

CW EXCLUSIVE





# FIRE STARTER

STORY BY CHRIS NEAL

Blake Shelton reflects on his hot new album, his smokin' romance with Miranda Lambert and seven years of sizzling stardom.

The date is May 16, 2001. A tall, mullet-haired 24-year-old newcomer named Blake Shelton is seated at a table in the conference room at the Music Row offices of his record label. His debut single, "Austin," is making its way up the singles chart. A *Country Weekly* reporter asks him about his career goals.

"It sounds goofy, but I just want a song to break through to the Top 10," he confides. "It's real important for me to have a Top 10 at some point in my career."

Seven years and six Top 10 hits later, Blake laughs heartily when the same reporter reminds him about that long-ago ambition. "That's still my goal!" he declares. "I'm like, 'Man, please, one Top 10 from this album!'"

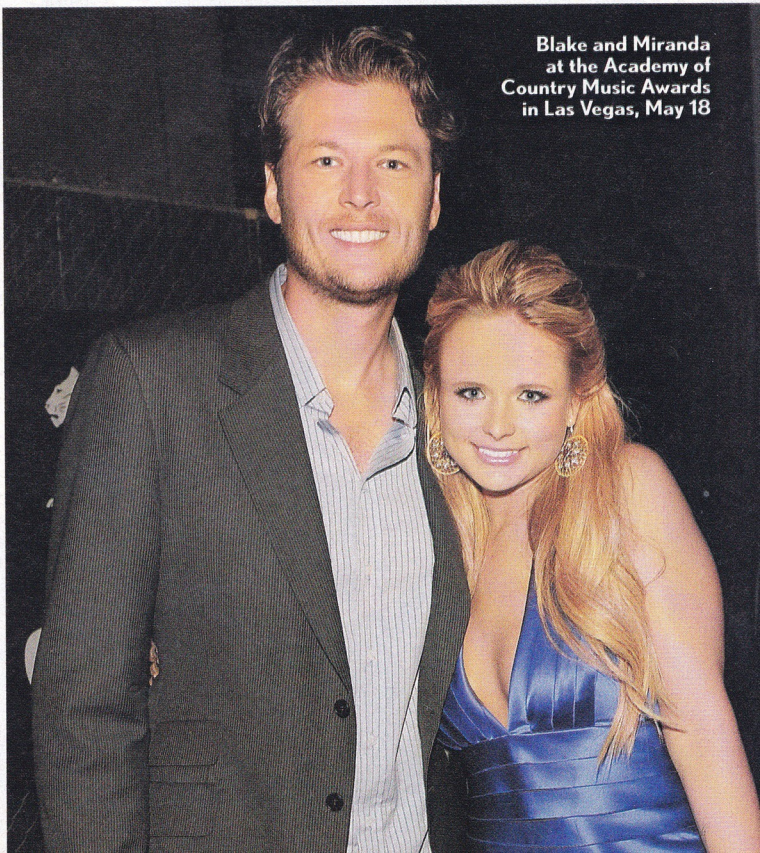
Blake's short-term goals may not have changed, but today he has a very different perspective on his life and career. Since that day in 2001 he has released five albums (three of them gold), played hundreds of shows for audiences across the continent, gotten married, gotten divorced, moved back to Oklahoma and even cut off his mullet. Today, relaxing in the listening room at his management firm's Nashville office, Blake notes that he has learned to take nothing for granted.

"I know, after seven years of doing this, the value of a hit song, a gold album, a tour that sells well, being

part of an awards show and things like that," he says. "Those are big deals. I know now to appreciate those things when they happen."

There has been much to appreciate lately. Over the summer, the chart-topping "Home" became Blake's

biggest hit in years. He spent October playing to packed houses on his first-ever co-headlining tour with girlfriend Miranda Lambert. And on Nov. 18 he released his fifth album, *Startin' Fires*, which features the fast-rising new hit "She Wouldn't Be Gone."



Blake and Miranda at the Academy of Country Music Awards in Las Vegas, May 18



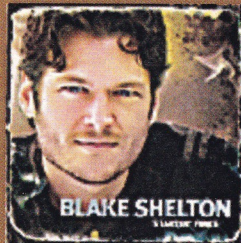
## BLAKE SHELTON CONTINUED

"There was a time or two there that I wasn't so sure I'd be making my fifth album right now," he admits. "This business is so fickle, and I definitely had low points where I was totally off the radar. But I think those ups and downs taught me a lot. You see a lot of people come out and they're huge, and then they just screw it all up."

Blake is well aware that this fate could have befallen him in 2001, when "Austin" stayed at No. 1 for five weeks and catapulted him to instant fame. "I was in dreamland back then," he recalls with a chuckle. "Now I know that's it's almost impossible to have a No. 1 single unless you're one of the seven or eight artists that have that position held down all year long. When 'Home' went No. 1, it was a way bigger deal to me than when 'Austin' went No. 1."

