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Dierks Bentley Takes a 'Different' Route With Elle King Duet



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The follow-up to "Somewhere On A Beach" provides a full picture of Bentley's new album Black.

One of the key lines in Dierks Bentley's recent No. 1 single "Somewhere on a Beach" finds the character bragging about his all-night parties: "I'm gettin' some, gettin' sun/And I ain't slept in a week."

In the days before the release of the follow-up single, Bentley's real-life nocturnal habits were challenged, but not from celebrations.

Instead, he was "nervous as hell, scared to death," he recalls with a laugh. "I didn't sleep a wink [one] night thinking about singles."

The source of that anxiety is “Different for Girls,” a duet with genre-defying Elle King that takes a decided left turn from the feel of “Somewhere on a Beach.” The original game plan, says producer Ross Copperman (Brett Eldredge, Jake Owen), was to go with “Freedom,” a brisk track with a tempo and title that fit well on a summer calendar that includes Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.

“Different for Girls” was a “super-last-minute audible,” muses Copperman, but one with a big potential payoff. “It is a risk,” he acknowledges, “but risks are important.”

In this case, the risky single — when considered in tandem with “Somewhere on a Beach” — does a great job of providing some insight into Black, an album that follows a relationship down a rocky path. The same character who handles a breakup with a mind-numbing bender in “Beach” reaches a new level of maturity in “Different for Girls,” recognizing that women typically take a more sensible approach to emotional healing.

“At times, I wasn’t sure how it would fit in this album,” says Bentley. “All of a sudden, it’s like a centerpiece to the record.”

“Different for Girls” owes its history to a woman that songwriter J.T. Harding (“Sangria,” “Somewhere in My Car”) met in the summer of 2015. She had recently come out of a relationship but showed no visible signs of the heartbreak she was processing.

“As I was getting to know her, I was shocked to find out she was in the middle of a devastating breakup,” recalls Harding. “She was so together going to her job, and I don’t remember the words she said, but it was something like, ‘I can’t just let everything fall apart. You just have to keep pushing through.’ It was so different from what I do when I go through a breakup.”

Harding came up with the title, “Different for Girls,” and he had a few lines for the chorus. He also had an idea to list things that a guy would do to hide from the pain instead of confronting it. Harding brought up the concept during a co-writing session in August 2015 at the Music Row office of Shane McAnally (“Noise,” “T-Shirt”), who saw it as a celebration of female strength.

“Their openness to being emotional is sometimes viewed as weakness,” says McAnally. “A lot of times, girls are made to feel small or silly over wearing their hearts on their sleeves, but the truth is guys just aren’t at the same level. I mean, emotionally [guys are] too weak to show their emotions a lot of times.”

They pieced it together in just a couple of hours that day, surrounded by McAnally’s songwriting plaques — “It’s like you’re in the Hard Rock Cafe over

there,” jokes Harding — and giving it a comparatively lengthy, 11-line chorus that veers from a thoughtful cadence at the opening to more rhythmic phrasing at the end.

“When we had that sort of ‘post’ feeling in that section — ‘A guy gets drunk with his friends and he might hook up’ — it was almost like we’d written a bridge that we ended up [putting] in every chorus,” says McAnally.

They saved a rough version of it on their smartphones, then employed guitarist Ilya Toshinsky to produce a demo. Harding asked at the beginning of the session for a guitar counter-melody under the chorus, and as the work unfolded, he repeated the request several times. Eventually, as they were wrapping, he exploded.

“I’m a pretty cool person,” notes Harding with a laugh. “Finally, I said, ‘I would like a guitar melody under the chorus. I said it five f—ing times — just do it!’ Everyone’s quiet, and Ilya says, ‘Well, J.T., with a lyric this special, I don’t think you want to cloud it up with a melody.’ I looked at the whole room, and I said, ‘Well, when you say it like that, I agree with you.’ ”

McAnally sent the demo to Bentley’s executive producer, Arturo Buenahora, who made sure Bentley heard it. After just one verse, Bentley texted McAnally directly from his bus on Sept. 5 and asked if he could put it on hold. He wasn’t sure it would make the album, but he kept coming back to it. Finally, in December, when *Black* was mostly done, he decided to book one more session at Zac Brown’s Southern Ground Studio, where he cut “Different for Girls” and the album’s closer, “Can’t Be Replaced.”

Manager Mary Hilliard Harrington had been lobbying to use King on the album, and “Girls” became the right vehicle. “I love her voice,” says Bentley. “It’s so powerful on her own records, and on this one, she has this quieter thing going on, this tone, but there’s so much attitude and personality in her voice.”

Bentley revved up his plane, affectionately referred to as “Dude Air,” and flew Copperman to Austin to record King’s vocals at Arlyn Studios on March 9, prior to a concert at Stubb’s BBQ.

“He literally wears the ‘Drunk on a Plane’ hat and the sunglasses in the [cockpit],” says Copperman. “It’s hilarious.”

Singing a song that someone else wrote — while recording with Bentley and Copperman for the first time — was a challenge for King. “I was super nervous,” she admitted while standing alongside Bentley during a CMA Music Festival press conference. “[Bentley is] so dreamy and nice and makes great music. But

it's always good to take yourself out of your comfort zone because that's the only way that you'll grow and change, especially as a musician."

They wrapped that session in less than two hours.

"She is a real badass," says Bentley. "I'm really proud to have her on it — lucky to have her on, really."

Lucky to have gotten home, too. Storms were so bad that day that a BandsInTown.com reviewer pondered why King's outdoor concert wasn't canceled. Bentley had to contend with that same weather when trying to safely land Dude Air back in Nashville.

"We almost died like three times, because there was a line of thunderstorms we had to go around," says Copperman. "Dierks and the other pilot got off the plane, and they were like, 'OK, I think I need a beer.' That's not what I want to hear my pilots talking about after they get off the plane."

Obviously, Bentley and crew made it through after diverting the aircraft. Bentley diverted plans again by releasing an edited version of "Different for Girls" to radio — "get laid" became "get some," mirroring a phrase accepted in "Somewhere on a Beach" — via Play MPE on May 26. Bentley is no longer losing sleep over it. "Different" debuted on the Country Airplay chart dated June 11, and — after a week that saw Bentley and King perform it during the CMT Music Awards and at the CMA Fest — moves 38-32 in its third charted week.

"I just love that in the first two singles we're going way wide," says Bentley. "I'm hopefully showing the depth of the record. I don't know how smart it is to do that, but I can take chances and go for something that's a little unexpected. That's what makes this whole thing fun."