



(04.29.19) - <https://www.cmaworld.com/dierks-bentley-country-superstar-champion-music-education/>

Dierks Bentley: Country Superstar and Champion for Music Education



by Deborah Evans Price

Anyone who has seen Dierks Bentley command the stage on his sold-out Burning Man Tour would find it hard to imagine the chart-topping entertainer getting nervous before performing in front of schoolchildren. But he admits that was the case when he visited the Hector Fontanez School in the Bronx in 2012 to spread the word about CMA's mission to bring music education to public schools.

“That was an incredible experience,” says Bentley. “I can go play in front of 15,000 people and be totally calm, just internally at peace, but in front of a small group—especially a group I’d never played in front of before—it’s so nerve-racking, and there were kids. I realized a bunch of my songs talked about drinking and I was like, ‘What song could I do here that actually works?’”



Bentley dipped into his repertoire for some of his more kid-friendly fare, and the result was a sing-along he’ll never forget. “We started singing together

and they were such great singers. It makes you realize that the human voice is THE original instrument,” says the artist who has scored 18 No. 1 hits and three CMA Awards. “It was so cool to see these kids come alive through music. I’m a stranger to them. They are strangers to me. Then we start playing guitar and everyone starts singing. It’s like, ‘Wow!’ Music just crosses all boundaries, all borders, all languages, all cultures. It’s the most powerful thing there is. That was a very transformative experience for me, and it just continues to show how powerful music is to connect people.”

Touring the school’s newly outfitted music rooms and hearing the kids singing firmly cemented Bentley’s belief in the power of music, and reinforced his enthusiastic support for the CMA Foundation’s work. This past year, Bentley participated in the Foundation’s It Starts With M.E. (Music Education) campaign, and on April 30, he will host the CMA Foundation’s Music Teachers of Excellence event, a night honoring music educators from across the country who will receive classroom grants and personal stipends.

“It’s an honor to be asked to be a part of this,” says Bentley. “It’s something I feel very passionately about, so I’m looking forward to being a part of this special night, thanks to the CMA Foundation.”

Bentley's support of music education dates back to 2012, when he first started visiting schools and promoting CMA Foundation's mission to equip schools with instruments and resources needed to continue music education programs. Bentley says participating in music activities at the Phoenix Country Day School in his native Arizona helped stoke his desire to make music a career. "I sang in elementary school. There was a group called the Super Singers; I think anybody could be a part of it, so the name is a little deceiving," Bentley says with a laugh. "I played saxophone in the school band. I wanted to play the bass guitar, but Brian Fox was already playing it so I had to play the sax. I'm thankful that I went to a school that had a music program and probably took it for granted that I got a chance to play the saxophone. I always looked forward to getting out of the classroom, doing the band stuff and having an instrument. I always thought it was really cool."

Though active in school music programs in his younger years, Bentley says music wasn't as much a part of his high school years. "I went to high school in New Jersey," he says. "I got shipped off to a prep school when I was 14 and I didn't do music there at all. I played guitar and I listened to bands but I didn't take any music programs. I was listening to a lot of rock music from ages 13 to 17. I listened to Country growing up, though. I got an electric guitar from a friend of mine when I was 13. With the electric guitar, I felt like I could just escape, be alone and accompany myself, and just had my own friend in the instrument."

Now as a father of three—daughters Evie, 10, and Jordan, 8, and son Knox, 5—Bentley is even more keenly aware of the importance of music education and the impact it has on kids. "They all love music. They will get up and sing with me a little bit," he says proudly. And they did just that during his recent sold-out Nashville show at Bridgestone Arena.



"With Evie, the piano teacher has been wonderful and is using the Suzuki method.

Evie and my wife spar a little over practices. We gave her a chance to quit and told her she didn't have to do that anymore, but she wanted to keep going at it. Jordan was playing the fiddle and she gave up on that one. It's tough to learn. After four years into it, now she wants to play the guitar, and my son Knox loves the drums."

Thirty teachers will be honored during the CMA Foundation's Music Teachers of Excellence Awards. Bentley felt it was important that he invite a particular music teacher who has had an impact on his family to attend and take part in the celebration of those deserving teachers. "There's a guy that teaches at my kids' school named Bakari King. [He has a] passion for kids and music and theater and all things creative," Bentley says. "He leads the music program at my kids' school and he's just a shining light on campus. He plays music himself and is also an actor and does choreography. He's all-around such a resource for that school. I can't imagine the school without him. ... To have a teacher that epitomizes that energy, that fun creative spirit, is crucial for every school so I'd like to recognize Bakari that night."

Giving others recognition and supporting causes he believes in have long been part of Bentley's personal agenda. In addition to supporting the CMA Foundation, Bentley has raised more than \$4 million to benefit the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt through his annual Miles & Music for Kids charity motorcycle ride and concert. He also tries to instill good values in his kids by taking them to Second Harvest Food Bank in Nashville to pack meals for families who depend on the organization for aid.

"You get some currency as a celebrity, as a Country singer, and you've got to find the right way to use that currency. It's really important that you give back," Bentley says. "The CMA Foundation does such a great job at making it pretty easy for us to get involved. All of us as artists recognize how lucky we are and it makes you really grateful for all the folks who've come into your life to help you get to where you are because there's nobody, obviously, that gets anywhere on their own, no matter how good they are."

Bentley cites Country radio and other musicians among his most influential teachers and supporters. "Country radio has been like my teacher in this and the Station Inn and the people down there," he says, citing the beloved Nashville

venue where he spent a lot of time listening to bluegrass after moving to Music City. “[Grascals guitarist] Terry Eldredge used to sing with the Sidemen, and I paid my \$5 cover charge to go watch him sing every night. I learned a lot just from watching him.”



These days, Bentley is an artist others learn from and hope to emulate. His current release, *The Mountain*, is his seventh album to hit the top of the Billboard Top Country Albums chart, and his Burning Man Tour is selling out in cities across the U.S. “We’ve

had 18 No. 1s. I can’t even believe that,” he says modestly. “I don’t look back and spend too much time thinking about it. You are trained early on in this business to always keep grinding toward the next goal, and if you look back and take your foot off the pedal for a second, someone is going to pass you. So I don’t spend too much time thinking about it.”

However, there are special moments that do make him pause for a second and revel in just how far he’s come since he was that kid in the Super Singers. “I was lucky enough to get a chance to perform a song for Ricky Skaggs at his Country Music Hall of Fame induction ceremony,” he says. “Up on that stage, it was me, Garth Brooks and Chris Stapleton singing for Ricky at different times. Looking out at that room and seeing Charlie Daniels and Randy Travis and all the folks I know who are in the business, it was such a weird feeling. It was like, ‘Wow, I’m right back to where I was when I moved to town!’ Everything I accomplished felt like it was just swept away and I was just a kid who loves Country Music and has so much reverence for these people. The whole thing felt like a dream.”