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Judith Levitt for The New York Times

Audience participation: the singer Dierks Bentley at the Hammerstein Ballroom Wednesday night.

A Ramblin' Guy With a Hankerin' to Please

The country singer Dierks Bentley ended his first album with a wistful song called "Train Travelin.'" He called his second album "Modern Day Drifter." And his new album is "Long Trip Alone" (Capitol Nashville). Get the point?

**KELEFA
SANNER**

**MUSIC
REVIEW**

On Wednesday night he came around to the Hammerstein Ballroom to entertain "such a huge crowd," as he put it, though the room was huger still. He brought a small rock 'n' roll band: just bass, drums and a loud electric guitar, along with a pedal steel player who sometimes switched to banjo. With their help, Mr. Bentley put on a show that was both enjoyable and — literally — incredible.

The thing is, Mr. Bentley is a self-proclaimed ramblin' man who seems an awful lot like a cuddlin' man instead. He excels at singing love songs and lost-love songs, like his recent hit "Settle for a Slow-down," which topped the country charts. He spent much of Wednesday night skipping across the stage, shaking hands and encouraging audi-

ence participation; he is nothing if not eager to please.

Dierks Bentley
Hammerstein Ballroom

At different points, he mentioned George Jones, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, George Strait, Merle Haggard, Ray Price, Waylon Jennings and others. But his own slick, well-written country-rock songs sound less like old-fashioned homages and more like radio-friendly pop songs.

Which is no bad thing. "Long Trip Alone" is an enormously likable and fat-free CD; listen to it once and you may find that all 11 songs are stuck in your head. Mr. Bentley's voice isn't sublime, but it is sturdy, and he sang memorable versions of "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" and "Every Mile a Memory," both from the new album.

For most of the night, his eager posturing was an amusing distraction. He talked and sang a lot about beer, sounding ever more like the sober guy at the bar who keeps reminding his buddies how hard he is party-

ing. And in "That Don't Make It Easy Loving Me," a snarling guitar riff gave him a chance to sing about his "rake and ramblin' life" and to apolo-

*Singing about beer
and the road while
reaching out and
touching his fans.*

gize to the woman who sticks by him. One imagines a wife smiling indulgently, kissing him on the forehead and asking him to pipe down, because it's almost time for "Grey's Anatomy."

Near the end of the show, he sang the new album's beautiful title track, which cleverly balances a lonesome verse with a cuddly chorus. "Maybe you could walk with me awhile/ Maybe I could rest beneath your smile/ Everybody stumbles sometimes, and needs a hand to hold," he sang. Hmm. Apparently, modern-day drifters don't have to go it alone.