

Dierks Bentley

In the Fall of 2010, Dierks Bentley played four shows in four nights in New York City that illustrate just how unique he is among contemporary country music artists. First, Dierks the multi-platinum arena headliner played his hits at the Bowery Ballroom. Then Dierks the bluegrass student and devotee performed with the Del McCoury Band, and after that it was a songwriter's night with fellow Music Row tunesmiths and a show with Chris Thile's experimental Punch Brothers.

Probably no other artist on country radio in the past ten years could manage this kind of range and versatility. Especially when one considers the broader record. He's had eight No. 1 singles and written every one of them. He's performed at Lollapalooza, the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, Bonnaroo and the CMA Music Festival, tailoring his sets to each. His instantly recognizable voice and acoustic/electric hybrid sound have propelled him to membership in the Grand Ole Opry and, in 2011, a performance for the President at the White House. All made possible by his devotion to developing all sides of his musicianship.

Dierks has embraced musical diversity in his recording career as well, as his new album *Home* demonstrates. The project plunges him back into the country mainstream after a successful sojourn in bluegrass and roots music with the acclaimed and Grammy-nominated *Up On The Ridge* album. Moreover, working with some of Nashville's most innovative studio musicians, *Home* finds Dierks singing over some new sonic textures and, for the first time, interpreting a few songs that he didn't write himself.

"I definitely stepped away from the commercial country world for a little while," says Dierks, noting that his last such album, *Feel That Fire*, album came out in early 2009. "That seems like a really long time ago. So this record feels fresh. It doesn't feel like a continuation of any other project or series of recordings."

But if there's newness, there's also a distinct familiarity about how Dierks and his music are connecting with fans. This sixth album of his Capitol Records Nashville career produced a No. 1 hit even before its release. That album-opening song, "Am I The Only One," is a rallying cry to the fun-loving Dierks army. And it sets a tone - a good-time song kicking off a good-time record. Fans have already been enjoying tunes like "5-1-5-0" and "Diamonds Make Babies" in shows. The recorded versions will no doubt be spilling out of car windows as the weather warms up in 2012.

Home's title track gives the mostly light-hearted album a vital, spiritual anchor. The song expresses pride and patriotism without sentimentality or illusions. It unflinchingly speaks of America's "scars" and her tensions while illuminating those as sources of strength. The writing session took place just four days after the shooting in Tucson, AZ (Dierks's home state), which took six lives and injured Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. That tragedy did not inspire the song by any means, but it did cast a shadow and influence Dierks and his co-writers, once some opening lines popped out that seemed to speak to the vitality of being an American in these challenging times.

"It's really hard to write a patriotic song," confesses Dierks. "But you want to. It's something I think about all the time. I love the history of country music and I love the history of our country." He seems to have pulled it off. The song impressed critics and earned a call from National Public Radio. Dierks was able to tell that audience that the aim was "to be inspiring and hopeful, but also address the realities of what's going on." Elsewhere on radio, country stations embraced the risky single, despite its departures from any flag-waving formula.

The rest of the project is divided evenly between songs Dierks co-wrote and those he found on an unprecedented song hunt. From the former category we hear "The Woods," a homage to another side of home, the privacy afforded by those little-known and mysterious backroads and fire circles where friends gather and rites of passage take place. Dierks also co-wrote "Breathe You In," a pure act of romance and sonic seduction that continues the tone set by the multi-week chartopper "Come A Little Closer" a few years ago. And closing the album, Dierks and Jim Beavers conceived "Thinking Of You," a connecting, reassuring song that comes honestly from a man who's away from his family more than he'd like. Daughter Evie makes a brief guest appearance at the end, singing the record's appropriate final words: "Daddy's home."

On the song scouting side, Dierks "reached out to the publishers and let it be known that we were looking for great songs. It didn't matter where it came from and who wrote it – how big the name or little the name. We were just searching for as many songs to listen to as possible," he says.

The results are rich. "Diamonds Make Babies" is a country cranker, bristling with electric guitar and a great beat. But the true hook is the lyric, a wry and worldly-wise bit of advice to an eager suitor who thinks he's ready to get down on one knee and offer the stone. Dierks also throws his vocal power up to "In My Head," which explores the fine line between love and obsession against a driving, pulsing track. And Dierks reaches back to the influence of one of his favorite musicians – Jamie Hartford – in recording "When You Gonna Come Around." The slow-dance of a song is a duet with the wonderful Karen Fairchild of Little Big Town and offers some of the most organic textures and honest vocals on the album.

Dierks Bentley's career in country music could be taught in music business classes because of its rare balance of commercial success and artistic breadth. Most young Nashville newcomers who gravitate to the Station Inn and the city's bluegrass heritage are not the ones who wind up on arena stages. The city's not programmed that way, even if it should be. But Dierks made some savvy choices, soaking up sound and wisdom on Tuesday night bluegrass shows and on Wednesday nights on Lower Broadway with the twanging, electrifying Jamie Hartford Band. In those same days, his day job at The Nashville Network's tape vault gave him access to a library of classic country music performances, which he soaked up like a sponge.

Under these many influences, he wrote and recorded songs that honored the past and the heritage while saying something fresh. Early songs like "I Wish It Would Break" and "Bartenders, Barstools and Barmaids" suggested this was a writer/artist who could add something to the country tradition while speaking a contemporary language. That promise was fulfilled upon teaming up with Capitol with the shocking No. 1 debut "What Was I Thinkin'?" It continued with indelible hits, including "Settle For A Slowdown" and "Every Mile A Memory."

The tone for Dierks's career was truly set in 2005. He won the CMA's Horizon Award for most exceptional emerging artist. And his passion for and stewardship of classic country music earned him membership in the Grand Ole Opry, where he was the third youngest artist ever to be inducted. The first Grammy Award nominations came in 2007 and they quickly became routine. Through the critically acclaimed *Up On The Ridge* album, he's earned ten Grammy nods. And throughout, Dierks has pursued a broad-based strategy on the road, juggling arena dates supporting George Strait with club and college shows and now balancing headliner status in country music settings with gritty, jammy tours of rock venues.

"I walk a different path," Dierks says. "Because of my love of acoustic music, I have opportunities to do different musical things. It's not just one type of show, which I really think would be a lot easier!" Reflecting on a career that's sent him from the bars of Lower Broadway to the top of country music, Dierks is a mix of amazement, gratitude and determination. "I don't know what the next ten years holds but I think I've put myself in a position where I can satisfy all of the different things that I love about music."

Throughout this journey (and critical to it), Dierks has sought out and made use of technologies that could help erase the distance between himself and his fans. The website that went up before the release of *Home* is perhaps the most audacious expression of that yet. The album's cover is rendered as a mosaic of miniscule images farmed from Dierks's nearly 200,000 Twitter followers. Drag over it, and the faces pop out in a magnifier. Click on any tile, and up pops what they've been saying – to Dierks and each other. It's like a microcosm of everything Dierks has cultivated in his fan base: connectivity and immediacy.

He's done things his own way, satisfied his own muses and done all he can do to bring all kinds of fans along with him. There's every reason to think they'll follow him *Home* too.