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Why Dierks Bentley Had to Leave Nashville to Record New Album ‘The Mountain’

“I’m not fucking around, I’m trying to make a great piece of work,” says the country-radio star, who decamped to Colorado for his rustic LP



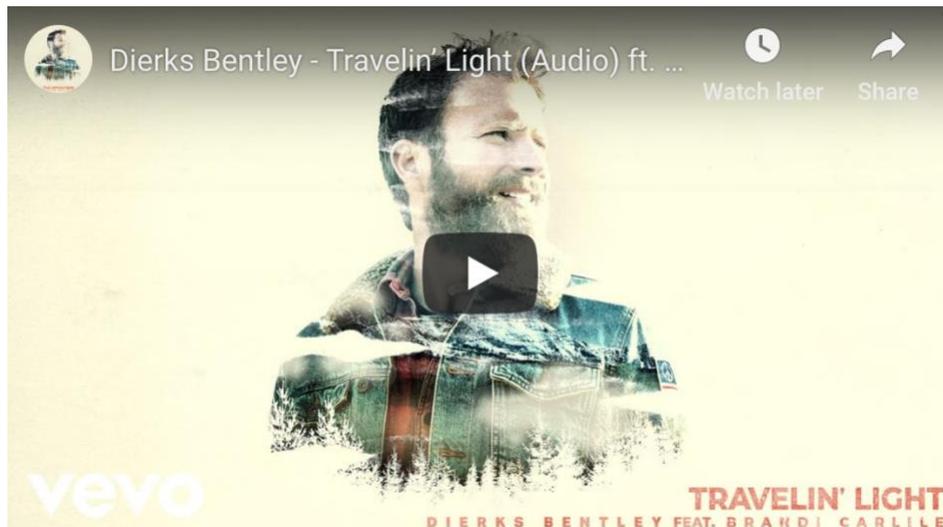
For Dierks Bentley, there’s nothing quite as welcoming as an elk carcass and a tray of weed brownies, high up in the Colorado mountains. At least that’s what greeted him when he arrived at the Studio in the Clouds, an eco lodge-cum-recording mecca in Telluride, to make his newest LP, *The Mountain*.

“When I pulled up, [owner Alan Bradbury] had an elk carcass on the ground with a dog protecting it,” Bentley tells *Rolling Stone Country*, seated in his writing room at Nashville’s Hutton Hotel in jeans and a pair of almost orthopedic-looking sneakers, his flip phone resting on the coffee table. “The dog had been shot a couple times by the neighbor, so he’s a little defensive, and there’s Alan just grinding up an elk carcass and walking around handing out pot brownies.” Bentley, naturally, was eager to partake. “We honored 4/20 every single day we were in there,” he says. “We were in Colorado, after all.”

Colorado – Telluride, specifically – is like a silent producer of *The Mountain*, Bentley’s ninth album. Armed with the idea of something vaguely “Western” and eager to get out of Nashville to record, he and his friends decamped to the mountain town to write. Arizona-raised but Nashville-residing, Bentley loves the Centennial state – he’s a mountain guy, the kind who drags his kids on arguably too-difficult hikes, keeping up the rear and chanting in their ears as the ascents get tougher. And after 2016’s *Black*, a concept LP inspired in part by his wife, Cassidy, and part by the furious progression of any passionate love story, he was ready to find his muse more in a place than a person.

“I had a tiny dumb idea of wanting to do something about the west,” says Bentley, speaking, as he tends to do, with his eyes closed – as if he is watching the words tick across the inside of his lids like a chyron. Sometimes, he’ll do this for what feels like minutes at a time, getting deeper and deeper into his thoughts from within all that blackness. “I’m from Arizona, so was it that I was going to go back there? Is it going to be a Marty Stuart concept album thing, or Western-sounding baritone guitar? Is it lyrical? I had no idea. And I didn’t want to share it with anyone, even, because it just takes one person to say, ‘That’s dumb,’ and you go, ‘Yeah, ok. It is dumb, let’s just go and record a bunch of Music Row songs.’”

Bentley is no stranger to “Music Row songs”: he’s had plenty of hits and carries tracks like the light and purposefully silly “5-1-5-0” in his repertoire. But he’s also always been adept at blending his affinity for bluegrass with modern country – which he dove into full-force when he released a bluegrass record, *Up on the Ridge*, in 2010, and toured on it, too. It’s a quirky, gut-based kind of choice, which is what Bentley is: a quirky, gut-based kind of person. When he speaks – with those eyes closed – the sentences often veer off into three or four branches, punctuated with words like “wavelength.” The first thing he does when he gets up in the morning is take an ice-cold, 60 second shower. He was once so sick in love that he lost an alarming amount of hair to the point that his mother started sending him “horse pills.” He curses frequently and feels deeply. He thinks he needs to be a better mandolin player.



It was a crazy thing to do, after all: release *Up On The Ridge* as his name as a bankable country star was on the rise, but he didn’t care. Bluegrass legend Del McCoury likens him to Vince Gill, the kind of artist who can easily float between mainstream and traditional projects, and excels at both. “Vince Gill is the same way,” says McCoury, who will appear, alongside Miranda Lambert, Clint Black, Brothers Osborne, Lucie Silvas and others at Bentley’s inaugural Seven Peaks Festival in Buena Vista Colorado over Labor Day weekend.

“They can both meld the two together,” says McCoury. “There are a lot of country artists that like bluegrass and some of them got their start in bluegrass, but Dierks is really a prolific songwriter. And he got those boys to do that bluegrass record. He’s got the voice to do either one – great country, and great bluegrass.”

