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CD REVIEWS

Goin' and goin'

COUNTRY REVIEW: Bentley's road songs are a relaxed ride

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Dierks Bentley's third CD, *Long Trip Alone*, as its title suggests, is a road record. Just about every one of the 11 tracks refers to a life characterized by miles of asphalt, motel rooms and hundreds of fans in smoky honky-tonks.

That's hardly novel, since scores of traveling musicians have recorded odes to the elation and frustration of living in a touring bus. But more so than his commercially successful first two CDs, Mr. Bentley's *Long Trip Alone* showcases the artistic positives of this hardworking, road horse newcomer.

On his debut disc, 2003's *Dierks Bentley*, he had promise but needed a batch of better songs. With 2005's *Modern Day Drifter*, he came up with one awesome track, the absorbing ballad "Settle for a Slow-down," on an album marred by mediocrity. But this time he succeeded by not trying too hard, letting his relaxed baritone ride over a stack of solid material.

His penchant for bluegrass surfaces more here, particularly on the banjo-fueled "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" and his collaboration with the Grascals, "Prodigal Son's Prayer." For a guy who name-drops Texas' Southern rockers Cross Canadian Ragweed and pays homage to Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, George Jones and other legends on the metaphorical "Band of Brothers," he has a soft spot for the music of Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley.

"Brothers" is a particularly strong tune, one where he likens playing one honky-tonk dive after another, the dues-paying part of the road to superstardom, to fighting on the trenches of a battlefield. ("Me and my band of brothers got you covered/On the honky tonk front lines.") The cut's sound is roadhouse country with elements of roots rock.

The disc's other standout tracks both have religious overtones. During the bold, plaintive "The Heaven I'm Headed To" he firmly sings about believing the afterlife should be inclusive, not restrictive. "In the heaven I'm headed to," he sings, "There's a place for preachers, thieves and prostitutes/Saints and soldiers, beggars, kings and renegades."

Then on "Prodigal Son's Prayer" he's traveling down another road, this one to meet his maker. Amidst fiddle, banjo, mandolin and upright bass, Mr. Bentley convincingly sings: "I lost my way but now I'm on my knees/If it's not too late won't you tell me please/You gotta place for me/A little grace for me."

That song's honesty punctuates the appeal of Mr. Bentley's third effort. He's finally found his artistic middle ground. By singing about what he knows, and doing it with straightforward conviction over worthy tunes, the Phoenix native hit his stride.

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