

Up On The Ridge: Blazin' bluegrass by Bentley, et al

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 30 July 2010 11:11

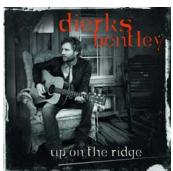


Dierks Bentley is hot – not only because of the way he fills out a pair of jeans – right now, he's riding the crest of a wave most artists can only dream about.

Named CMT's Top New Artist in 2004 and nominated for five Grammys, Bentley bet the farm on his new CD, "Up On The Ridge," released last month by Capitol Nashville.

Conventional wisdom would dictate that Bentley stick close to his country rock roots like number one hits "What Was I Thinking," "Free and Easy," and his latest barroom anthem, "Sideways."

Throwing caution to the wind, Bentley decided to shine a spotlight on Music City's rich acoustic heritage. And he doesn't think his choice was all that unusual.



"This record's not a departure for me," Bentley said in a press release. "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."

When Bentley left Phoenix to pursue his musical dreams in the late 1990s, he was exposed to the magic that happened every Tuesday night at Nashville's Station Inn.

According to Bentley's website, the Station Inn is the "nerve center" of Nashville's unparalleled bluegrass scene.

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"I thought it was 'old folks' music," Bentley said. "The music they were playing was a revelation."

Bentley cultivated friendships with the musicians he met.

"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."

Alison Krauss, the darling of bluegrass, and Stuart Duncan, named American Country Music's Fiddle Player of the Year five years, joins Bentley on the title cut.

It's a hard driving anthem to everything country: Hard loving, hard drinking and the night sky.

*Let's blow out these city lights
Let's just leave it all behind
Get up where the air is still
You can hear the whippoorwill
Start a fire, pass the 'shine
Won't be home 'til morning time*

Miranda Lambert and Jamey Johnson provide sizzling vocals on Verlon Thompson's "Bad Angel."

Lambert's carving out quite a niche for herself as a rocker chick, and Johnson's voice proves once again that he is the heir apparent to Merle Haggard.

Their voices provide the perfect blend of honky tonk desperation in this homage to the demons of addiction, with Duncan's fiddle serving as a grace note floating above it all.

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For sheer bluegrass, it's hard to find better tunes than "Rovin' Gambler," "Fiddlin' Around" and "You're Dead to Me."

Banjo playner Noam "Pickles" Pikelny's work on "Gamblin' Man" is lightning quick, evoking the ghost of Earl Scruggs.

Scott Vestal's banjo licks on "You're Dead to Me" should required listening for anyone who claims to be a bluegrass fan.

Duncan takes over on "Fiddlin' Around," proving why artists like Dolly Parton, George Strait, Reba McEntire and Barbra Streisand use his talents in the studio. Mix in a dash of Vince Gill harmony on the vocals and you have one of the best examples of pure country music to come along.

Only a stone could listen to these cuts and not tap a toe or do a little dance.

The gifted Punch Brothers (led by mandolin master Chris Thile, formerly of Nickle Creek, on mandolin) are featured on "Rovin' Gambler, and covers of Bob Dylan's "Señor" and U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)."

If you're thinking that "Pride" isn't a song that lends itself to bluegrass – either by subject matter or musicality – think again.

*Early morning, April 4
Shot rings out in the Memphis Sky
Free at last, they took your life
They could not take your pride*

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While it probably won't get a lot of airplay, the tune is haunting and memorable.

Bentley shows off writing chops, penning five of the CD's tunes.

His "Draw Me A Map," written in a minor key, seamlessly bridges the gap between a country love song and a bluegrass standard.

Alison Krauss' harmonies take the melody to angelic heights.

Bentley also penned the final cut, "Down in the Mine," a sobering look at the coal industry. It's heavy, stark and terrifically sad.

*Well the old timers talk
But you just don't believe
It can all go to hell
At 2,000 feet.
Life sways in the balance
Of nature and time
And fate has no mercy
Down in the mine.*

The CD's only misstep is the inclusion of Kris Kristofferson's vocals on "Bottle to the Bottom."

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It's a great arrangement of the Kristofferson tune, and I love a world-weary baritone, but his voice is gone and it's time for him to do us all a favor and bow out of studio work.

Bentley's touring heavily behind "Up On the Ridge." He's performed on Craig Ferguson's "The Late, Late Show" and on "Late Night with David Letterman." Here's a video of that performance.

CMT has filmed a night with him at the Ryman that's been on rotation. Catch it on replay if you can.

One of my Nashville friends said the town was buzzing the day after the show taped – understandably so.

Bentley's gig and the CD it's based on are audacious displays of musicianship, backed up by some of the best names in the business.

9/03/10 UPDATE: "Up on the Ridge" has been nominated for CMA's Album of the Year.

Here's a clip of the newly released "Bad Angel," with Miranda Lambert and Jamey Johnson sitting in. The tune was also nominated for a CMA in the Musical Event of the Year.

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