In the years since *Up on the Ridge*, many fans have been urging him to dip back into those waters, and *The Mountain*, in many ways, is exactly what McCoury is talking about – a fusion of both sides of the coin. It’s not a bluegrass record, but there are bluegrass moments. There are sweeping rockers and temperate ballads, too. The mountain itself exists as life’s eternal metaphor: it’s difficult to scale, but the view at the top is glorious. And though the descent is easier, you’re also left to reckon with being at the very end of your climb.

Bentley came up with the concept for *The Mountain* while at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival last June – he'd been stalling a bit after *Black*, even releasing a fourth single to buy a bit of time. But as soon as he set foot there it was clear how he was going to make the record, up in these mountains, with musicians like this. "I said, 'This is amazing,'" Bentley recalls. "Real people, playing real music. Inspiring music. People I always have looked up to. Bluegrass, acoustic musicians. It was unbelievable. But what I didn't know is, how do I explain this to [his longtime writing partners] Natalie Hemby or Jon Randall? So my wife said, just do a writing retreat out there."

"I don't care how you buy it, or listen to it. I'm making the record for me."

So he did – Bentley, his team of writers, all hanging out in Telluride, "pretending like we were kids and living in Boulder, just sharing a house together." Bentley would spend his morning on the top of the mountain, drinking coffee and watching the sun come up. "I'd ride the gondola up there," he says, "and just feel so alive and fired up about life."

Those songs became the bulk of *The Mountain*, and when it came time to record, keeping things in Colorado felt like the only feasible option. Enter Studio in the Clouds, a breathtaking place that looks a bit like a luxe-rustic ski barn and is covered in solar panels – it claims to produce 40 to 50 percent more energy than it uses, and boasts of air in the studio filled with "negative ions which expand the creative mind." Bentley describes its owner, Bradbury – the one with the elk – as the kind of guy who doesn't have a cell phone, uses essential oils and can "live off the land but is very in touch with the vibes." Those "vibes," along with a box truck full of top of the line gear, ace players (like Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas and Tim O'Brien) and some weed became the basis for the record.

Make no mistake, this is a record – not a collection of songs or singles. That's just not how Bentley does things. But he's also not insistent that it's listened to front to back. "I'm not fucking around, I'm trying to make a great piece of work," he says, eyes closed and head tilted toward the window like he's trying to find the light. "But I don't care if you buy the whole album. People can't afford the whole album. I don't care how you buy it, or listen to it. I'm making the record for me."

As an album, it's indeed a climb: there's a loose sense of life's obstacles, from romance, to aging, to a growing sense of confidence with the various facets that make Bentley who he is. There's even a kiss-off to the stifling Nashville culture, "You Can't Bring Me Down," inspired by some gossip back in town.

"A friend was talking about Music Row and gossip," he says, "which is part of the reason I made my album outside of Music Row, because it can be like high school. It's just a lot of the same writers, and gossip central. So I said to him, 'Dude, it can't bring me down.' That's the truth."

Bentley's hard enough on himself as it is – at the ACM Awards, he was struck by how, in the program, he was billed as the singer of "5-1-5-0" next to a photo of him looking slick and serious in a black leather jacket. The whole thing made him squirm: it's not that he's embarrassed by songs like that, but he knows their place, and it didn't sync up. "It's not like I'm going to play '5-1-5-0' acoustic around the house," he says, "but it's one of those songs that needs the fans, like how a whiskey needs a few cubes of ice, to work."

This time, Bentley wanted everything consistent, down to the images: he and his photographer just headed out into the woods, no glam squad in sight. "There is no one doing hair and makeup, it was just me and Jim [Wright] going on hikes and fucking around. It was very organic."

The Mountain feels organic, too. There are love songs here – Bentley’s known for his penchant to sex it up – but they’re less about lust than they are gratitude: the single “Woman, Amen” and the piano-centered “Religion” among them, which is a blend of Billy Joel and classic country balladry. But mostly, Bentley’s trying to climb up and around the riddle of his own life: he’s multidimensional on “Burning Man,” the album’s opening kinetic boost of energy featuring the Brothers Osborne, making peace with letting a partner go on “One Way,” and shifting his priorities on the exceptional “Traveling Light,” sung with Brandi Carlile, which is the album’s most bluegrass-tinged track. With dobro from Douglas and weightless harmonies from Carlile, it’s about letting go of what brings us down: “when you live in the rearview you just crash,” Bentley sings. “I’m done carrying my past like that.” The penultimate track on The Mountain, it’s a culmination of all he’s learned, about how getting up and down the hill of existence is a hell of a lot easier without a backpack full of lead.

“I can really relate to what Dierks is saying,” Carlile tells Rolling Stone Country. “We’re all seeking permission to lay down our burden whether we know it or not.”

Bentley’s been thinking about all sorts of burdens – the mortal burden being one of them. He was listening to the story of country singer Eddie Rabbitt the other day, who died at only 56, and it got his mind wandering. “That’s 13 years from now,” Bentley says. “And what would I do right now, if I knew I only had 13 years?” He leans in and whispers, even though there’s no one else in the room: “I’d move to Colorado.” He pauses, and then laughs. “I love Nashville,” he says, “but can we get a sidewalk?”

The album’s last track, “How I’m Going Out,” finds Bentley meditating on all this, too, except here he’s doing it in terms of his career. Bentley didn’t write it, but he relates deeply to its premise: that any musician’s life in the spotlight is bound to end, just like everything else on earth. He’s not dismissive about fame, but there’s an impression that should things dwindle and sales tank, he wouldn’t be too bummed to check out of Nashville and move west, to where there are sidewalks, endless hiking trails, elk that run wild and cliffs that dust the sky.

“That song is a chance to remind myself that, spoiler alert, it’s coming to an end. Hopefully it’s not for a while,” he says. “But when it is, I’m out. I have other things I want to do. There are mountains to climb.”