Blake took the success of "Home," which had previously been a pop hit for singer Michael Bublé, as an opportunity to push his musical boundaries further when he began recording *Startin' Fires* in June. "I was able to go in and record some outside-of-the-box things that I wanted to do artistically, just to satisfy myself," he says. "I figured that if I want to try new sounds and continue to grow as an artist, right now is the perfect time for me to do that."

One new angle on *Startin' Fires* comes with "Bare Skin Rug," a tongue-in-cheek acoustic duet with Miranda and one of several songs the two have written together recently. Collaborating with a romantic partner can be hazardous, but Blake says the couple's songwriting sessions have been smooth sailing so far. "Miranda and I are so honest with each other, and have been for so long, that we don't hurt each other's feelings



## BEHIND THE SONGS

When finding material for a new album, Blake says, "I'll listen to hundreds of songs, and the ones I end up recording are just the ones that I can't get over." Here, he discusses a few of the songs on his new album, *Startin' Fires*, and why he couldn't get over them.

### "SHE WOULDN'T BE GONE"

"'She Wouldn't Be Gone' is about a guy that's desperate. My favorite songs in the world are songs about regret, and this is definitely a guy full of regret. Even though she's out of there, there's just a little part of him that thinks he's going to find her and get her back. The clock's ticking, and he thinks that if he can just find her he can fix it."

### "GREEN"

"When I first heard that, musically and groove-wise it had me from the start. As the lyrics were hitting me, I started laughing. I called [producer] Scott Hendricks and said, 'Do not let this song get away from us.' I texted him four times after that saying, 'I'll kill you if this song gets away.' It's rare that I know immediately that I want to cut a song."

### "I'LL JUST HOLD ON"

"The guy in this song knows he's completely whipped by this girl. She calls him when she's lonely, but the guy's singing it like, 'OK, I'll look stupid if that means I'll get you for a little while. I'll take what I can get.' There's a little bit of humility in there, and it's still romantic at the same time."







## BLAKE'S DOZEN

Before making his new album, *Startin' Fires*, Blake and his label had discussed the possibility of instead releasing a greatest-hits collection. "That really sunk in on me," he recalls. "It made me feel like I had accomplished something, and at the same time it kinda made me feel like an old codger. I don't know if I'm ready for that. I still want to be one of the new guys. It's more fun that way!"

Whenever Blake does get around to releasing a greatest-hits album, he'll have plenty of songs to choose from. Here are his 12 most successful chart hits to date:

**"Austin"** (No. 1 for five weeks, 2001)

**"Some Beach"** (No. 1 for four weeks, 2004)

**"The Baby"** (No. 1 for three weeks, 2003)

**"Home"** (No. 1 for two weeks, 2008)

**"Nobody but Me"** (No. 4, 2006)

**"Goodbye Time"** (No. 10, 2005)

**"Don't Make Me"** (No. 12, 2007)

**"Ol' Red"** (No. 14, 2002)

**"She Wouldn't Be Gone"** (No. 18\*, 2008)

**"All Over Me"** (No. 18, 2002)

**"Playboys of the Southwestern World"**  
(No. 24, 2003)

**"Heavy Liftin'"** (No. 32, 2003)

\*Chart position at press time

any more," he explains.

Blake readily acknowledges that fan fascination with the relationship is one reason that his tour with Miranda did so well. "I'm totally comfortable with that," he says. "Whatever ends up happening with Miranda and I, there's nothing wrong with getting in front of as many people as we can every night to showcase our music. So it doesn't bother me at all."

While some stars work overtime to keep their personal lives private, Blake is OK with letting his fans in on what's happening in his romantic life. "I don't want to be one of those artists I hear about that has all these secrets that people are constantly trying to cover up," he says. "I can't imagine living that way. It's stupid. I'm not a politician, I'm not trying

to get anybody's vote. I'm trying to make records."

On record, Blake is sharing more of himself with listeners than ever. In preparing *Startin' Fires*, he made a

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determined effort to record songs that reflected his everyday life at home on his ranch in Oklahoma. "My life's been an open book, for people who care, but I've really never talked about

what I do in my music," he says. "So I decided to explore that a little bit more with songs like 'Green,' 'Country Strong' and 'Home Sweet Home.'"

Those three songs extol the virtues of the rural life Blake leads when he's at home. "That's my lifestyle, it really is," he says. "I don't go to the beach, I don't go to Vegas. I'm always driving the back roads around my house and burning brush and drinking beer and planting corn. That's what I get off on. That's who I am. It's that simple."

Blake is confident that *Startin' Fires* is not just his most personal work, but his best to date. "I think this album is pivotal for me," he notes. "From top to bottom, it's the best I can do. All I want to do is give this album the best opportunity to be heard that it can get." **CW**