

Dierks Bentley Looks to Spread Country

By JOHN GEROME
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The first of Dierks Bentley's two big outdoor shows this month is a gimme.

He'll play for thousands of adoring country fans this week at the CMA Music Festival in Nashville.

The second gig is trickier. He'll be the only mainstream country star to perform alongside rockers like the Police and the White Stripes at the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in Manchester, Tenn., June 14-17.

Some of the Bonnaroo rock fans won't know Bentley from Toby Keith or Kenny Chesney; some of them may not care much for country music.

Bentley knows this, and it makes him a little uneasy.

"It's putting us in a position we're not entirely comfortable with as a band," he acknowledged recently before heading off for rehearsals. "It's going to be sink or swim. But I'm excited about it."

And eager to try to change people's minds.

"This kind of music, when done properly, can appeal to anybody. It can be hokey if it's put out hokey. But if it's done right, it's the coolest type of music out there," he said.

The annual Country Music Association festival opens Thursday and runs through Sunday. Besides Bentley, Alan Jackson, Reba McEntire, Brooks & Dunn, Martina McBride, Brad Paisley, Carrie Underwood, Gretchen Wilson, Trace Adkins, Sugarland and Big & Rich are slated to perform.

Known as "Fan Fair" when it started in 1972, the Country Music Association's annual festival has always been a chance for fans to shake hands or maybe just see their favorite country singers in person.

Bentley, who at 31 is the youngest member of the Grand Ole Opry, is an obvious choice for the CMA Music Festival lineup, but he's also a good ambassador for country music at Bonnaroo, reaching out to hipsters and hippies alike. Like Dwight Yoakam and Travis Tritt in the '80s and '90s, he brings a rock swagger to country radio with hits like "What Was I Thinkin'" and "Every Mile a Memory."

"This guy is a staunch traditionalist, and he can debate you forever about traditional country music," remarked Mike Dungan, president and CEO of Bentley's label, Capitol Records Nashville. "But he grew up in a time when he was exposed to rock music and he loves U2 and Coldplay and bands like that. I think that combination comes through."

Growing up in Phoenix, Bentley heard lots of country music from his father. But at 13 he learned to play electric guitar and got into the heavy metal "hair" bands of the day. Things changed after a friend turned him on to Hank Williams Jr. when he was 17. He immediately connected to Williams' rebellious swagger and redneck bravado.

"From 17 to 26, I listened to nothing but country and bluegrass," he said. "I was really hardcore about it."

Bentley loosened up as he got older and, oddly enough, found a niche playing in rock clubs. He even recorded a concert DVD at Denver's Fillmore Auditorium, a well-known hall patterned after the historic Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco.

"I liked it because people there really paid attention to the music. They got a beer and sat down and faced the band. They wanted to hear the music, and not just as background music," he said.

A road warrior (Bentley logged more than 300 days away from home last year), he's gained a following on college campuses and in the rootsy Texas music scene. He's played or recorded with bluegrass stars McCoury, Alison Krauss and the Grascals and written songs with Americana singer-songwriter Buddy Miller.

"I'm a Nashville-based band and a country act, but we do things differently than most mainstream acts," he said. "We're trying to take this music to new places."

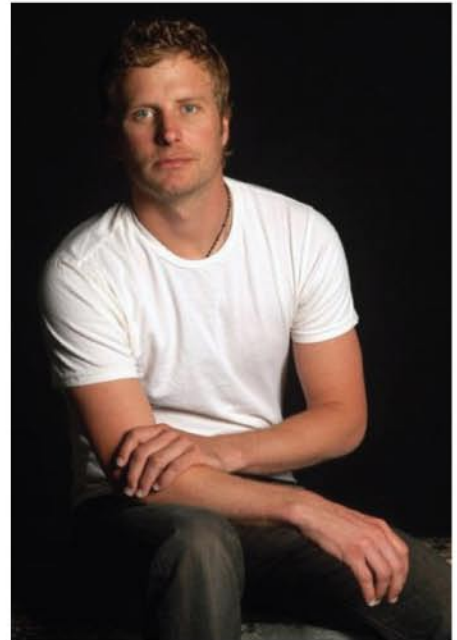


Photo by CHRISTOPHER BERKEY, AP