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How Dierks Bentley Became Country Music's Most Relatable Star

This singer-songwriter didn't need a highly calculated PR plan to find success.

It's a sultry August afternoon at the St. Louis record mecca Vintage Vinyl, and in the back of the shop amidst carrels of LPs, Dierks Bentley is surveying the robust crowd that's gathered to celebrate the vinyl release of his album *Black*. "You guys are all glistening out there," he says as he gets ready to play another track. "You're not sweating—you're *glistening*. It's a beautiful thing."

That grace is not lost on the audience, who have crowded themselves into the store's aisles in order to catch a closer glimpse of Bentley—he's playing the big shed in town later that evening, and the NFL has just announced that he'll be co-headlining their September 8 kickoff concert in Denver. Bentley tees from past tours dominate the crowd, with one couple sporting matching BENTLEY FOR PRESIDENT shirts. (They have one to give to their dream candidate as well.) The vibe is loose and fun, with audience members shouting out requests from *Black* and older albums in his catalog.

One of those requests is "Can't Be Replaced," the meditative ballad that closes *Black*. On record, the song's mood is set in part by the sweetly sad tones of a dobro; before he and

his bandmates went into the song, Bentley noted that he added the dobro at the record's end as a tribute to his dog, Jake, who'd passed away a month earlier and who had appeared on the cover of his major-label debut, 2003's *Dierks Bentley*. "I knew it was going to be a bookend to our time together," he says. The crowd, already glistening, melts.

That attention to detail has dominated Bentley's career and made him one of country's most relatable stars, someone whose love of music means that he can remember "the exact moment of the hour, minute, second" when, he says, country went from being his dad's music to being his passion. His first record was a 45 containing Waylon Jennings' good-ol'-boys-saluting theme to the '70s TV smash *The Dukes Of Hazzard*, but it wasn't until he was in his late teens that he sat up and realized what country music had to offer.

"A friend sat me down," Bentley recalls in his dressing room at the Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre outside of St. Louis, where a thunderstorm outside has forced the audience to their cars, "and played me a song by Hank [Williams] Jr. called 'Man to Man,' and it just really changed my whole life. It was one of those few moments where I just knew without a doubt what I wanted to do."

"Hank Junior when I was 17," he marvels. "'Man to Man' is just a real testosterone-fueled song, electric guitar solos and just a lot of bravado. It just really resonated more than the other rock music was—the lyrics, the story. 'Who is this guy, singing this way?'"

Two years later, Bentley moved to Nashville and started pursuing music. He kicked around for a while, and *Dierks Bentley* spawned a hit almost right out of the gate: "What Was I Thinkin'," a breakneck track about a man who falls under the spell of a woman "in

a little white tank top," hit No. 1 on Hot Country Songs and established Bentley as an upstart force in Nashville. The rest of the decade was good to Bentley; he headlined his own tours and supported heavy hitters like Brad Paisley and Kenny Chesney, balancing robust record sales and heavy radio play with acclaim from even those critics who had seemed allergic to Nashville's output in the past.

In 2010, though, Bentley threw a curveball: *Up on the Ridge*, a bluegrass-inspired album that included his take on U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)" and Kris Kristofferson's downcast 1973 track "From the Bottle to the Bottom." Striking out on his own path in that manner changed his outlook on what he was doing with his career, and how albums and tours functioned within it.



"Playing the live shows is my favorite thing above everything," he notes. "I love live music—that's why I do anything. It started off being pretty good in the beginning, even when I was playing for free beer. But I think there was a time when I viewed records

more as a way to further my career as far as the tour; the albums were really like the jet fuel for the plane, and the plane was the tour.

"I was making great records, but my mentality shifted after the bluegrass record. It had to, because I knew that record wasn't going to help touring at all. This was going to be a record that wasn't going to help anything at all, just something that I had to do. From there forward, I really just tried to make great albums and let the albums be what they're going to be, and touring be totally separate from the album, and not try to write a song that would be good for the stage, or find a[n album] title what would work also well as a title for a tour. I'd just separate the two. And it made great records."

Bentley continued traveling his own path, and it eventually struck big. 2013's *Riser* is, for the most part, a contemplative album that deals frankly with the death of his father; its title track is a moody ballad about holding on to one another through tough times. One of the album's relatively lighter moments is the cheekily titled "Drunk on a Plane," which balances a keenly detailed hard-luck story of a guy who bought non-refundable tickets for a now-canceled honeymoon with a singsong chorus that revels in "pourin' Coke and whiskey." It became a massive hit, but one with a lot of heart beating underneath its liquor-soaked façade.

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"'Drunk on a Plane,' no doubt, became bigger than 'What Was I Thinkin'." "Not that I

was actively trying to," he explains, "but it took me ten years to write a hit bigger than that one—more than 10 years. Nearly 12."

And then came *Black*, the follow-up, which came out in May. It's contemplative and well-paced, full of tracks like the regretful post-drunk-dial chronicle "What The Hell Did I Say" and the sensuous "Black" that are rich with detailed lyrics only made even more vivid by Bentley's rasp. Women's voices come in, too, on "I'll Be The Moon," a duet about a split heart with the country upstart Maren Morris, and "Different For Girls," an attempt to broach the gulf between the sexes that Bentley sings with the whiskey-voiced spitfire Elle King. While King's hard-living persona is, well, different from the more sensitive women outlined in the lyrics, Bentley noted that her presence made the song's message more of something to mull over than take at face value.

