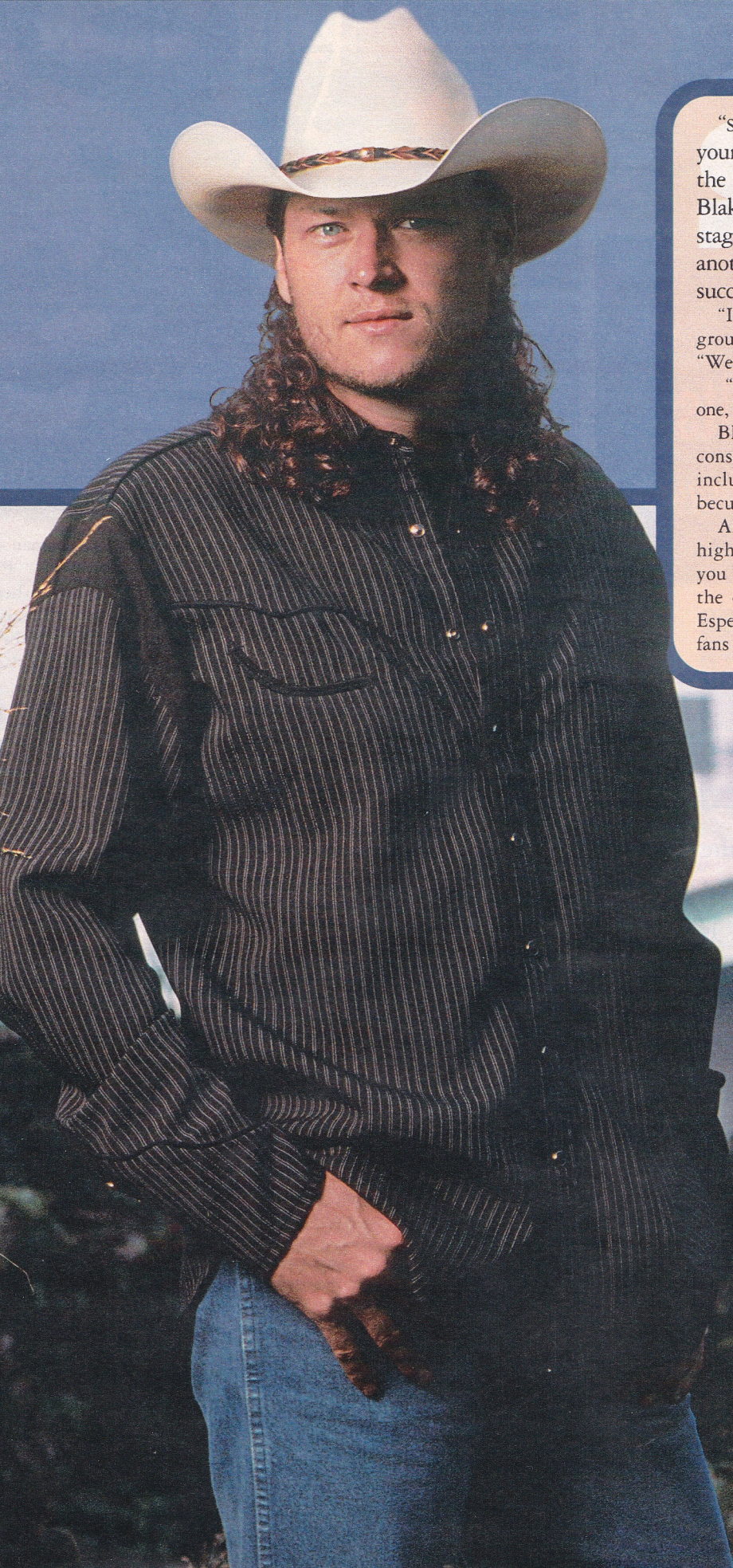


**Make 'em
Laugh,
Make 'em
Cry**

Story by
David Scarlett

Just coming off a tour with superstar Toby Keith and now headlining his own shows, **BLAKE SHELTON** is on a musical mission propelled by his love of great country songs.





"SIR, I NEED TO SEE YOUR BADGE," DECLARES THE young security staffer manning a backstage door at the Pyramid Arena in Memphis. He's talking to Blake Shelton, who's making his way to the backstage pre-show buffet with a couple of buddies before another performance as part of Toby Keith's wildly-successful *Shock'N Y'all* Tour.

"I don't have one," replies Blake, the only one in his group not wearing some sort of all-access credential. "Well, you really need one," replies the staffer.

"Well," Blake says with a good-natured smile, "if I had one, the picture on it would look ... just like me."

Blake and his companions get a chuckle out of it as the conscientious guard finally relents and lets the group – including Blake – go get a plate of famous Memphis barbecue and corn bread.

