

COUNTRY BY KEN TUCKER

Building The 'BS'

Intermittent Chart-Topper Blake Shelton Rolls With The Punches

Blake Shelton's persistence is about to pay off. After changes in labels, producers and managers—he's now with Narvel Blackstock, who is married to and manages Reba McEntire—he finally has the vehicle that just might break him out of the midlevel artist pack.

Originally signed to now-defunct Giant Records, Shelton moved to Warner Bros. Nashville in 2001, just as his first single, "Austin," was being released. A couple of years later, Warner was sold to Edgar Bronfman Jr. and a number of upper-level management changes were made. "Every time somebody takes over it makes me work that much harder," Shelton says. "I don't want them to look at me as somebody who's lazy, that feels like I've arrived. Maybe that's why I've been able to survive."

"I've never made it to that upper level of artist," he adds, "but at the same time, I've also been one of the few guys that's hung around."

As Shelton has "hung around," he has scored three multiweek No. 1 country airplay singles and has had each of his first three albums certified gold by the RIAA. But his success can best be described as "inconsistent." For every No. 1 there were a couple more that stopped well short of the pinnacle.

His album sales, while solid—he has averaged 636,000 units sold on his first three records—haven't broken through the platinum-plus level.

Warner Bros. Nashville executive VP Bill Bennett believes Shelton's "Pure BS," which debuts at No. 2 on Billboard's Top Country Albums chart this issue with first-week sales of 48,000 copies, may be the one to break him. "His talent and abilities far exceed his sales to date," Bennett says. "It's our hope and intention to

make this one be his breakthrough album."

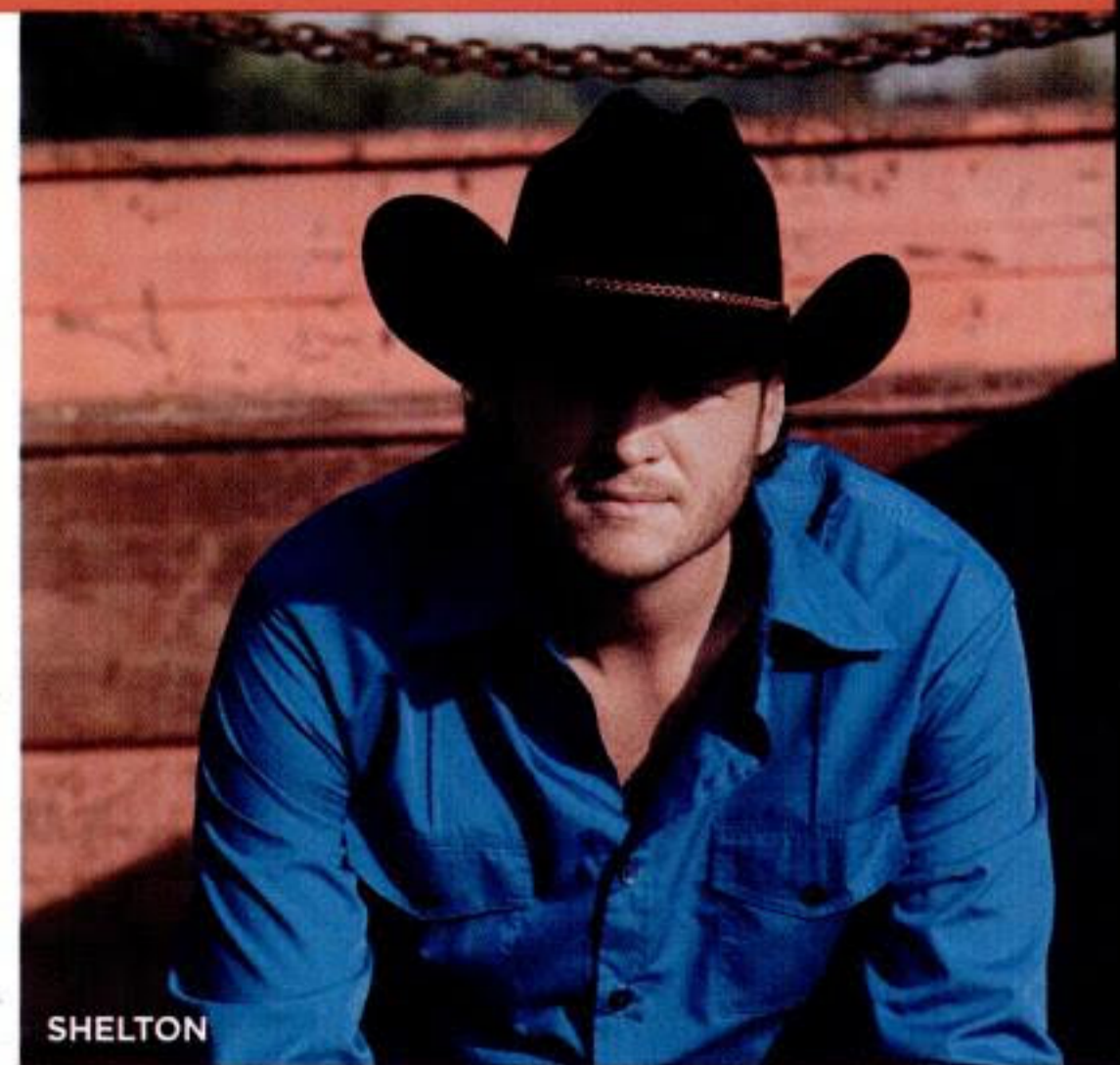
The label encouraged Shelton to take a different approach in the studio. He recorded with longtime producer Bobby Braddock, as well as with Brent Rowan and Warner Bros. Nashville chief creative officer Paul Worley. "The only way I knew Paul was as the 'evil record company guy,'" Shelton says. "It was really good for our relationship. He's funny, and I never knew that about him."