"We hit it off right away," he notes. "She added a nice layer to the song; she is the girl that's gonna drink her way through a heartache, and she's gonna, maybe hook up to get over somebody. She's singing this part because I didn't want the song to be too typecast. I do see the world as being different for girls—especially now, having daughters. I think her being on there makes it a little bit more... not ambiguous, but the edges aren't so defined that people can just listen to it for themselves, and hear what they want to hear."

That willingness to be ambiguous is one of the reasons Bentley's work has caught the ear of so many different types of listeners, whether they're country-music lifers or people who append "but rap and country" to their rundowns of personal musical tastes. He can sing a song that's front-loaded with country-party motifs—beaches, airplane drunkenness—and twist it just enough, allowing listeners to get a glimpse of the real person inhabiting each song.



"I can only do it one way because that's just what you do," he states. "It's not that you can do this calculated move, to try to further your career. You just follow what's in your heart, and later you look back and go, 'I was either really dumb, or really smart, I can't believe I did that.'"

Black came out on vinyl about three months after its initial release. Bentley's attention to detail is so exacting that he decided to sit in on the mastering of the album, making sure that it would stay true to his initial intent of telling a two-part story.

"You see a lot of people [release] double albums, where you can make the groove wider and therefore be able to play it louder," he notes. "But I wanted to do [a single] album, because I feel like in my mind there's an A side and a B side. It's the tiny little things that maybe someone wouldn't notice—but I would notice."

One other thing that Bentley noticed: The disarray that comes with the tour bus life would be mitigated by the presence of vinyl.

"You'd wake up in the morning there'd be all this booze," he recalls. "Booze, booze, booze, booze, booze. Red cups, coffee maker, sink. You wake up in the morning and saw all this alcohol. I was like, 'Man, let's just put that in a drawer. Let's put a record player on the bus.' And so you wake up in the morning, get your coffee, and about 20 records sitting there, got the audio tech, it's a very deliberate way to start your morning."

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Although more often than not, his morning's deliberate start will involve a trip to the airport. Bentley got his pilot's license in 1997; 15 years after that, he realized that using it would allow him to better keep in touch with his family. Bentley married his wife Cassidy in 2005, and they have three young children; he flies between concerts and stops at home to see his family, allowing him to have an enviable, if labor-intensive, work-life balance.

"I'm at the point now where it's like, I love what I do out there so much, it really would take a lot to ever pull me away from that," he says. "I really can't tell you the feeling I feel like, being on stage, it's such a high; it's like running a marathon. You just can't get that feeling anywhere else. So it would take a lot to pull me away from that. Three young kids is a lot on the other side of the scale, and being able to see them in the morning, and they're good and they're happy, I know that everything's good there. And then I hop into

the left seat [of the plane] and go play a gig somewhere and rock that thing as far as I can."

Later that night, Bentley roars through a set for those patient fans that have braved the lightning and waited in their cars while the storm's heaviest aspects passed through. The gravity of "Riser" and the title track of *Black* are balanced by rollicking tracks like the over-the-moon "5-1-5-0" and the giddy "What Was I Thinkin'"; there's also an Eagles cover ("Take It Easy") and, of course, "Drunk on a Plane," which turns into an on-stage dance party.

"Nineteen-year-old me never thought I'd be playing at this level, and doing all this with my family," he says. "Success came really late in some ways for me, but I'm so thankful it did because it's all so much more meaningful now, with them. They can remember some of it. I probably won't—I don't remember ten years ago, let alone five years ago," he laughs.

"I try to just keep present in the moment I'm in," he says. "This moment is very good and I'm so thankful I'm here. I still keep in touch with that buddy of mine that turned me on to country music. He always signs his notes 'L.D.H.F'—long distance high five—about some of the stuff that happens, which makes us both laugh."

That "stuff" is a result of Bentley taking control of his own career and following his muse to wherever it might take him—with the sky as the literal limit.

"It's so much cooler to fly any plane than sit in the back. Being up front is a lot of fun."

DESERT ISLAND DIERKS

Dierks Bentley's five favorite albums.

1. *Van Halen (1978)*: "I got into rock music at thirteen, listening to Van Halen, learned how to play the electric guitar."

2. *Del McCoury, The Cold Hard Facts (1996)*: "One of my favorite bluegrass records of all time. It was a really special time in my life when I was really just getting into bluegrass hardcore. Kind of being a Dead-head—sorry, Del-head."

3. *Hank Williams, Jr., Lone Wolf (1990)*: "That has the song 'Made a Man' on it, and a great album cover. It's Bocephus in his prime."

4. *Tony Rice, Church Street Blues (1983)*: "He's a bluegrasser. He's a singer-songwriter. Such a great musician. There's times I've been working out in a gym, I'm listening to Tony Rice, and I guarantee I'm the only person in this gym, maybe in this country working out to Tony Rice. I just love his music."

5. *The Cadillac Three (2012)*: "I'm a fan. 'Bury Me In Boots' is really good. It's still one of my favorites."