



Country Catch-Up: Rating The Genre's Most Popular Albums Of 2016 So Far

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Before we begin, please know that in terms of sales, Chris Stapleton's runaway success *Traveller* is far and away the biggest country album of 2016. It's just that *Traveller* came out way back in the spring of 2015, so despite its pervasive stature on the charts, I'm going to assume you know about that one by now. I'm also assuming you're already familiar with Sturgill Simpson's great *A Sailor's Guide To Earth*, given that we dubbed it *Album Of The Week* and ranked it highly on our list of the year's best albums so far. Instead, consider this a primer on other major releases. Let's begin.

Dierks Bentley – *Black*



Like any radio-supported pop music format, mainstream country has always been built on the back of assembly-line songwriting. The formula tends to evolve, as it does in rap and pop, but it's usually formulaic nonetheless. One of today's leading products is sad-eyed twilight balladry engineered to elicit an emotional downpour. Bentley is really good at this particular form, so Black is stacked with tracks that could accompany falling in or out of love late night at some small-town bar. Most are decent but few stand out besides "Different For Girls," an Elle King duet that attempts to combat gender stereotypes but maybe reinforces them instead. The album crosses back over into daylight occasionally, most pleasingly on the Trombone Shorty-featuring party grind "Mardi Gras," but mostly it exists in the shadows, brooding. And you thought Sam Hunt was country's fiercest Drake disciple.