

Blake Shelton

Nashville Loves Austin

There may be musical differences between Nashville and Austin, but that didn't stop Music City taking its Texas rival to the top of the charts

Walt Trott meets a singer who refuses to take credit for its success.

Since Blake Shelton's single, *Austin*, put that capital city at the top of the music charts, he oughta be a shoo-in for next Governor of Texas - and we all know where that leads. "Absolutely," joshes Shelton, who's already disqualified, being an Oklahoma native. "Yeah, I've never lived anywhere besides Ada and Nashville. I was born at Valley View Hospital in Ada, and lived there until I was about 17½ when I moved to Nashville."

Moving to Music City was somewhat inhibiting for the teenager but old family friends Carol and Larry Large kept an eye on him and gave him moral support. (Larry is now Blake's PA while Carol and their daughter Deborah share co-presidency of his fan club.) Additionally, the late songwriter and former Oklahoman Mae Axton - she wrote the Presley classic, *Heartbreak Hotel* - helped by hiring Blake to paint her house, giving him some much needed income.

But he worked hard at building a career, playing endless songwriter nights at Nashville venues, such as Douglas Corner, before finally landing a songwriting pact.

Fast forward to August 11, 2001 when his single of *Austin* hit the top of the charts and would stay there for five long weeks. The artist's debut album, *Blake Shelton*, has since peaked at #3 on the chart.

November, meanwhile, was a good month for the big guy. First, he got a spot on the network CMA Awards telecast, then received a surprise nomination from the American Music Awards as Best New Country Artist.

"That was a high, being on CMA's awards program! exclaims Shelton. "You know, I was scared to death being on that show. I remember as I was sitting out there in the audience for the first half, watching, thinking the show was going really good. And I just knew I was going to be the one guy to get up there and forget what I was supposed to say, and hear or hit a really bad note or something. But I was able to struggle my way through my 15-second spot, and when it was over, man, it was like a ton of bricks was off my shoulders."

The American Music Awards nomination pit him against Trick Pony and sometime touring partner Jamie O'Neal.

"That pretty much blew me away! That's not an awards show I ever thought that much about. And that's because it's such a big one ... I always thought of the CMA or ACM (Academy of Country Music) awards, as they're concentrating only on country. The AMA is for all music. It was a total shock to me and may be the biggest thing that's happened for me to this point." (In fact, Trick Pony won the trophy.)

Did he anticipate the strength of *Austin* chart-wise?

"No. But I don't think you can ever predict what any particular song's gonna do. My hope was that it would be a Top 20 success, and I could kinda build on my career from there, you know. I never imagined it being a number one single! My biggest expectation would have been, maybe Top 10.

"But that thing took on a life of its own - and to this day I believe that anybody could have hit with that song. It was a song that connected with people on a real emotional level - and I was just the lucky guy that got his greasy hands on it!"

Just how did he get that opportunity?

"Kirsti Manna and David Kent wrote that song, and David's publisher, a lady by the name of Jana Talbot, brought it over to Giant Records and played it for David Levinson, and they put it on hold for me."

Austin evolved from the personal experience of one of the writers' friends, himself a composer. After busting up with a girlfriend, who moved back to Texas, he put on her answering machine, "If this is Austin, I still love you." Kirsti sensed a great hook for a song and David cleared it with their friend, who declined a collaborative invitation to co-write it.

Following our interview, the 6'5" Okie was off to the airport, enroute to America's Windy City. "I'm gettin' ready to hop on a flight to Chicago. I'm goin' way up there because they're givin' away a truck with my picture on it."

Seems, on the strength of *Austin*'s long stay at the top of the charts, the Ford Motor Company singled Shelton out to star in a commercial hyping their new Harley-Davidson F-150 Super Crew.

