



Dierks Bentley Likes to Keep His Live Shows 'Dangerous'

"It's never been about 'putting on a show,' it's about going through this metamorphosis."

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Dierks Bentley (photo credit: Nino Munoz)

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By **Kurt Wolff**

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There's an element of danger at every Dierks Bentley show. At least, that's the plan.

As Bentley explains, though, what he really means by "dangerous" is an element of surprise and "spontaneity." Every performance has to be a challenge, both for him and his audience.

"Every night before I go on stage, in front of me, there's a mountain that has to be climbed. There's no easy way around it, I have to make the climb."

For a guy who spends some 120 days a year touring, it's exactly that kind of challenge that keeps the process exciting for him, night after night. "It's never been about 'putting on a show,'" Bentley says of playing live, "it's about going through this metamorphosis."

A different set of challenges faces him in the recording studio. But as he found out with his most recent album *Riser*, that can also be extremely rewarding.

The work he put into that album obviously paid off. Not only has it been chock full of strong songs (“I Hold On” and “Drunk on a Plane” both reached No. 1, and “Say You Do” is getting close), it earned an Album of the Year nomination at the 2015 ACM Awards, one of seven Bentley received this year.

“It’s a really weird deal,” Bentley says. “Seven is my lucky number, it’s on my guitar picks. This is my seventh album. And to have seven nominations is huge.”

The album nomination is extra meaningful for him personally. “This record in particular, the events surrounding it, my dad passing away, my son Knox being born—I feel like we were able to capture that in the studio. And working with a new producer...just taking chances and going for stuff.”

So, he says, “it felt like a nice reward to be nominated like this,” as it “really put a tangible element on what I felt intangibly all year long...that [there was] something special about this album.”

Bentley calls title track “Riser” the “cornerstone of the album,” a song that, when it was sent to him, “changed my whole perspective.” Because of that, he says, “I’m really honored, and psyched to get a chance to sing [it] at the ACMs in Texas Cowboys stadium. It will definitely be a huge moment for that song, and this album.”

Radio.com spoke with Bentley by phone from Nashville, where, taking a break from the road, he was in the studio working on some tracks that may or may not be part of his next album. “I cut some stuff this week, and I’m getting ready to go work on some of the vocals in a little bit. Yeah man, it never ends.”

He’ll perform at the 50th ACM Awards on Sunday, April 19, then he’ll gear up his Sounds of Summer Tour, which will, as promised, include more than a few surprises and that aforementioned element of ‘danger.’

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Radio.com: Your album *Riser* is powerful has really resonated with your fans. How did you approach it?

Dierks Bentley: When making a record like *Riser*, I attack it from several different ways. One is just straight-up grunt work. Booking writing appointments, meeting up with friends in Nashville and throwing ideas around. Maybe one out of 20 writes gets you something that might be considered for the album. You write a lot of B-plus songs, but I don’t want any B-plus songs on my record.

[On my own] I get four or five really good ideas a year, and I just try to be more calculated on writing those. Like [the songs that addressed] my dad passing

away such as “Here on Earth,” “I Hold On,” “Damn These Dreams”—those are the kind of things that got flushed out in my own mind.

And then just looking for great songs. Just listening, listening, listening, trying to find stuff that complements those, or helps promote thoughts that are in your head. So a song like “Riser” [written by Travis Meadows, Steve Moakler]—that was sent to me [and] it changed my whole perspective on the album. Like, “Wow, this is the cornerstone of the album. This is what I want to name the record.”

Have you considered releasing “Riser” as a radio single?

I always wanted it to be a single. [But] there’s a lot that goes into picking singles, a lot of people involved. I’ve got a great record label, and Mike Dungan [the Chairman and CEO of Universal Music Nashville], when you love something, he’ll let you do it. But I’ve learned there are some really smart people at the record labels, [and] it’s smart to listen to them.

