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## Education



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### 2004 Pop Conference Bios/Abstracts

#### Caryn Brooks

Caryn Brooks is currently a fellow with the *National Arts Journalism Program* at Columbia University in New York City. Previously she was the arts and culture editor at *Willamette Week* newspaper in Portland, OR. At the 2003 EMP Pop Conference she presented a paper on karaoke. She is still pro karaoke.

#### Panel(s):

##### Dixie Chicks Cubed

Saturday, April 17, 2004, 10:45 - 12:15

#### Abstract:

##### "Liz Phair, The Dixie Chicks and 2003's Music Culture Wars"

What makes a culture war?

For the Dixie Chicks—who faced expulsion from the country music infrastructure after lead singer Natalie Maines made disparaging remarks about President Bush at a concert this past spring—the classic culture war scenario was unleashed. Like Lenny Bruce and Andres Serrano before her, Maines's political declaration rubbed some the wrong way. Unlike Bruce and Serrano, government regulators hoping to put the clamp on didn't chase the Dixie Chicks. Instead, they were dropped from country radio by a large media conglomerate whose market domination empowered it as a de facto regulator.

A not so classic example is the Liz Phair phenomenon, which can be lumped into the category of sub-culture war; here the politics in question aren't easy to categorize. Phair had no qualms about portraying her self-titled new record as an attempt to reach a larger audience and (hopefully) earn some cash. Last year, Tom Piazza wrote in the *New York Times* that Bob Dylan's decision to plug in at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival was an event "...seen by nearly everyone—pro or con—as a portent of the split between a commercially driven youth culture and the politically committed folk establishment." While response to the new Liz Phair didn't symbolize quite the same level of cultural drift, it did highlight some of the more important, yet often unspoken, commandments ruling the 1990s founded Indieville and the boho art world at large: don't talk about money and don't aspire openly to mainstream acceptance. After denouncing Phair's new "desperate" approach, Meghan O'Rourke famously called Phair's recent turn "career suicide" in the *New York Times*. While Pink can be judged as a pop artist without moral judgment, someone who makes the leap, as Phair did, from bedroom recordings to The Morning Zoo, can be branded in some communities as a sell-out and—just like the Dixie Chicks— a traitor.

Both the Dixie Chicks incident and the Liz Phair imbroglio share interesting commonalities. Yes, both parties are female and yes, both have lost fans (and gained new ones) in battle. Arguably, however, the most important quality they both share is the kind of freedom that comes from shedding expectations. During their recent Top of the World tour, the Dixie Chicks expressed their independence from Nashville by showing a film featuring great moments of dissent, including snippets from gay rights marches and pro-abortion demonstrations. And after being pelted with eggs, Phair can move forward with a career that no longer requires check off from the hipster hierarchy—for her this crowd's abandonment is a liberation of sorts.

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