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Country star reconnects with his roots

Dierks Bentley takes a trip into bluegrass territory

By Sarah Rodman/Globe Staff

On a small-scale club tour to offer his fans a peek at his forthcoming bluegrass-accented album, “Up on the Ridge,” the country music star with the classic singer-songwriter skills and central-casting good looks was hopeful that fans who knew him only from his mainstream radio hits would be receptive to his new, stripped-back sound.

Receptive would be an understatement.

If anyone at the sold-out Showcase Live show was suffering from electric guitar and studio polish withdrawal, they did a good job hiding it, stomping along to the aforementioned Allman Brothers Band and George Strait covers, older Bentley hits like “Settle for a Slowdown” — given a vibrant, rootsy retrofit — and hooting through the grandly swampy noir of songs like Kris Kristofferson’s “Bottle to the Bottom,” which appears on “Up on the Ridge,” out Tuesday.

Amid the furious virtuosity of the Travelin’ McCourys — fiddle bows flying fast and furious, mandolins and banjos picked with precision, and high harmonies ringing out with an ecstatic lonesomeness — Bentley, 34, looked positively giddy.

“I did this tour just to be able to do things like this,” the curly-mopped musician said a few hours before showtime, relaxing in his dressing room and rhapsodizing about the band — essentially the highly regarded Del McCoury Band sans its leader. And these are not just hired guns. The men in this band are the ones that awakened Bentley’s inner bluegrass hound when he stumbled into the Station Inn in Nashville as a 19-year-old musician in search of a sound.

“He probably had a fake ID at the time,” mandolin player-singer Ronnie McCoury says with a chuckle. “But he really enjoyed the music — that’s for sure. He was trying to figure out exactly what he was going to do.”

The Arizona native reared on everything from Van Halen to Hank Williams Jr. ended up veering toward the pop-country arena, touring relentlessly first as an opener and then as a headliner, releasing four successful albums that spawned 10 top five country hits including “What Was I Thinkin’,” “Lot of Leavin’ Left to Do,” and “Sideways.”

Fans of those songs might view “Up on the Ridge” quizzically. “It is a huge departure in some ways,” Bentley admits. The album features obscure Bob Dylan covers, spooky and spunky originals, and a run through U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love)” that is shocking in its freshness. It is neither strictly bluegrass nor country. It has roots, rock, and pop inflections. It is simply what Bentley wanted to do, and he felt he’d finally built up the credibility to give it a shot.



Dierks Bentley performing at Showcase Live in Foxborough, where he gave fans a peek at his forthcoming bluegrass-accented album, “Up on the Ridge.” “It is a huge departure in some ways,” Bentley says of the album. (Debee Tlumacki for The Boston Globe)