

Music Video Analysis – Overview

The Chicks’ “March March” music video is a powerful statement in support of Black Lives Matter and other social justice issues. In collaboration with artistic director Seanne Farmer, the Chicks compiled protest footage from throughout US history into a compelling montage that strengthens the original message of the song. Strayer explains that they wanted to show “marches through time that reflected the lyrics but also reflected what was happening right now.”²⁴⁹ Over the course of a two-week collaborative process, the three band members contributed clips and images to the video, and Farmer brought them to life with her skillful editing techniques, playing an important role in enhancing the musical and lyrical elements of the song.²⁵⁰ Drawing on scholarship in music video analysis, the remainder of this chapter analyzes the interconnected musical, lyrical, and visual components of “March March.” I explore how “March March” serves as an expression of the Chicks’ political activism as well as how the song and video continue the Chicks’ practice of challenging the boundaries of country music. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the Chicks use music video to recontextualize “March March” to reflect current events, thereby enacting a “bricolage” process.

Music video primarily functions as a promotional tool for songs and artists. As Diane Railton and Paul Watson note, “All music videos have an avowedly commercial agenda: they are

²⁴⁸ Abigail Covington, “‘March, March,’ The Chicks,” *Country Queer*, July 14, 2020, <https://countryqueer.com/reviews/song-review/march-march-the-chicks/>.

²⁴⁹ Power, “The Chicks Explain Why They Removed ‘Dixie’ from Their Name.”

²⁵⁰ Power.

first and foremost a *commercial* for an associated but distinct consumer product, the music track itself.”²⁵¹ As such, it’s impossible to ignore the fact that “March March” is in fact a promotion for the Chicks’ corresponding single. Indeed, the video’s release amidst the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 may lend itself to suspicions about the Chicks’ true intentions, appearing to be simply an opportunistic strategy to take advantage of current events in order to sell more records. Yet, as this chapter has demonstrated so far, the Chicks have shown a genuine commitment to responsible allyship by recognizing their past mistakes, quietly making necessary changes, seeking out educational opportunities to learn from BLM leaders and other activists themselves, and yielding their voices to those most impacted by systemic injustices. Accordingly, “March March” as a music video can be read as having a dual function, that of promoting the Chicks’ new single and album while simultaneously promoting important social causes, particularly Black Lives Matter. By releasing a music video as a form of political activism, the Chicks leverage their platform as celebrity musicians to advocate for important social issues and raise awareness amongst their audiences.

In addition to extending music video beyond its primary commercial purpose, the Chicks’ “March March” continues the trio’s practice of destabilizing genre boundaries. According to Railton and Watson, “individual genres of music video ... do not map onto music genres in a straightforward fashion...”²⁵² That is, musical genres are not equivalent to music video genres and don’t necessarily correspond to each other; any type of music video can accompany any genre of music. As Railton and Watson continue, “although some music genres may privilege a particular type of video, any given music video may have, and often does have, far more in common with a video which promotes a song from another music genre than with others of its

²⁵¹ Railton and Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, 2.

²⁵² Railton and Watson, 43.

own.”²⁵³ For instance, while country music videos may have a tendency visually engage with domestic themes such as marriage or family—as the Chicks have done in many of their previous videos including “Top of the World,” “Ready to Run,” and “Goodbye Earl,” among others—this type of video is certainly not a requirement for a country song. As such, “March March” as a music video affords an additional path for the Chicks to continue stretching musical genre boundaries. Through the video’s overt display of political imagery for progressive causes, the Chicks expand the possibilities for what can be considered a country song, reshaping the boundaries of the genre as they participate in it.

In order to determine the music video genre of “March March,” I turn to Carol Vernallis’ work on the subject. Vernallis asserts that music videos may be classified as existing somewhere along a continuum between narrative and nonnarrative form, although the vast majority of music videos lean towards the nonnarrative side.²⁵⁴ This overwhelming preference for nonnarrative forms is due to the fact that music video is merely a secondary product that must support the primary product, i.e. the song itself. Vernallis explains that this is because “videos follow the song’s form, which tends to be *cyclical and episodic* rather than sequentially directed” and “videos mimic the concerns of pop music, which tend to be a *consideration of a topic* rather than an enactment of it [emphasis added].”²⁵⁵ “March March” follows a nonnarrative music video form consisting of a montage of political protest footage, accompanying the song’s *cyclical* form and illustrating the *topic* of protest in the song’s lyrics. The specific nonnarrative genre of “March March” can be considered “the catalog,” which Vernallis defines as a music video that “involves categories, series, or lists.”²⁵⁶ Indeed, “March March” explores a series of different

²⁵³ Railton and Watson, 43.

²⁵⁴ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 4.

²⁵⁵ Vernallis, 4.

²⁵⁶ Vernallis, 20.

political topics and memorializes the countless Black lives killed by police with a long list of names during the song's climactic instrumental bridge.

In addition to categorizing different types of music video, Vernallis highlights the importance of visual editing in creating a compelling video. She notes that “music-video editing exceeds the functions of film editing largely through its responsiveness to musical features—rhythmic, timbral, melodic, and formal.”²⁵⁷ Visual editing helps to reinforce the musical elements of a song such as, but not limited to, beat patterns, tempo, timbres, phrases, melodic contour, articulations, harmonic changes, and formal structure. Editing can also help shape the meaning of a song and reinforce the message conveyed by the lyrics. While there are endless possibilities for different music-video editing strategies, the strategy most prevalent in “March March” is montage editing, whereby “two shots edited together could create a new meaning that could not inhere in either shot alone.”²⁵⁸

The Chicks have used montage editing in previous music videos such as “Top of the World” and “Not Ready to Make Nice,” both of which have been analyzed by Jada Watson and Lori Burns.²⁵⁹ For instance, in “Top of the World,” as Watson and Burns explain, “montage-style editing allows for movement between parallel story lines, between the narrator and the story, and even *between the historical past and immediate present* [emphasis added].”²⁶⁰ “Top of the World,” as well as “Not Ready to Make Nice,” are narrative music videos that use montage editing to convey multiple narrative perspectives. Yet, montage editing can also result in powerful effects in nonnarrative videos such as “March March” with the use of similar

²⁵⁷ Vernallis, 44.

²⁵⁸ Vernallis, 41.

²⁵⁹ Watson and Burns, “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice”; Burns and Watson, “Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound.”

²⁶⁰ Burns and Watson, “Subjective Perspectives through Word, Image and Sound,” 10.

approaches. For instance, “March March” juxtaposes footage and images from both the “historical past and immediate present,” highlighting historical movements such as women’s suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement alongside Black Lives Matter and other contemporary social movements.²⁶¹ “March March” also uses montage editing to enhance the musical features through the rhythmic qualities of the edits. The following chapter sections provide an analytical interpretation of “March March,” beginning with an overview of the lyrics and music and then examining how these two components intersect with the images. Throughout the following pages, I invite the reader to view Figure 1, a detailed form diagram of the music video that provides an overview of how the musical, lyrical, and visual components function in each section of the song.

Lyrics

The lyrics for “March March,” which can be found in the first substantial row of Figure 1, were inspired by the Chicks’ attendance at the 2018 March For Our Lives rally in Washington, DC, an event organized in response to the 2018 mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As Maines explains, “It was so impactful for me. That’s the first time I’ve ever been in a march that large. And we weren’t there as performers, we were just in the crowds ... We took a lot from that, the energy of it.”²⁶² After attending the rally, the trio felt empowered to incorporate activism into their music. In Verse 1 of “March March,” the Chicks directly address the issue of gun violence. For instance, the opening line, “Brenda’s packin’ heat cuz she don’t like Mondays,” refers to the 1979 mass shooting at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego, in which 16-year-old shooter Brenda Spencer open-fired at the school because, as she told

²⁶¹ Burns and Watson, 10.

²⁶² Apple Music, “Gaslighter by The Chicks.”

