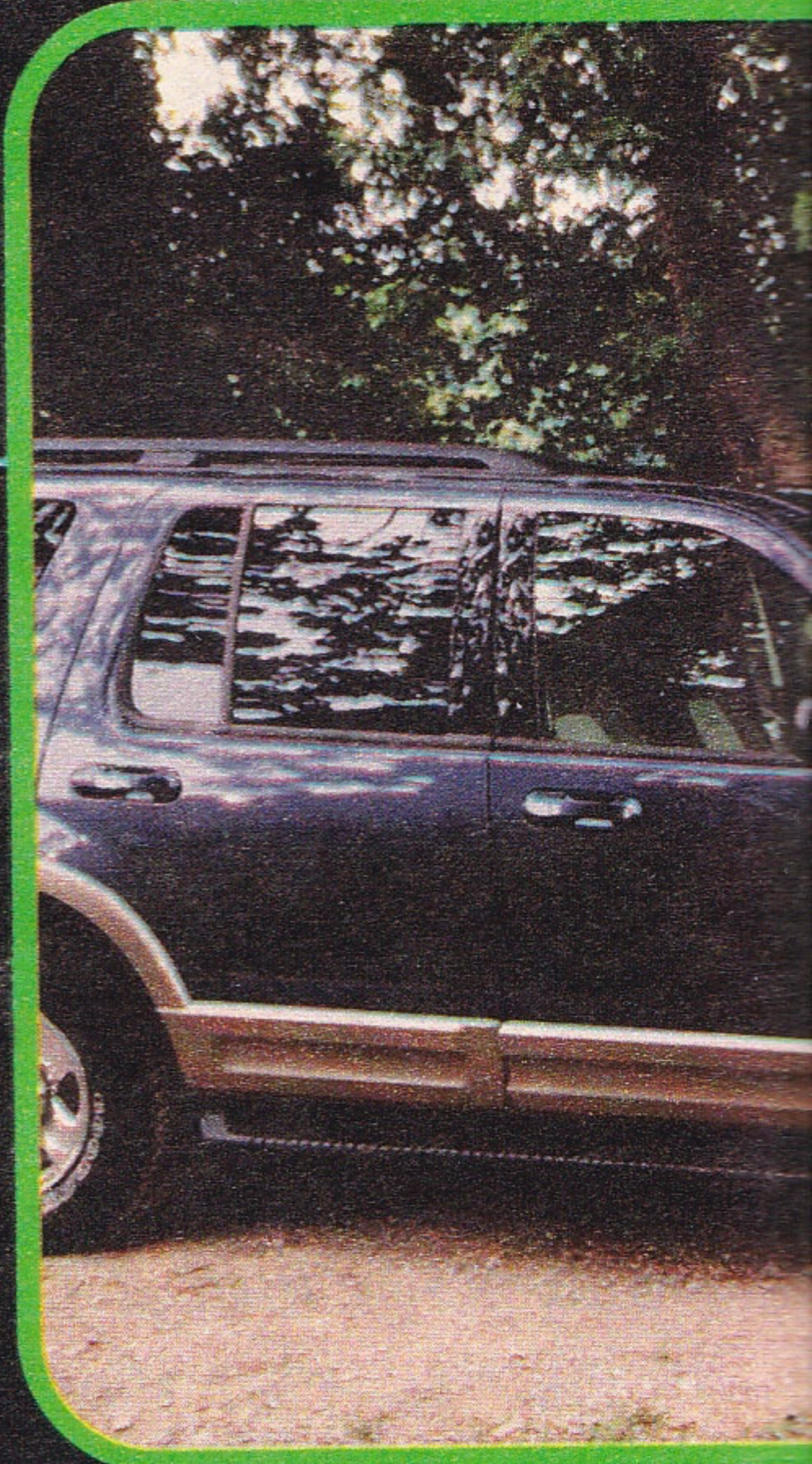


# Big Wheel

**Blake Shelton's debut smash sends him truckin' in style to TV**



PHOTOS BY TIM CAMPBELL

In country music, it's a little-known fact that if your song goes No. 1, you get a free truck. Well ... not really. But that's what happened when Blake Shelton's debut single, "Austin," soared to the top of the charts.

Blake's stone-country image and rising profile were the perfect match for Ford, who recently tapped the "Austin" singer to star in a commercial for its new Harley-Davidson Ford F-150 Super Crew. "The commercial's only going to be in test markets across the country right now," explains Blake. "But if it does what we hope it will do, then it will air nationally. That's the goal."

