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Concert review: Dierks Bentley knows how to make Charlotte feel special

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We've all seen the artists who take a break between songs to shout out a generic, "You guys are the most amazing city on the tour so far!" – and even if we've had a beer or three too many, we know they're just blowing smoke.

Then there's Dierks Bentley, who clearly seems to have a thing for Charlotte.

"This is a very special place," the country-music star told a nearly sold-out crowd at PNC Music Pavilion Thursday night, less than midway through his 90-minute set, in not-so-generic fashion. To explain: "In 2014, we (wanted) to see if we could start headlining some of these amphitheatres – and this is the very first place we played. ... We tried so hard for so long to headline places like this. To be back here now just means so much to me."

Still sound like broad-based praise? OK, try this.

“The first time I came through town, 15 years ago ... we weren’t even playing bars yet; we were just playing radio stations and trying to get a little song called ‘What Was I Thinkin’ ’ heard. Then several years later, man, I finally sold out Coyote Joe’s, and that was a really big deal. A really big deal. That was one of those career moments. When you sell that place out, you know things are going right.”

Whether or not you’re now sufficiently convinced that the Arizona native doesn’t say these kinds of things to all the cities, this much is true: In the two years since Bentley’s bow as a big-venue headliner (and yes, indeed, his 2014 Riser Tour kicked off at this same amphitheater), he has developed a rapport with his fans as a live performer that artists possessing 10 times as much headlining experience can’t boast.

That rapport allows Bentley to appear charmingly at ease when he, say, brings a burly fan up on stage to shotgun a can of beer with him, as he did after singing party-starter “Am I the Only One.”

Or when he follows break-up song “Somewhere on a Beach” by borrowing sunglasses from one fan and a beer from another, then trust-falls/reverse-stage-dives into the surprised throng in the pit.

Or when he breaks from his scripted set list to sing a verse and a chorus of love song “Come a Little Closer,” after the wife of a U.S. Marine shoved the handwritten request into the rear pocket of Bentley’s jeans (turns out it was their wedding song 11 years ago).

On Thursday night, Bentley did spend a few moments memorializing his dog of 15 years, Jake, who was put to sleep last week – most notably in a brief photo montage that played on the giant video screen at the rear of the stage during the final notes of the nostalgic “Every Mile a Memory.”

But otherwise, he kept the mood light in a variety of ways, from pretending to pass out on stage after high-fiving practically every other fan as he waded through the pavilion aisles at the end of anthemic flag-waver “Freedom” ... to suiting up as an airline pilot for the rollicking “Drunk on a Plane” finale, during which he was joined by openers Randy Houser, Cam and Tucker Beathard.

And he won the night with a Luke Bryan joke that seemed – to this observer, at least – off-the-cuff.

Standing on a “B” stage in front of the lawn, Bentley had his back to the fans in the covered section of the amphitheater, which until that point had been looking at the front of him for almost an hour.

“I think they like this side back here,” the 40-year-old heartthrob said, then: “It’s funny ... I washed my jeans the other night and (on the dryer) there’s like low, medium, high, hot, and there’s a Luke Bryan setting. I put it on the Luke Bryan setting. I think Charlotte likes that.”

Is it possible he’s used this line on another city? Of course. But if this is as generic as his banter with the crowd gets, we should feel awfully lucky.

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