Figure 1: "March March" Music Video – Form Diagram

	Intro	Chorus	Verse 1	Chorus	Verse 2
Time stamp	00:00	00:13	00:36	01:00	01:33
Length	4 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars	8 bars
	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	Brenda's packin' heat cuz she don't like Mondays Underpaid teacher policing the hallways Print yourself a weapon and take it to the gun range Ah cut the shit / You ain't goin' to the gun range	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	Tell the ol' boys in the white bread lobby What they can and can't do with their bodies Temperatures risin' cities are sinkin' Ah cut the shit / You know your city is sinkin'
Lyrics	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	Standing with Emma and our sons and daughters Watchin' our youth have to solve our problems I'll follow them so who's comin' with me Half of you love me / Half already hate me	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one	Lies are truth and truth is fiction Everybody's talkin' / Who's gonna listen What the hell happened in Hellsinki
		Overhead footage of street packed with protesters Gay flag waving "Say Her Name" painted on street Women's march outside Capitol in DC	<u>First half of verse:</u> Tutting, representing guns with hand movements <u>Second half of verse:</u> X Gonzalez - March for Our Lives Malala Yousafzai Greta Thunberg Climate Marches Anti-Iraq War protests Anti-Chicks protest, CD burning	<u>First half of chorus:</u> Women's suffrage movement Black women suffragists Black nationalist women NAACP Silent Protest Parade 1917 Ruby Bridges first day of school 1960 BLM June 3, 2020 in Merrick, NY: little girl shouting "No justice!" <u>Second half of chorus:</u> Lincoln Memorial in DC Gay liberation movement Black LGBTQ lives matter poster	<u>First half of verse:</u> Women's liberation movement White House interns 2018, with "Vote" text above Gloria Steinem, Women's Liberation Rally Wildfires, flooded cities <u>Second half of verse:</u> Anti-Vietnam war rally March On Washington, 1963 Greta Thunberg Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) rally Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes 2014 Sojourner Truth Black Trans Lives Matter face mask
Images	Jo Artis Ratti Krump				
Text	"If your voice held no power, they wouldn't try to silence you." - unknown	Chorus lyrics overlaid above footage		"Army of one" displayed above images	"Vote" overlaid above the image of Trump white house photo
Music	Synthesized beat, syncopated	A natural minor, Blues scale for vocals (and later for instrumental solos) i - iv - i - iv Synthesized beat, syncopated	More synthesized layers (long held tones, with slides, to emulate a slide guitar) i - iv - i - iv Synthesized beat, syncopated	Sliding electronic harmonic layers continue 3-part harmony in part of chorus i - iv - i - iv Synthesized beat, syncopated	Synthesized harmonic layer i - iv - i - iv Electric guitar blue-scale lead-in to Chorus (last bar of verse) Synthesized beat, syncopated

	Chorus		Bridge (Instrumental)	Outro
Time stamp	01:46	02:09	02:33	03:42
Length	8 bars	8 bars	24 bars	5 bars
	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one			
Lyrics	March March to my own drum March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm an army of one Oh I'm an army of one			
	<p>Footage of police brutality from what appears to be the Civil Rights Movement</p> <p>BLM protesters wearing gas masks to protect from tear gas</p> <p>Cops in riot gear marching towards protesters</p> <p>People running away as tear gas is thrown at them, overlaid with fire/flames imagery</p> <p>Sign that reads "they can't kill us all," demonstrating strength in numbers.</p> <p>A sign that reads, "white silence is compliance"</p> <p>Minneapolis burning building</p> <p>#EndWhiteSilence</p> <p>A sign that reads, "Say Their Names"</p>	<p>Bars 1-4: Strayer on slide guitar, band member doing leg slaps</p> <p>Bars 5-8: group of BLM protesters playing drums marching with drums. Child dancing at a BLM rally. Strayer on banjo</p> <p>Bars 9-12: a sign that reads "Dump Your Racist Boyfriend." More protesters with drums. People dancing at BLM protests. Image of Black Ballenas in front of Robert E Lee statue</p> <p>White House fence BLM posters</p> <p>Overhead shots of streets packed with protesters</p> <p>Bars 12-16: McGuire fiddle solo, more dancers at BLM protests, overhead footage, drummers.</p> <p>Person with BLM face paint (video of removing the paint but in reverse)</p>		<p>"use your VOICE. use your VOTE. The Chicks" signed Emily, Natalie, Martie</p> <p><u>List of organizations (with website urls) to support:</u> Headcount, Black Lives Matter, Human Rights Campaign, American Civil Liberties Union, Supermajority Education Fund, March for Our Lives, Fridays for Future, Mi Familia Vota, Native American Rights Fund, Planned Parenthood, White People for Black Lives, Innocence Project, Proclaim Justice, Marsina P. Johnson Institute, Advancement Project, United We Dream</p>
Images	<p>BLM protest footage from various cities: DC, New York, Tucson, AZ, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Ann Arbor, MI</p> <p>Cars on fire, protesters facing police confrontation. (e.g. tear gas, riot gear, arrests), burning cars/buildings.</p>			
Text	"Army of one" displayed for first half of chorus, entire lyrics displayed for second iteration of the chorus		List of 367 names (see Figure 5)	
Music	<p>Transition between "March March" and "own drum" in 1st half of chorus: rapid drum beats - correspond to quick visual editing</p> <p>Sliding sounds with electric guitar, and other instruments</p> <p>i - iv - i - iv</p> <p>Synthesized beat, syncopated</p>	<p>McGuire fiddle solo</p> <p>Pulsing piano chords (on 8th notes, A minor chord as pedal)</p> <p>i - iv - i - iv</p> <p>Synthesized beat, syncopated</p>	<p>Syncopated synthesized beat stops</p> <p>Bars 1-4: i - iv. thigh slaps</p> <p>Bars 5-8: i pedal. thigh slaps and acoustic drums (snare drum for a march)</p> <p>Bars 9-12: i pedal. Banjo solo</p> <p>Bars 13-16: lament bass. Banjo continues</p> <p>Bars 17-24: lament bass. Fiddle solo. Banjo continues</p>	<p>Completely acoustic. No synthesized beat. Just fiddle and banjo solo</p>

a reporter, “I just don’t like Mondays.”²⁶³ The lyrics of Verse 1 continue by acknowledging the prevalence of “underpaid teachers” as well as concerns about the ease of obtaining guns via 3D printing. In the line, “Standing with Emma and our sons and daughters,” the Chicks honour X González (formerly Emma González), survivor of the Parkland school shooting and co-organizer of the subsequent March For Our Lives movement.²⁶⁴

Though the Chicks were initially inspired by the March for Our Lives rally, they wanted the song to extend to other pressing issues besides mass shootings. As Maines says, “We didn’t want it [the song] to be about one particular march, so on the verses we talk about different things that are important to us.”²⁶⁵ For instance, Verse 2 touches on reproductive rights (“Tell the ol’ boys in the white bread lobby / What they can and can’t do with their bodies”) and the climate crisis (“Temperatures risin’ cities are sinkin’”).²⁶⁶ Additionally, the second verse subtly criticizes President Trump, calling out his gaslighting behaviours (“Lies are truth and truth is fiction”) as well as his controversial, clandestine meeting with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki in 2018 (“What the hell happened in Helsinki”).²⁶⁷ Of course, the Chicks couldn’t touch on everything they were passionate about in just a four-minute song with only two verses. As Maines told George Garner of *Music Week*, “once you go down that path [of writing about social justice issues], we could have had endless verses.”²⁶⁸ The Chicks recognize the limitations of

²⁶³ Pauline Repard, “40 Years Ago, Brenda Spencer Took Lives, Changed Lives in a Mass Shooting at a San Diego Elementary School,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/sd-me-brenda-spencer-school-shooting-20190129-story.html>.

²⁶⁴ Louis Lucero II, “What Emma González Said Without Words at the March for Our Lives Rally,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/us/emma-gonzalez-march-for-our-lives.html>; Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁶⁵ Apple Music, “Gaslighter by The Chicks.”

²⁶⁶ Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁶⁷ Chris Cillizza, “Trump and Putin Met One-on-One in a Room for 2 Hours. Here’s Why That’s a Problem.,” *CNN*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/17/politics/donald-trump-putin-meeting/index.html>.

²⁶⁸ George Garner, “‘The Fans Are Excited, and We Can Feel That’: The Chicks on Their First New Album in 14 Years,” *Music Week*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.musicweek.com/talent/read/the-fans-are-excited-and-we-can-feel-that-the-chicks-on-their-first-new-album-in-14-years/080451>.

relying on the lyrics alone to express their views, so the inclusion of protest footage in the corresponding music video has allowed them to expand upon the meaning of the song, as will be discussed shortly.

All that being said, Maines says that the overall message of “March March” is not just about the individual movements referenced in the lyrics and video, but, more importantly, a general statement about standing up for your beliefs. This sentiment is reflected in the lyrics of the chorus, in which Maines sings, “March March to my own drum” and “I’m an army of one.”²⁶⁹ As she tells Zane Lowe of Apple Music,

What’s cool about the song is it’s not so much about all the causes. I mean, the video is, and we definitely sing about certain things in the verses. But it’s really about the listener and the person, whatever it is that you’re passionate about and that’s important to you. You have that power to be an army of one, stick to your guns, do what you believe is right in your heart.²⁷⁰

The Chicks want each individual listener to take ownership of the song and apply it to causes they feel most strongly about in their own lives.

Though “March March” is a protest song, its broader message fits in with the rest of *Gaslighter* due to its intersection of the personal and the political. As Maines explains, “I don’t necessarily see a separation in a song being personal or being a comment on something in culture or the sign of the times. ‘March March,’ even though it is a protest song, it is a personal protest song.”²⁷¹ Indeed, “March March” encourages listeners to apply the song’s message to whatever issue they feel most passionate about in their personal lives, demonstrating the inseparability between the personal and political realms. Furthermore, “March March” relates to the rest of *Gaslighter* due to its expression of “rambling,” a common theme in country music. As in

²⁶⁹ Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁷⁰ Lowe, “The Chicks: Creating ‘Gaslighter’ and Working With Jack Antonoff.”

