

On the HUNT

Whether tracking deer or making hit records, Blake Shelton's aim is true

In front of a camera or a microphone, it's easy for a singer to pretend to be someone he isn't. But there's no faking it when hunting for deer deep in the Iowa backwoods – you're either the real deal, or you're not.

The *Wal-Mart Great Outdoors* program on ESPN2 has presented plenty of celebrity hunters over its 13 seasons, but none have displayed more over-the-top enthusiasm than Blake Shelton.

"Oh man, he's just loving it," says producer Rich Larson, shaking his head and chuckling as he recalls how eager the rangy Oklahoman was to shoot the first deer he saw that morning – until the crew advised that patience likely would lead to a bigger one.

"He's just like a kid at Christmas," Larson continues, relaxing at the lodge of Timberghost Ranch, a white-tail preserve for trophy hunting in southeast Iowa.

Just then, series co-host Jack Youngblood bursts through the door, a huge smile on his face. The football hall-of-famer – a former defensive lineman for the Los Angeles Rams – invites everyone outside to admire the prize he calls "Deer-zilla."

Now the question is whether Shelton will be so lucky. It's past dark, and dinner's almost ready. Had the singer bagged a trophy buck, he'd be back by now. He and Youngblood have bonded with a bet – \$100 for the biggest deer, another \$100 for the prettiest.

"He loves the outdoors, and he's one

fun guy," Youngblood says. "It's like taking your son hunting."

When the 6-foot-5-inch Shelton returns to the lodge, his smile is even bigger than Youngblood's. His buck is bigger as well, an 11-point beauty. Everyone again rushes outside to eye the treasure.



"Hunting and fishing were always my first love, music second," says Shelton, showing off his prize 11-point buck. He also aims to bag more big hits like "Austin" and "The Baby."

"My goodness!" exclaims Youngblood. "You're going to have to build a new house with 14-foot ceilings to display that one. Guess I'm down \$200."

"This is the greatest day of my life," gushes the dimpled, curly-haired Shelton, and there's no one among the TV crew or

the hunting-lodge staff who doesn't share his happiness. Shelton's the sort of playful joker who puts people at ease, making even new acquaintances feel like old friends. Without a trace of the prima donna, he's a man's man among the guys and a ladies' man around the women, yet everyone agrees that there's no b.s. in Blake Shelton.

"Hunting and fishing were always my first love, music second," he reveals inside the lodge. "I saw more bucks today than I have in my life, and I know I'll never shoot a bigger one than this."

By now, the 26-year-old Shelton should know never to say never. Just a year or so earlier, "Austin" gave him the biggest chart-topping breakthrough by a new male artist since Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart." The singer feared he'd never enjoy another hit like that again, but his recent hit "The Baby" looks to be another career milestone.

Instead of succumbing to the dreaded sophomore jinx, he and producer Bobby Braddock (best known as the co-writer of "He Stopped Loving Her Today" and "D-I-V-O-R-C-E") have raised the bar. Where "Austin" provided a calling card, Shelton's new *The Dreamer* is the sort of album that makes an up-and-comer a star.

"I was really proud of that first record, but this is a way better album," agrees Shelton. "My voice has gotten stronger just from singing every night on tour for a year and a half, and we've reached a completely different level with song quality.

BY DON MCLEESE



Instead of publishers reaching down into that drawer where there are songs that have been laying around for years, they're reaching into the top drawer for new material by their best writers."

While "The Baby" finds the singer justifying the faith publishers put in him, the most revelatory cut on *The Dreamer* is the Shelton-written title track. Addressed to his fiancée, Kaynette Williams, it describes how it feels to become an overnight success after eight years of scuffling – and shows how the dream that came true left Shelton rattled in its wake.

"She and I went through some really hard times when 'Austin' came out," admits Shelton. "To be honest with you, I went off the deep end in a lot of ways and pushed a lot of people out of my life. I had people depending on me for the first time to make their living, where I was the guy three months earlier who didn't even know how I was going to pay my rent. There's no other way to describe it than temporary insanity – and no way to know how it feels until you go through it. I'm glad I came to my senses."

If success was different than Shelton had anticipated, it was still better than the dead-end lives he saw so many friends living back home in Ada, a town of 15,000 in south-central Oklahoma. Around there, he says, teenagers tend to find



KEVIN FERGUSON

thinking about what had happened every morning for about three years, trying to figure out the meaning," says Shelton. "What I took from it is that you only get one chance at this, and you have to give it your best."

Further impetus for Shelton to leave Ada came during a homecoming celebration for Mae Boren Axton, writer of "Heartbreak Hotel" and mother of singer/songwriter Hoyt Axton. At 16 years old, Shelton had been singing around town and was part of the entertainment when Ada gave Axton the key

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trouble just to have something to do.

A profound influence on his early days was his big brother, Richie, to whom he addressed this dedication on his 2001 debut album: "He was my hero, and I still miss him every day."

Eight years older, Richie Shelton was everything his kid brother wanted to be – a good-looking guy who was popular with the girls and loved racing motorcycles and listening to music. He never backed away from a fight. If a singer was cool enough for Richie – from Waylon Jennings to Bob Seger – he was cool enough for Blake.

After returning to Ada from a stint in the Army, Richie died in a 1990 car crash. "After he died, I woke up

to the city. She told him she thought he had a future in Nashville.

"Man, that was all the encouragement I needed," remembers Shelton, who left Oklahoma for Tennessee as soon as he graduated from high school.

Ready to conquer the world at 17, he called Axton when he arrived in Nashville and asked what he should do now. She told him he could start by painting her house.

Being able to drop Axton's name around Music Row opened doors for Shelton as a songwriter. One of his first collaborators was Michael Kosser, who played one of their songs for his friend Bobby Braddock.

Though Braddock wasn't knocked out by the song, he heard something in the singer.

"I thought this guy could be a modern-day Hank Jr.," remembers Braddock. "And after seeing him live and getting to know him, no disrespect to Hank Jr., but I thought he was the next Garth Brooks. He had that charisma, that electricity that appeals to both male and female audiences."

Though part of Shelton's strength is that he's as country as they come, neither the artist nor his producer see him as any kind of neo-traditionalist throwback. On *The Dreamer*, he sings about Mama ("The Baby"), driving a truck ("Asphalt Cowboy") and drinking ("Georgia In A Jug"), but he also echoes Aerosmith on "Underneath The Same Moon" and Van Morrison on "Playboys Of The Southwestern World."

"To me, country music has been changing since it's been invented," says Shelton, who considers '80s hitmaker Earl Thomas Conley his favorite vocalist. "I can use the latest technology and make music that competes with everything else on the radio – from Top 40 to Adult Contemporary – and still sounds real country."

Braddock agrees. "Whatever Blake sings, he's gonna sound like a country boy," the producer/songwriter says. "And country boys his age grew up listening to AC/DC and the Black Crowes as well as Hank Jr. and Travis Tritt."

Though music has taken him far from Oklahoma, Shelton never sounds like a guy who has lost his way home. And if this country thing doesn't work out, he's got a standing offer back in Iowa at the Timberghost Ranch. During the peak of deer season, they can always use a guide who loves hunting as much as Shelton does.

But don't look for him to be switching jobs any time soon.

"I guess the odds were even more against me making a living in music than in hunting," he says with a laugh. "It sounds really stupid to tell yourself you're going to go to Nashville and become a famous country singer. But as Bobby Braddock told me a couple of years ago, if you want something bad enough, you can make it happen."★