

LADIES' CHOICE

Shelton Starts A Female-Friendly Fire

Not long ago, fans would come to Blake Shelton concerts to hear pure country music. But this year—most recently on a mini-tour he completed with girlfriend Miranda Lambert—that's changed. Now, he says fans “also want to hear some jokes and wisecracks.” And he's been happy to oblige.

Audience demographics are shifting, too. As Warner Bros. Nashville prepares the Nov. 18 release of Shelton's fifth album, “Startin' Fires,” the singer's newest fans are skewing younger, label executive VP Bill Bennett says, and the crowd probably runs about 70% female—up from maybe 60% last year. “I would say we are marketing him to women,” marketing director Kelli Cashiola says. Fan stats for Shelton's Web site, she says, suggest the label is reaching its target.

Several factors have coincided to affect the change. First, there's the way Shelton presents himself. “He has his personality, a sense of humor, and he has this great look—like a matinee idol,” Bennett says. But only recently has that image taken center stage. In the last year or two, Shelton has begun wearing his cowboy

hat less and his hair shorter, he's ramped up his Web presence with goofy YouTube vignettes such as a countdown of New Year's resolutions, he's introduced himself to millions of reality TV viewers as a judge on “Nashville Star” and a contestant on “Clash of the Choirs,” and he topped Hot Country Songs this summer with a cover of Michael Bubl 's AC hit “Home”—a song which, initially, wasn't even on a proper Shelton album.

The association with Lambert has helped shape Shelton in fans' minds as well—even if it was her simultaneously released “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” that kept his 2007 album “Pure B.S.” out of the No. 1 country spot, and even though, Shelton says, “musically she and I don't see eye to eye.” He's the obsessive sort of traditional country fanatic who'll “spend \$300 a week at Ernest Tubb Record Shop” when he's in Nashville. And where Lambert swears by Ashlee Simpson, Shelton would usually rather listen to John Conlee. “Startin' Fires” concludes with the pair dueting on a spare waltz about teen



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deflowering called “Bare Skin Rug,” with crickets chirping in the background.

At slightly less than 400,000, Shelton's prior album, “Pure BS,” was his weakest seller to date, according to Nielsen SoundScan. His self-titled 2001 debut and “Blake Shelton's Barn & Grill” from 2004 have both sold well more than 750,000. But after two underperforming singles started convincing Warner Bros. that “Pure BS” was a lost cause, Shelton scored big with “Home”—a song first pitched to him by Bennett, then later, by coincidence, loaded onto his iPod by Lambert.

“Home” was released first on a Wal-Mart-exclusive “Collectors' Edition” EP, targeted to new fans who'd discovered Shelton through the song itself and his TV appearances; an expanded edition of “Pure BS,” featuring “Home” and bonus tracks, followed. “From that point on,” Bennett says, “what was driving our vision, our marketing plan, was momentum.”

To keep himself in the spotlight, Shelton says the plan was “to take this moment and go into a whole new project.” So when the autumn single “She Wouldn't Be Gone” clicked with radio—it's No. 21 on Hot Country Songs—“Startin' Fires” was moved up from early 2009. Cashiola says the label opted to try to capitalize on holiday sales rather than gamble that fans might have gift cards after Christmas.

Shelton calls “Startin' Fires” his “most autobiographical album.” A couple of years ago he moved back from Nashville, “because it's way too big for me,” to his native Oklahoma; after four albums done mainly with Bobby Braddock, the new set is Shelton's first produced by Warner Bros. senior VP of A&R Scott Hendricks, a fellow FFA-reared Okie. And Shelton says he's excited now “to be singing about tractors, about deer on the timberline.” The hilarious back-to-the-land opener, “Green,” might be the first country number ever to mention carbon emissions. And tracks like “Country Strong” and “Home Sweet Home” have more small-town soil beneath their fingernails.

But several songs also show the singer maturing into a more romantic side. Shelton, Bennett and Cashiola all mention the smoldering “I'll Just Hold On” as a possible single, and “This Is Gonna Take All Night” is downright erotic. Partly, Shelton says, this is just a result of choosing material that puts more emphasis on his vocals. Until he went top 10 country with “Goodbye Time” in 2005. “I was always the story-song guy,” Shelton says. “But now it's about singing it, and delivering it and selling the passion.”