



## Dierks Bentley on New Album 'Black': 'I've Claimed the Right to Be Me'

Country hitmaker's latest LP is a candid, at times uncomfortable, look at relationships

**RS**Country BY JOSEPH HUDAK | May 27, 2016



Dierks Bentley says his new album 'Black,' which explores the gray areas of long-term relationships, may make some listeners uncomfortable. Mike Coppola/GettyImages

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Dierks Bentley just wants to be himself.

"I think I've claimed the right to be any version of me that I want to be," he says, sitting in a studio on Nashville's Music Row, nursing a second cup of coffee. The 40-year-old singer-songwriter is deep in the promotional cycle for his eighth studio album, *Black*, an ambitious doozy of a concept record that follows the ups, downs and bad decisions of a long-term relationship. Bentley was inspired to explore the more nebulous areas of love after watching the Showtime series *The Affair*, about the fallout from an extramarital dalliance. "[*Black*] is the other side of the story, the things we don't talk about as much," he says, "like the two people who got ditched so two people could live happily ever after."

He's keenly aware, and almost revels in the fact, that *Black* — its title nods to the maiden name of his wife of 10 years, Cassidy — may make some listeners uncomfortable, especially its guys-gone-wild first single, the two-week Number

One "Somewhere on a Beach," and the cheating ballad "I'll Be the Moon."

"That's what we get to do as songwriters, right? You get to explore stuff. It makes people uncomfortable," says Bentley. "Certainly, my own wife will be uncomfortable. Her name's on it and people are going to go, 'Ah, the Bentleys are having a hard time. 'I'll Be the Moon,' huh? What's going on there?'"

But listener engagement, however awkward, is the whole point, he contends. And, as Bentley reiterates, he's earned it.

"I want to be free to be any version of me I feel like being. I don't want to be McDonald's that serves the same food every time. Although that is frankly what works in this business, being a brand. I'd rather be a brand that is known for 'What's he putting out next?' Even though it may not be doing myself any favors with being as popular as I can be, it helps me continue to be interested and invested in what I do."

Bentley came close to burning out near the end of the 2000s. A few years into his marriage, he struggled to balance the drifting troubadour persona he created in hits like "Lot of Leavin' Left to Do" and "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)" with that of reliable husband and father. "I was really carrying the torch for the single dude and my whole mantra was about being single. It was like a train going full speed, [touring] 300 dates a year. I met my wife and I was like, 'OK, jump on the train.' But it doesn't work that way. You have to get on a different train," he says. "On some of my records in there, I was struggling to figure out who I was. The Feel That Fire record, I think, was where I reached the end of the road, where I needed to reboot. That's where the bluegrass record came into play."

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That bluegrass record, 2010's magnificent *Up on the Ridge*, reconnected Bentley with his musical roots (he says he's always thinking about recording another). A longtime picker and a staple at Nashville's bastion of string-music, the Station Inn, Bentley was reborn with *Ridge*, an introspective album that featured minimal production, organic instruments and Dylan and Kristofferson covers. It was the sound of a successful country-radio artist stepping away from the game and, as can be near impossible in Music City, making the album he wanted and needed to make. His full-lengths since then, 2012's *Home* and 2014's *Riser*, represent Bentley sure of his place in the genre.

Which is what made "Somewhere on a Beach," the first taste of *Black*, such a head-scratcher. On the surface, and out of context of the rest of the album, it's a vacuous hook-up song, with schoolyard rhymes like "she got a body and she's naughty" and "I'm gettin' sun, gettin' some." Even Bentley's most passionate followers were wary.

"I had some longtime fans say, 'I've always wanted Dierks to be successful, but I hate this song that's doing it for him,'" Bentley recalls with a laugh. "I'm like, 'Thanks a lot.' But I get it."

Listen to "Somewhere on a Beach" in sequence on *Black*, however, and the inclusion of the song (written by a team of five songwriters; Bentley not among them) is not only validated, but makes perfect sense.

"It's the hinge point of the whole album," he says, explaining where the song's character is at in the arc of the record. "He's got the new girl, he's got it going on, he thinks he's found the thing he's looking for — but he hasn't, and you find that out later on. It's a critical song on the album."

Although *Black* has a number of personal connections to Bentley, it's not entirely autobiographical. For starters, he and Cassidy are happily married, with three children. "She's like, 'Where are the love songs for me?' But there aren't any love songs. . . this isn't the 'happily ever after' album," he says. "I owe her a lot of credit for not only letting me be personal, but go beyond that and write [and record] stuff that is not personal but people might think is personal."