²⁷¹ King and Whitley-Berry, “The Chicks Look Back And Laugh.”

“Julianna Calm Down” and “Young Man,” “March March” encourages listeners to forge their own paths in life, even if it means being “an army of one” and going against conventional expectations. Overall, “March March” continues to encourage the next generation to stand up for what they believe in and to stay strong despite life’s challenges.

Music

“March March” was one of the most difficult songs on the album for the Chicks to write; with such a serious topic at hand, they spent a significant amount of time experimenting and perfecting the musical sound. Maguire explains that “It was a heavy subject, and it needed to have the appropriate heavy track. So we were willing to put in the time and headspace to get that one just right.”²⁷² According to Maines, the sound of “March March” evolved significantly throughout the creative process. She says, “It was a totally different song on the first day we left the studio. It was cool, but there was something hokey about the tempo or parts of the melody. Jack is definitely the one who helped us solve what was going wrong.”²⁷³ Through their collaboration with Jack Antonoff, the Chicks worked through their struggles in the recording studio and ultimately crafted a strong musical track to complement the protest theme of the song. As will be discussed shortly, the use of musical elements such as the blues scale and lament bass help to convey the serious topic of the song. Additionally, “March March” blends electronic elements with acoustic bluegrass instruments, continuing to challenge genre boundaries between pop and country music.

The melodic and harmonic content of “March March” play important roles in expressing the song’s serious subject matter. As shown in Figure 2, after a brief, four-bar rhythmic intro, the

²⁷² Lowe, “The Chicks: Creating ‘Gaslighter’ and Working With Jack Antonoff.”

²⁷³ Garner, “The Fans Are Excited, and We Can Feel That.”

Figure 2: "March March" Chorus 1 Transcription

$\text{♩} = 80$

Voice

Percussion

Bassline

4

March March to my own drum March March to my own drum

A min: i

7

Hey hey I'm an ar-my of one_ Oh_ I'm an ar - my of one_ March March to my own drum

iv i

10

March March to my own drum Hey hey I'm am ar - my of one_ Oh_ I'm an ar - my of one_

iv

chorus enters and establishes the tonal center of A natural minor; Maines' corresponding vocal line is built entirely on the A blues scale. The use of this scalar pattern reflects the somber content of the song and is used as a foundation for the melodic content of the vocal lines and instrumental solos. The tonal center of A natural minor is maintained throughout the entire song, achieved mostly through the alternation between tonic (i) and subdominant (iv) in the bass line, as demonstrated in Figure 2. The instrumental bridge, however, slightly deviates from this pattern. As shown in Figure 3, the first four measures of the bridge continue the i – iv pattern, but the next eight measures break the pattern by holding just a tonic pedal tone. Then, in the second

Figure 3: “March March” Bassline of Bridge Section

♩ = 80

A min: i iv i

9

i lament bass

17

half of the bridge, the bass line introduces a chromatic descending tetrachord ostinato, A–G–Gb–F–E, otherwise known as the lament bass. Though most typically found in music of the Baroque era, the lament bass is a common topos that can be found throughout western music; it typically expresses “a mournful text” and is often used during “an exceptional moment of emotional

climax or particularly intense expression.”²⁷⁴ Fittingly, the lament bass occurs during the musical and visual climax of the music video, where numerous names flash rapidly across the screen in mourning of the countless Black lives lost to racially-charged violence from police officers and other perpetrators. Overall, the melodic and harmonic techniques used in “March March” contribute significantly to the solemn character of the song.

In addition, the rhythmic and textural elements of “March March” enhance the song’s impact via the blending of synthesized and acoustic sounds. As shown in Figure 2, the song opens with a rhythmic ostinato consisting of a syncopated, synthesized beat split between a low, un-pitched beat and a high-pitched beeping sound that hints at an E-natural, anticipating the opening E of the chorus vocal line. The synthesized ostinato beat continues throughout the choruses, verses, and pre-bridge. Then, during the bridge, the rhythmic layer switches to an acoustic rhythmic pattern with faster subdivisions, driving the momentum to the song’s climax. Here, the percussion consists of thigh slaps as well as snare and bass drum, drawing on percussion instruments typically used in marches and reflecting the lyrics from the chorus, “March March to my own drum.”

The harmonic texture throughout the song also incorporates both acoustic instruments and synthesized sounds. In the first chorus, the harmonic layer is quite thin, consisting of synthesized pitches in the bassline simply alternating between i and iv. As the song continues into Verse 1 and subsequent sections, the texture gradually thickens with the addition of more and more layers of sound, including acoustic instruments, building momentum to the bridge. Jack Antonoff’s tactful skills as a producer seamlessly blend the synthesized and acoustic sounds

²⁷⁴ Ellen Rosand, “Lamento,” in *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000015904>.

together, making it difficult to discern the difference between the two components, with the exception of the clear instrumental solos.

The combination of synthesized and acoustic elements in “March March” continues the Chicks’ practice of challenging genre boundaries. The use of synthesized textural layers and beats points the Chicks towards a more pop and hip hop inspired sound. At the same time, the synthesized sounds draw on country influences by hinting at a country “twang” via the bending and sliding of the pitches, emulating the sounds of traditional country instruments such as the pedal steel or slide guitar. Furthermore, the prominence of acoustic instruments such as banjo and fiddle within a larger synthesized texture keeps the Chicks connected to their country and bluegrass roots. Thus, “March March” subverts genre conventions not only through its content as a protest song but also due to the experimentation and blending of musical sounds.

Images – Interaction with Lyrics

The Chicks used the lyrics of “March March” to speak out about several important social issues. However, they could only cover a limited number of topics within just two verses. The Chicks address this gap in their corresponding music video, providing historical and contemporary images of protests throughout history. Historical movements highlighted in the video include women’s suffrage, the Civil Rights movement, gay liberation, women’s liberation, and the anti-Vietnam and Iraq war movements; contemporary movements include March for Our Lives, the climate marches, women’s marches, and, of course, Black Lives Matter. The Chicks consulted with movement leaders from BLM and other activist groups for guidance on their name change and the creation of their protest music video. The images that the Chicks chose to incorporate into the video demonstrate their awareness of interconnected systems of oppression

by featuring, for instance, images of Black women suffragists and Black LGBTQ+ marches of summer 2020. Although the Chicks cover a wide range of social issues in the video, the music video ultimately serves as an expression of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter Movement.

In the remaining two sections of this chapter, I explore how the images in “March March” interact with the lyrical and musical elements to amplify the song’s message. I begin by exploring the relationship between the images and lyrics, emphasizing the crucial role that the lyrics play within this particular music video and exploring specific instances of how the two components intersect with one another. In the final section, I examine how the music video images extend beyond the meaning of the song’s lyrics to express support for the Black Lives Matter movement, enacting a “bricolage” process of recontextualizing the song to reflect current events. Additionally, I consider the relationship between the images and the musical sound as well as the role of visual editing.

According to Carol Vernallis, lyrics typically play a subordinate role in music videos vis-à-vis musical and visual elements. She likens music video lyrics to film scores, asserting that lyrics are “essential but often unheard and only sporadically capable of occupying the viewer’s attention.”²⁷⁵ I argue, however, that “March March” goes against this assumption, as the lyrics play a central role in conveying the message of the music video. The prominence of the lyrics is made clear from the entrance of the first chorus, where the lyrics are visually depicted in large, bold text overlaid above corresponding protest footage. (For an outline of the text that appears visually onscreen throughout the video, see Figure 1.) The entirety of the lyrics are visually displayed during the first chorus, and portions of the lyrics continue to be displayed during the second and third choruses. By clearly showcasing the lyrics in large text on screen, the Chicks

²⁷⁵ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 137.

emphasize the importance of the message conveyed in the chorus, i.e., a general statement about standing up for what you believe in, even if it means forging your own path as an “army of one.”

Unlike the choruses, the two verses don’t display the text of the lyrics on screen. Yet, the images in each verse make up for this deficit by vividly illustrating specific words and phrases from the lyrics. (For an outline of the images included within each section of the video, refer to Figure 1.) For instance, the lyrics in Verse 1 specifically address the issue of mass shootings and the corresponding images directly reflect this. The verse begins with alternating videos of two women creating rhythmic movements with their hands, or “tutting,” which is “a style of dance that uses the quick, sharp movements of fingers, hands, and arms to mimic ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.”²⁷⁶ The women start out with relatively abstract gestures, but then they gradually shift towards more concrete hand movements that can be interpreted as building, loading, and shooting a gun—reflecting the corresponding lyrics, “Print yourself a weapon and take it to the gun range / Ah cut the shit / You ain’t goin’ to the gun range.”²⁷⁷

The second half of Verse 1 consists entirely of protest images that closely reflect the lyrics. For example, during the line, “Standing with Emma and our sons and daughters,” the video cuts to an image of X González at the March For Our Lives rally in DC in 2018, during which they gave a heartfelt speech in honour of their fallen classmates.²⁷⁸ And while the lyrics of Verse 1 are clearly about gun violence, the images allow the text reflect a broader range of issues. For instance, the following line, “Watchin’ our youth have to solve our problems” extends beyond González by including images of other notable youth leaders such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. Furthermore, the very last line of Verse 1, “Half of you love me

²⁷⁶ Cate Matthews, “All Hail The ‘King Of Fingers,’” *HuffPost*, January 8, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pnut-king-of-fingers-dance-video_n_4555714.

