

Dierks Bentley

Up On The Ridge

Conventional wisdom says that in the music business, once you achieve a certain threshold of success, caution should be your guide. You've come this far, you're told by everyone around you. Don't surprise your audience too much.

But trepidation will not be part of Dierks Bentley's legacy. At every turn in his career, he's done his own thing, whether that meant touring with jam bands, playing rock venues or recording with bluegrass all-stars on platinum country albums. Now Dierks steps forward with his most artistically daring project yet - the all-acoustic *Up On The Ridge* - a powerful, beautiful album steeped in the bluegrass and roots music that moved Dierks Bentley to be a country musician in the first place.

His fifth album for historic Capitol Records, *Up On The Ridge* is a document of an artist who's using some well-earned freedom to write in a fresh vein and cook up collaborations with the musicians who fascinate and amaze him most in the world. It's the way all albums should be made - built on an idea and an artist-driven vision - as opposed to formulaic packages of eleven songs with four radio singles.

Dozens of talents have contributed in some way to this project. Besides the five co-written by Dierks himself, the songs come from such varied sources as Bob Dylan, Buddy and Julie Miller, U2 and Kris Kristofferson. The monumental Kristofferson is here as a guest vocalist as well, on his own song, along with a slate of today's best traditional country singers, including Alison Krauss, Vince Gill, Jamey Johnson, Miranda Lambert, Sonya Isaacs and Chris Stapleton of the Steeldrivers. And then there are the players, recruited from

the top echelons of bluegrass and acoustic music. Among them: Chris Thile and the Punch Brothers, the Del McCoury Band, the legendary Sam Bush, dobro player Rob Ickes, guitarist Bryan Sutton, fiddler Stuart Duncan, and mandolinist Ronnie McCoury.

All this energy was corralled by producer John Randall Stewart, a singer/writer/picker whose track record in roots and country music Dierks admires as much as anyone. He and Stewart agreed they had to avoid the trap of making a contrived-feeling “Dierks Bentley And Friends” album by creating groups and settings that would let everyone work at the top of their game. They matched songs with pickers and guest singers masterfully. They dreamed up a few crazy ideas and pulled them off. It was a genuine creative adventure made possible only by the fact that Dierks established his credibility in bluegrass circles more than a decade ago.

“This record’s not a departure for me at all,” says Dierks. “It’s really just going back and reclaiming something I feel like I do have some ownership of, which is the acoustic music scene in Nashville.”

Long before his seven chart-topping singles, headlining arena tours, prestigious industry awards or even his record deal, he was a Nashville novice on the brink of discouragement, looking for something musically nourishing and a reason to keep pushing toward a career. And then, providentially, he visited the world famous Station Inn. The humble cinder block building is the nerve center of Nashville’s unparalleled bluegrass scene, and when Dierks went there with a friend on Tuesday night in the late 90s and heard the Sidemen - the Station Inn’s weekly house band - playing hot and fast, it was a revelation. He’d heard only a little bluegrass before and halfway thought of it as “old folks’ music,” but that changed with a few quickened heartbeats. These players were his own age, and the music had both a heart and an edge. Perhaps most remarkably, it came with a big wide front door. When Dierks, a complete newcomer to the scene, approached the musicians with questions and obvious fascination, they were more than willing to share insight into their music.

Dierks remembers the next few years as an inspiring and important time. “They invited me over to their houses for moonshine and picking parties and pot lucks,” he says. “And they knew more about country music and Nashville and acoustic music than anyone on Music Row. Without that whole bluegrass community taking me in and helping me find my foundation, I would have had no place to start from.”

Bentley honed his own style playing all kinds of country music in the clubs and honky-tonks of Nashville’s Lower Broadway and Second Avenue, mixing bluegrass with classic standards, obscure covers he found digging through old albums and an increasing number of his own songs. And when he landed his record deal with Capitol, he was happily surprised to find support for keeping his ties to bluegrass. Not only did many of his singles and album tracks feature prominent acoustic instruments, especially dobro, each of his albums included a certified bluegrass song with the McCourys or The Grascals, a band largely comprised of the guys Dierks had met in those early Sidemen shows.

Throughout his career on Capitol, as Dierks built one of the most loyal, connected fan bases in modern day country music, the press recognized that he was pulling off something extraordinary. His music was grounded in tradition but with enough relatability to work on the radio. *No Depression* magazine, the bible of the Americana movement, praised him for being a bridge between the roots world and the commercial mainstream. His fans began asking with some regularity when he was going to make a bluegrass album.

Then last year, after a grueling tour, Dierks approached the fall and winter feeling the need to throw out the rule book and indulge in the sounds that brought him to the show. The song that set the tone for the project and gave it its title was inspired by some time spent on an actual ridge - a plot of land Dierks bought in rural Williamson County with no buildings except an old barn and a commanding view of hills, fields and trees. Dierks finally arranged a long-sought writing session with Angelo, a lyrical and sonic wizard who’d come to Dierks’ attention working with Kim Richey but who’d gone on to rock

production stardom with the Kings of Leon. A conversation about the good time possibilities of hanging out on the ridge matched with Angelo's spooky, mantra-like guitar riff, and the gritty title track was born.

From there, the partnership with John Randall led to a series of sessions where a complete album took shape. Mountains were moved to get busy artists together in the relaxed setting of Gary Paczosa's studio. Dierks arranged to write and record with one of his heroes, Tim O'Brien, producing a darkly comic and swinging country/grass classic, "You're Dead To Me." Kristofferson's song "From The Bottle to the Bottom" was unknown to Bentley, a student of great country songs, until it was suggested by Jon Randall. And they pulled together two of the biggest stars of traditional country music - Jamey Johnson and Miranda Lambert - for a three-way harmony blowout on the Verlon Thompson/Suzi Ragsdale song "Bad Angel."

The production team decamped at one point for Brooklyn, New York, where Dierks spent a magical three days recording with the Punch Brothers, arguably the most innovative and technically complete pickers in acoustic music. He matched voices beautifully on Bob Dylan's rippling and subversive "Senor." And he and Stewart pulled off the coup of the album - a searing vocal duet with Del McCoury on U2's "Pride (In The Name of Love)" over the Punch Brothers exquisitely arranged soundscape - one of the great acts of group interpretation of a standard you'll ever hear.

U2 and Kristofferson notwithstanding, some of the very strongest songs on the album are by Dierks. He and John Randall came up with "Draw Me A Map," with its seductive dobro-thick melodic theme and its longing lyrics. Their version of "Rovin' Gambler" is the hardest, fastest bluegrass number on the album. And they wrap the project with the moving "Down In The Mine," which adds another gem to the historic catalog of bluegrass mining ballads.

Throughout this journey of 12 tracks, Dierks's voice sounds liberated and authentically connected to the songs. Its grainy honesty is captured in all its nuance by the recording genius of Paczosa, who is widely regarded as the top acoustic engineer of this era. "This album is a brilliant piece of work," says

Paczosa. “And he didn’t do it for any other reason than this was the record that was his heart. And even though the bulk of the record is pretty straight ahead bluegrass instrumentation, there are plenty of other elements that, to me, tie this record to his past records. I know his intent, first and foremost was to make a record that he could be proud of.”

Mission accomplished.