Will criticism prompt Chicks to fly the country coop?

By Brian Mansfield, special for USA TODAY

As the Dixie Chicks launch their 59-date Top of the World tour tonight in Greenville, S.C., two questions regarding their career loom: When will country radio start playing their records again? And if it doesn't, how long will country's biggest act remain country?

More than half of Billboard and Airplay Monitor's reporting country stations didn't play a single Dixie Chicks record last week — seven weeks after singer Natalie Maines made controversial comments about President Bush during a London concert.

But signs point to a reconciliation. Yesterday, Cumulus Media lifted its ban on playing Dixie Chicks music for its 42 country stations.

"Although the ban has been lifted, and I think it's the right time to do that, the reactions we're getting from markets vary," says Cumulus executive vice president John Dickey. "Some of them are interested in playing (the group's songs) to some extent, some of them still are not going to play (them). It's going to be left up to the stations to decide."

Country radio consultant Rusty Walker says some stations quietly have started playing such Dixie Chicks hits as Wide Open Spaces and Cowboy Take Me Away without triggering a torrent of vitriolic calls.

Other radio formats already want to fill the vacuum. One of adult-contemporary radio's leading consultants, Mike McVay, posted a column on his Web site (www.mcvaymedia.com) this week stating, "Attention Dixie Chicks, if they don't want you at Country radio, we'll take you at AC." (Related item: Industry buzz: Dixie Chicks would be well received on pop radio.)

"I'm afraid the Chicks and the label won't necessarily wait for country radio to come back," says Radio & Records' Nashville bureau chief Lon Helton. "They're going to forge ahead. I hope we don't lose them as our superstars and let them go on..."
forge ahead. I hope we don’t lose them as our superstars and let them go on somewhere else.”

Last week, after returning from their international tour, the members of the trio took the offensive, baring their souls to television’s Diane Sawyer and radio’s Bob Kingsley. They bared even more for Entertainment Weekly, posing nude for the magazine’s Friday cover with phrases such as “Dixie Sluts,” “Saddam’s Angels” and “Free Speech” written on their bodies. It couldn't have been conceived as a way to win back alienated fans, but it just might have been an effort to court a more accepting pop audience.

“That may be their most brilliant marketing scheme,” says Walker. “If that was an overt gesture, I think it’s cool.”

Walker adds, “There are two things I feel good about. It does look like the biggest performing act in country music might get to come back again. The other is they'll be a lot more well known and have a lot more notoriety.

"And there's nothing wrong with that."