²⁷⁷ Chicks, *Gaslighter*.

²⁷⁸ Lucero II, “What Emma González Said Without Words at the March for Our Lives Rally.”

/ Half already hate me,” hints at the hate that Maines and her bandmates received following the 2003 incident; this intimation is made explicit through the inclusion of images of anti-Iraq war protests as well as images of anti-Chicks protests and people setting their CDs on fire.

The lyrics of Verse 2, which tackle reproductive rights, the Trump administration, and the climate crisis, are all reflected in the accompanying images. For instance, the opening two lines, “Tell the ol’ boys in the white bread lobby / What they can and can’t do with their bodies,” are heard alongside the official photo of Trump’s 2018 White House interns with the word, “Vote,” overlaid in large bold text and then accompanied by historical footage of Gloria Steinem speaking at a Women’s Liberation rally in the 1970s.²⁷⁹ The following line, “Temperatures are rising, cities are sinking,” is accompanied by images of regions in the US affected by natural disasters, such as footage from an active wildfire as well as photos of flooding in Houston and New Orleans.²⁸⁰ Additionally, the line, “Lies are truth and truth is fiction / Everybody’s talkin’ / Who’s gonna listen,” is applied to a wide variety of protest images including a student anti-Vietnam rally in 1968, the March On Washington in 1963, various Women’s Liberation and Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) protests in the 1970s, a 2020 Women’s March in Washington, DC, and Greta Thunberg speaking at a climate march in Washington, DC in fall 2019.²⁸¹ Verse 2

²⁷⁹ Emily Stewart, “Exclusive: Here’s the Photo of a Very White Summer Intern Class the White House Didn’t Release,” *Vox*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/29/17793104/white-house-intern-picture-summer-2018>; Kinolibrary, “1970s USA Women’s Liberation Rally, Gloria Steinem,” January 18, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eP_8a7PSik.

²⁸⁰ Michael Sheetz, “Underwater Metropolis: Photos of Houston before and after Historic Flooding,” *CNBC*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/28/underwater-metropolis-photos-of-houston-before-and-after-historic-flooding.html>; Jim Gabour, “New Orleans under Water: 12 Years after Katrina, Officials Can’t Get It Right,” *The Guardian*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/15/new-orleans-flooding-rain-water-louisiana>.

²⁸¹ Bettmann, “Student Anti-Vietnam Rally, 1968,” Getty Images, November 5, 1968, <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/des-moines-ia-participants-in-a-students-for-a-democratic-news-photo/515448544>; Steve Schapiro, “March On Washington For Jobs & Freedom,” *Getty Images*, August 28, 1963, <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/view-of-hands-held-together-and-the-front-line-of-news-photo/869444574>; Marissa J. Lang and Samantha Schmidt, “Women’s March Protesters in D.C. and across the Country Pledge It’s Only the Beginning,” *Washington Post*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/womens-march-protests-set-for-saturday-as-organizers-pledge-its-only-the->

ends by highlighting notable women leaders via a 2014 image of Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes as well as a historical photograph of Sojourner Truth.²⁸²

Overall, the lyrics are a crucial component of the “March March” video. Not only are the lyrics depicted literally on screen in large, bold text during the chorus, but they are also illustrated throughout the verses with various images that closely reference the words of the lyrics. That being said, the lyrics only touch on a limited number of topics, omitting important movements like Black Lives Matter. The following section explores how the “March March” music video uses images to invoke additional meaning and express support for the BLM movement; I also explore how visual editing strategies intersect with the musical elements of the song.

Images – Interaction with Music

“March March” begins with footage from a 2020 BLM demonstration in Santa Monica where street dancer Jo’Artis Ratti performed “krump,” an improvised style of street dance, in front of a line of police officers in riot gear. As reported by Sarah Kaufman of the *Washington Post*, krump is a form of “protest art,” and “Ratti used it to improvise on a lifetime of rage and despair within a few feet of a police line.” In Ratti’s words, “Krump was created to bring awareness ... It’s a testimony.”²⁸³ Kaufman continues to emphasize the prevalence of dance throughout the BLM protests:

beginning/2020/01/17/9a7186b2-3945-11ea-bb7b-265f4554af6d_story.html; Associated Press, “Greta Thunberg Joins Climate Protest in Washington,” September 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHTh9MYmm7w>.

²⁸² Priscilla Frank, “Gloria Steinem & Dorothy Pittman-Hughes’ Restaging Of Iconic Portrait Shows Activism Has No Age,” *HuffPost*, March 1, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gloria-steinem-dorothy-pitman-hughes_n_58b6d8e1e4b0a8a9b787c8cb.

²⁸³ Sarah L. Kaufman, “In Pain and Rage, a Protester Approached Police. And Then He Danced.,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/the-george-floyd-protest-dance-that-went-viral/2020/06/04/e285c85c-a5d1-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html.

Powerful choreography such as this is happening across the country and beyond. Where demonstrators have gathered in Floyd's name to decry racism and police brutality, the streets have become dance floors. Protesters are tapping into dance's power as an act of rebellion as well as connection, a way to express ineffable emotions and share those emotions with others.²⁸⁴

By opening their music video with Ratti's dance sequence, the Chicks recognize the power of dance and other artistic mediums as forms of expression within protest movements, particularly BLM. As will be discussed shortly, the Chicks continue to showcase dance during the bridge section, where they include footage of dancers at various 2020 BLM protests as well as a photo of Black ballerinas posing in front of a vandalized Robert E. Lee Statue in Richmond, Virginia.²⁸⁵ The inclusion of these images in "March March" serves to amplify Black artistry and recognize how art can be leveraged during the fight for racial justice.

The intro of "March March" establishes BLM as a central theme in the music video by highlighting Ratti's dance sequence from a BLM protest. With the arrival of the first chorus, the Chicks continue to visually introduce topics that are explored throughout the video. (The images in each section of the video are summarized in Figure 1.) For instance, overhead footage of a street packed with protesters illustrates the overall protest theme of the song; a waving rainbow flag introduces the topic of LGBTQ+ rights; and footage from a Woman's March outside of the Capitol building in Washington, DC introduces the topic of women's rights. Furthermore, the first chorus showcases an overhead view of a street mural in Louisville, KY with the words, "Say Her Name," painted in large, yellow text in honour of Breonna Taylor.²⁸⁶ By including this image, the Chicks not only further establish the video's solidarity with BLM, but, more

²⁸⁴ Kaufman.

²⁸⁵ Sarah McCammon, "In Richmond, Va., Protesters Transform A Confederate Statue," *NPR*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/12/876124924/in-richmond-va-protestors-transform-a-confederate-statue>.

²⁸⁶ WDRB, "'Say Her Name' Mural Pops Up on Louisville Street to Honor Breonna Taylor," June 8, 2020, https://www.wdrb.com/news/say-her-name-mural-pops-up-on-louisville-street-to-honor-breonna-taylor/article_5309c83c-a9ef-11ea-af74-2b5eef826eb.html.

specifically, they introduce the #SayTheirNames campaign, which they engage with later on during the bridge section where countless names of victims of anti-Black violence appear on screen in quick succession.

The second and third choruses provide an opportunity for the Chicks to visually explore topics that are not mentioned in the verse lyrics. For instance, the first half of Chorus 2 highlights the women's suffrage movement. The Chicks feature some photos from the white women's suffragist movement including scenes from marches in Washington, DC and New York City in the 1910s and images of white suffrage leaders in jail including Lucy Burns, Helena Hill Weed and Vida Milholland.²⁸⁷ Yet, the Chicks also recognize the problematic history of the suffrage movement due to the exclusion of Black women, so their music video also includes several images highlighting the efforts of Black women suffragists. For instance, the video features images of notable Black women leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Ida B. Wells, among others; an image of a group of Black nationalist women marching; and an image of a group of Black suffragists in Chicago in 1916 holding a sign that reads, "Head-Quarters for Colored Women Voters."²⁸⁸ The inclusion of these images demonstrate the Chicks' awareness of intersectional systems of oppression and the unique disadvantages faced by Black women.

²⁸⁷ Alan Taylor, "The 1913 Women's Suffrage Parade," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/03/100-years-ago-the-1913-womens-suffrage-parade/100465/>; Alan Taylor, "Photos: The Battle for Women's Suffrage in the U.S.," *The Atlantic*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2019/06/the-battle-for-womens-suffrage-in-photos/591103/>; Library of Congress, "Vida Milholland [in Jail Cell]," 1917, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000252/>; Library of Congress, "Helena Hill Weed, Norwalk, Conn. Serving 3 Day Sentence in D.C. Prison for Carrying Banner, 'Governments Derive Their Just Powers from the Consent of the Governed,'" 1917, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000060/>.

