

(1.23.20) - <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/8548791/hot-country-knights-douglas-d-douglason-interview>

Hot Country Knights Frontman Douglas D. Douglason on Why Country Music Needs Saving: Exclusive



Dierks Bentley's alter-ego says, 'People want to hear kick a-- country music'

Country music is about to get a major shake-up with the Hot Country Knights. The '90s-influenced group promise to bring back the music and themes of the decade, and in his first-ever interview, frontman Douglas "Doug" Douglason sat down with *Billboard* to explain the evolution of the band, debut single "Pick Her Up" featuring Travis Tritt, and working with producer Dierks Bentley -- who he comedically refers to as Jerks Jentley or Dirk Brantley.

While seated at Nashville-based studio Station West on an unseasonably warm day in early January, Douglason's dirty blonde mullet is just as eye-grabbing as his attire. Dressed in white-washed jeans

hiked up well past his belly button, brown track jacket with a white Planet Hollywood New York tank underneath, and '90s-era polarized rainbow razor sunglasses that mask his eyes, it's hard to believe the year is actually 2020.

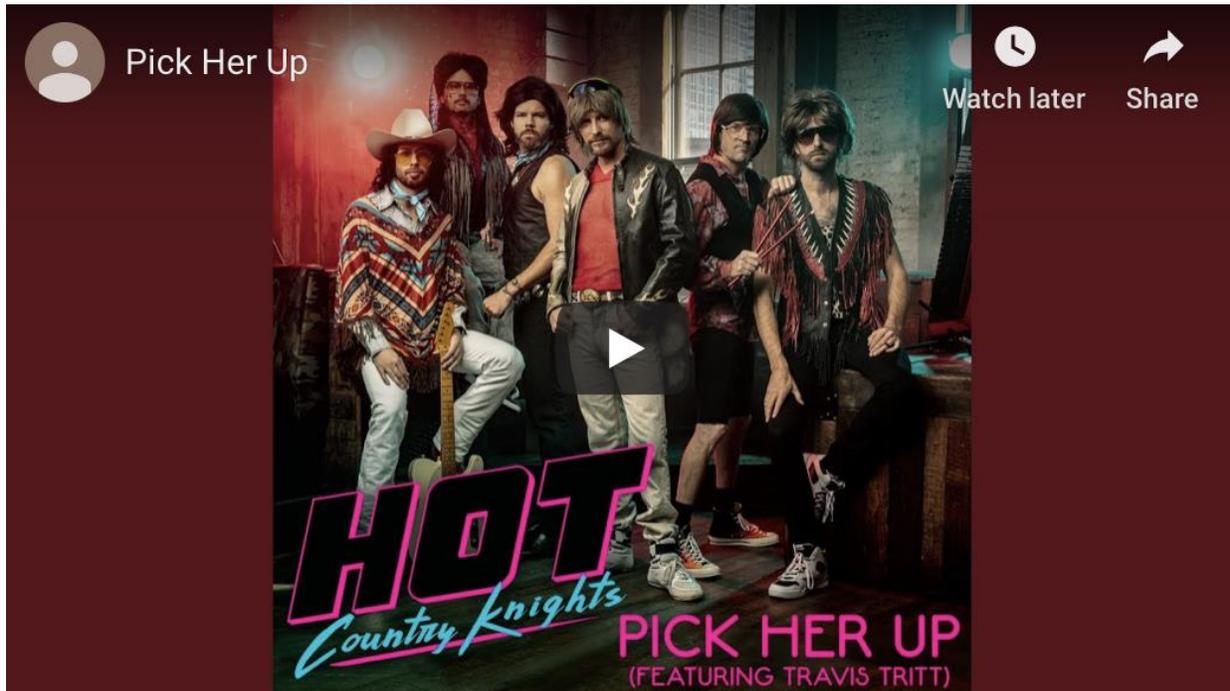
Hot Country Knights first started as a cover band -- led by Douglason, who is in fact Bentley's alter ego -- performing around Tennessee over the years before garnering an official opening slot on Bentley's 2019 tour. The six-piece outfit (all members of Bentley's touring band also performing under different personas), is known for its spirited take on hits from the '90s, with popular acts from today like Miranda Lambert, Brothers Osborne, Thomas Rhett, Caylee Hammack and Tenille Townes often joining them on stage.

"We've been doing this for a long time, and we were, and always have been, a cover band," Douglason tells *Billboard* as he settles into a chair behind the studio console. "A lot of people consider us to be the fourth or fifth best cover band to ever come out of Murfreesboro, Tennessee and we took a lot of pride in it. We sung a lot of other people's hits. We made them greatest hits 'cause we sing them: Us singing them, that makes them greatest hits."

Douglason says several months ago he bumped into Bentley, who convinced the band to record an album. A longtime admirer himself, Bentley wanted to work with the Knights, and served as producer on its upcoming debut album expected later this year.

