

Music Review: Bentley Matures on CD

By MICHAEL McCALL
For The Associated Press

Dierks Bentley, "Long Trip Alone" (Capitol)

Dierks Bentley spent his first two albums stamping his free-wheeling personality onto a variety of country music styles, from traditional honky tonk to spirited bluegrass to contemporary country. With his third CD, he focuses more intently on a distinct form of modern country-rock that emphasizes complex instrumental arrangements and personal storytelling.

Bentley's use of acoustic instruments over a hard-charging, sophisticated rhythm section isn't new. In his own way, he furthers a sound developed by the Dixie Chicks, Keith Urban and others. But he rocks harder than those artists, and lyrically he moves beyond Nashville's usual politeness toward a more honest reckoning of what it's like to be a young, attractive, successful guy in modern America.

His best songs — "That Don't Make It Easy Lovin' Me," "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" — are autobiographical tunes about a hard-traveling fellow who enjoys a good time, struggles with responsibility yet wants a good relationship, too.

He also deals with his religious convictions in a bold way for a Nashville artist. In "The Heaven I'm Headed To," he envisions a Christianity that's more tolerant and inclusive than the way it's currently preached by Baptist fundamentalists.

Altogether, Bentley continues to forge a fresh, cliché-free sound that marks him as one of country music's most interesting new voices — and a worthy successor to the Nashville outlaws he considers his mentors.