²⁸⁸ Lynn Yaeger, "The African-American Suffragists History Forgot," *Vogue*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/article/african-american-suffragists-women-voting-rights>; Keisha N. Blain, "The Black Women Who Paved the Way for This Moment," *The Atlantic*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/pioneering-black-women-who-paved-way-moment/612838/>; Jennifer Robinson, "The Vote On American Experience," *KPBS Public Media*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/arts-culture/2020/06/05/vote-american-experience>.

Furthermore, the first half of Chorus 2 features historical images that illustrate the prevalence of systemic racism throughout US history. For instance, the music video includes an image from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Silent Protest Parade in New York City in 1917, in which a protester holds a sign that reads, “Race Prejudice is the Offspring of Ignorance and the Mother of Lynching.” This section also includes the famous image of Ruby Bridges as she was escorted by federal marshals when she became the first Black child to integrate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans in 1960.²⁸⁹ Immediately following the photo of Bridges, the music video cuts to a short clip of a young Black girl at a 2020 BLM protest shouting, “no justice, no peace.”²⁹⁰ The juxtaposition of these two images—both of young Black girls, one contemporary and one historical—demonstrates the cyclical nature of human rights issues throughout history, particularly institutional racism against Black Americans. This montage editing technique of juxtaposing images from different time periods is utilized throughout the video, highlighting the similarities between protest movements past and present. Overall, these images serve to acknowledge the history of systemic violence towards Black people in the US that has pervaded society long before the 2020 BLM protests.

In the second half of Chorus 2, the Chicks showcase another important issue that was not mentioned in the verse lyrics, namely, LGBTQ+ rights. The music video features several images from the 1970s gay liberation movement while also drawing connections to the 2020 BLM protests. As with their engagement with the women’s suffrage movement, the Chicks approach LGBTQ+ rights through an intersectional lens, including images such as a protest sign that reads,

²⁸⁹ Alexis Newman, “New York City NAACP Silent Protest Parade (1917),” *BlackPast.Org*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/naACP-silent-protest-parade-new-york-city-1917/>; Mary Louise Kelly et al., “Ruby Was the First Black Child to Desegregate Her School. This Is What She Learned,” *NPR*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/07/1121133099/school-segregation-ruby-bridges>.

²⁹⁰ Scott Brinton, “What a Little Girl Is Teaching the World about Racism,” *Herald Community Newspapers*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.liherald.com/stories/what-a-little-girl-is-teaching-the-world-about-racism,125677>.

“Black LGBTQ+ Lives Matter” as well as a photo of someone wearing a facemask painted with the colours of the trans flag and the text, “Black Trans Lives Matter.”

While the first half of the “March March” music video—i.e., the two verses and the first two choruses—highlight a wide variety of protest movements from the past and present, the visuals in the three remaining substantial sections—the third chorus, pre-bridge, and bridge—focus exclusively on the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. In the third chorus, the Chicks include a significant number of photos and short clips from BLM protests across the country in cities such as Washington, DC, New York, Tucson, AZ, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, among others.²⁹¹ Additionally, the third chorus and subsequent pre-bridge section illustrate the realities of police brutality by including videos from BLM protests that turned violent. These sections include footage such as cars on fire, large groups of protestors blocking highways, and aggressive actions taken by police officers such as throwing tear gas on protesters, charging at protesters in riot gear, and forcefully dragging away protesters. Additionally, at the beginning of the pre-bridge, two layers of footage appear simultaneously, overlaid transparently above each other: contemporary footage of the BLM movement cross-faded with historical footage from what appears to be the Civil Rights Movement. The historical footage shows baton-wielding police officers charging and trampling protesters, drawing attention to the fact that police brutality against Black people is not a new phenomenon, but rather a systemic issue that is deeply rooted in US history. As with the rest of the video, juxtaposing historical and

²⁹¹ David Montgomery, “George Floyd Died Right before the 99th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre. This Photo Essay Spans the Current Protests — but the Quotes Paired with Them Span 100 Years.,” *Washington Post*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/magazine/the-endless-call-for-racial-equity-and-justice-in-photos-and-quotes/>; Arit John and Laura Newberry, “Compton Cowboys Join Spirited Caravan through City to Protest Police Brutality,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-08/compton-cowboys-lead-car-caravan-through-city-to-protest-police-brutality>.

contemporary movements with visual editing techniques demonstrates the similarities and connections between protest movements of different eras.

Towards the end of the pre-bridge, the visuals help transition the music video to the climactic bridge section. While the pre-bridge highlights the prevalence of police brutality that occurred during the summer 2020 BLM protests, the bridge section expands on this by memorializing the countless Black lives lost to systemic racism and violence. At the very end of the pre-bridge, the music video displays a photo of a burning building in Minneapolis, the city where George Floyd was murdered, then the text, “#End White Silence,” in glowing letters, and finally a picture of a BLM protest sign that reads “Say Their Names” including a list of over a dozen names of Black people killed by police.²⁹² These images lead directly into the bridge section, throughout which the names of hundreds of Black victims flash across the screen above various images such as the Chicks playing their instruments, BLM protesters dancing and drumming, and various other posters, including one that reads, “Dump your racist boyfriend” as well as a video of the White House fence covered in BLM protest signs.²⁹³

The bridge section (see Figure 4), marks a significant arrival point in the music video. First of all, the bridge is much longer than any of the other sections of the song, consisting of 24 measures as opposed to the standard 8-measure section length. The extended length of the bridge allows for a significant build-up of intensity throughout the entire section. Furthermore, the bridge, as well as the preceding pre-bridge section, are completely instrumental, so there are no lyrics to contribute to the meaning of the music video. As such, the bridge section serves to

²⁹² Neil MacFarquhar, Tim Arango, and Manny Fernandez, “Ex-Officer Charged in Death of George Floyd in Minneapolis,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/us/minneapolis-police-george-floyd.html>.

²⁹³ USA Today, “White House Fence Covered with ‘BLM’ Posters,” June 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdUayucqYC8>.

Figure 4: "March March" Bridge Section – Outline

Bridge section							Outro
MUSIC	mm. 1-4	mm. 5-8	mm. 9-12	mm. 13-16	mm. 17-20	mm. 21-24	fiddle solo banjo solo
melodic layer			banjo solo	banjo solo	fiddle solo banjo solo	banjo solo	
percussion layer	thigh slaps	bass drum snare drum thigh slaps	bass drum snare drum thigh slaps	bass drum snare drum thigh slaps	bass drum snare drum thigh slaps	bass drum snare drum thigh slaps	
harmonic filler layer	electronics slide guitar	electronics slide guitar	electronics slide guitar	electronics slide guitar	electronics slide guitar	electronics slide guitar	
bass line	i - iv	i pedal	i pedal	lament bass	slide guitar lament bass	slide guitar lament bass	
IMAGES							
band members	Strayer - slide guitar Maines - thigh slaps	Strayer - slide guitar Maines - thigh slaps	Strayer - banjo Maines - thigh slaps		McGuire - fiddle	McGuire - fiddle Strayer - banjo Maines - thigh slaps	
protest footage - drumming/dancing		drummers at a protest (snare drum) child dancing at BLM protest	more protest drummers (snare drum) people dancing at BLM protests	Black ballerinas in front of vandilized Robert E Lee Statue people dancing at BLM protests	protest drummers (bass drum) people dancing at BLM protests	people dancing at BLM protests	
other protest images			"dump your racist boyfriend" sign BLM sign	White house fence BLM posters Overhead shots of streets packed with protesters	Overhead shots of streets packed with protesters		
other images					Person with BLM face paint (video of removing the paint but in reverse)	Person with BLM face paint (video of removing the paint but in reverse)	
text	8 names: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael, Lorenzo Dean, Tony McDade, Rayshard Brooks, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland		18 names		341 names		use your VOICE. use your VOTE. The Chicks signed Emily, Natalie, Martie list of organizations (with website unls) to support

highlight the instrumental virtuosity of Maguire and Strayer as well as draw the viewer's attention to the powerful images that express support for BLM. The strong impact of the bridge section is achieved through the intersection of musical and visual elements, which are outlined in Figure 4. These components work together to create a powerful climax in the video and pay tribute to Black Lives Matter.

