GRAVEL & GOLD Bio

There comes a time in any climb up one of Colorado’s famous 14,000 foot peaks when, after a few hours of striving, you pause on a ledge, turn around, and marvel at the vista and the ground you’ve covered. That’s where Dierks Bentley finds himself, 20 years into an exceptional career in 21st century country music. The view is breathtaking for sure, but this is a multi-platinum artist in peak shape, his eyes fixed on the summit.

The 2020 pandemic gave Bentley a moment to breathe and think about his journey to this point and the possibilities for the heights that lay ahead. The break led to a new burst of creativity. With one foot in Nashville and one in his beloved second home of Colorado, he worked harder than he ever had on an album - his landmark tenth, *Gravel & Gold*.

It’s a diverse, 14-track album **-** written almost entirely by Dierks with his closest collaborators **-** about perspective and self-awareness at many levels from the personal to the professional. It’s also a testament to the many strains of country music Bentley has mastered and cultivated in his career, from the arena shaker to the barroom weeper to the bluegrass fireballer. In its opening track “Same Old Me,” Bentley recognizes that midlife demands adjustments and adaptations - as well as nurturing the inner fire of the 18-year-old country music fanatic who first arrived in Nashville in the 1990s. Fifty minutes later, we’re in an intimate circle with Music City’s greatest pickers, trading licks and laughs on a witty song about getting high. It was no easy thing to encompass in one record the values and sounds that have defined Bentley across two decades of hits and millions of touring miles, but he’s pulled it off. The story of Gravel & Gold is one of renewal, family, persistence and devotion to making the music as authentic and lasting as it can possibly be.

“I was in Colorado and I was definitely kind of pushing music away for a little bit,” says Bentley about the limbo of 2020. “I put the guitar in a case, I didn't even get it out.” Playing outdoors “was just the greatest feeling of all time. I could never get enough bike rides and never get enough skiing and never get enough hikes or walks with my family.” It was the break from touring he (and his colleagues) dream about but dare not take. The home that Bentley, wife Cassidy and their three kids have had in Telluride for the past few years, a relatively modest manifestation of multi-platinum success, went from being a fun getaway to a sanctuary during a tough time for the country. Bentley hails from the West after all, and his passion for its landscapes and its “Rocky Mountain freedom” sparkles on track two of *Gravel & Gold*, “Sunsets In Colorado.”

Under such ideal circumstances for rest and revitalization, it was just a matter of time before the guitar came back out and songs began to flow, initially on Zoom sessions and visits to Telluride by some country music buddies. Bentley could feel the industry stirring 1,500 miles away, and he hadn’t released a new album since *The Mountain* in the summer of 2018. “I started doing writer's retreats and got a bunch of songs. We came back to Nashville and cut 15 songs at the Sound Emporium with my band,” he says. But when he sat with the results, Bentley realized it was not going to be so simple. Take two involved working with an old co-writing friend who shifted to the producer role. They cut five songs and took stock, and Bentley still wasn’t satisfied. The next mix of collaborators hit the target: a combination of Ross Copperman, Red Shippen, Jon Randall and Brett Beavers.  Bentley stepped into the producer role for the first time. Some of the songs on *Gravel & Gold* were recorded three times by the time the process was over, but you only get one chance to make a tenth album. Bentley had never had quite so much freedom to make sure every line, every instrumental part, every vocal harmony, every texture, was up to par.

“All you can do is try to make something that you don't have any regrets about. You know you put all the time you could into it. It wasn't rushed. It's as good as I can make it - as good as we can make it. I can look at it for the rest of my life and be like, yeah, that was harder than I thought it would be, but it worked out.”

After “Same Old Me” and “Sunsets In Colorado” establish key themes close to Bentley’s personal story, “Heartbreak Drinking Tour” calls on country music’s capacity for telling stories of others, and of all of us. In this blue-lit classic that could have been on the radio in any of the past four decades, a guy moves to the west coast for love, and when it comes crashing down, he makes his way homeward, drowning his sorrows and crashing in every town along the way, set to some clever wordplay. “Something Real” reasserts the importance of holding on to integrity and self in a world of pressures, while “Still,” one of Bentley’s favorite tracks, is a spacious and lovely meditation on staying spiritually grounded, largely through the power and freshness of nature, whether the titanic Rockies or the shady trails of Nashville’s parks. “Cowboy Boots” features sharp writing about a timeless but humble subject, while “Beer At My Funeral” gives the album a jab of Roger Miller humor at 21st century arena scale.

“Gold,” the album’s first single, falls in the middle of the project, refreshing its core theme of perspective with a road-trip vibe and wisdom that can only be earned by putting in the years and the work. “They say heaven is somewhere on the other side,” sings Bentley. “But I ain’t waitin’, Hell I’m thinkin’ it’s a state of mind.” A similar gratitude for connection and life’s gentle gifts can be found in “Walking Each Other Home.” And to round out the generous collection, we get “High Note,” a song that taps Bentley’s passion for and experience with bluegrass music, not to mention his friends. The witty track about Colorado’s now-legal intoxicant concludes with a super jam featuring Billy Strings and Jerry Douglas on dobro, Sam Bush on mandolin, Charlie Worsham on guitar along with Bryan Sutton on guitar and banjo.

This final track carries Bentley full circle to his formative years in Nashville. He arrived from his native Phoenix with a hunger for all kinds of country music, a love of classic WSM-AM and the Grand Ole Opry, and a willingness to seek out knowledge and greatness wherever it could be found. So when Bentley first discovered Nashville’s Station Inn, the venerable bluegrass bar in a then decrepit part of downtown, he felt like he found a second home and family. Meanwhile, he filled notebooks with classic country songs and played them at bars downtown well before the Lower Broadway boom. He landed a song publishing deal in 2001 and a record deal followed with Capitol, his career home, two years later. Bentley saw his first single “What Was I Thinkin’” climb to No. 1 on the *Billboard* country chart. In the remarkable year of 2005, he released his sophomore project *Modern Day Drifter*, secured the CMA Horizon Award as best new artist and was asked to join the Opry.

In the years since, Bentley has built a vast fan community and performed consistently at the top tiers of his industry without chasing trends or making music that wasn’t satisfying to himself. While other artists came and went, he has cultivated longevity and legacy, with nine albums reaching platinum or gold status, 21 No. 1 hits, three CMA Awards and 14 Grammy Award nominations. He’s launched the annual Seven Peaks Music Festival in Colorado and Dierks Bentley’s Whiskey Row franchise of bars with four locations. He’s also back playing bluegrass at his beloved Station Inn on a regular basis featuring an acoustic version of the road band he’s valued for so many years, plus special guests from the elite of acoustic music. Nobody can say at this point that his professed love for timeless country music and the soul of Nashville was anything but genuine and lifelong.

“Selfishly I've always wanted to have my cake and eat it too,” says Bentley. “I'm in the bluegrass space. I'm in the traditional country space. It’s always been important to me to have the love and support of this community in Nashville, particularly the older establishment and the Opry - and to know that I’m part of the scene at the bigger venues, you know? It’s fun to be out there on the big stage and swing for the whole deal and have that as well.”

It’s a track record of versatility and success that’s unmatched in country music in the past 20 years. More gold undoubtedly lies ahead.