Like "I'll Be the Moon," in which Bentley plays the part of the side piece. "I don't wanna be a liar / I don't wanna be a fool / I don't wanna be a secret / But I will, if you want me to," goes the chorus, written by Heather Morgan, Matt Dragstrem and Ryan Hurd. Although originally conceived as being from the standpoint of a guy, Bentley recast the song as a duet with Maren Morris.

"I've always listened to that song as a one-sided view of someone that you can't really have. I thought it was brilliant to show the girl's perspective," says Morris, who first heard the track a year earlier when Hurd played her his demo. "It was one of my favorite songs just because it's so heartbreaking and it's so beautiful."

Morris says Bentley texted her to sing on "Moon" and, by the next day, they were in the studio. "Usually things take time, but this was just so instinctual," she says.

"I'll Be the Moon" is one of two high-profile duets on *Black*. "Different for Girls" features "Ex's & Oh's" singer Elle King and is Bentley's new single. If "Somewhere on a Beach" is the album's character losing his conscience and inhibitions, "Different for Girls" is him gaining maturity and perspective.

"The guy in 'Beach' ends up being the guy who sings 'Different for Girls,'" says Bentley. "Maybe he is seeing the world differently."

While recording *Black* in Nashville, Bentley and producer Ross Copperman (who also oversaw *Riser*) approached the project as if they were making a vinyl album. Bentley sees the anthemic *carpe-diem* declaration "Freedom" as the end of Side

A and the introspective and stripped-down "Why Do I Feel" as the first song on the flip side. Bentley co-wrote both and considers them polar opposites. He says "Why Do I Feel" helps foster the narrator's evolution.

"My goal was to make a physical vinyl album. I visualized it in my head . . . and the back half is more the maturity and the growth," he says. Much of that growth is aided by some strong female voices: that of King and Nashville veterans Natalie Hemby, Jessi Alexander and Hillary Lindsey, all three of whom wrote songs for the album. Morris's vocal cameo specifically appears early on the first "side" of *Black*: Bentley calls her the "instigator" of the album's conflict.

"You start hearing some of these other female voices on the record and the album takes on a bigger idea of just a young man's journey from being free to being in a relationship," he says.

In May, Bentley set out on his own long trip, returning to the road with his *Somewhere on a Beach Tour*. It's only the third year he's headlined amphitheaters and that newness, like his commitment to keep fans guessing with each album, makes him especially invested onstage. It also results in one of country music's most high-energy shows: Bentley slams beers, dives into the crowd and taxis out the fuselage of an airplane for his monster hit "Drunk on a Plane."

Randy Houser, who is opening the tour, along with Cam and Tucker Beathard, compares Bentley to one of the genre's most successful live performers.

"Dierks has a way with an audience that arguably may be the best that we have. If you watch Dierks when he's on, he's like Garth Brooks in a sense that they can draw you in," says Houser. "He's really good at it. He's worked out his show where the right things happen at the right time."

Like turning the stage into a hangar for the encore.

"The encore in country is usually — and I know this because I've been doing them for 12 years — you run back onstage, do a couple songs. But we're doing shit they do in pop music. We have a friggin' airplane," Bentley says, trying to win over the male half of his audience. "The girls love it; I got the girls. So I look at the faces of the dudes. We were playing Pittsburgh, and they are tough guys. I took my Jeep around the parking lot, and it's like, don't fuck around with these guys here. They will kill you. But onstage, I'm looking at the dudes and they're loving it, man. I think they appreciate the effort."

Bentley is a dude himself, and, like his former single-guy persona, it's a skin he inhabits when the moment calls for it. After gigs, if he's not flying back to Nashville (he's a pilot too), he holes up on the bus, where pop music and even the kind of beer-and-truck radio country Bentley has helped make popular —

"I've contributed a lot to that," he sighs — are the last things he wants to hear. Out of the spotlight, he returns to what is likely his base self: probing songwriter.

"As a country fan, I love different country music for different reasons. Our live show is very loud and fun and we're shotgunning beers with fans, and stage diving, but on the bus, I like listening to sad, more lonesome, dirtier stuff. Whether lyrically or musically, it reaches in there and grabs your soul. That's the stuff I gravitate toward," he says. "I ended up making a record that I think goes down that road of intrigue and mystery."

On *Black*, the enigma explored is one of the oldest — and most cruel — of daily existence: Why attraction, not to mention love, fades.

"The concept for this record was following someone as they leave one thing behind for another. It seems people are searching for something and they find it in somebody, but then it goes away later on," says Bentley, pausing. "Love is such a mysterious thing."