"Look, the '90s are hot right now," Douglason says matter-of-factly. "[Bentley is] pretty much riding our mullets to the finish line on this one. He wanted to get involved with us and produce us and [we] wrote some original songs. It's been awhile since I've done that—writing. Just using a pen. I don't read or write much. He wrote most of them but stole most of my ideas."

Rollicking throwback debut single "Pick Her Up" featuring Travis Tritt, who Douglason calls the band's "spirit animal," comes out today and will impact country radio Feb. 3. Douglason says the track served as the catalyst for the album.



"You listen to the radio right now, oh my gosh. You wonder why there's not a lot of girls on the radio, and it's because the guys are singing all the girls' songs. You've got the guys who are singing bro country, but they're also doing boyfriend country. They've stolen the entire format from women," he

says. "We need some guys to come out there and put a little 'T' back in country -- a little testosterone. So we want to put it out there and get it going. And that song really got the juices flowing."

Bentley wrote "Pick Her Up" with frequent collaborators Brett and Jim Beavers in 2019 while at his Seven Peaks Festival in Denver, Co. He invited eight songwriters to the festival grounds for three days where the intention was to solely write songs for the Hot Country Knights. Bentley liked the Beavers brothers' initial idea for "Pick Her Up" so much, he even considered recording it for his next solo project.

"I was like, 'If we're not pitching this to the Hot Country Knights, then I'm going to take this and cut it myself on my record because this is just great, fun country music,'" Bentley says, calling from his cabin outside of Nashville the following day. "I'm not really sure where to go after doing *Riser*, then *Black* and *The Mountain*. These albums all have these great big themes and I have no idea where to go personally, in my own career, but that song I would have cut and put it on my own record. It was such a fun tune. The Knights loved it, so the Knights got it."

Bentley says what sets the Knights apart from other country acts on the radio is the humorous lyrical content as heard within the feel-good live track "USA Begins with Us." The Knights' patriotism is on display with Douglason declaring, "The Hot Country Knights have played shows in all 48 states ... We don't see black, white or brown/ No! In fact, we don't see colors. We only see red, white and blue/ These days, there's a lot of people who want to divide us/ I'm no math genius like all those smarty dudes up there in D.C./ But I know division is the exact same thing as subtraction and the Knights are not about subtraction, we're all about addition."

Bentley initially hoped working with the Knights would inspire his own solo project, but he says the band quickly gathered momentum and is his main focus at the moment. "It's become less of a side project and my main focus for at least the first half of the year," he adds.

"I'm not really in a rush to get off this. It's really fun and I think it's really needed in country music right now. [The country genre], myself included, can take themselves way too seriously. This is a good reminder of why I got into country music, which is great songs, great personalities, great people, characters, colors and energy. It's a nice way for me to reset my next project, just by being around these guys."



The Hot Country Knights announced their signing to Universal Music Group Nashville in early January and Mike Dungan, chairman/CEO of the label, said the first time he saw the band perform he was instantly reminded of “how silly I looked 25 years ago. But they also reminded me of how fun country music was 25 years ago,” he tells *Billboard* via email. “The market and the fans are responding to everything that hints of the ’90s right now, so we thought we would take a shot at reviving them. Cher did it. Maybe Hot Country Knights can do it too.”

Dungan asserts that Hot Country Knights is not a novelty project. In on the joke, he says the band was “kind of big in the ’90s” and UMG will be actively promoting “Pick Her Up” to radio. “I predict that radio will only be thrilled to play something that doesn’t sound like click track finger-snap ‘boyfriend’ country music,” he adds. “Hopefully this will be easier than promoting a new artist. Because radio (and the rest of the market over the age of 30) should remember them. I hope. Does radio remember Yankee Grey? You bet your a-- they do!”

While the Knights may be out for a good time, they are deadly serious about paying tribute to ’90s country, and the acts that influenced its sound, including Travis Tritt, Randy Travis, Alabama, Alan Jackson, and Billy Ray Cyrus.

“The Hot Country Knights’ album, we have everything that made the ’90s great. The ’90s, we were painting with a hundred colors. I listen to country radio today, and it feels like they’re using three colors to paint with,” Douglason says. “I just want people to know the Knights are for real. We feel like we deserve this shot to be on the radio like anybody else. If there’s no room for us, they need to kick off some of the guys ... To me, other than the Hot Country Knights’ album, I think the most interesting music out there is being made by women. More women and more Knights.”

The band already has a fan in Keith Urban, who was texting Douglason throughout the interview praising the band, as well as actress Tiffani Thiessen, who stars in the upcoming video for “Pick Her Up” as Kelly Kapowski, her character from beloved ’90s sitcom *Saved By the Bell*.

“She’s an honorary Knight,” Douglason says. “She held her own. I think she might even have made the video better by being in it, which is saying a lot because we were in it ... Country music’s about to get saved by the bell to be honest. We were lucky we showed up in just the nick of time to rescue it. It’s getting pretty bleak out there. People want to hear kicka-- country music.”