

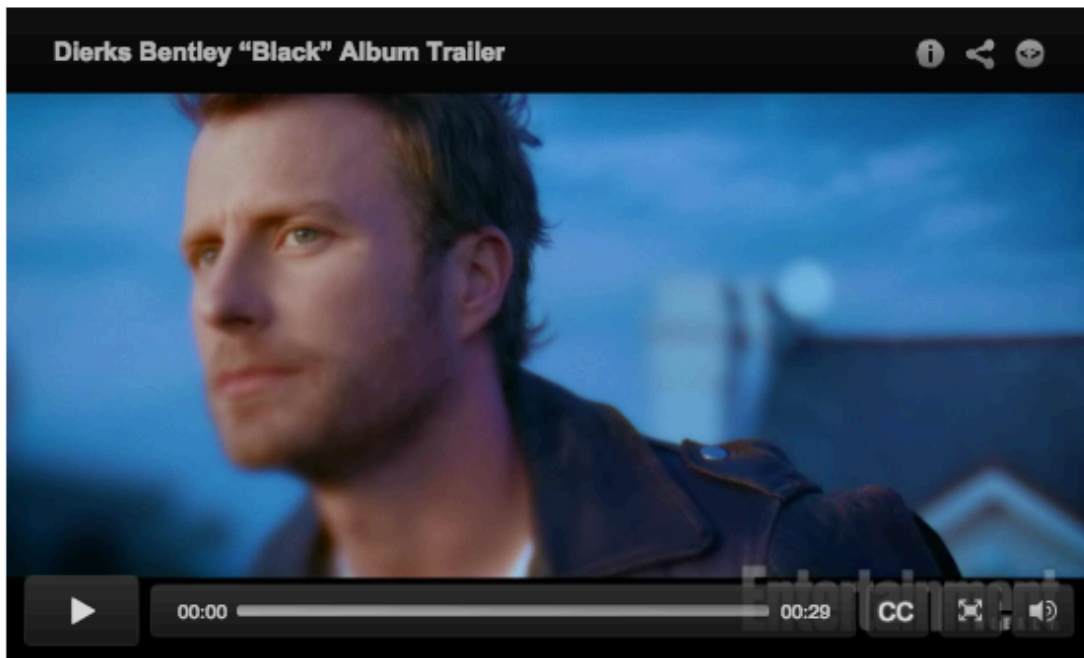
Entertainment

MUSIC

Dierks Bentley returns with new album *Black*, due out this year

'If I was ever making a record just to make a record, I would quit,' he says of finishing up his eighth effort.

BY MADISON VAIN · @TWEETSINVAIN



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Dierks Bentley is a rarity: He won the Nashville game by simply refusing to play it. He sells out enormous tours, is a perennial favorite of format radio stations, and earns critical acclaim without compromising his artistic vision. He's currently up for a Grammy for "The Driver," his collaboration with Charles Kelley and Eric Paslay, and this April, he'll co-host the 2016 Academy of Country Music Awards with superstar Luke Bryan.

In this light, he is perhaps the most singular Music City singers working right now. This will only become more apparent as he drops his eighth full-length *Black* — a project EW can exclusively announce.

Bentley has dubbed his latest a "relationship record," though *Black* could easily be interpreted as a concept collection based on his 10-year marriage to wife Cassidy Black; the romances — big, small, scandalous, silly — that led up to and through the

union itself. (One of the standouts from an early listen is the title track, an intriguing case for the enduring spark of long-term monogamy.)

Bentley has credits on roughly half of *Black*, while the others are needles he's found in the Nashville songwriters' haystack. As for the title? It both encompasses the project's overall vibe and is hyper-personal to the singer. "Some people associate red with love, but to me red is for an earlier stage of a relationship," Bentley says. "Black is much deeper, to me. It's certainly the sexiest color. [And] this record has a sexiness, in a well-worn leather-jacket kind of way. It's not glossy sexy—there's a realness to it. The kicker is that my wife's last name is Black." (By the way, Bentley laughs every time he says the word sexy. There's also a realness to that.)

He tells EW that the relationship-centric focus emerged early in the creative process, which began back in February 2015. Bentley, along with songwriter Dan Wilson, and longtime producer Ross Copperman wrote a currently untitled song that "explores the darker corners of your heart," the singer says. "I hadn't heard anything else out there that looked at love in the 'Everything's good so why am I suspicious?'-way. It asks why you play tricks on yourself, why you push people away. I really gravitated toward it."

For those who might wonder why the 40-year-old is crooning so specifically about his relationship a full decade in, he says: "Everyone talks about new love all the time, but there's so much to draw from when you've been in a longer relationship. It makes me stick my chest out a little bit. It's like, 'I know what you've been through, but you don't know what it's like over here.' [Marriage] isn't always commercialized as being cool, but it really is."

The collection, so far, is unlike anything fans have heard from Bentley, which is what he wanted. The singer has made a career out of sharp left turns, and he does so again here. "I listen to all types of music, but big rock records are the ones that in the walk-up make me wonder, 'What's this next set going to sound like?'" he asks, explaining his penchant for sonic detours. "I've tried to carve out a niche in country where people allow that from me."

He's aware that this approach wouldn't work for many of his genre mates. "[Fans] don't allow that from a lot of their favorite artists," he admits. "Part of being a brand is the thinking that an artist can only make one type of music, and that's good for business." Thankfully, Bentley, Inc. has never trumped Bentley The Artist.

"I ask myself all the time, 'Why keep doing this?'" Bentley says. "If I wasn't exploring or finding something to write about that was personal or meant something, there'd be no reason. If I was ever making a record just to make a record, or ever just like, 'Just put something out there that someone will buy,' I would quit. I really would."

Black is due for an early 2016 release via Capitol Records Nashville. The set's first single has not yet been announced.

<http://www.ew.com/article/2016/01/11/dierks-bentley-new-album-black>