

# DIERKS BENTLEY

## A country star rediscovers a teenage love affair with bluegrass

DIERKS BENTLEY WAS A 19-YEAR-OLD FROM PHOENIX, Ariz., aiming for a career as a country singer when he walked into Nashville's Station Inn nightclub, famous as the stomping ground to many of the city's finest bluegrass pickers. What he heard there changed his life. "Up to that point I always thought of bluegrass music as being an older generation's genre," he says. "I didn't associate it with being young, cool and hip. But I walked in and saw kids my age tearing away on these instruments and having so much fun playing together. It was like Columbus seeing land—it was a whole other thing I never knew existed."



Danny Clinch

16 M MUSIC & MUSICIANS JUNE 2010

Bentley eventually got the mainstream country career he was after, but always made sure to include a detour into bluegrass on each of his albums. For his latest, *Up on the Ridge*, he opted to pursue a sound closer to what he heard that first night at the Station Inn than to the sleek sounds of modern country radio. He set up shop with producer Jon Randall and tackled a set of songs ranging from his own originals to Kris Kristofferson's "Bottle to the Bottom" and even a version of U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)" that finds bluegrass elder statesman Del McCoury singing the chorus' keening harmony part. "Here's a guy that's as hardcore bluegrass as they get," Bentley says, "but I thought his voice would sound great on that song."

McCoury is only one in a long list of high-profile guests that also includes Alison Krauss, Jamey Johnson, Miranda Lambert, the Punch Brothers and Kristofferson himself. Bentley was determined

to make all the collaborations happen in an unforced way. "I didn't want to make a record that was like *Dierks Bentley and Friends Do Bluegrass Music*," he says with a chuckle. "It just came together naturally. It was really organic."

Bentley is the first to acknowledge that *Up on the Ridge* is not a straightforward bluegrass album—rather, it's a record that combines his influences from that genre as well as country and rock in an acoustic setting. "Pretty much from day one I knew we were going to start breaking down the genre walls," he says. "I said, 'It's gonna have drums on it, it's gonna have electric bass on it, but it's obviously going to be heavily bluegrass-y.' I felt like the record was going to be what it was going to be, and everyone else can define it as whatever they want to define it as. I hope they'll just define it as being good."

—Chris Neal

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