A key component contributing to the increase in intensity during the bridge section comes from the four musical layers, which are outlined in Figure 4: the bass line, harmonic filler layer, percussion layer, and melodic layer. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the importance of the bass line in this section, noting the significance of the lament bass in the second half of the bridge. In the context of the music video, this bassline can be interpreted as signifying the mourning of Black lives lost due to racialized violence. The upper two layers—the percussion and melodic layer—also build up the intensity of this section, gradually adding additional layers phrase by phrase. For instance, as shown in Figure 4, the first four bars begin with just thigh slaps in the percussion, followed by the addition of snare drum and bass drum in the next four bars. Then, the banjo solo enters in m. 9, followed by the fiddle solo entrance in m. 17, creating a very thick musical texture with all instruments playing simultaneously for the final 8 bars of the bridge. The arrival of the Outro is marked by a sparse, acoustic texture featuring bare fiddle and banjo solos without any other musical layers.

The visual editing during the bridge is closely connected to these musical components, intersecting to create a compelling moment of climax for the music video. Throughout the bridge, the Chicks include a total of 367 names of Black people killed as a result of racialized violence that flash one by one on screen; these names are listed in Figure 5. In doing so, the Chicks engage in the #SayTheirNames campaign, recognizing the humanity of each victim and

Figure 5: “March March” List of Names in Bridge Section (367 names total)

Bar 1-4: 8 names total, 2 names per bar

1. George Floyd
2. Breonna Taylor
3. Michael Lorenzo Dean
4. Tony McDade
5. Rayshard Brooks
6. Ahmaud Arbery
7. Trayvon Martin
8. Sandra Bland

Bar 5-8: 18 names total, 4.5 names/bar

9. Philando Castille
10. Tamir Rice
11. Alton Sterling
12. Eric Garner
13. Eric Reason
14. Alteria Woods
15. Amadou Diallo
16. David McAtee
17. Botham Jean
18. Chris Beaty
19. Italia Marie Kelly
20. Dion Johnson
21. Jamel Floyd
22. William Green
23. Troy Hodge
24. Darrien Hunt
25. Kalief Browder
26. Renisha McBride

Bar 9-24: 341 names total, 21.3 names/bar

27. Oscar Grant III
28. Miles Hall
29. Kendrick Johnson
30. Charleene Lyles
31. Timothy Caughman
32. Sylville Smith
33. Corey Jones
34. Tyre King
35. Dontre Hamilton
36. Victor Duffy Jr.
37. Kobe Dimock-Heisler
38. Clinton R. Allen
39. Kionte Spencer
40. Darius Tarver
41. Wayne Arnold Jones
42. Manuel Ellis
43. Rekia Boyd
44. Danroy “DJ” Henry Jr.
45. Karvas Gamble Jr.
46. Korryn Gaines
47. Bradley Blackshire
48. Timothy Thomas
49. Reginald Doucet Jr.
50. Marcus Deon Smith
51. Chavis Carter
52. Martin Lee Anderson
53. Christopher McCorvey
54. Nicholas Heyward Jr.
55. Christopher Whitfield

56. Willie McCoy
57. Victor White III
58. Carol Denise McNair
59. Carole Robertson
60. Cynthia Wesley
61. Ryan Matthew Smith
62. Derrick Ambrose Jr.
63. Addie Mae Collins
64. Sean Bell
65. Atatiana Jefferson
66. Jemel Roberson
67. James Lee Alexander
68. Aiyana Stanlee Jones
69. Pamela Turner
70. Dominique Clayton
71. Antwon Rose II
72. Tayler Rock
73. Malice Green
74. Ramarley Graham
75. Elijah McClain
76. Aaron Bailey
77. Ronell Foster
78. Stephon Clark
79. Corey Carter
80. Terrence Crutcher
81. Paul O'Neal
82. Bobby Russ
83. Jordan Edwards
84. Demetrius Dubose
85. Demarcus Semer
86. Willie Tillman
87. Terrill Thomas
88. Torrey Robinson
89. Darius Robinson
90. Kevin Hicks
91. Mary Truxillo
92. Dyzhawn Perkins
93. Christopher Davis
94. Marco Loud
95. James Byrd Jr.
96. Peter Gaines
97. Antronie Scott
98. Wendell Celestine
99. David Joseph
100. Calin Roquemore
101. Quintinio Legrier
102. Wayne Wheeler
103. Janet Wilson
104. Randy Nelson
105. Miguel Espinal
106. Brian Pickett
107. James Carney III
108. Bettie Jones
109. Richard Perkins
110. Phillip Pannell
111. Nathaniel Harris Pickett
112. Benni Lee Tignor
113. India Kager
114. La'Vante Biggs
115. Carlos Santiago
116. Michael Lee Marshall
117. Dominic Hutchinson
118. Anthony Ashford
119. Alonzo Smith
120. Tyree Crawford
121. Keith Harrison McLeod
122. Leslie Sapp
123. Lamontez Jones
124. Paterson Brown
125. Asshams Pharoah Manley
126. Michael Stewart
127. Felix Kumi
128. Michael Sabbie
129. Brian Keith Day
130. Christian Taylor
131. Troy Robinson
132. Albert Davis
133. Darrius Stewart
134. Billy Ray Davis
135. Samuel Dubose
136. Freddie Carlos Gray Jr.
137. Joseph Mann
138. Salvado Elswood
139. Johnathan Sanders
140. Brendon Glenn
141. Victor Manuel Larosa
142. Eric Harris
143. Walter Scott
144. William Chapman II
145. Alexia Christian
146. Natasha McKenna
147. Tony Robinson
148. Anthony Hill
149. Mya Hall
150. Phillip White
151. Matthew Ajibade
152. James N. Powell Jr.
153. Frank Smart
154. Ernest Lacy
155. Tanisha Anderson
156. Akai Gurley
157. Andre Murphy Sr.
158. Jerame Reid
159. Michelle Cusseaux
160. Mary Turner
161. Lacquan McDonald
162. Malcom X
163. John Crawford III
164. Michael Brown
165. Ezell Ford
166. Dante Parker
167. Medgar Evers
168. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
169. Henry Smith
170. David McAtee
171. Robert Johnson Jr.
172. McHale Rose
173. Dreasjon Reed
174. Michael Wallace
175. Lucas Alvarado

176.	Kerry Michael Bounsom	240.	Elijah James Smith	304.	Alejandro Cordero-Rivera
177.	Jerome Hill	241.	Antonio Aquino	305.	Rumain Brisbon
178.	Francine Graham	242.	Saheed Vassel	306.	Mark Bartlett
179.	Malik Williams	243.	Edward Van McCrae	307.	Leonardo Little
180.	De'Von Bailey	244.	Juan Carlos Romero	308.	Naeschylus Vinzant
181.	Hashim Wilson	245.	Linus F. Phillip	309.	Kyron Hinton
182.	Mantry Norris	246.	Danny Ray Thomas	310.	Keith Childress
183.	Jaquan Dijon Thompson	247.	Rueben T. Ruffin Jr.	311.	Kevin Matthews
184.	Brent Durbin-Daniel	248.	Jermaine Massey	312.	Michael Noel
185.	Bryan Bernard Wallace	249.	Osbaldo Ramirez	313.	Leroy Browning
186.	Terry Frost	250.	Shermichael Ezeff	314.	Roy Nelson
187.	Jaquavion Slaton	251.	Decynthia Clements	315.	Freddie Gray
188.	Edtwon Stamps	252.	Alkeeta Allena Walker	316.	Nathaniel Pickett
189.	Ryan Twyman	253.	Jamil Harvey	317.	Tiara Thomas
190.	Fabian Rivera	254.	Joel Jacobo	318.	Cornelius Brown
191.	Samuel Galberth	255.	Darion Baker	319.	Jamar Clark
192.	Enosa Strickland Jr.	256.	Lee Edward Bonner	320.	Reginald Moore
193.	Ryan Smith	257.	Chris Kimble	321.	Cristopher Kimble
194.	Isaiah Lewis	258.	Raymond Bishop	322.	Junior Prosper
195.	Harold Vincent Robinson	259.	Mark Daniels	323.	Freddie Blue
196.	Marzues Scott	260.	David Darden	324.	Victor Larosa III
197.	Anthony Orlando Bowers	261.	Tierre Guthrie	325.	Spencer McCain
198.	Oscar Cain	262.	Brett Dontae Bush	326.	Kevin Bajoie
199.	Julius Glover	263.	Anthony Joe Williams	327.	Zamiel Crawford
200.	Michael Gulley	264.	Albert E. Morton	328.	Jermaine Benjamin
201.	Daviri Robertson	265.	Gilberto Salas	329.	Kris Jackson
202.	Chris Joseph	266.	Khalil Lawa	330.	Kevin Higgenbotham
203.	Kevin Samuel Capers	267.	Donte D. Shannon	331.	Ross Anthony
204.	Osaze Osagie	268.	Terry Amons	332.	Richard Davis
205.	Michael Cohen	269.	Amanuel Dagebo	333.	Curtis Jordan
206.	Sokhom Hon	270.	Shalun Dique Smith	334.	Marcus Clark
207.	Phillip Wayne Outland	271.	Trayvon Mitchell	335.	Lorenzo Hayes
208.	Rodney Fisher	272.	George Mann	336.	De'Angelo Stallwaorth
209.	Roy Anthony Scott	273.	Jarvis Lykes	337.	Dajuan Graham
210.	Gary Clark	274.	Dennis Plowden	338.	Reginald Moore
211.	James Scott Reed	275.	Kameron Prescott	339.	Nuwnah Laroche
212.	Tommy Kirby	276.	Zoe Dowdell	340.	Jason Champion
213.	Angel Burke	277.	Mario Sanabria	341.	Bryan Overstreet
214.	Sterling Durant Humbert	278.	Kieta O'Neal	342.	David Felix
215.	Clayton Joseph	279.	Robert Lightfeather	343.	Terry Lee Chatman
216.	Willie McCoy	280.	Armondo Frank	344.	Samuel Harrell
217.	Antonio Arce	281.	Madgiel Sanchez	345.	Norman Cooper
218.	Demontry Floytra Boyd	282.	Herbert Gilbert	346.	Brian Acton
219.	Emantic Bradford Jr.	283.	Patrick Harmon	347.	Darrell Brown
220.	Jemel Roberson	284.	Adam Trammel	348.	Frank Shepherd III
221.	Neico Crooks	285.	Douglas Wiggington	349.	Donald Ivy
222.	Matthew T. Graves	286.	Malik Carey	350.	Jason Moland
223.	Oshae Terry	287.	Gregory Kever	351.	Denzel Brown
224.	Rashuan Washington	288.	Zelalem Eshetu Ewnetu	352.	Brandon Jones
225.	Harith Augustus	289.	Olugbalah Ridley	353.	Askari Roberts
226.	Thurman Blevins	290.	Keith Price	354.	Terrance Moxley
227.	Maurice Granton Jr.	291.	Isaiah Murrietta	355.	Bernard Moore
228.	Alan Goyano	292.	William Spates	356.	Charly Keunang
229.	Ronald Clinton	293.	Roy Dale Evans Jr.	357.	Darrell Gatewood
230.	Keeven Robinson	294.	Raynard Burton	358.	Deontre Dorsey
231.	Shukri Said	295.	Willard Scott	359.	Thomas Allen Jr.
232.	Demonjhea Jordon	296.	Quanice Hayes	360.	Lavall Hall
233.	Terrence Carlton	297.	Nana Adomako	361.	Calvon Reid
234.	Matthew G. Brown	298.	Tiano Meton	362.	Gerdle Moise
235.	James Bauduy	299.	Gregory Gary	363.	Terry Price
236.	David Tenyuque	300.	Michael Sutton	364.	Jeremy Lett
237.	Charles Whitley	301.	Travis Faison	365.	Kevin Garrett
238.	Sanchez Lowe	302.	Jerry Nowlin	366.	Alvin Haynes
239.	Juan Markee Jones	303.	Delbert Gutierrez	367.	Emmett Till

