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Dierks Bentley 'different, darker' on new album



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Dierks Bentley hasn't slept in days. It's barely a week before the May 27 release of his eighth studio album, "Black," and the country star is exhausted. "I'm more excited for this one, and nervous, than any record I've ever made," he admits.

After the 2014 release of "Riser," a deeply personal album made after the death of his father and the birth of his son, Bentley wasn't sure how to proceed: "I didn't know what I was going to write about. ... How do I move on from that record?"

He started by putting pen to paper. "I wrote the song 'Black,' and it made me think it could be the foundation for a new record," Bentley says. "Black" also is the maiden name of his wife of 10 years, Cassidy, which added another dimension to the song. Inspired, he began writing and looking for songs that were "different, darker and had some intrigue."

"I started realizing that to really chase this idea, I needed to write, or sing, from a standpoint other than my own," Bentley adds. "The songs are personal and autobiographical, but a lot of them are me taking creative freedom as a songwriter and artist to explore the edges of love ... some of the stuff we don't talk about as much. I started hearing songs that weren't what I was going through right now but I could relate to at different points in my life."

The songs of "Black," including its standout track "I'll Be the Moon," a duet with rising star Maren Morris, address infidelity, heartbreak, rebound relationships and new love. It is, says Bentley, the closest he's ever come to a concept record: "There's a thread and a story through the record that works for me. And now we'll see what other people think, but all I can do is try to make something that I can play on my record player at home and be (proud of.)"

Onstage, Bentley, 40, is a one-man party. He chugs beer with fans, stage dives and sings party anthems such as "Drunk on a Plane" and current single "Somewhere on a Beach." But after the show, you can find him on his tour bus listening to records by classic country singers like Johnny Paycheck, Ray Price and Faron Young. "Country music is much younger now than it used to be, and I love that, but there was a time when it wasn't really meant for people under the age of 17. You had to have lived some life to understand it, and that's the country music that I gravitate towards, even though that's not exactly who I am onstage every night."

When Bentley's in town, he regularly calls in to Eddie Stubbs' show on 650 AM WSM to request songs that were recorded years before he was born. The two men first met backstage at the Grand Ole Opry one night when Bentley was still a college student who worked in The Nashville Network's video library and hung out at the Opry House and bluegrass gem The Station Inn whenever he could.

"You could tell he was something special," Stubbs said. "He was young and hungry, and he had a desire to learn about the business and those who came before him. Dierks is a big fan of what's real and what's good, and that's a wonderful thing. In spite of the fame and fortune he's still the same Dierks Bentley I met over 15 years ago."

The final song on "Black," called "Can't Be Replaced," pays tribute to another one of Bentley's great loves: his 15-year-old dog, Jake, a longtime companion who's now deaf and undergoing chemotherapy treatments.

"The last thing you hear is a verse about Jake and then this great Jerry Douglas (dobro) solo ends the record. My very first record (2003's 'Dierks Bentley') has a picture of Jake on it and 'What Was I Thinkin' ' has a strong dobro solo from Randy Kohrs," Bentley says. "I didn't intentionally do it — I'm not trying to retire — but I feel like this did bookend my career so far."

"I feel like I've laid it all out there. I feel like it's my best work and I feel like unconsciously, I've kind of wrapped things up. I don't really know where to go after this record."

Of course, he's said that before.

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"When I think about making an album, I think about the vinyl record: side A, side B. It's going to be put on CD, it's going to be on iTunes, people are going to stream it, they're just going to buy the single, whatever. For me personally, when I'm making an album, I want to have a story, a thread and a theme." — Dierks Bentley

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