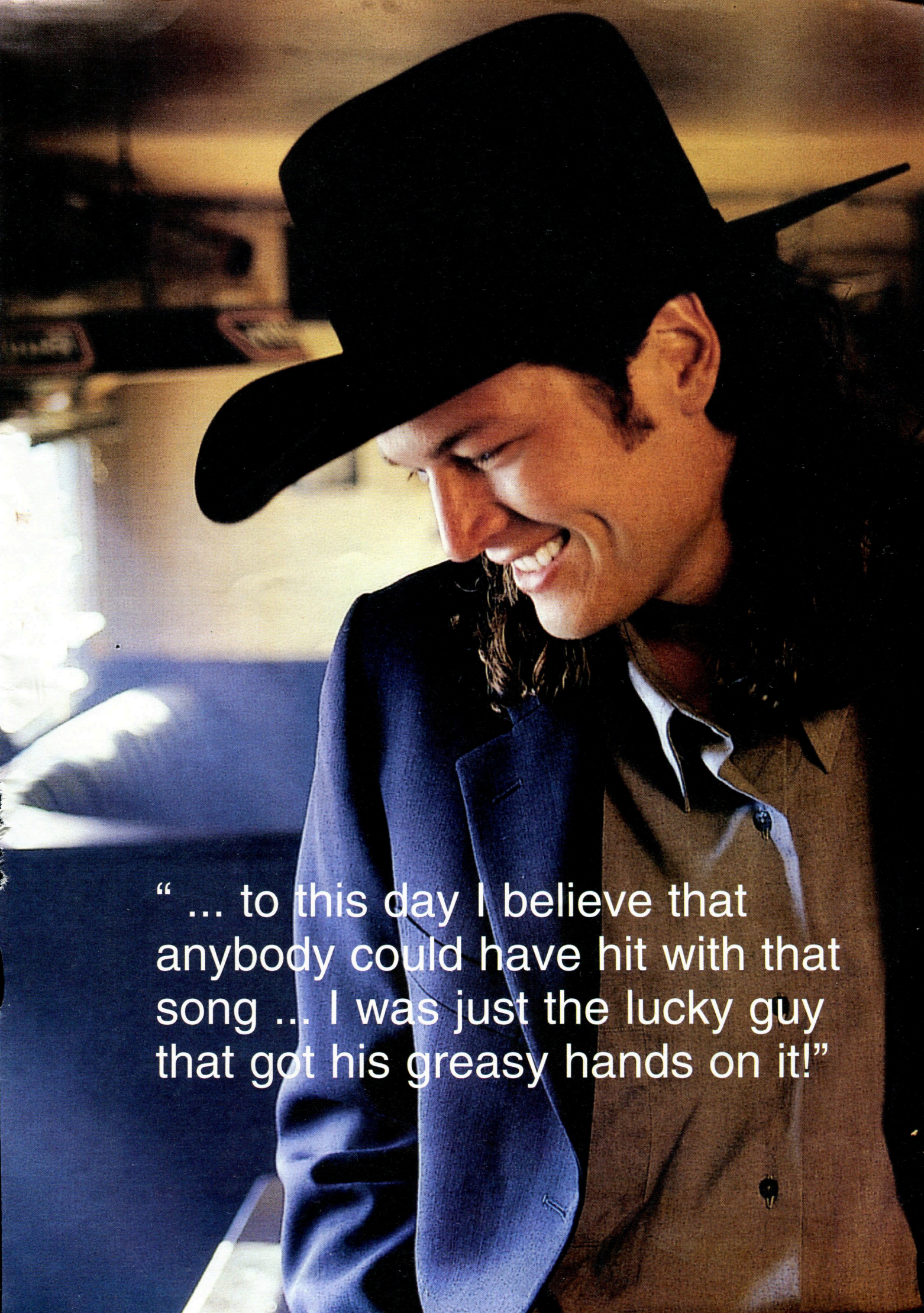
Shelton had a hand in writing four songs for his album, including *Problems At Home*, his strongest entry, in which he calls on God to intervene for troubled loved ones. How had the Sept. 11 tragedies affected him?

"It gets me down like it does everybody. It's scary, too. But I'm not any different than anybody else. I hate it and I wish to God that it hadn't happened. And I'm glued to the TV every night, looking at the news to see what's going on.

"Other than that, I'm just doing what our President asked us to do, and that's get on with business. That's the first thing we did. We had a couple shows that got cancelled right after it happened but, as soon as we were able, we were back on the road again."

Has it inspired him in his writing?

"Not really. I don't know what I would say that could make a difference. Obviously, Alan Jackson knew exactly what to



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say to make a difference. I'm sure that when he sat down to write that song - *Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)* - he was writing it for himself.

