

TAKING THE LONG WAY

It was Gary who introduced me to the Dixie Chicks. He is a very gregarious sort, and unhappy with solitude in Houston, he bought a rescue dog in early 2007 and named her Dixie. Dixie is a bit of a Heinz 57, with something of a collie-look about her, but with a bit of Labrador or something else in there for good measure. She is an incredibly good natured animal, and happy enough being accidentally walked on by children from time to time.

As a naturally long haired dog she was a bit of a rarity in Texas, with the brutal summer climate about as hostile to her breed as it could be. But if she suffered, it was in silence, and Gary took her occasionally to have her coat clipped.

“Why did you call her Dixie?” I asked.

“After the Dixie Chicks”, he replied.

“Who?” I said.

“The Dixie Chicks. Come on Bermo, don’t tell me you’ve never heard of the Dixie Chicks? The largest selling female band in the world?”

“Er, no”.

I’m not entirely sure why Gary was surprised. It was an established fact that my knowledge of modern music was up there with my knowledge of Swahili and particle physics. My record collection had stopped abruptly in about 1986 when I was posted to Germany with the Army, and somehow I had never really got into collecting CDs, and eventually lost all interest.

I have long had a hatred of nightclubs and “discos” because 10 years standing in close proximity to pieces of artillery had left me with damaged ears, and I find it painful now to be surrounded by pounding sounds, and unable to hear what anyone is saying. Or at least that’s my excuse. Maybe I’m just a boring git. Jemima and Freddie introduced me to James Blunt in 2006, before I came to Texas, but I have a sneaking suspicion that they really liked his music not for what it is, but because some of his lyrics are ‘rude’. By the time I got home in 2009, their affections had switched to Lily Allen, for much the same reason I reckon.

“Bermo”, said Gary, “right now on cable TV there is a film called ‘*Shut up and Sing*’. Just watch it. Okay?”

“Okay”, I said, with absolutely no intention whatsoever of watching it. From time to time, Gary would say “you must read this book”, or “I’ll show

you this article I've been reading - it will help you with some of your issues" (the issues he alluded to were never specified). The way I see it, Gary reads all sorts of rubbish as a surrogate for work and as an escape from reality. He talks in terms of "right side brain activity" versus "left side activity", and that kind of gobbledygook.

Now don't get me wrong; I'm sure there's a place for all this, but generally speaking, and certainly at this point in our Texan adventure, I would have preferred Gary to be actually doing something that would help our case than reading some psycho-babble. His contribution up to that point on Giles's allocated list of tasks had been negligible.

As luck would have it, however, I was at home that particular night with nothing much to do (actually I was home most nights with nothing much to do), and I happened to be scrolling through the movies when I came across 'Shut up and Sing'. At worst, I thought, this could give me the opportunity to tell Gary that it's the biggest load of bollocks I've ever seen, so what the hell?

But it wasn't.

An hour and a half later I got up from the sofa with tears streaming down my cheeks. The next day I went down to the local Borders bookstore, and bought a copy of the DVD and the latest CD. Over a year later, when it came time to report to prison, the CD would still be in the car stereo, playing constantly. Emma and the children would be subjected to the music whenever they came out, and all returned to the UK able to sing all of the songs, and began the process of getting all their friends hooked too.

It's not that the film is in any way great. It isn't. As a piece of documentary making it's really pretty average. But it just so happens that the makers were there to witness one of those once-in-a-lifetime events, that no-one could ever have predicted, and just kept the cameras rolling for another three years, through what could only be described as a rollercoaster journey towards redemption.

What struck me were the parallels with our own situation. Three good friends, successful in their careers, trod on what turned out to be a huge landmine, and overnight their lives were turned upside down. There was no going back. In the case of the Dixie Chicks, they were faced with the choice of sacrificing all of their principles, or fighting and accepting the horrendous consequences. They chose to fight.

What's more, they stuck together when many would not have done. They are, quite simply, inspirational people. Not quite up there with Nelson

Mandela, obviously, but definitely on my “I would really like to meet these people before I die” list.

Oh yes, and they come from Texas, which was really the root of all their problems, as it was to turn out.

The Dixie Chicks are Natalie Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire, but then I guess most of you reading this are saying “duh, who doesn’t know that?”, so I apologise for my lack of knowledge of contemporary music, but maybe you can just skip on a few paragraphs.

Actually Natalie is rather the interloper, firstly because Emily and Martie are sisters, and secondly because when the band was originally formed, in 1989, Natalie was not a part of it. She would only join as lead singer some 6 years later when Laura Lynch left the band. Their first album thereafter, ‘Wide Open Spaces’ released in 1998, sold 12 million copies in the US alone, and spawned three number one singles in the Country music charts.

The next album, *Fly*, sold 10 million copies and spawned nine singles, including several number ones.

After a contractual dispute with Sony, their record label, the girls released an album entitled “Home” in 2003, which was independently produced by Natalie’s father, Lloyd Maines. This was less obviously a country album, and the first track, ‘Long Time Gone’, reached the top ten of the US pop singles charts, as well as number two in the country chart. The girls were invited to sing the Star Spangled Banner at the Superbowl. Their stock could never have been higher. The album won four Grammy awards including Best Country Album.

