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Country star's new sound is a gamble he believes has paid off

By Randy Lewis
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It's a rarity for a mainstream country artist, especially in today's shaky music business, to mess with a formula that's been as successful as the one Dierks Bentley has been working since his 2003 single "What Was I Thinkin'" took him to the top of the country chart.

But to talk to the 34-year-old singer, songwriter and guitarist from Phoenix about the turn he's taking with his new "Up on the Ridge" album, it's immediately apparent that he knew exactly what he was thinking in setting aside the breezy country-rock sound he's been so comfortable with in favor of a bluegrass-steeped collaboration with several of the world's finest acoustic instrumentalists.

"Generally how it works in country is that you build your brand, then you put a chokehold on it and stay with what works," Bentley said in his NBC dressing room backstage in Burbank a few hours before a recent appearance on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno."

"It's tough not to," he said. "You get the ball rolling in a certain direction, and soon you're picking up extra tour buses and picking up more crew, the crew is picking up wives and they're having kids. Now you're in charge of this huge snowball that's rolling, and everyone's lives are affected by decisions you make.

"I love my band and crew, and I love playing in the big arena that's country music," said the man behind more than half a dozen No. 1 country hits in as many years. "But musically, at the end of the day, I am a songwriter."

With "Up on the Ridge," which hit stores June 8, that translates into a rootsy outing that grew out of what he encountered when he first moved to Nashville more than a decade ago hoping to carve out a country music career. The album also constitutes a significant step forward in Bentley's evolution as a songwriter and singer.

"Bentley should be applauded for taking a bold musical chance," veteran music writer Chet Flippo, now editorial director for CMT.com, suggested recently in his Nashville Skyline column, "instead of settling for recording the current country clichés."

In the title song, Bentley and co-writer Angelo paint a scene of a liberating — albeit slightly eerie — place far from the city where "no one cares what you do/Ain't no law to answer to."

In addition to a handful of deeply felt



"Musically, at the end of the day, I am a songwriter," says Dierks Bentley, who has more than half a dozen No. 1 hits in as many years.

songs he crafted with a variety of songwriting partners, he's included songs by other writers, with a few surprises among them, chiefly Bob Dylan's characteristically oblique "Senor (Tales of Yankee Power)" and the song that's likely to grab the most attention, a redo of U2's anthem to the spirit of Martin Luther King, "Pride (In the Name of Love)" with the Punch Brothers.

Other album guests include bluegrass queen Alison Krauss, Vince Gill, Jamey Johnson, Miranda Lambert, multi-instrumentalist Sam Bush, the McCoury sons and band members Ronnie and Rob McCoury, and Kris Kristofferson, who duets with Bentley on his own song, "Bottle to the Bottom."

The album closes with "Down in the Mine," an ode to the determination and danger faced daily by coal miners, one that sounds written straight off the news of the recent mine disaster in Montcoal, W.Va., in

which 29 miners were killed, although Bentley and Stewart wrote it months earlier:

*Well the old timers talk but you just don't believe
It can all go to hell at two thousand feet
Life sways in the balance of nature and time
And fate has no mercy down in the mine*

The West Virginia explosion had taken place just a few days before Bentley's visit to the Leno set among a brief run of acoustic shows with many of the players from the album, and Bentley said the confluence of art and life made it unlikely he'd perform that song live soon.

But he also made it clear his immersion in a traditional style of music largely absent electric guitars and thundering drums is no quick flirtation.

"I always wanted to make this kind of

Bentley's No. 1 songs

On Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart:

- "Sideways" (2009)
- "Feel That Fire" (2009)
- "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" (2007)
- "Every Mile a Memory" (2006)
- "Settle for a Slowdown" (2006)
- "Come a Little Closer" (2005)
- "What Was I Thinkin'" (2003)

record," he said. "It was just a matter of finding the right time to do it. The truth of the matter is it started the first time I walked into the Station Inn," referring to Nashville's esteemed showcase for bluegrass music. "I walked in there, and it changed my life."

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