

# Nashville

by Phyllis Stark



## Scene

**WHILE MANY** of today's young country artists pay lip service to the legends, Warner Bros.' **Blake Shelton** has already worked with several of them.

Legendary songwriter/producer **Bobby Braddock**, best known for writing **Tammy Wynette's** "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" and the **George Jones** masterpiece "He Stopped Loving Her Today," has produced the 25-year-old artist's self-titled debut album, due July 31.

Even before hooking up with Braddock, Shelton had been encouraged in his career ambitions by veteran songwriter **Mae Boren Axton**—co-writer of **Elvis Presley's** "Heartbreak Hotel"—and her singer/songwriter son **Hoyt**.



Shelton got Boren Axton's attention when he performed at a tribute to her in his hometown of Ada, Okla., where she once lived. At her urging, Shelton moved to Nashville two weeks out of high school at age 17, where he befriended Hoyt Axton and began visiting him regularly on his tour bus, where Axton was living in his mother's driveway.

Shelton signed with Giant Records in July 1998 and turned in the first version of the album in August of the following year. Then the waiting and wondering began, as the release date changed several times and rumors began to swirl about Giant's demise. Shelton says, "The good thing about it was we got to keep looking for and recording songs over that time period. If it hadn't been for it taking a while, we wouldn't have found 'Austin.'"

That song has enabled Shelton to accomplish a feat few new artists achieve these days—a hit debut single. "Austin" rises 6-4 on Hot Country Singles & Tracks this issue.

While he did not write "Austin" (**David Kent** and **Kirsti Manna** take those honors), Shelton did pen four songs on his album, including, "All Over Me," which he co-wrote with his musical hero **Earl Thomas Conley**.

The Giant staff was going through the process of setting up Shelton at

radio when word came down that the label was shuttering. "Giant closed on a Friday, and the next Monday the song debuted on the chart," Shelton says. "I thought, 'That's it. If it falls back off again, that's just going to be a strike against me.'"

Instead, the Warner Bros. staff immediately picked up and ran with the project. Shelton says, "I guess we developed enough buzz about it on the radio tour [that] Warner Bros., my God, they put everything they had behind it immediately, and it got some legs under it."

Still, he admits, that period was hard for him: "We were right in the middle of development on the single, and there were all these rumors floating around, and I was worried that people were thinking, 'That's something we don't have to worry about. The label's going away.' When it finally happened, it was like a relief. [Warner Bros. president] **Jim Ed Norman** called the last day Giant was open and let me know he wanted me to come over."

Since "Austin" became a hit, Shelton says, he's entered an unfamiliar phase in his career: offers of paying gigs are coming in to his management office. "It's weird to think people are calling for me now," he says. "That's new to me. I've always dealt with begging somebody for a job."

Shelton is grateful to his famous producer for his success thus far: "I can't say enough about Bobby. Not only did he [get] me a production deal with [Sony/ATV Tree Publishing], he actually is the guy that took [the demo] around to the record labels and got me the record deal. And he hung in there, most importantly—stayed with and fought for me."

"I wouldn't say he's your average producer, because he's very, very involved in everything that we do," Shelton continues. "He actually comes out when I'm rehearsing with my band, and if he hears something that could be better, he'll put in his two cents' worth."

"He's kind of like a mentor to me," Shelton says. "I'll never know why, but he's just kind of taken me under his wing, and I'm not worthy."

**SIGNINGS:** Dreamcatcher Records has signed songwriter/instrumentalist **Randy Dorman** to its roster. His debut album, *No Boundaries*, is due this month. Dorman has played guitar in label co-founder **Kenny Rogers'** band for more than 20 years.