The promotional tour for the album was entitled the “Top of the World” tour, with dates all around the planet, finishing back in the States for the final few concerts. Most were sold out well in advance.

On 10th March 2003, the girls played a gig at the Shepherds’ Bush Empire in London. A camera crew from a small production company was accompanying them, chronicling the tour, with much emphasis on the “behind the scenes” look at the band.

Shut up and Sing shows the girls prior to going on stage at Shepherds’ Bush, watching a news broadcast and asking what’s happening about the preparations for war in Iraq. One of the singles on the album, *Traveling Soldier*, is a ballad about a young girl who waits in vain for a soldier who she only met once, but to whom she writes regularly, to come back from Vietnam.

In the middle of the gig, Natalie Maines, in an impromptu remark to the packed crowd, uttered the words that would shatter their lives:

“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”.

Given that this comment was off the cuff, uttered some 5,000 miles away from their home, in a smallish London venue, to an audience who cheered like mad, there had to have been a really good chance that it would be of no consequence. And it very nearly was.

Only one publication picked up on the comment. Betty Clarke of the Guardian newspaper reviewed the gig two days later, and mentioned the remark. Actually, her review contained only the bit about being sorry that George Bush was from Texas, not the words that preceded it. In the context of her review, it wasn’t unfair, as she was making the point that The Dixie Chicks ain’t no ordinary blue-grass country band, and they are unashamed to rub up the establishment the wrong way.

The problem was that the remarks were picked up by the newswires, and within hours were headline news in America. That’s America, where freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of the Constitution. But it’s the same America that espouses the concept of “my country, right or wrong” more than perhaps any other functioning democracy. And when “my country” has just gone to war against Iraq, “my President” represents all that is good about “my country”. And of course there was the added insult of Texan girls belittling one of their own, who happened to hold the highest office in the land.

At times like these, you really need a time machine. You just want to go back and unsay the things you’ve said. You know they’re being misinterpreted. You know they are being taken out of any proper context. You know they are being used in ways in which they should never be. Nothing you can say by way of explanation (Natalie tried, she really did) can make it right. Let’s just go back and do the gig again, and not say what I said. Or maybe say something that’s less catastrophic.

Whatever the girls felt about Natalie’s words, that was just how I felt about the bloody e-mails which caused us so many of our troubles. No one was interested in finding out what she really meant, in the same way that for six years no-one was interested in finding out what the hell those e-mails were really about. The words spoke for themselves, right?

And so it was that within days, the Dixie Chicks were taken off the playlist of pretty much every single country music station in America. They started to receive hate mail. People were throwing their CDs in the garbage in organized public displays. They achieved pariah status. Even their tour sponsor (Lipton's Tea) was forced to disassociate itself from them because of the negative connotations. And they still had the US dates of the Tour to come.

Most normal people at this stage would collapse in a jibbering heap, and beg for forgiveness. Alternatively, the two people who had not made the offending remarks might sack the third, replace her, and disassociate themselves from her. This would be the option favoured by most UK Government Ministers, I'm sure, although they would probably get someone else to stab her in the back whilst publicly professing their support and sympathy.

But the Dixie Chicks are made of sterner stuff. Having tried in vain to explain that they were not anti-American, and that they loved the US soldiers (you only have to listen to the lyrics of *Traveling Soldier* to realize that they were anti-war, not anti-soldier), and that they were just frustrated that non-violent means could not be found to end the Iraq problem, the girls decided that enough was enough.

To the horror of their publicist, they agreed to pose naked on the May 2003 cover of Entertainment Weekly, covered in painted phrases like "Dixie Sluts", "Traitors", and "Saddam's Angels", alongside others such as "Free Speech", "Peace" and "Proud Americans".

From that moment onwards, by their own acknowledgement, they would have to plow their own furrow. If the country music scene wanted to turn its back on them, then so be it. They would continue to make music, but on their terms, and if people wanted to come back to them, or new audiences grew, that would be just fine.

Shut up and Sing is all about how their lives were turned upside down, and how they decided that their own friendship transcended any of these other issues. Through adversity, they became stronger. Even when Natalie was receiving very specific death threats in the days before the Dallas gig towards the end of the tour, they did not flinch. They held their heads up.

The album that came out of this experience, entitled *Taking the Long Way*, is the one that I still play in the car every time I am driving somewhere alone. It won five Grammys in 2006, by which time of course many people were having to make all kinds of embarrassing u-turns about their support for the Iraq war.

It helps to have seen the film before you hear the music, because every single song is a part of the story. I still have difficulty singing along to some of the tracks without choking up, and it helps to play the music really loud. And I'm not going to tell you how *Shut up and Sing* finishes, because if you haven't seen it the ending is brilliant and I wouldn't want to spoil it for you.

Ultimately, of course, the stories diverge because the Dixie Chicks stuck to their guns and we did not, but for a time at least I felt we were kindred spirits, the three against the many.