commemorating the devastating loss of lives at the hands of systemic racism in the US. As Caitlin O’Kane of *CBS News* notes, “The #SayTheirNames campaign encourages publications and social media users to not just identify victims of police brutality by the incidents that killed them but to focus on their individual humanity and use their names. The hashtag is often accompanied by lists of names of Black men and women killed in recent years.”²⁹⁴ Throughout the bridge, the rate of change of the displayed names gets faster and faster in tandem with the increase in musical intensity. As shown in both Figure 4 and Figure 5, the first four measures of the bridge display a total of eight names (two names per bar), accompanied by thigh slaps in the percussion. Then, during the next four measures, the speed of the names increases by more than two times, with a total of 18 names shown over the four-bar phrase, or an average of 4.5 names per bar. This corresponds to the thickening of the percussion layer with the addition of drums to the musical texture. Then, in measure 9, the speed of the names increases drastically to over four times the previous speed, showing a total of 341 names over 16 bars, or an average of 21.3 names per bar. The speed of these names becomes so fast that it's impossible to read all of them. This visual editing technique creates a powerful, emotional illustration of just how widespread the issue of systemic violence is and the sheer number of Black lives that have been lost.

Throughout the bridge, the Chicks include names of victims whose deaths spurred the 2020 protests such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among many others, as well as historical victims of racial violence including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, and Emmett Till. During the fleeting display of names, the instrumental solos—first the banjo, and then the banjo and fiddle together—express a sorrowful tone by using the blues scale for

²⁹⁴ Caitlin O’Kane, “‘Say Their Names’: The List of People Injured or Killed in Officer-Involved Incidents Is Still Growing,” *CBS News*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/say-their-names-list-people-injured-killed-police-officer-involved-incidents/>.

their melodic framework. In the context of the music video, the use of the blues scale can be interpreted as paying homage of African-American musical traditions. Furthermore, the addition of the lament bass in this part of the bridge further emphasizes the expression of mourning for these lost lives.

In addition to the long list of names, the images used in the bridge section contribute to the intensity of the video and continue to interact with the musical elements. As indicated in Figure 4 in the row labelled “band members,” the bridge section is the first time that the Chicks appear on screen during the music video. However, they do so in a way that is very modest and unobtrusive, refraining from showing their faces. The Chicks simply show themselves performing their instruments and thigh slapping with only their hands and instruments visible. Additionally, they are featured while wearing basic clothing with mellow colours, aiming to not draw attention to themselves. The videos of the Chicks performing correspond to the various instrumental entrances as the musical texture thickens, but the clips don’t overwhelm the images during the bridge as they are also interspersed with BLM protest footage. Overall, the inclusion of the Chicks performing—without showing their faces or any flashy attire—further demonstrates their commitment to decentering their voices and giving the spotlight to Black voices during the fight for racial justice.

In addition to videos of the Chicks performing their instruments, a considerable portion of the images in the bridge section consist of footage of drummers and dancers at BLM protests, which, in turn, help emphasize the musical components of the song. During the first four measures of the bridge, the images consist exclusively of Strayer on slide guitar and Maines thigh slapping. But then in measure 5, once the acoustic drum beat enters the audio, the visuals cut to a video of a line of drummers at a protest, as outlined in Figure 4. Throughout the bridge,

the Chicks include videos of protesters marching with drums and dancing, highlighting the importance of music and dance within protest movements. And although the names that flash across the screen certainly set a solemn tone for the bridge section, the showcase of dancers and drummers simultaneously portrays a celebration of Black expression and shared community, maintaining hope for the future and the next generation. For instance, one of the dancers featured in the music video, Fabricio Seraphin, joined a spontaneous dance circle during a protest in Lower Manhattan, New York while wearing a t-shirt with the text, “Black Boy Joy.” As he tells Siobhan Burke of the *New York Times*, “You can take from us, but you cannot take our joy ... That is ours to give, ours to do with what we please.”²⁹⁵ Indeed, Burke notes that, for Seraphin, “joy is a form of resistance.”²⁹⁶ Expressions of joy, particularly through performing art forms such as dance and music, have the power to uplift and bring people together during times of grief, creating a sense of community amongst Black people and other marginalized groups. Ultimately, the bridge showcases how music and dance can bring people together during difficult times to celebrate Black lives.

Overall, the bridge section of “March March” gains intensity through multiple strategies including the gradual addition of musical layers and faster percussive rhythms, the introduction of the lament bass, the rapid speed of the names appearing on screen, and the quick edits between various videos of dancers and drummers during the BLM protests. After 24 bars, the bridge reaches its climax and comes to a somewhat abrupt end, shifting gears to the Outro in which a thin, acoustic texture, featuring just the fiddle and the banjo, marks the conclusion of the song. The visuals conclude with the following statement on screen: “use your VOICE. use your

²⁹⁵ Siobhan Burke, “Dancing Bodies That Proclaim: Black Lives Matter,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/dance/dancing-protests-george-floyd.html>.

²⁹⁶ Burke.

VOTE. The Chicks,” accompanied by each of the three band members’ signatures. This leads into a scrolling list of 16 organizations with corresponding website links, guiding viewers towards various ways to get involved in different social causes. (For a full list of the displayed organizations, see Figure 1.) Ultimately, “March March” offers a sincere expression of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement, among other important causes, raising awareness about systemic racism and other injustices in society and inspiring viewers to take action.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the Chicks’ engagement with political activism, particularly their allyship towards Black Lives Matter, through a discussion of their name change and an analysis of their music video, “March March.” In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder and amidst widespread BLM protests across the US, the Chicks used their artistic platform to contribute to important discussions surrounding responsible allyship, removing the harmful term, “Dixie,” from their name and releasing a protest video in solidarity with BLM. While the Chicks should certainly be recognized for these actions, however, it’s also important to examine legitimate critiques of their allyship. Using Eric Smialek’s discussion of Taylor Swift’s allyship towards LGBTQ+ identities as a model, I frame the Chicks’ relationship to the BLM movement as “imperfect allyship,” acknowledging that allyship is a lifelong learning process in which mistakes are inevitable. For instance, critics have raised valid concerns regarding the Chicks’ lateness in changing their name as well as their reactive approach to allyship. Examining such critiques of the Chicks’ allyship, as well as the ways in which the Chicks have strived to do better, has helped foster beneficial learning outcomes for the bandmembers themselves as well as for other artists, audiences, and allies at large.

