

TASTE OF COUNTRY

Lyrics Uncovered: Dierks Bentley, 'Riser'



Dierks Bentley's "Riser" lyrics are bringing a triumphant spirit to country radio, and the song is aptly named, since it has defied all of the odds against it since the day it was written.

It began with an idea that Travis Meadows had been saving specifically to try to write with Steve Moakler. Meadows went through a dark period of substance abuse and multiple rehab stays before winning his way to sobriety and a career as one of Music City's most respected writers, and he remembered Moakler from a previous collaboration. He felt Moakler had just what the song needed.

"Steve and I had gotten together once before, and I'm still kinda coming out of the fog that I was in, and he had a really optimistic idea," Meadows tells Taste of Country. "He's such an optimistic young man anyway, and he told me his idea, and I said, 'Man, I don't think I can get in touch with that kind of optimism. I just don't know.'"

But as they fleshed out the idea, he recalls, "I got in touch with optimism, and Steve was a big part of that. The song wound up being great."

But when he presented his new idea to Moakler, the younger man just wasn't sure.

“He came in and said, ‘I want to write a song called “Survivor.”’ And I knew it was powerful, but it’s a big idea, it’s really heavy, and that’s a challenging title to write, and intimidating as a writer,” Moakler tells us. “And he started to mumble some ideas that were amazing, and the way that I describe Travis is, he’s twice my age, with three times the life experience. I’m 27; I haven’t been through that much. Compared to what he’s been through, it’s really nothing.”

He told Meadows he wasn’t sure what he could bring to the song. “And he got real mad,” Moakler says. “He stood up, and he threw the notebook, and he said, ‘Damn it, Moakler! I was saving this one for you ‘cause you’re so damn optimistic!’”

“And I said, ‘The last time that we got together, I couldn’t get in touch with my optimism, and we did really good,’” Meadows adds. “I feel like that optimism is exactly what would help the song not be as dark as I would make it without you.”

“There were some unseen powers at work, trying to get the message out there.”

Once they got down to working on the “Riser” lyrics, they flowed very quickly, with their different points of view balancing each other out. “It’s one thing to have been through a lot, and it’s another to believe that you can make it through a lot,” Moakler points out. “I think that song is both. It’s a song that I feel honored to have been a part of, and it’s a song that I hope to live up to.”

“What a magical day. It was a beautiful day. Steve is an incredible artist, and a great writer, and I feel like we just wrote a masterpiece,” Meadows reflects. “That’s one of those songs that as songwriters, we write a song like that, and then we kinda worry that we will never be able to write another song that great, because it’s just one of those very special songs.”

The song’s original working title was “Survivor,” but it got changed to “Riser” in the process of collaboration. “I think the term ‘riser’ was something that Travis had. I think that’s what makes it unique,” Moakler says. “The term ‘survivor,’ we’ve all heard that, and first of all the chorus lands on ‘riser,’ which is how most country songs are titled, and I think the term ‘survivor’ takes on a victim stereotype. You take away that connotation, but ‘riser’ is the opposite. You don’t have to have been through something to call yourself a riser. It’s more the determination.”

The writing flowed so easily that neither man professes to remember whose lines in the “Riser” lyrics were whose, with one exception.

“I do remember one in particular, because it’s one that I would have never come to on my own, and it’s exactly pointing to that optimism that I was talking about,” Meadows says. “I would say something like, ‘I’m a fighter,’ or ‘I’m a don’t-run-and-hider.’ But I would never in a million years say, ‘I’m a lighter.’ That’s such an optimistic phrase, and it’s one of my favorite parts of the song. ‘When darkness comes to town, I’m a lighter.’ What a beautiful thought.”

The pair were uncertain the song would ever get cut. But Bentley not only cut the track, he titled his enormously critically acclaimed new album after it and finally pushed for its release as the fifth single from the project.

“It’s been a fun ride,” Moakler says. “It’s been crazy. I really didn’t think it would be a single. But isn’t that the spirit of the song? Kinda coming up at the last minute, saying, ‘Hey, I’m still around.’”

“It’s a riser,” Meadows agrees. “Even the song itself, it just kinda grows legs and spreads love wherever it goes. It’s a pretty powerful thing. It just kinda re-affirms to me that that song was bigger than any of us. There were some unseen powers at work, trying to get the message out there.”