The album's title, "Pure BS," is more than a clever play on Shelton's initials. "It probably shows more who I am as a person than anything I've done before," Shelton says. "Lyrically, I think it's probably the countriest album that I've done, but production-wise, it's a little more edgy than anything I've done."

The first single, "Don't Make Me," currently No. 14 on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart, finds Shelton begging his lover to return his attentions, while "What I Wouldn't Give" is an introspective look at the singer's own relational shortcomings. "I've always kind of had that 'fuck me' attitude, and that's how I approached these breaking-up songs," Shelton says.

By contrast, "This Can't Be Good" is a rousing tale of what happens when you get caught with the sheriff's daughter, and "The More I Drink" is a honky-tonk, piano-laden ball of fun. The album's closer, "The Last Country Song," features appearances by George Jones and John Anderson.

WFMS Indianapolis PD Bob Richards says Shelton is already a star in his market "because our listeners have embraced him—and not just his music, but his personality," he says. "He is such a funny and likable and charismatic person."



SHELTON

Warner Bros. hopes that a series of virally marketed YouTube videos and other initiatives will expose that personality. In one video, perhaps channeling "Jackass," Shelton rolls a band member down a truck ramp in a barrel. He also added comic relief as a judge on USA Network's "Nashville Star" talent competition.

Richards is a believer. "He has all the makings of being one of those who in the next couple of years really launches to that superstar level," he says.

After touring with Rascal Flatts and Toby Keith during the last couple of years, Shelton wants to go it alone, at least for the time being. And his goals have changed in other ways, too. "When I first moved to Nashville I wanted to be Garth Brooks, and now I've kind of shifted to reality," he says. "I want to have a legitimate greatest hits album that is 10 or 12 big, solid hits. If I get that, I'll feel like I've made my mark, I've done something." ♦♦♦

ROCK BY TODD MARTENS

Bear Market

Suicide Squeeze Plots Major Campaign For 'Planet Of Ice'

There was a time when Minus the Bear wasn't taken very seriously. Albums and EPs were adorned with bizarre song titles like "Monkey!!! Knife!!! Fight!!!" and "I'm Totally Not Down With Rob's Alien." Lead singer Jake Snider ran a pre-Suicide Girls indie rock porn site dubbed Friction USA.

Then the Seattle-based band released 2005's "Menos

el Oso," and any doubts about its seriousness were laid to rest. What had been a sometimes lighthearted approach to songwriting was replaced with a more thoughtful, inward-looking album, and its frenzied indie rock was given a heavier prog rock slant. The indie porn site was dismantled, and with a focus strictly on music,

"Menos el Oso" would become the top-selling album in the 10-year history of indie Suicide Squeeze.

To date, the album has moved 45,000 units in the United States, according to Nielsen SoundScan, and peaked at No. 20 on Billboard's Heatseekers chart. It was a gradual success story, and one in which the band was

growing faster than the label.

Suicide Squeeze founder David Dickenson had worked with Minus the Bear largely on handshake agreements and finally signed the band to a two-album deal before the release of "Menos el Oso." Even then, Dickenson gave the band an out-clause, should it have designs on something larger.

The respect has not gone unnoticed by Snider. "We had interest all along the way from various independent labels, and we get e-mails from interns at major labels or whoever," Snider says. "But there's nothing that we've been jazzed about or enticed us at all. With the way the music industry is going, we feel safe on the indie we're on."

Two of the four albums Suicide Squeeze will release in 2007 are Minus the Bear efforts. The first was a remix album, "Interpretaciones del Oso," which the label gave a low-key release on Feb. 20. It's saving up for the Aug. 21 release of "Planet of Ice," a Yes-inspired album clad with fanciful guitar textures, and one that Dickenson says would be fit for a "laser light show."

The Touch & Go-distributed label is targeting about \$75,000 on retail marketing, and the label and band will soon release a series of behind-the-scenes videos on YouTube. Suicide Squeeze is

looking to ship approximately 30,000 units—its largest expenditure to date.

Touch & Go head of sales Leslie Ranson says the band's mainstream appeal surprised even her, as nearly half of the last album's sales were from large chains such as Best Buy. Dealing with such an anticipated title as "Planet of Ice" is new ground for the label, and Suicide Squeeze was willing to watermark advances, which would have cost an extra \$4 per CD, Dickenson says.

The choice was up to the band, and it ultimately decided not to, preferring not to fight the Web. Snider points to the YouTube videos as new marketing ground for the band, and one it is comfortable dealing with.

"I think these days in the music business, creativity and marketing are the only way that growth is going to continue," he says. "Indies lead the way with finding those guerrilla tactics." ♦♦♦



MINUS THE BEAR