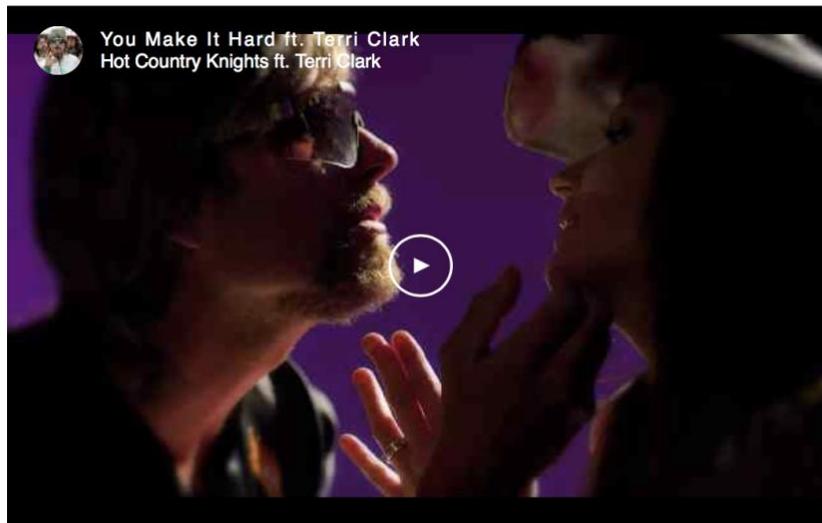


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## Hot Country Knights Recruit Terri Clark for Tim and Faith Homage 'You Make It Hard'

"People can listen to the album and be a little confused," says Dierks Bentley on producing faux Nineties country group's debut *The K Is Silent*



Dierks Bentley knows it's a weird time to be promoting things that are funny and ridiculous, what with the ongoing stress and loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. But maybe, he argues, funny and ridiculous things can be a welcome respite.

"This interview popped up and I was like, 'Is this the right time to be talking about Hot Country Knights with all that's going on in the world?'" Bentley says, calling from Colorado where he and his family extended their spring break vacation through the first part of the quarantine. "But then, I'm obsessed with Tiger King like everyone else. Moreso than ever, people enjoy laughter. And the Knights, they provide plenty of laughs, usually at their own expense, so maybe it is the right time."

Hot Country Knights traffic pretty exclusively in funny and ridiculous, as evidenced by the group's new video for "You Make It Hard." In the clip, Hot Country Knights frontman Doug Douglason (a mullet-wigged and goateed Bentley, in case you haven't figured it out) gamely frolics in a satin-covered bed with Nineties star Terri Clark, who also appears as his duet partner on the song. The lyrics do not hold back on innuendo: "With an ache in my heart and blood rushing to my head" is a pretty good line, or there's also the even-less-subtle "every inch of me is so into you."

"We were trying to check things off," Bentley explains of the studio writing session for "You Make It Hard," which included a contribution from his own manager. "Like, 'OK, we've got this patriotic song, we've got this hard-driving 'Pick Her Up' with Travis Tritt. We're kind of missing that Tim [McGraw] and Faith [Hill] duet

thing. We're missing that late-Nineties country duet where it's a little risqué but everyone overlooks it because for some reason they could get away with saying anything."

Bentley, who served as producer as well as a songwriter on many of the songs on Hot Country Knights' album *The K Is Silent* (out May 1st), is admirably committed to the group's schtick as a bunch of Nineties country refugees who never quite made it and are finally getting their shot 30 years too late. He's never admitted that he's the singer and has in fact held to a consistent narrative about the relationship between himself and his showboating, neon windbreaker-sporting character.

"I don't see the allure of what [Doug] has with his fanbase," Bentley says. "And let's be honest, his fanbase is mostly women 65 and older. But he has an amazing connection with these gals."

Initially, the group was a one-off thing of Nineties covers and guest stars like Miranda Lambert and Thomas Rhett — something radio VIPs would get to witness during Country Radio Seminar or CMA Fest — but they began opening shows on Bentley's tours and playing festival slots. Making an album was the next logical step. Bentley decided to produce the project, corralling Music Row aces Jon Randall, Jim Beavers, Brett Beavers, Luke Wooten, and others to write songs.

The album's lead single "Pick Her Up" is pretty straightforward by Hot Country Knights standards — a goofy, winking number about the game-enhancing powers of trucks. Travis Tritt, who Bentley says "is everything the Knights wish they could be," turns in his guest appearance like it's 1992.

"I would have put that out on my own if the Knights hadn't recorded it, because that's right in my wheelhouse," Bentley says. "It probably would have done a lot better on the radio."

Sometimes Hot Country Knights' studied Nineties homage feels eerily familiar. The dancing song "Moose Knuckle Shuffle" actually shouts out Tracy Byrd and gives partial songwriting credit to the guys behind "Watermelon Crawl" ("It's pretty much the same song," Bentley says), while "Then It Rained" bears at least a passing resemblance to a certain very serious Garth Brooks song.

"Then It Rained" obviously sounds a lot like 'The Thunder Rolls,' but it's not. We looked at it six ways from Sunday — it's not the same melody. There's no copyright infringement there. If Garth wanted to sue, that would be amazing for the Knights. Bad publicity can only help these guys," Bentley says.

But that's part of the charm of *The K Is Silent*. It comes across like a loving send-up of all that was good, bad, and awkward during country's big commercial boom, mixed with a slew of borderline racy jokes that might have to be explained to aging parents or children under 12.

"A little of the goal was to have it be, we're making an album, and people can listen to the album and be a little confused. 'Is this supposed to be like this? Is this supposed to be funny?'" Bentley says. "The end goal is for people to go, 'Hey, I don't care if it's funny or not, it's just great music, great songs, great recording, great playing.'"

Of course, it's a little tough for the Hot Country Knights right now, because onstage is where the group truly shines, giving performances that are as skillful as they are anarchic. In the meantime, they'll have to wait until it's safe for us to go back out.

"In some ways, it's fitting that the Knights' [tour] got canceled," Bentley says. "They've been waiting 30 years for this moment, it's like nope. Coronavirus comes along and ruins it. They'll be back in 30 more years."