

Close Call

Thanks to "Austin," Blake Shelton got his chance

Blake Shelton knows all about unusual twists of fate. If not for a couple of unexpected turns that proved particularly timely, he might not be looking promisingly toward the future as one of the biggest breakthrough country artists of 2001.

Twist No. 1: Shelton thought he had finished recording his debut album with producer Bobby Braddock when an executive from Giant Records called, telling him, "You've got to hear this song." The 6-foot-5-inch native of Ada, Okla., dutifully listened and recognized that the song was indeed special. But he wasn't sure it was right for him.

Still, Braddock encouraged him to work with the tune, so Shelton kept playing with the arrangement, tweaking it while playing it on his guitar. Suddenly, with just the right musical nudging, it felt *very* right, and Shelton went back into the studio to quickly record it. Giant rushed the song onto the CD at the last minute, and then sent it out as the album's first single. The rest is musical history, quite literally. With its five-week run at the top of the charts, Shelton's "Austin" tied with Billy Ray Cyrus' 1992 smash, "Achy Breaky Heart," as the longest-running No. 1 song for a new male singer.

Twist No. 2: A week after "Austin" began receiving radio play, Giant Records closed. Shelton's self-titled debut CD wasn't out yet. "I thought my career was over," the singer says in his heavy Okie drawl.

But fate decided differently. Because radio programmers were raving about the just-released "Austin," Warner Bros. Records picked up Shelton's contract and released his debut CD without changing a thing.

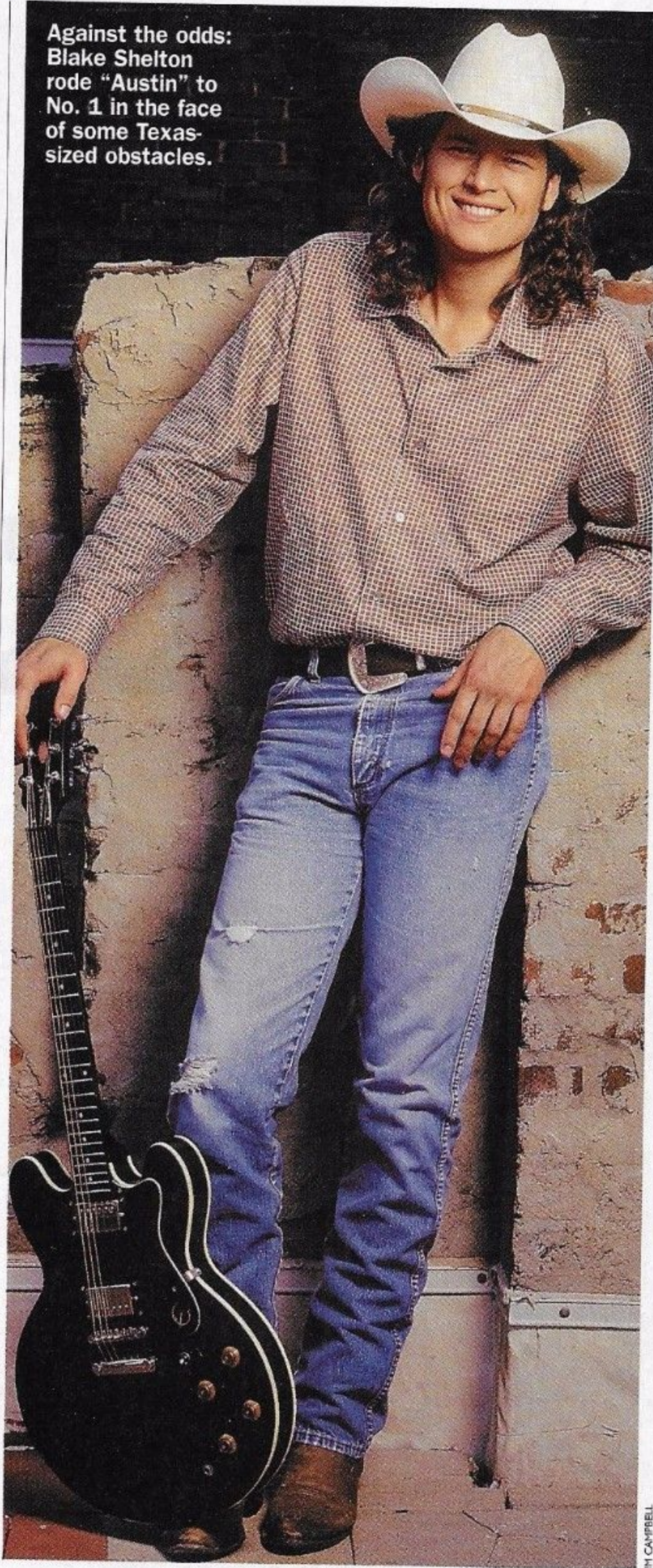
When the album finally came out July 31, "Austin" was a chart-topper and *Blake Shelton* sold nearly 35,000 copies to become the third-best-selling country album of the week – topping such established stars as Tim McGraw, Lonestar, Toby Keith and Faith Hill.

All this hoopla for a song that nearly didn't make an album that almost didn't get released. "It's all extra sweet for me," says Shelton, "because the odds were stacked against me."

The son of a used-car salesman and hairdresser, Shelton began his career in his early teens, playing community events and honky-tonks around Ada. Another Oklahoma native, respected songwriter Mae Boren Axton, saw one of his performances and encouraged him to move to Nashville.

Shelton took her advice, moving to Nashville at the tender age of 17. Axton – writer of the classic Elvis Presley hit "Heartbreak Hotel" and mother of the late actor/singer Hoyt Axton – took the singer under her well-respected wing. She even gave him his first job, painting her house.

Against the odds: Blake Shelton rode "Austin" to No. 1 in the face of some Texas-sized obstacles.



Fate also introduced Shelton to his all-time favorite singer, Earl Thomas Conley. The two co-wrote "All Over Me," Shelton's second single. "If my career were over tomorrow, just knowing I had met and written a song with Earl Thomas Conley – it's personally a huge accomplishment," Shelton beams. "I'm the luckiest man alive."

— Charlene Blevins