

*Success
taught
Blake
Shelton
some
valuable
lessons*

Growing

Up

Fast

Blake Shelton's first hit, "Austin," was a stunning chart-topper, his self-titled debut album was a Top 5 smash – and the writing of his new hit, "All Over Me," led to one of his childhood fantasies being realized. That's because Blake's writing partners on the song were friend Mike Pyle and none other than Blake's idol, '80s superstar Earl Thomas Conley.

Story by Wendy Newcomer

Photos by Tim Campbell

BLAKE SHELTON

"I think I made Earl a little uncomfortable when I met him, because I was such a fan," chuckles Blake. "I probably asked him a million silly questions. But he's been my hero for so long that I couldn't help myself."

Blake helped himself to some caffeine courage before going to Earl's house for the first time. "I got up extra early that morning so I would be awake and alert," he recalls, "and I was so nervous I must have drank two pots of coffee. So when I got to his house, the first thing I did after meeting him was ask him if I could use his bathroom. When I got in there the only thing I could think of was, 'I'm using Earl Thomas Conley's toilet!'"

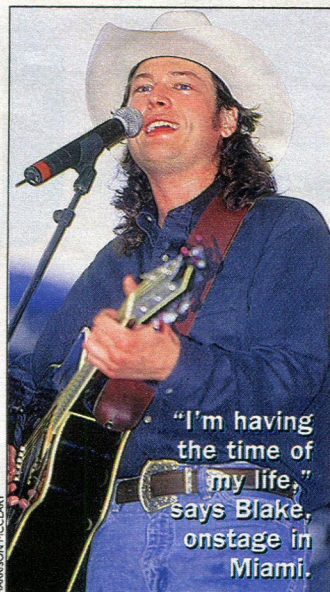
He still thinks Earl hung the moon, but now Blake is a little more levelheaded about his hero. "He's such a great guy," praises Blake. "You might never know the man had 18 No. 1 hits, because when you're with him, he'll never tell you. He'll talk about golf or something else besides his music."

For Blake, it's been nothing but music

since the release of "Austin" – and that's led to some sudden shifts in his life. "Some artists begin their career and have a while to get used to the way their lives change," he says. "When 'Austin' came out, it was such a success so fast that I didn't have that option. I had no idea how much my life was going to change."

One welcome difference was his income level – but with that comes new commitments. "Before 'Austin,' I could barely pay my own rent," Blake explains. "Now I have eight or nine people working for me who depend on me for their living. That's a big responsibility. It makes you grow up pretty fast."

Some of those people have been accompanying Blake as he burns up the nation's highways – he's performed 90 shows in his first six months on the road. During that time he's experienced some of the same kind of admiration he showered upon Earl Thomas Conley. "I haven't really been around long enough to be some-



"I'm having the time of my life," says Blake, onstage in Miami.

one's hero," says Blake, "but I can tell a difference in how some people behave around me. I've noticed it in a few guys from my opening acts when I play clubs. It's a nice feeling, because I was that guy for so many years."

Still, Blake admits that all that sudden adulation might have even gone to his head – a little. "I pretty much 'ego-d out' during the summer," he confesses. "Not that I had a big head about myself, but

I just got to the point where I thought, 'People like me and accept me, so it doesn't really matter what I say or how I dress.'

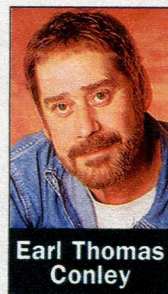
"And now I realize that it does matter. I've listened to a few radio interviews I did over the summer and thought, 'I wish I hadn't joked all the way through it.' Or I'll see pictures of myself from that time and think, 'I wish I'd dressed a little nicer.'"

With those lessons learned, Blake is excited about the year ahead. He's nominated for Favorite New Country Artist at the American Music Awards this month – and when that's over, he'll be cooking up some new music.

"We're going into the studio in February to cut some songs," he says. "I have three right now that I think would be good for the next album. But I'm in no hurry – it took us three years to make the first one!"

He reflects on his first taste of success with gratitude – and one regret. "I wish I could have taken the time to step back and enjoy it," he says. "I'm not complaining – I'm having the time of my life. I just never realized how much work it was going to be. I always thought, 'You get a record deal, you get your song on the radio and you become rich and famous' – but it's not that glamorous."

"It's a lot of work. But I'm the luckiest guy in the world to get to do it."



Earl Thomas Conley

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