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Country's Dierks Bentley Is Evolving Sonically, And His Fans Are Loving It

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With one look at the cover of Dierks Bentley's latest album, "Black," and one spin of the disc, it's obvious that the country singer has metamorphosed.

Bentley, 40, is sporting leather at night with a serious expression in an urban area. That's quite a contrast from 2012's "Home" album art in which Bentley is wearing a jean jacket with a ball cap smiling on a dirt road.

The sonic difference is also evident. The new tunes are slower and the grooves are bigger, but Bentley is maturing as a recording artist. And his popularity is soaring, topping Billboard's country albums chart with "Black," his eighth studio album.

"You grow all the time," Bentley said. "Your tastes and approach changes as time passes. I remember what I liked as a kid."

While coming of age in Phoenix, Bentley was all over the map in terms of music.

"I grew up loving hard rock, pop and country," Bentley said. "It really didn't matter what it was, as long as it was good. I would go out and see some of these bands and I was really impressed with the ones that were great live. U2 blew me away and so did Bruce Springsteen, who is just on another level."

Bentley impressed during a concert in Camden, N.J., last month, connecting with the crowd while bantering during his solid, 18-song set, which included some covers.

"I like to have fun when I play out," Bentley said in Camden. "I love performing. I really like playing the new songs."

The fresh material is decidedly slower, with the exception of the relatively up-tempo "Mardi Gras," which features the dynamic New Orleans musician Trombone Shorty. A number of the new songs are reserved, earnest and poignant. There are a couple of very catchy cuts, such as "Somewhere on a Beach" and "I'll Be the Moon."

The new songs feature a calmer, deeper Bentley but he cuts loose when he reaches back in his canon for big hits like "Drunk on a Plane" and "Feel That Fire."

"There's room for different types of songs during a show," Bentley said. "My set list can span my career."

And what a career it's been for Bentley — 25 of his singles have hit the country charts. Fourteen of those songs have peaked at No. 1. It's not easy for Bentley to assemble a set list. How can he not play such smashes as "Every Mile a Memory," "Come a Little Closer" and "Am I the Only One"?

"Having songs people want to hear is a good problem to have," Bentley said. "Those songs help me connect with the fans."

Bentley has always been one of country's most engaging performers. "That's what it's about," Bentley said. "It's about taking the audience on a ride."

Bentley could go on autopilot and cruise for the rest of his career since he has enough hits to fill an entire set. "But I can't do that," Bentley said. "I love recording new songs and coming out with albums. I'm far from done recording new music. It'll just make it tougher for me to come up with set lists. But that's fine. I just want the live experience to be the best it can be when I come to town. I'm going to go all out with my band to help take the fans there to another place."

DIERKS BENTLEY appears Friday, June 10 at the Xfinity Theatre, 61 Savitt Way, Hartford. Randy Houser, Cam and Tucker Beathard will open. Tickets are \$32.75 and \$57.50. Showtime is 8 p.m. Information: 860-548-7370 and livenation.com