

Pop Talk: Bentley has hit the ground running in country music

by Dan Kane

Let's just say that Dierks Bentley has had a good past few months. His fourth CD, "Long Trip Alone," was released and debuted in the top spot on Billboard's country albums chart. Its first single, "Every Mile a Memory," is a major country hit.

Bentley performed the song on "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" and "Today," and did the same at the 2006 Country Music Awards, where he was a nominee for male vocalist of the year.

ON A ROLL - Dierks Bentley was nominated for best male vocalist of the year in 2006's Country Music Awards. CNS Photo. The critics, not always big country boosters, have praised Bentley's latest: "An enormously likable and fat-free CD," said The New York Times. "A consistently top-notch album," said USA Today. "A fresh, cliché-free sound," said The Associated Press.

LONG WAY TO GO

"I really don't feel like I've made it yet," Bentley, 30, said in December. "I look at where I want to be and what we're trying to accomplish, and I still have a ways to go. I'm in this for the long haul."

Mine was Bentley's 10th and last consecutive interview that afternoon but he was unfailingly upbeat, unhurried, polite and articulate.

"I'm real proud of this new record and I'll talk about it all day long," he said brightly. "In the end, it's not about me but about the music."

Bentley was doing a publicity blitz in New York City when he phoned. Lacking a single local country radio station, Manhattan is hardly a country music capital.

"But I love taking country to places they say you can't take it," he said. "I think country when it's done right, it really is the coolest genre there is. I mean look at Johnny Cash's wide appeal."

A Phoenix native who moved to Nashville, Tenn., at age 19, Bentley has enjoyed steady chart success from the get-go.

MUSIC AWARD

The singer-songwriter's self-titled 2003 debut album spawned a No. 1 hit. "What Was I Thinking?" sold more than 1 million copies and earned him the Academy of Country music's top new male artist award. His second album, "Modern Day Drifter," also was certified platinum and yielded hit after hit: "Lot of Leavin' Left to Do," "Come a Little Closer," and "Settle For a Slowdown."

Did Bentley feel much pressure to create another smash with this third CD?

"Any pressure applied is from myself," he said. "I always want the next album to be a step up, or take things somewhere new, not just another batch of songs. I want it to be something special."

Finding songwriting inspiration was not a problem for Bentley.

"I've been a traveling minstrel these last four years," he said. "I've seen a lot. And writing these songs, I was thinking about the road - and about the road of life, really." Bentley's favorite on the new CD is the title song, "Long Trip Alone," an affecting, achingly tender ballad.

"It's a song where if you listen to it one time, it sounds like a personal love song. Listen to it again, you might hear it as a prayer," he said. "I think it's the best song I've written."

NONSTOP TOURING

Complimented on his album's effectively simple production, Bentley said, "You try to take the energy of the live show and inject that into the album. Maybe using not as much clutter but somehow it's a bigger-sounding record in the end."

Nonstop touring has been the main focus of Bentley's life the last four years. Most recently, he opened 70 shows for country superstar Kenny Chesney.

"His audience and our audience got along really well," Bentley recalled of these summer gigs. "You're out there in front of 15,000 to 70,000 screaming fans and you think they're all there for you. Then you come back out when Kenny's playing and you remember, 'Oh yeah, they're here for Kenny.' "

Bentley's current tour, with support from Miranda Lambert, is his first time being top-billed.

"At some point you have to throw your hat in the headlining ring," he said. "We're carrying our own P.A., sound, lighting on three semi trucks. It's kind of a big deal.

"It's fun to be top dog but we're paying for all this. It's a little scarier, makes the show a little intense. We're playing with a little more hunger this time."

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