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Dierks Bentley on Collaborating With Elle King on New Album 'Black' and Why 'Women Are More Evolved Than Men'



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A lot has changed in the thirteen years since Dierks Bentley first hit the charts with "What Was I Thinkin'." In a conversation surrounding *Black*, his new album, the country star doubts whether he could have approached the subject matter on the new disc with the same depth and intensity back then.

"I thought the other day about what I've been through the last ten years, and it's crazy. Being married is one thing, but having kids will completely change you. I still go out and hang with my buddies, but having two daughters will completely change your perspective on the world. On the last record (2014's *Riser*), my father had passed away, and my son had just been born," Bentley tells *Billboard*.

Bentley explores relationships on *Black* -- especially how his own personal life has changed immensely. "I really think when I wrote *Black*, and our tenth anniversary came and went because we really didn't have a chance to do much about it because there was so much going on, I started to think about how our society is so focused on youth and hook-ups, and young love stuff," says Bentley. "The people I always loved listening to had a little bit of dirt under their fingernails because they had done some living and had these stories to talk about. I was able to explore some new themes on this record. I'm the same guy I was, but there has been a shift over the past ten years. I feel like what I am

writing now is a lot more nourishing than what I was writing back then.”

And women -- both as songwriters and guest vocalists -- played a large role in the making of *Black*. “You’ve got Elle King and Maren Morris not just on harmony vocals, but full-blown duets,” he says excitedly. “Then, on the songwriters’ side of things, you’ve got Jessi Alexander, and she’s on the record, as are songs by Natalie Hemby and Hillary Lindsey. There’s also a Heather Morgan cut on there, so there’s definitely that presence. It’s an album about relationships, so I guess it makes sense to have that female component to the record. It wasn’t something that I did intentionally -- I’m not that smart -- but, it did come out that way organically, which is always the best.”

Taking it a step further, Bentley says that the album’s title was actually influenced by his wife Cassidy. “That’s the main woman’s touch -- my wife’s maiden name is *Black*,” he explains. “That’s where I got the title from. When I wrote that song, it became the cornerstone of the record. It’s a very passionate song, one with a whole lot of layers to it. I guess you could say that’s the ultimate woman’s touch right there for me,” he says with a laugh.

After the critical success of *Riser*, Bentley did feel some pressure while making the new album. “I put a lot of pressure on myself. I tell my wife when she’s listening to my songs that the slightest hint of whether she likes it or not puts the pressure on me,” he admits.

The impetus for the album came to the Grand Ole Opry member while he was watching one of his favorite television shows. “I started to have this concept a couple of years ago after watching a show called *The Affair*, where I would write a song about a guy having an affair and being in the moment, but things start to head south -- he found the girl, then the bottom falls out, and it just keeps happening,” says Bentley. “The problem isn’t with the other person. It’s internal. I pulled these chapters out that I had written, and tried to poke holes into it from a creative standpoint to see if I was forcing anything, but I felt like I ended up sequencing the album in about two minutes once I had the songs.”

The collaboration with King, “*Different For Girls*,” spoke to him as a father. “Shane McAnally texted me and said he had this song, and before he sent it to anyone else, he wanted to send it to me because he felt it was something I could do well. I listened to it, and thought ‘This is such a crazy song.’ It talks about the idea how guys and girls process heartaches differently, but there’s also the judgment that one places upon a girl if she does go out and drink the heartache off -- society does judge them for that.

“I definitely think there is some bias there. It’s an interesting conversation worth having, and being the father of two girls, I don’t want them to grow up in a world where there are hidden biases. I’m surrounded by all these strong women -- my publicist, my manager, and my wife, and sometimes I think that women are more

evolved than men, and they are able to process a heartache better," he says. "I love the lyric, and I love Elle King. I love her voice, and she has these Nashville roots. She can play a little banjo, and I love how her voice fit mine. I think the voices blended so naturally. It wasn't a forced collaboration, at all."

Black comes to a conclusion with the sentimental "Can't Be Replaced," which the singer co-wrote with Luke Laird and Hillary Lindsey. It's a composite of the dozen songs that precede it, but part of his influence on the song comes from one of his oldest and dearest friends -- whom his fans are all familiar with.

"It feels like these songs all lead to that last one. They are all about these relationships and this life, and no matter how much you try or how much money you have, some things can't be replaced. It's a somber song. It's a country song, and a real one. That last verse is actually about my dog, Jake," explains Bentley. "He's been with me from my evolution as a single guy, a married guy, and as a father with three kids. He's been there every step of the way, and knows me better than anyone else. For some people, it would be silly, but for me it's very important."