The first single [from Riser] we put out, “Bourbon in Kentucky,” totally died, it was way too heavy. I don’t think people were ready for that on country radio. That might have been a mistake...but maybe not. It showed we weren’t afraid to take chances and push boundaries. And we came back with “I Hold On.” [Then] the record label chose “Drunk on a Plane,” which I’m thankful they did, it’s one of the biggest songs of my career [and] one of the funnest songs to play every night. I love “Say You Do,” I’ve always loved that song, but I love “Riser,” too. I hope it is the next single. That’d be pretty sweet.

You’ve got a new tour coming up. Tell us about what goes into picking songs for your live show.

Charlie Daniels used the analogy a long time ago, about shows being a roller coaster. You want to take ’em on a ride, man. And there’s a certain way to do that in country music. In a rock show, rock songs have a lot of the same groove, an uptempo groove. Country, you’ve got your uptempos, you’ve got ballads, [and] you need to place them just the right way to go for that ride.

What I try to do is keep the door to spontaneity open, having some part of the show that’s not planned out and changes every night. This summer, I’ll be letting the fans choose [a song each night], whether through people holding up posters, or something online—just make it local to that place. I’m not sure yet if it’ll be just Riser or songs that span my whole career. There may be a couple, who knows? I just want to have that moment there where anything can happen.

I’ve always tried to have that in my shows, whether it’s pulling people up on stage to shotgun beers, or diving out into the crowd, just something that feels a little dangerous for me and for the show. Keeps me on my toes.

Dangerous?

I think what can kill a live show is...it sounds weird, but selfishly you've got to make it fun for you, more than anybody else. Probably the greatest blessing in my whole career is that every night, no matter where I'm playing, I'll walk off stage with the band, we'll go back to the dressing room, just the six of us, and for 30 or 45 minutes we're going over that one particular show, just bouncing off the walls. It's like running a marathon every night and being on that high. It's never been about 'putting on a show,' it's about going through this metamorphosis.

I tell my wife this every night before I go on stage, in front of me, there's a mountain that has to be climbed, there's no easy way around it, I can't get a helicopter over it, I have to make the climb. But it's a good, cathartic feeling every night. And when I'm feeling that, I know the crowd [is] feeling that too.

It's just a real fluid relationship between us and that audience, and I live for that. If that wasn't there, I couldn't play 120 shows a year, just putting on a dancing-bear costume and going out there and dancing around. There needs to be a fight involved, if that makes any sense.

I'm sitting in my car right now outside a coffee shop, so I'm not really on the battlefield. But man when I'm out there, and we finally get to "What Was I Thinkin'" [Bentley's first single, dating back to 2003], and you look at all those people...just "here we are, dreams are coming true, 20,000 people," it's like, "whoa." Between that and some of the moonshine or whatever I'm drinking [laughs], it's lethal every night.

So you're in the studio right now?

I am. I cut some stuff this week, and I'm getting ready to go work on some of the vocals on that in a little bit. Yeah man, it never ends.

It's nice to be off the road for a little bit. It's healthy for me and the guys in the band, and the crew. I think it's important for everyone to remember that you do have a life outside of touring. It's healthy for families, it's just healthy for your soul. And for me personally, [it's a] time to really concentrate on starting this record process. Getting an early start on it, see where my head's at. It's been really important.

Is this where your next album begins?

The old process was, take a break from the road, make an album, get back out on the road. That's just the way it is in those early years. The process now is more about quality control, and making the best album possible. So I was in the studio—maybe we were cutting songs for the record, maybe we were just...cutting songs. I just want to go in there and see how it feels. Open up that vein and see what's going on.

We're just going to take our time and not rush anything at all, and make sure we put out something that is the best it can be.

Dierks Bentley performs on the 50th ACM Awards, which air live on Sunday, April 19 at 8pm ET on CBS. His Sounds of Summer Tour kicks off June 5 in Raleigh, N.C. Get details on Bentley's website.