Ah, showbiz. Every time you start to think you're flyin' high, there's sure to be something – or someone – to bring you back down to reality. But Blake's not concerned about the one guy in the arena who doesn't know who he is. Especially not when a couple of hours later, thousands of fans who *do* know are on their feet singing every word

**Photos by
Tim Campbell**



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BLAKE SHELTON

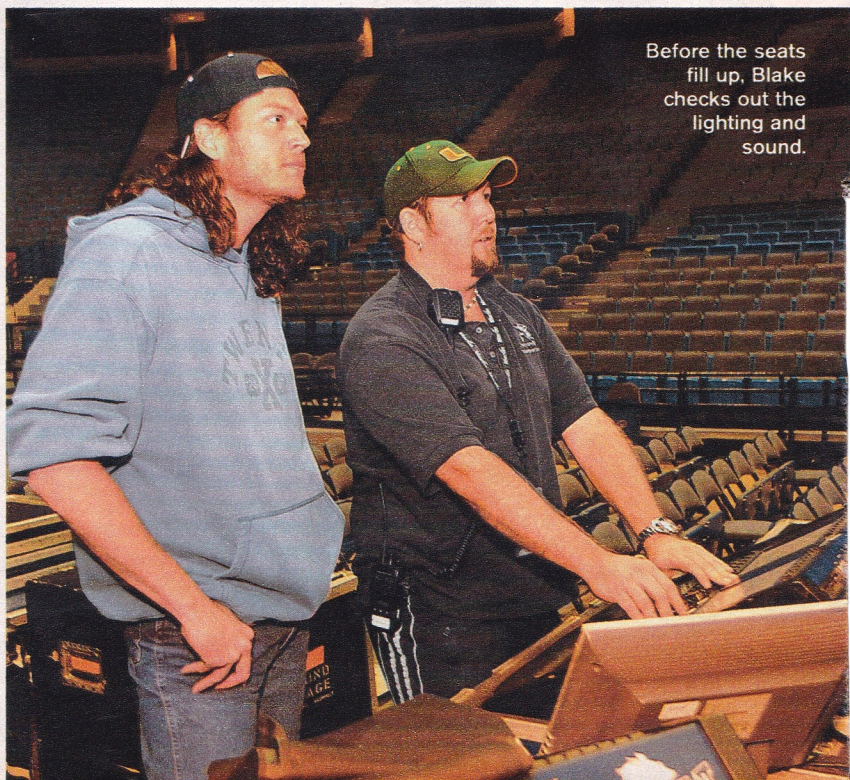
with him during a powerful performance of his hits "Austin," "Ol' Red," "The Baby," "Playboys of the Southwestern World" and other tunes from his first two albums. It's a dreary, rainy night in Memphis, but Blake's got the place rockin' – and he loves it.

"What I love most about being on the road is obvious," says Blake with a grin after the show. "It's the short amount of time I get out there onstage, whether it's one of these shows with Toby or my own. It's never long enough. That's my favorite part about bein' out here.

"Outside of that, man, I can't honestly tell you that I like bein' on the road. I like being at home. I've got a place near Nashville and when I have vacation time, I don't go on vacation, I go home. I'm not happy unless I'm there. But in the past nine months, I've probably spent a total of about forty days at home."

Blake's new bride, Kaynette, travels with him and takes care of fan meet-and-greets and other aspects of his business on the road, so he's at least able to be with her – a luxury most artists don't have when they tour.

So what does Blake do to pass the time when he's on the road? "We spend



Before the seats fill up, Blake checks out the lighting and sound.



A few hours before the Memphis show, Blake heads to the bus to go over business with manager John Dorris and drummer Tracy Broussard (left). Later, Blake's in his stage clothes (above), and ready to sign a few autographs backstage.

so much time on that bus cooped up with each other. You've just gotta do somethin' to break out a little bit," he explains.

And on tour with Toby, that means one thing – basketball!

"My band and crew didn't even play basketball until we came out here and started doin' this tour," he says. "Today is the first day we haven't played in a long time. Toby's got a goal they carry in one of the semis. He's got a four-person team and I've put together a four-person team out of my group. You know, we just really suck horribly. I can think of maybe two games that we've won in the months of doin' this tour!"

Considering the way their first game started, perhaps Blake ought to be less concerned with the scores and more grateful that Toby's willing to play him at all.

"The first time we played I thought I'd have some fun with Toby, so I got off the bus wearin' a pair of Kaynette's tight pink shorts. He saw me and

"I can't honestly tell you that I like bein' on the road. I like being at home. I've got a place near Nashville and when I have vacation time, I don't go on vacation, I go home."

wouldn't even get off his bus to play until I changed clothes!" laughs Blake.