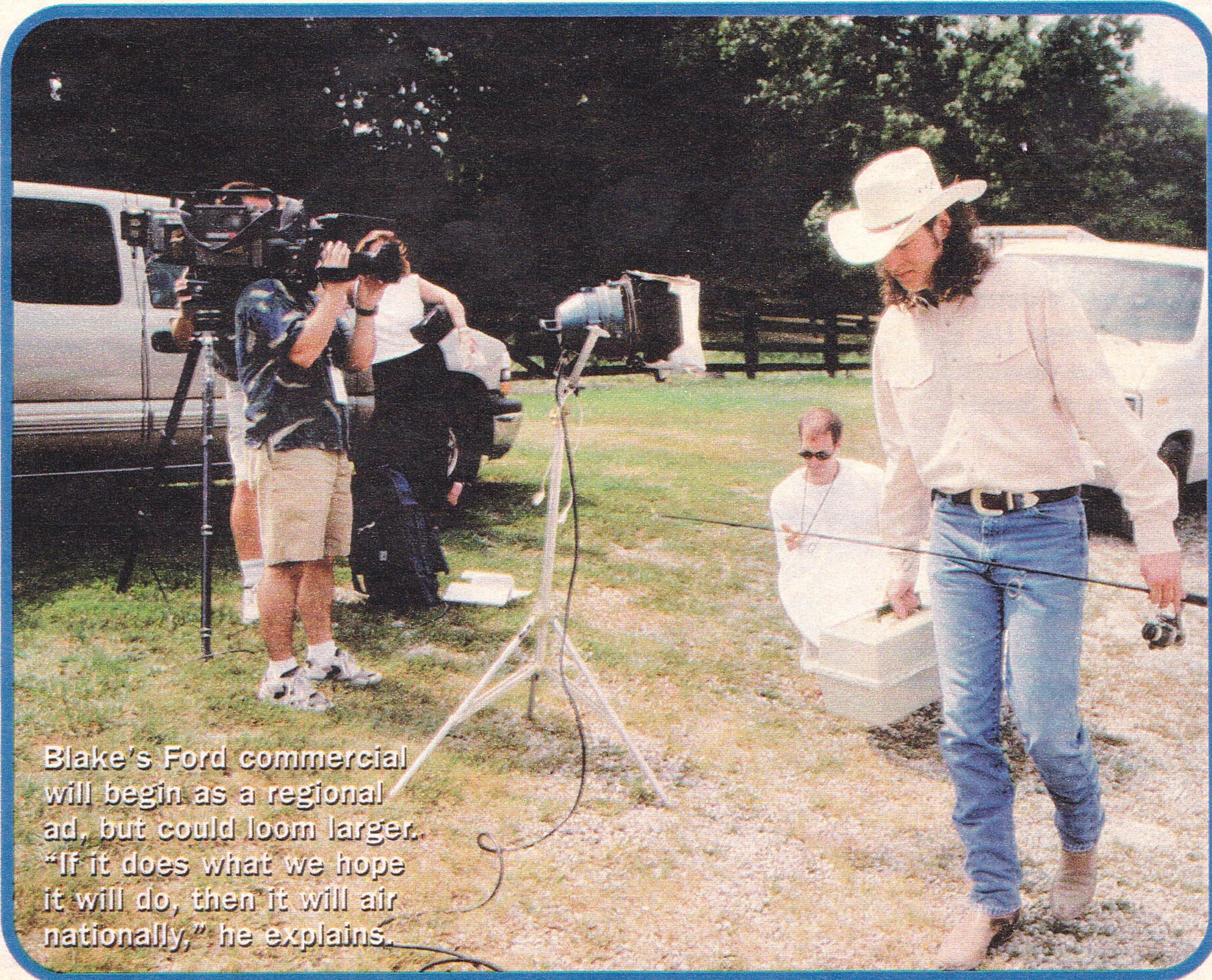
To thank him for being its pitchman, Ford presented Blake with a brand-new Explorer to cruise around town. "They didn't give me the car," acknowledges Blake, "but Performance Ford in Nashville is letting me drive it until the end of the year. It's awesome!"

"Awesome" is an appropriate word for Blake's career these days. At press time, "Austin" had captured the No. 1 spot for five consecutive weeks. His life hasn't been the same since he first heard the news.

"I was standing in the driveway of my mom's house in my hometown of Ada, Okla.," recalls Blake. "That was the week



**Truckin' testimony:** Blake gets a last dash of makeup before filming his spot for Ford trucks. He'll be smiling from here to "Austin" in a new Explorer, on loan from a Nashville dealer until year's end.



Blake's Ford commercial will begin as a regional ad, but could loom larger. "If it does what we hope it will do, then it will air nationally," he explains.

my album came out, and I was set to do an autograph signing at a store in Ada. The record company called me on my cell-phone that morning to tell me congratulations. I immediately had to go change my shorts!" he declares, laughing.

After changing his shorts, Blake says he celebrated "just like a lot of Oklahoma people do — I went out with my friends and had a night on the town."

Blake's success story is even more remarkable considering all the obstacles he faced as a new artist. He struggled for seven years before landing a record deal with Giant Records. Then the week "Austin" debuted, Giant closed. "I was convinced it was over at that point," he confides.

When his album was picked up by Warner Bros., Blake still faced the challenge of being the new kid on the block — and with a ballad as a debut. "All of those things stacked against me made it that much more huge in my mind when 'Austin' went No. 1," he notes with a smile.

Also huge was the first time Blake was recognized in public. "I was at a Hardee's somewhere between Kansas City, Kan., and Manhattan, Kan.," he says. "We stopped the bus and I went in to get a hamburger. A young guy and his wife walked up to me and asked if I was who I was.

"It was a good feeling," he adds, "but it's an adjustment. I've gotta learn to straighten up a little bit and not be acting like a 25-year-old out in public," declares the 25-year-old with a sheepish grin. "It's hard to straighten up. This is the biggest time of my life right now and I just want to be going crazy. I've got to try to hold myself back!"

There's no holding back when Blake talks about his next single, "All Over Me." "I wrote that song with Earl Thomas Conley and Mike Pyle," says Blake. "That was pretty exciting because Earl is my all-time country music hero. He's always been my favorite vocalist because of the emotion he sings with and the cool songs he's written.

"The fact that I got a chance to meet him is one thing," he says. "But knowing I've written a song with him that's going to be my next single is an amazing personal accomplishment."

With a mega-hit as a debut single, Blake admits feeling the pressure to duplicate his success with "All Over Me."

"I don't know how you *couldn't* feel the pressure to repeat it," he confesses. "When you have a multi-week No. 1, that's hard to top.

"But I'm up to the challenge!"

— Wendy Newcomer