"I don't know that I could come up with something that ingenious," confides Shelton. "That guy is unbelievable. He's got to go down in history as one of the all-time greats. To me, he's a lot like Hank Williams Sr. He can sit down and write a classic song about anything. I don't know what I have to contribute about something like that - and if it's not going to be that significant, I don't even want to try."

When did Blake write his first song?

"I started writing, I guess, when I was about 15 years old (a song entitled *Once In A Long, Long While*). That's about the same time I started learning to play guitar, too. They just kind of went hand-in-hand for me. If I was strumming a chord, I was trying to make up a lyric to go along with it, right off the bat.

"It's something that I've been doing awhile, but I don't think I ever really got the hang of songwriting until maybe four or five years ago. I've probably written seven or eight songs in ten years that I feel are hit calibre. Songwriting is something that doesn't come as naturally to me as to somebody else, like Bobby Braddock.

"But if something hits me real strong - and that doesn't happen often - I'm one of those guys who may get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and write till daylight. But that's rare."

How did he connect with industry veteran Braddock, who produced Blake's debut album?

"Bobby is the one person that I probably owe more to, personally and professionally, than anybody else in the world. He's been an angel to me, for lack of a better term. I know that sounds kinda sissy," interrupting his original answer, with a chuckle, before continuing. "And I know he'll make fun if he reads that - but he really has been. I don't know why, but he took me under his wing about four years ago."

Braddock, a Florida native, first hit Nashville during the 1960s when he started playing piano for Marty Robbins. His forté, however, was songwriting. Following a brief try as an artist at MGM, with his first 1967 charting, *I Know How To Do It*, he concentrated more on his penmanship, and became one of the greatest of Nashville songwriters: witness *He Stopped Loving Her Today*, *D-I-V-O-R-C-E*, *Her Name Is ...*, *Golden Ring* and, more recently, *Time Marches On*.

Nearly five years ago, a co-writing buddy of Blake's urged Braddock to listen to Shelton's demo - and Bobby liked what he heard.

"He decided he wanted to cut an album on me," notes Shelton. "And he did it by himself. Then he took it around Nashville by himself. You know, his name goes a long way in this town and he was laying it on the line for me. Bobby was able to get me a record deal and really, basically, got everything done for me.

"I don't think he realises it, but Bobby's a powerful person here. Part of the reason is that everybody just likes him so much, and he's well-respected ... there's that ingenious songwriting talent."

(Braddock currently has another charttopper on his hands: *I Wanna Talk About Me*, recorded by Toby Keith.)

Did it disappoint Blake that he didn't get a single on that song - which was originally intended for him.

"I don't know. I mean, I don't know that I could've had the hit that Toby Keith has had on it. Obviously, for Bobby's sake, I want him, as a writer, to make \$10 million a year. He's gonna do well with that one. I don't know that a new act could have gotten away with saying that same sort of thing.

Toby, I think, really is the perfect artist for that song. It's his attitude and who he is as an artist - and people accept him for that, and love him for that."

Braddock says he was inspired to pen that song when a friend, sorting through some personal problems, began dominating their conversations with things affecting her life. A second inspiration was Blake Shelton, who had been horsing around, doing a country rap: "Blake was just being funny. But I wanted to write a rap number for him."

Indeed, Bobby cut it with Shelton, but the label mixed it as a single for a newcomer, who hadn't yet earned his stripes.

Shelton, like Toby Keith, Reba McEntire, Vince Gill and Garth Brooks, hails from Oklahoma. Is it something they put in the water back there to produce such terrific talents?

"Ha! I've been asked that a lot and it made me think about it some. There's a couple of things I've come up with, and I don't know that it matters or not, but I know when I go to Oklahoma and I'm driving around or outside of Ada, I'm picking up all these stations you can barely tune in. It seems like every small town - and I'm talking about towns smaller than 10,000 people - has a country radio station that barely reaches outside the county line. They're just everywhere. Anytime you can barely pick up a station, it'll be country.

"Obviously, every place has a lot of people who are musicians, but that makes for a lot of country artists, I guess, in Oklahoma. Also, back home the club scene is still doing fairly well and there's a lot of live bands playing around. I think it makes for a lot of people that want to get into it.