The Chicks have recognized their past mistakes and have taken actionable steps to make improvements by decentering their voices, seeking out educational opportunities, and yielding to the voices of those most impacted by systemic injustices. The Chicks consulted with movement leaders from BLM and other activist groups regarding their name change and the creation of their music video. In turn, the “March March” music video reflects the Chicks’ growth as allies and serves as a powerful expression of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, the video showcases Black artistry by including videos of numerous dancers at BLM protests, memorializes the loss of Black lives by engaging in the #SayTheirNames campaign, and recognizes intersectional systems of oppression by highlighting, for instance, Black women suffragists and Black LGBTQ+ rights. Additionally, the Chicks continue to decenter themselves by excluding their faces from the video, focusing instead on highlighting images from a wide range of protests, both contemporary and historical. Overall, the music video serves to raise awareness amongst viewers, encouraging them to get involved in activist causes via the overall protest message of the song.

The powerful impact of “March March” is achieved through the intersection of musical, lyrical, and visual components. The use of montage editing allows for the rapid juxtaposition of protest images from a wide variety of social movements past and present; these images reflect topics from the lyrics, i.e. reproductive rights, gun violence, and climate change, as well as highlight additional movements not mentioned in the lyrics, particularly Black Lives Matter. Throughout the video, musical and visual elements work together to drive the momentum, especially during the bridge section where the gradual addition of musical layers and the increasing speed of names appearing on screen intersect to increase the intensity of the video. The visual editing also helps reinforce the rhythms in the music, whether through the actual

rhythmic qualities of the montage edits or through the inclusion of footage of protesters playing drums at various marches, complementing the acoustic drum beats in the music. Lastly, the musical track reflects both the lyrics and the overall theme of the song through somber musical qualities such as the blues scale and the lament bass.

Ultimately, the Chicks' "March March" music video serves as an exemplary addition to their 2020 album, *Gaslighter*, as well as to the rest of their artistic output. "March March" continues the Chicks' practice of bending genre boundaries, both politically and musically, through its overt support of progressive causes, particularly Black Lives Matter, and through the fusion of acoustic country instrumentation with pop-inspired synthesized sounds. Through the use of music video, "March March" engages in the strategy of "bricolage" by recontextualizing the song to reflect current events, namely, the Black Lives Matter movement. The Chicks have used video as a bricolage tool throughout their career to invoke additional political meanings in existing songs; recent examples include "Gaslighter" and "For Her," in which the Chicks used video to criticize President Trump and memorialize Ruth Bader Ginsburg, respectively. In an earlier example, the Chicks recontextualized their song, "Truth No. 2," on their 2003 tour by featuring a video montage of protest footage that highlighted important causes such as the Civil Rights Movement, reproductive rights, and gay rights, among others—a striking resemblance to their 2020 "March March" video.²⁹⁷ Lastly, "March March" continues to express the larger themes from *Gaslighter* such as rambling, inspiring the next generation, and combining the personal and political realms. The song encourages listeners to stand up for their beliefs and forge their own paths in life, even if it means going against conventional expectations, as well as to apply the song's message to issues that they feel most passionate about in their personal lives.

²⁹⁷ Bowers, "Taking the Long Way Home: Poetry, Politics, and the Dixie Chicks," 142.

Overall, the Chicks' "March March" demonstrates the power of art as a form of political activism.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the Chicks' complex relationship to country music through an analysis of their 2020 album, *Gaslighter*. Drawing on existing scholarship in genre theory, on the Chicks' previous music, and in music video analysis, as well as an abundance of primary source materials, I have demonstrated how the trio continues to challenge genre boundaries both musically and politically. This thesis begins at the macro level in Chapter 1 by exploring the trio's career at large through the lens of genre studies. I illustrate how the Chicks' self-identification as a band has evolved over the years, contrasting their perception of their genre before and after the 2003 "incident," in which Natalie Maines spoke out against President Bush and the Iraq War. While the Chicks were proud country musicians during their early years, the trio has continued to distance themselves from the genre ever since 2003, veering more towards rock and pop influences and insisting that their music cannot be defined in any one particular genre. I also demonstrate how external methods of genre categorization classify the Chicks' music. For instance, while country radio and fans fully embraced the Chicks' music during their pre-controversy days, they have since exiled the Chicks from country music for disrupting the genre's conservative political leanings. Yet, the Chicks have consistently topped both country and mainstream pop *Billboard* charts throughout their entire career, demonstrating the versatility of their music and their ongoing crossover success. Lastly, I situate the Chicks within the changing landscape of the music industry, i.e. the rise of streaming and social media, and demonstrate how they have helped influence the next generation of musicians such as Taylor Swift and Kacey Musgraves to speak their minds and break down barriers within country music.

Chapter 2 examines *Gaslighter* as a whole, exploring how the album continues the Chicks' practice of subverting genre boundaries through the gendered themes expressed in the

songs' lyrics. Building on existing scholarship on the Chicks' previous music, I demonstrate how *Gaslighter* functions as a continuation of the Chicks' musical output through analyses of four songs from the album: "Gaslighter," "For Her," "Julianna Calm Down," and "Young Man." I illustrate how *Gaslighter* draws on personal experiences from the band members' lives, particularly divorce, and touches on a wide range of emotions that resonate with their audiences. Throughout the album, the Chicks engage with important issues such as domestic abuse, emphasizing the importance of community as a way to heal and breaking the multi-generational cycle of abuse. The album also embraces the theme of "rambling" from a female perspective, inspiring the next generation of women to forge their own paths in life beyond the confines of domestic expectations. Moreover, *Gaslighter* utilizes the strategy of "bricolage" to recontextualize songs with implicit political meanings to reflect current events, combining the personal and the political realms. Though Chapter 2 focuses extensively on exploring the lyrical themes in *Gaslighter*, I also investigate the Chicks' creative process in the recording studio, focusing particularly on the trio's artistic collaboration with producer Jack Antonoff. I demonstrate how their collaboration fostered the development of new songwriting strategies as well as the fusion of country and pop musical styles, combining the Chicks' signature sound—fiddle, banjo, and three-part harmony—with Antonoff's synthesized beats.

Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the Chicks' political protest song and music video, "March March." The first half of the chapter evaluates the Chicks' allyship towards Black Lives Matter. I examine the trio's decision to release their protest video and drop the problematic term, "Dixie," from their band name in response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent BLM protests of summer 2020. I propose that the Chicks' actions should be understood as a form of "imperfect allyship," recognizing valid critiques of the Chicks' allyship—such as their lateness

and reactive approach to allyship—while also highlighting beneficial outcomes of their activism. By recognizing their past mistakes and demonstrating a commitment to growth as allies, the Chicks have contributed to important conversations surrounding responsible allyship and have served as an example for other artists. In the second half of the chapter, I conduct an analysis of the interconnected lyrical, musical, and visual components of “March March,” demonstrating how the music video expresses solidarity for the BLM movement. For instance, the Chicks engage with the #SayTheirNames campaign by displaying the names of hundreds of Black lives lost to racialized violence on screen, and they juxtapose a wide range of historical and contemporary protest images to recognize the prevalence of systemic racism throughout US history. Furthermore, as with the rest of *Gaslighter*, “March March” continues to challenge the boundaries of country music through the fusion of pop and country musical elements and through the expression of progressive political views.

Ultimately, this thesis has illustrated the Chicks’ continued impact on country music and the music industry at-large despite their 14-year hiatus. The Chicks’ rebellious, unapologetic stance permeates throughout their music as they continue to defy expectations with regards to genre, gender, and politics. By focusing specifically on *Gaslighter*, this thesis contributes to an existing body of scholarship on the Chicks’ music, providing an updated perspective on the trio’s artistic career. Moreover, my research offers implications for future studies on the Chicks’ music and within the field of popular music studies at-large. For instance, while the scope of this thesis allowed for in-depth analyses of just five songs from *Gaslighter*, future research has the potential to expand on this work through analyses of all twelve songs from the album, providing an even clearer picture of how the album functions as a whole. Additionally, the analytical frameworks and discussion points from this thesis could, for example, be applied to a study of the Chicks’

2022 tour, examining how *Gaslighter* has materialized in the context of live performance and exploring concert reviews and responses from audiences.

Moreover, this thesis contributes to broader discourse in country music, music and politics, and music video analysis. For instance, my research could be expanded to further explore the Chicks' impact on musicians such as Kacey Musgraves and Taylor Swift, among others, and could serve as a framework for studying other female country artists who have broken down barriers within the genre. Additional research directions might include the study of artists who, like the Chicks, use their music to express allyship for BIPOC and other marginalized communities as well as artists who have created political protest music videos that employ similar strategies found in "March March." Lastly, by using genre theory as a framework to explore a specific band and album, this thesis serves as a case study that exemplifies how genre boundaries function within artists' careers as well as how the genre of country music is defined today.

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