But ever since the attire issue was resolved, the games have been intense. "Toby's pretty rough," grins Blake. "But he doesn't mean to be ... he's just so big. He'll knock you down because he doesn't realize his strength sometimes. I'm always the guy who gets stuck guardin' him. But he's naturally so much stronger than I will ever be. He's one of those big guys who just knocks me down time after time. That's fine ... I love gettin' out there and playing."

But basketball only helps pass the time once the bus has stopped. Blake and his buddies have also found ways – some of them pretty unusual – to keep things interesting while they're rollin' down the highway.

"A couple of years ago we were in Florida," he recalls. "We had a friend there who was a big surfer. He gave the bass player, Rob, a skateboard that was really long and pointed on both ends. We were in the front lounge of the bus at four in the morning. There were only three of us still awake, so we were going down the road pushing Rob back and forth down the hall-

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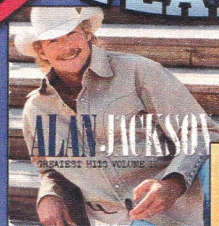
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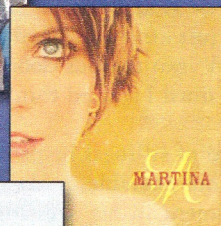
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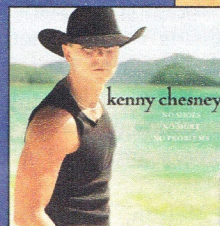
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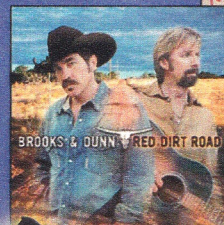
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For The Girls



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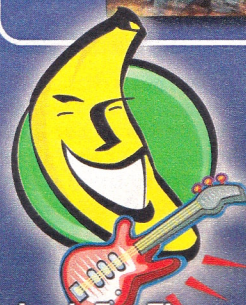


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As wife Kaynette looks on, Blake and band members wait for tourmate Scotty Emerick to adjust his guitar in Blake's dressing room before picking a few pre-show tunes. Earlier, Blake tried his hand at playing some electric bass (above).

BLAKE SHELTON

way on the skateboard, seeing if we could make him fall off of it!

"And when he eventually did, the skateboard just kind of slipped out from under him and flew down the hallway and stuck into the bus door. We lease the bus, so I had to buy a door. It was funny until I started thinking, 'Man, I've gotta pay for this crap!'"

But no matter what kind of silliness helps make the months away from home and the miles in the bus bearable, it always comes back to the music. As Blake finds a quiet moment in his dressing room, he softly picks and sings his new single, "When Somebody Knows You That Well." It's an emotion-packed song about relationships that are so close that feelings are difficult to hide. The tune was co-written by one of Blake's favorite writers, Harley Allen, who also co-wrote Blake's smash "The Baby" (with Michael White).

"Harley wrote this new one with Jimmy Melton," Blake explains. "I love that thing. The first time I heard it I knew I wanted to cut it." While Blake isn't always able to describe exactly what he looks for in a song, he knows it when he hears it and is getting a handle on *who* he is as an artist.

"I can see a direction we're going, which is something I haven't had yet," he admits. "I've always just cut songs I was excited about. The songs I love are songs about hard work and heartache, and drinkin' and bein' drunk, and broken hearts. And just reality, you know? No matter what I try to do, I'm always just gonna be a country guy."

