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Dierks Bentley Plays Backyards and Bars in Chicago

Intimate Concerts Provide Plenty of One-on-One Time With Fans

By Alison Bonaguro

CHICAGO — Why is it that the bigger Dierks Bentley's career becomes, the smaller his venues get? Is it some kind of twisted irony? Or a deliberate move to bring the music closer to the fans?

You'd have ask Nancy Richards. She was the winner of the Dierks Bentley Backyard BBQ contest thrown by Bentley's crew and radio station WUSN (US99) in Chicago. It's just one in a series of such shows Bentley's doing across the country to promote his new album, *Greatest Hits/Every Mile a Memory 2003-2008*.

So in a rare backyard appearance on Monday (May 12), with an audience of about 25 of the winner's closest friends, Bentley spent almost two hours in the otherwise quiet suburb of Des Plaines, Ill. "It's just so cool to get out and see beyond the bus and beyond the alley," Bentley said.

Once the tour bus maneuvered its way down the curving residential street, Bentley was eager to take the cement slab and break down the walls that usually separate the artists from their fans. Strumming a vintage Martin guitar, with Rod Janzen picking a Taylor guitar by his side, they took requests from the group. "What Was I Thinkin'," "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" and "My Last Name" started the set. When he got to "Every Mile a Memory," it was as if the air traffic controllers at O'Hare Airport timed it just right. As he sang "airplanes flying by" instead of the standard "billboards flyin' by," planes flew over the house. His vocals were powerful enough, even without a microphone, to overcome the interference.



The casual setting lent itself to more than the usual crowd banter. So Bentley had more time for storytelling. And one, about sneaking out to see a Bon Jovi concert and trying to get backstage when he was 13, provided just the touch of reality he needed to set the stage for "With the Band," a song from the new album. The entire set bolstered Bentley's reputation as the kind of artist who sounds just as good with or without an elaborate stage and a full band behind him.

Before and after the show, Bentley mingled with guests. Not just the smile-and-sign kind of vibe you might get at an artist meet and greet, but genuine mingling. Asking people where they were from, how they were invited and, of course, if they like country music. He even made time to have a classic Chicago Italian beef sandwich.

Earlier in the day, Bentley spent another five hours promoting the same album in a different part of the city. Joe's Bar, on the city's North Side, feels so comfortable to Bentley he said he needed to get an apartment in the neighborhood because he seems to be playing there so often. He packed that show with more songs and even more candor about life on the road.

"I'm an open book," he admitted before sharing stories about falling off a ramp during a show, listing whose numbers he has in his cell phone (Dwight Yoakam, Kenny Chesney), reveling in the bathroom humor on the bus and wondering aloud if the bar had ever sold as much beer on a Monday before 2 p.m.

"Domestic, Light and Cold" was one of the tunes that put folks in the mood for grabbing a cold one so early in the day, especially when he added a new verse that proclaimed "Where I'm from a friend don't let a friend drink alone." Again, this set was stripped down to just Bentley and Janzen on their acoustic guitars.

Other hits, including "Come a Little Closer," "Lot of Leavin' Left to Do" and the new single, "Sweet & Wild," went over just as well with the fans who had won their way in through Bentley's fan club or the radio station. On "Trying to Stop Your Leaving," Bentley explained that this is the song for the day your girlfriend comes to pack up her stuff in her new boyfriend's Suburban — just the kind of miserable day that would inspire a country hit.

He didn't play the whole time, though. The performance was book-ended with opportunities for Bentley to meet with every one of the 400 people there. And it was ample pay for the Chicago contingent of the 3,000 executive producers from his greatest hits album. Those fan club members signed up to be key decision makers on the album's content, and all their names are listed over nine pages in the liner notes. "I thought it was too early for me to make a greatest hits CD," Bentley said. "But when I looked back, I realized we'd had so many hits because of these fans."

His gratitude toward those fans parallels his appreciation for the simple things that complete his life. "I've got a guitar, a dog, a girl and a truck," he said. "I don't really need anything else."

Bentley's Backyard BBQ tour will make a few more stops, then his Throttle Wide Open tour picks back up Friday (May 16) in Atlanta.