

(5.14.17) <http://www.courant.com/entertainment/music/hc-interview-dierks-bentley-xfinity-theatre-hartford-0601-20170515-story.html>

## Country's Dierks Bentley Wants To Hear Your Weirdest Song



The video for Dierks Bentley's 2014 hit "Drunk on a Plane" has more than 46 million views on YouTube. Let that sink in for a moment: a population larger than Spain tuned in to a mile-high fantasy about solo-boozing one's way down to Cancun ("It's Mardi Gras up in the clouds / I'm up so high, I may never come down") to celebrate the pre-paid honeymoon of a botched wedding.

Country fans want what they want. But "Black," Bentley's most recent chartbuster (named for his wife's maiden name), had plenty of unexpected emotional peaks and troughs. Live, Bentley has party anthems to spare, but it's the in-between numbers, he says, that intrigue him the most; he's after the weird, out-of-the-box lyrics, the sounds that defy country conventions, ones that simultaneously look back to country's outlaw past while forging ahead into new terrain. Q: Is the pressure still off, for the time being?

A: The pressure's off right now, which is why I try to get in there and do it. I have no problem writing with my back up against the wall. I've been there before. I've been where I'm touring 300 days a year and we need an album. You can do that if you don't have three kids and three dogs. You can just go, "OK, I'm going to live in the studio for a month and live and die for this album." I respect that, and I've done that. I've recorded some of my best records doing that. But I think I'm making my best records now by really just putting more time into the writing process, and really listening, too. I'm recording more songs now than I ever have in the past. I'm writing more songs and I'm working harder this summer than I ever have, but I'm also working with an executive producer who actually worked on my very first record [Brett Beavers]. We got back together again for the last three albums. He's really good at saying no. He's really good at saying, "Nah, I like that song better."

If the ultimate goal is to make the best album, then I don't care where the song comes from. The core of it is probably going to come from me. In a book, the main thesis is your idea. But you have other friends who contribute other ideas to back up that thesis. You make the best album you can. These guys who write for me, I know they're writing songs on their own. I'm like, "Hey, let me hear what you've got, and think of me when you go into your next songwriting appointment without me."

Q: They know you and your style, and they write professionally. It's what they do. Everyone has different skill sets.

A: They do. Their knives are sharp all the time. Their pencils are sharp all the time. I know how to do my thing on the road, and that's the main thing that I do.

Q: "Black" was successful, but it was also seen by some as a musical departure. Does that encourage you to follow your muse even more?

A: It does. Country music is in such a great place right now. It's really wide open, production-wise, which is great, in my mind. I think what makes country country is just great songs, as far as the lyrics go, just great storytelling, the craft of writing a great song in 3 minutes and 30 seconds. For me, as long as we write great songs, great lyrics, great stories, we can really go for stuff on the production end. I've also been going back, digging through country songs and songs. With the next record, I have no idea: Will it be more of a classic country sound? Will it try to push ahead and search for something new? Should we get some bluegrass back into the mix again? It's the exciting part about the whole process. For me, it's not just, "Hey, this is working, let's just go with the same guys and make more of the same doughnut." I need to find a way to keep this exciting for me. I've been fortunate to be successful and a lot of good things have happened. We also need to try something new, to try something that people may not like. It's different. When people send me songs, I say, "As long as it's something different. I don't want something that sounds like anything else. Send me your weirdest song. Send me the songs that nobody wants to cut." That's what I want to hear. Bentley speaks to CTNow about songwriting and his current tour, which stops at Hartford's Xfinity Theater on June 2.

Q: Your latest album, "Black," was released about a year ago. Are you already thinking about what comes next?

A: I'm already getting up to speed and writing songs and seeing what happens. I just go in there, hang out, catch up with some buddies and write some songs, just see if we can't make something happen. Also, most of your ideas come through writing itself, so to get in there and do that, you might stumble into a song idea or a lyrical idea. That's what happened with "Black." I had no idea what I was doing. I wrote that song, "Black," and it gave me a direction, a sound for the whole album. That just came from one day of writing. I'm just going to keep going back there every day and hope to find something that makes it possible. Q: What qualifies as "different" for you?

A: Lyrically, I think it's songs that say things that aren't necessarily considered to be cool or hip. "Riser" [the title track of Bentley's 2014 album]: I'd never heard a song like that on the radio before. It wasn't about a girl or trucks or beer or parties. It's a mantra for people who put one foot in front of the other, no matter what they're going through. Other things that excite me: songs about being a man, responsibilities. I have a set list full of songs about parties and girls, and I rely heavily on those songs during a live show. That's where a lot of the energy comes from, those party songs. But I think the most important songs in the live show are the ones in between those huge, uptempo hits, the ones that kind of glue the whole thing together. You can't have a roller coaster that goes downhill the whole time. You have to have some ups and downs. You have to find ways to take the audience on a ride. I have big songs like "5-1-5-0," "What Was I Thinkin'" and "Drunk On A Plane." I know what those songs are going to do, that they are going to get the audience crazy: What can I do between those songs to make the ride different?

Q: When you come up north this summer, to these big outdoor sheds, is there a sound and vibe that's different than indoor venues?

A: It's totally different. All winter long, I've been up in Canada, playing arenas all over the U.S. I love playing arenas. They're so fun. The crowd just hangs right there. The sound is great; it's always dark. The opening acts love it because it always looks good to them. They're not waiting for the sun to go down. At the same time, once it gets nice outside, you're like, "Man, I want to be outside in the summertime." Especially for me, being from Arizona, I hate being inside. You start looking forward to those amphitheater dates and get excited for your first one. I get excited just talking about it now. Everyone's out there, they're feeling good. You get a chance to be a part of the party. I can't go out there obviously, because I'm singing, but I feel like I'm part of the tailgate, part of the fun. We're all out here under the stars, feeling good. It brings back a lot of memories of going to concerts as a kid. It's totally different. And then in September, it's like going back to school: let's get back inside, let's contain the crowd, contain the crowd. It's funny how it goes back and forth. Right now, I've got a few arenas left, and then I'm so ready to get back to the amphitheaters.

Q: You were in Boston recently with your kids, cheering on your wife as she ran the Boston Marathon. She ran in support of Safe Haven, a shelter in Nashville you've championed for some time. How did that begin?

A: We were making the video for the song "Riser." We started thinking about how we could make a difference, how we could tie this in with an organization or charity. Wes Edwards, who I do a lot of videos with, and I stumbled upon Safe Haven and found a girl there named Amy, who had a story about losing her house. Through Safe Haven, they were able to get back on their feet. It became a relationship with her and the organization, and my wife has done a lot of work with them since then. \$20,000 can make a big difference for Safe Haven.

Q: Nashville Mayor Megan Barry recently tapped you to serve on the Nashville Airport Authority Board. Planes play a big role in your life, onstage and off. What will you bring to that position, and are you generally interested in getting involved with politics in a bigger way?

A: Definitely not anything bigger. When this career is over, I'll be in Wyoming or Montana or back in Arizona. I love Nashville, and I plan to be here for many years to come, but I'm not looking for another job. I do love the city [of Nashville]. It has grown so much. I'd love to help shape it in the small way that I can. Aviation is the key to everything. For me, my career would not be possible without aviation. With my kids and the life I have here, I need to get back and forth as much as possible. That's why I became a pilot, so that I could cut the corners on that travel. It's been a godsend. I'm excited to be on that board. Megan Barry is a great person, always out and about promoting Nashville. It's the local level of politics there, being part of it on that board. It gives me a better seat as I watch Nashville evolve and grow.