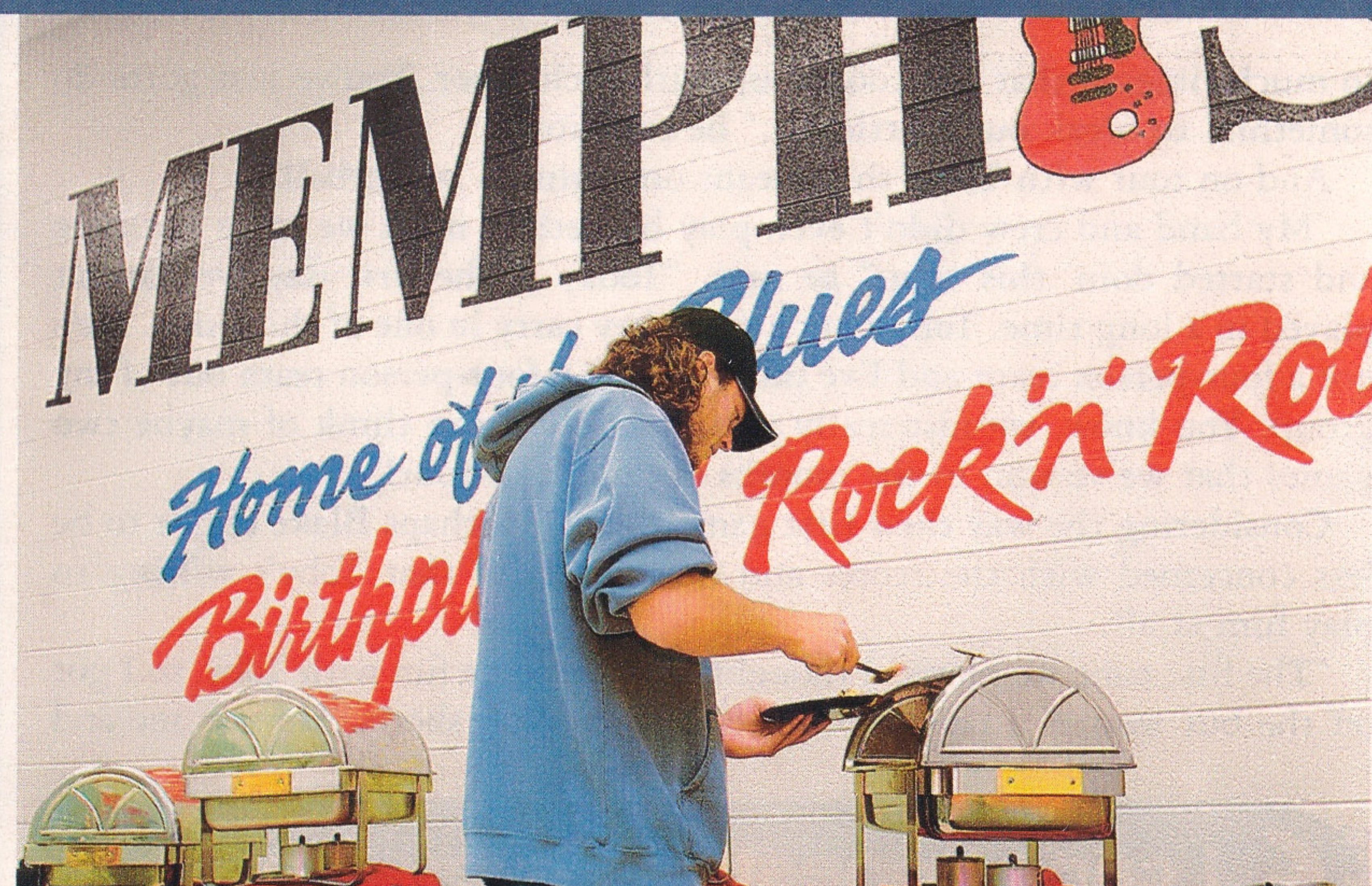
"So I've decided I'm just gonna treat my music that way, too. I'm not gonna try to be somethin' I'm not. It seems like everything I have success with is a cool story or somebody overcoming heartache – or not overcoming it. It's just the attitude that life's not perfect. That's where I'm gonna go with my music."

And in the coming months, Blake's fans will have a chance to hear more of it in his live shows as he leaves Toby's tour to headline his own dates. Instead of the 40-minute sets he's been doing on Toby's stage, Blake will be able to stretch it out and play a lot more tunes, including some from the new album set for release later this year.

But spending time with Toby has definitely been a great experience – other than those occasional basketball bruises!

• If you get a chance to travel with your favorite star on his or her bus – and it's your first time – be sure to bring warm clothing. A lot of tour buses are kept really cool, either because the headlining star prefers it that way or because many performers think a cooler bus is better for their health.

{fast fact}



Memphis may be the home of the blues, but Blake's just concerned with finding a good home for some barbecued chicken – on his plate!

"Toby's at the top of his game," declares Blake. "There's probably one level above Toby at this point, and that would be Elvis or the Beatles. It's amazing to go out and see the kind of effect he has on people, and what he stands for."

"He's a real polarizing artist," notes Blake. "Toby's one of those guys that you either love him or hate him. There's rarely somebody who says, 'Well, he's OK.' They're usually real passionate about Toby, one way or the other. And that's what makes for a superstar. Plus, he's never tried to cover up how he feels about his politics, how he feels about issues. If he's passionate about something, you'll hear about it in his music."

"But I'm still learning where I stand on certain issues and who I am as a person. I'm 27, and all I really know for sure is I like the simple things in life. Those will always be things I'll stand up for. More importantly, I love country music. I hope that someday I will be known for a catalog of great country music. I want to be remembered for great songs like Conway was and Don Williams, people like that."

"I don't think I'll ever be Entertainer of the Year. I'll never be that artist, like Toby is. I don't know if I have it in me. But the one thing I do know I have in me is passion for great songs. That's the one thing I know that I can do."

"I can bring the people a song that'll make 'em laugh or make 'em cry. And I'm happy with that." ★