"Another thing is, man, there's not much else to do back there. There aren't any pro teams or anything to get you involved. Music is one of the few things you can get into where I'm from; so that may be a part of it, too."

After several years' struggling to get his career off the ground, it must have been devastating to Shelton when his label, Giant Records, closed. To make matters worse, his debut single was just beginning to chart (#58) and was well-received regionally in the Lone Star State.

"I credit *Austin* with saving me. It took on a life of its own," Shelton replies. "It all came down to, like they say, the song. From what I'm told now, a couple of guys from promotion made some calls around the country to see what

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the radio stations thought about my record - and Warners got a good report. So they decided to pick up the project and see what they could do with it."

Not for a minute does Shelton think he was salvaged because of his artistic potential: "I don't think it had anything to do with me being a great artist because they didn't know anything about me at Warner Bros. Not that they didn't think I was capable, but they didn't really know me. All they knew is one day they got a call that said Giant is closed - you can have their roster if you want it.

"I think what it amounted to is there were a handful of stars like Clay Walker and Neal McCoy, whom they obviously knew. But they didn't know who the new guy - Blake Shelton - was. All they knew was he had a song just debuting on the charts. I think that shows the power of *Austin*."

Does he feel more secure now, with a number one hit?

"Oh, sure. Any time you get something like that happening, it makes you not worry so much about what's going down

between you and your record label. I suppose the first time I get a single that dies, I'll begin wondering, 'What's gonna happen with me?' Right now I'm out on the road, trying to get as much done as I can. I let the record company do their job, while I do mine. Me and my band are going out to California to do about 21 shows (in December last) headlining different venues like clubs and small theatres."

What's his band's name?

"I never named my band. I jokingly call them The Guys I'm Using Until I Can Afford A Decent Band ... just to keep 'em on their toes. I just joke around with them a lot like that."

(Members include Rob Byrus, bass; Donny Carpenter, fiddle; Frank DeBretti Jr, guitar; David Dpak, drums; and Scott Joyce, keyboards.)

Blake's second single is *All Over Me* which he co-wrote with Mike Pyle and Earl Thomas Conley: "It's doing well, man. Seven weeks out now and it's at #23. That's a good position, just a little bit ahead of where we were with *Austin* at this same time." (At publication, that was the peak position achieved by the cut.)

The song was co-written by one of Blake's two major influences, singer-songwriter Earl Thomas Conley (the other is his Uncle Darrell, the only other member of his family to pick and sing). "Earl Thomas Conley is easily my all-time favourite vocalist in any form of music. He's my hero. I got a chance to meet him about two-and-a-half years ago. A guy named Mike Pyle, a good friend of mine, plays acoustic for Earl. He introduced me and the three of us sat down and co-wrote two songs together - and one of 'em was *All Over Me*. I've said it before, but if my career's over tomorrow - and you never know what's going to happen in this industry - just knowing that I've written a song with my hero is a huge personal accomplishment, and I'll always be proud of that."

There's no video to promote *All Over Me*; however, *Austin* didn't rely on a video to soar into the elusive pantheon of hits.

"You know, videos are just a totally different world for me. "I'll tell you, *Austin* went out there and did its own thing. Its video finally came out the week the record went number one, which has got to be the latest a single's video came out, of all time. It's fun to do 'em, but I hate to see myself on television. I think I look like an idiot."

Shelton was thrilled to make his Grand Ole Opry bow, May 5, 2001. "That was a real big deal for me, obviously, as it would be for any country artist. It's the watermark (high) for places to perform in your career. I don't know how anything could be bigger or feel more like an accomplishment than to play the Opry. It's something you'll always remember and always have to your credit, once you've done it."

Keeping up such a busy schedule, does the lanky performer have time for relaxation?

"I don't have a lot of time for anything. For me, fun is going out fishing and hunting. I pretty much don't have any time for anything anymore other than my career - and that's OK. They say you got to make hay while the sun shines, and maybe one of these days, whenever I'm able to slow down, I'll be happy that I worked so much.

"I've got a girlfriend named Kaynette. She's from right outside Ada. I went to Ada High and she went to a school called Stonewall. I don't see her as much anymore. That's hard.

"But it's all part of having success. You see, there's two sides to every story. If you want to be a successful country artist, you might as well forget having a personal life for a while." **CMP**