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# THE TENNESSEAN

## Dierks Bentley finds success 'a dream come true'



Dierks Bentley stands on stage at The Stage on Lower Broadway in neon sunglasses, a blond, mullet wig and desperately dated Wranglers. He spars with his bass player before they cover Travis Tritt's "T-R-O-U-B-L-E." Bentley maintains it's not him, but his alter ego Douglas Douglason on stage in the '90s country cover band Hot Country Knights.

Mike Dungan, chairman and CEO of Universal Music Group Nashville, watches from the balcony as the singer he calls "my boy" entertains the audience with a slapstick combination of humor and nostalgia.

It's both a full circle and a far cry from one of the first times Dungan grabbed a stool at the end of the bar and watched Bentley belt out a few cover songs. Buoyed by the critical acclaim and commercial success of his recent album "Riser," 2014 was the most successful year in Bentley's career.

Dungan signed Bentley in 2001 after a showcase at 12th & Porter. A month later, the executive was downtown on a Wednesday night and caught Bentley's weekly gig on Lower Broadway at Wolfy's Den. There were less than 10 people in the bar and he watched Bentley "fail to hit every note possible."

He soon realized the bar patrons were super fans who had spent the night getting Bentley drunk.

Nearly 14 years later, Bentley has developed into one of the most creative and consistent hit makers on Dungan's roster of artists. Since his first No. 1, "What Was I Thinkin' " in 2003, Bentley has landed 11 more No. 1 songs, including two in the past year, "I Hold On" and "Drunk on a Plane." Bentley carried his first amphitheater headlining tour in 2014. He initially worried that no one would show up. Fans did — up to 20,000 of them a night.

"The word that was coming back from the road was that these crowds were crazy at these shows," said Wade Jessen, senior chart manager for Billboard in Nashville. "I think Dierks is an easy artist to root for. He has a lot of good will."

After spending time in recent years opening for Kenny Chesney and co-headlining with Miranda Lambert, Bentley marveled that his tour bus got the best parking place and that the biggest dressing room had his name on it.

"I feel like the way I got here was giving up on trying so hard to headline and just changing my focus to just making a great album, making great music," he said. "To get to the place of playing an amphitheater for 20,000 people, you can't force it. There has to be some magic and connection that happens, and that's the music."

Bentley struggled with balancing that connection with the authenticity in his music several years ago. The Arizona native made a name for himself with single guy anthems such as "What Was I Thinkin'," "Lot of Leavin' Left to Do" and "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)." But after Bentley married wife Cassidy in 2005 and they started having children, those types of songs didn't ring true to him anymore.

"We hit a little rough spot where Dierks was kind of confused about what he was supposed to be," Dungan said.

The answer was a musical reset. Bentley had always wanted to make a bluegrass album and the men decided that was the time to do it. The singer released "Up on the Ridge" in 2010 to widespread critical acclaim. He said that experience helped him refocus and led him to record his past two albums, "Home" and "Riser."

"I think in the back of my mind, I knew that if I was ever going to get to this place, there was only one way to do it, and it was to turn the truck around and go back

to the main road and give it one more shot," Bentley said.

Bentley remembers his first goal when he moved to town was just to play the "Grand Ole Opry." He visualized it. He made Grand Ole Opry general manager Pete Fisher's name the password on his computer so that every time he logged on, he typed Fisher's name.

"Lo and behold, that came true," Bentley said. "This whole career is a dream coming true. "

The area that he hasn't had much success is awards shows. Bentley, who was the leading male nominee at the CMA Awards in November and is again heading into the Academy of Country Music Awards in April, earns the nominations, but watches his friends take the trophies.

He approaches awards shows with a maturity gained from his decade-plus of success in country music. When you're younger, he said, it's all about winning. When you're older, career longevity is the ultimate goal.

"I'm really coming from a place of perspective and gratitude, which you don't have when you're younger," he said. "If I were to win an award, it would be ... heartfelt shock. If that doesn't happen, that doesn't change (anything)."

Part serious cover band, part drama troupe and all in the name of fun, Dierks Bentley's '90s country cover band Hot Country Knights packed hundreds of an invite-only crowd into The Stage on Lower Broadway on Wednesday night.

Bentley grew up listening to '90s country music and he and his band had discussed the covers project for a long time.

"It's been a total blast," said Bentley, whose alter ego in the band is named Douglas Douglason. "It's one thing to be able to listen to them and be able to play them properly. It really tunes your ear into harmonies and sounds."

Hot Country Knights welcomed several special guests. Charles Kelley of Lady Antebellum showed up in brown wig, dark jeans and huge belt buckle to deliver his best Ronnie Dunn impression as he sang Brooks & Dunn's "My Maria." Randy Houser and Kip Moore also came out. Miranda Lambert darted on stage, swiped Bentley's neon sunglasses and made Shania Twain's "Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under" her own.

Songs in the set list included: Collin Raye's "Little Rock," Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart," John Michael Montgomery's "Grundy County Auction" and Sawyer Brown's "Some Girls Do."