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Music preview: Dierks Bentley dives into shadowy side of relationships on new album

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Dierks Bentley's world is about to go "Black."

The country rocker from Phoenix, who opens the First Niagara Pavilion season Friday, is a few weeks away (May 27) from releasing "Black," an eighth studio album that takes a deep, dark dive into relationships, from the initial glow to the messy, shadowy parts.

"I had this concept two years ago," he says, "about following a guy on this journey through relationships, how maybe he leaves one relationship for another and the temporary high that it can provide, and the way that the bottom can drop out on you in love and relationships."

Upon venturing into the songwriting, he moved away some from that guy and that tight concept and more toward himself, with some fictional flourishes.

“This is really a record about self-transformation,” he says. “I lost my dad and had a son being born, and my wife and I have been married for 10 years, and I’m really in a place of thinking about long-term relationships and love. They can lead you down dark roads sometimes. ... From start to finish, it just takes you on a journey and the songs wind down through jealousy and deceit, new love and a new feeling.”

It begins with a steamy, close-the-curtains title track that borrows wife Cassidy’s maiden name.

“I have to give my wife credit for letting me explore this all in public,” he says. “Some of it is very personal and autobiographical, some of it is me as a songwriter just exploring things that happen in the shadows.”

Arriving after a sneaky rendezvous or two, the breezy single “Somewhere on a Beach,” which sounds like a sequel to “Drunk on a Plane,” is the point of the record where the character finally runs off with someone else. That high remains through “Freedom” and then the sense of “self-sabotage,” as he calls it, kicks in on “Why Do I Feel,” and he finds himself counting his old blessings on “Light It Up” and “Can’t Be Replaced.”

Joining his exploration on the album are more female voices than he’s ever had on a record, including Elle King (“Different for Girls”) and Maren Morris (“I’ll Be the Moon”) on a pair of slow sultry ones.

“I just loved her voice,” he says, when asked about hitmaker King. “I didn’t know her, but I felt like I knew her through her music. Just her attitude. She seemed really cool, and it turns out she is: down-to-earth, self-deprecating and so talented. I flew down to Austin, and I was only in Austin for about three hours, and we recorded the song together.

“It’s a very organic thing,” he adds. “It wasn’t intentional, the women being involved in the album, but looking back on it, it really made sense that the relationship-based album would have female voices in the conversation.”

Mr. Bentley is a month removed from hosting an ACM Awards ceremony that paired country’s biggest stars with a handful of outsiders, including Katy Perry, Nick Jonas and Trombone Shorty (who also appears on his album). Having grown up like most modern country stars on a mix of music, he likes seeing the boundaries expanded.

“Country: It’s pretty ambitious for one word to sum up an entire genre. And it’s so expansive and there so many different types of country music. What it boils down to is the lyrics of the song and the way you take all these words and work them into the roughly 3½ minutes, the way you tell a story and how it affects people. It’s always going to change, and it is what it is.

“Even Merle Haggard,” he says, “who we just lost, he would have hated being labeled a traditionalist. He always pushed the boundaries. The guy had saxophones on his records, and he took heat for not being traditional, so that whole thing kind of irks me, but at the same time I love what we call traditional country music. I love listening to 650 AM WSM when I’m home and hearing [deejay] Eddie Stubbs talk about great steel guitar solos and great fiddle work. At the same time, I love the new stuff out there, people trying to push the boundaries and not being saddled with having to carry some torch on. I think there’s two kinds of music: good and bad.”

He’ll get to Burgettstown two weeks before “Black” comes out and is excited about sharing the new songs while realizing that fans come to these big outdoor gigs for the hits.

“I’m going to use a lot of new songs in the show,” he says. “At the same time, I love concerts, I love going to shows, and I’m not a big fan when artist does too many new songs. But there’s energy going on with our music right now, and we want to have that represented in the live show. We’ll pick the songs that work best and try to make it a big-ass party.”