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Black



Black | Dierks Bentley | Capitol Records Nashville

■ BY STEPHEN L. BETTS | May 27, 2016



Jim Wright

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Singer-songwriter dives deep - and dark - on LP centered around relationships

Like a two-sided *Lost Weekend*, emotional – and literal – darkness is at the troubled heart of the first half of *Black*, Dierks Bentley's adventurous 21st century take on cheating songs and the reclamation of love, which marks the most fully satisfying of the country superstar's LP's since 2010's brilliant bluegrass disc, *Up on the Ridge*. Long a linchpin in country music, tales of infidelity offered from the perspective of those doing the deed may be commonplace but have rarely taken on the weightiness that Bentley's dusty vocals convey throughout the journey from thrilling, clandestine sexual encounter to repentant resolution.

Bentley is convincing as a hedonistic jerk in search of pleasure, and as a hedonistic jerk who's man enough to eventually acknowledge the consequences of his actions; his self-exploration is especially discomfiting when he tries to put the seductive genie back in the bottle. The entire concept, while surprisingly ambitious, is solidly realized, especially at the halfway point, as the narrator begins to take responsibility for his selfishness through the inward-glancing "Why Do I Feel." Throughout the record's second half, fleeting lust in the dark gives way to enduring love in the light of day (while nicely avoiding the cloying devices

of, say, a neatly tied-up rom-com), and the whole sordid mess culminates in the beautiful album-closing "Can't Be Replaced." But what lifts Black past merely being a good concept album is an old-school musicality that never takes a backseat to modern-country conventionality. When contemporary pop touches do slip in, they work; see the hip-hop-spritzed "Somewhere on a Beach," in which our hero plays the drunk, post-breakup d-bag pathetically dialing up his ex to tell her what a great time he's having with his new girl. The flip side of that song is the deliciously clever "Mardi Gras," a 'the party's over' party jam featuring Big Easy badass Trombone Shorty.

Two of the album's best songs wisely deploy female foils to hint that his narrator knows he's not the only one affected by his actions – the gorgeous darkened room fantasy "I'll Be the Moon," featuring the tender-voiced Maren Morris, and "Different for Girls," where the gutsy Elle King joins Bentley to somberly survey the cultural advantages men have starting over after the collapse of a relationship. The last act of this LP's stunning morality play unfolds with the "stained glass Sunday morning" of "Light It Up," illuminating the promise of a bright, romantic future following a shadowy, but entirely compelling past.