



Pure Country and No Bull!

Alan Cackett and Blake Shelton talk true country...

Blake Shelton is pure Country—and that's no bull. Because there's not a hint of pop or even rock inflections in his vocals or musical arrangements, he has not always enjoyed the kind of chart consistency that the major labels demand. Since making his debut in 2001, he's achieved several number one hits with such memorable country songs as *Austin*, *The Baby* and *Some Beach*, but in-between those big hits, he's watched other, equally impressive singles, miss out almost entirely on the country charts.

Luckily, for those country fans who favour the purer sounds of modern country, Blake has ridden out the down times with regular touring and released three gold albums. Earlier this year he released album number four, the aptly titled *PURE BS*. It is pure Blake Shelton, straight country music in the time-honoured tradition of classic George Jones, Gene Watson, Earl Thomas Conlee and Conway Twitty. An honest, convicted collection of songs that showcases Shelton's range of talent and exposes the uncertainty and heartache he has endured recently.

"I didn't think that I would fall in love with songs that were making me feel bad," Blake explains over the transatlantic phone. "But maybe it would help me get through my divorce and all of that. I found myself kind of leaning

toward those songs and recording them, and after we had about 8 or 9 things recorded it was easy for me to see what I was doing. I was looking for help, and errr, I think, it ended up being the best album I could make because of that."

"Even though I didn't know I was doing it, I did what I was supposed to do. I was making an album that was from my heart, you know, something for my heart. That's probably the best way you can make a country album, just to be honest and open up even when times are tough. That's what country music is supposed to be—it's supposed to be about reality and if that's what it takes to make a great album then that's what'll happen. I just hope I don't ever have to go through that crap again!"

Blake filed for divorce from his wife Kaynette after less than three years of marriage in May 2006, exactly a year before the release of *PURE BS*. The couple were married November 17, 2003, in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Kaynette played a major part in the singer's career, travelling on the road with him as his assistant, being a sounding board for his song material and also appearing in his *Some Beach* video.

"What was interesting that even for the making of this album, I was sending her tracks, and she still was giving her opinion on the music," Blake discloses. "She'd call and say yes or no. It was tough, you know. Neither one of us was

gonna let it end on a horribly bitter note, and music, once again, was the bridge there too."

Though Blake only had a hand in the writing of three of the eleven songs, several of the others seem to reflect the turmoil of his marriage break-up, especially *What I Wouldn't Give*. Written by Charlie Brown, Charley Steff and Tommy Karlas, the song paints the picture of a lonely, regretful man who realises his failed relationship is due to his own shortcomings.

"Yeah, yeah, I can't tell you how many times, you know, you wake up in the middle of the night all in a sweat ... you know, I don't want to do this, this is not what I wanted. And then the next morning, I'll be mad at her about something, and then the next day I'll feel guilty about the thing, its just all those things. Every one of those songs, I've felt that way at one point or another, especially *The More I Drink*," he laughs.

Blake is one of the few new young country singers who regularly includes drinking songs in his repertoire. Country radio has deemed drinking songs 'politically incorrect'—unsuitable for the 25-35 year-old Middle America housewives to be listening to on the kitchen radio. Hard-times, broken-heart drinking songs are the very bedrock of country music and all the time there's bona fide country singers around like Blake Shelton that's the way it will

Blake Shelton

remain.

Born and raised in Ada, Oklahoma, Blake developed a love for country music early on and began performing country music while still in his teens. He happened to meet Ada native and songwriter Mae Boren Axton—who wrote Elvis Presley's famed *Heartbreak Hotel*—and she encouraged the young singer to visit her in Nashville. Upon his graduation from high school, Blake moved to Music City, and Axton helped him get settled and do some vital networking in the music community. In those early Nashville days he worked a variety of day jobs while he honed his songwriting and performing skills. He painted signs for a living, then worked for a year making tape copies for a publishing company. It took him seven years from the time he hit Nashville to when he heard his first song on the radio. "I think if you perform, you're going to go in the hole in Nashville, so you got to have a job," he says. "I never left. I was just beating on doors, writing with as many people as would take time with me, until I just made the right connections."

Blake got his big break when he met famed songwriter Bobby Braddock. "I was co-writing with Michael Kossler in Nashville quite a bit and he and Michael were pretty good friends," Blake explains. "I didn't know it at the time, when Michael and I would write a song, Michael would have taken the time to play those songs to Bobby just to see what he thought of the songs. Bobby became interested in my vocals and one thing led to another and we met, and had a few more meetings. After about a year, year and a half, we decided that we wanted to work together. We went and cut three or four things and within a couple of months Bobby had got me a record deal with Giant Records in Nashville."

The week that Blake's first single, *Austin*, was released, Giant Records was shuttered. "I was convinced it was over at that point," he confides. Then his debut album was picked up by Warner Bros., but 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 number one," he adds.

That debut single topped the country charts for five weeks, but for a time in the aftermath of that massive success, Blake felt a little like a one-hit wonder. His follow-up singles barely scraped into the top twenty but he stuck to his straight country guns and found Bobby Braddock a great ally in keeping it country.

"All three of my previous albums have had at least one number one hit on them, so there's been a draught spot on all the albums," he says. "Hands down, my most successful album was the *BARN & BURN* album. I had a lot of momentum going with that particular record, but our *DREAMER* album, for instance, only had basically one radio hit. The first album, I think had two, and it's hard to recover from those things. You're just lucky enough to get your hands on the right song, so whatever those songs are, we got our hands on a few on the way."

Getting hold of the right songs has much to do with the producer, because though Blake writes, much of his successes have been from outside writers, so he is always quick to give credit to Bobby Braddock.

"We really connected musically, and he kind of took me under his wing," Blake explains. "He got me my record deal, and he's still my producer today. He used to write George Jones' hits, and many other people's hits along the way. I think he's associated with the Jones' hits so much because he wrote George Jones signature song *He Stopped Loving Her Today*, along with some other big hits he wrote for him. The way I see it, that song is the watermark for all country songs from then on. Listen to a country song and what it's all about, every stereotype about country music and it's all there in *He Stopped Loving Her Today*. That's how big an impact it had, so Bobby will always be the guy that's associated with George Jones because they were so



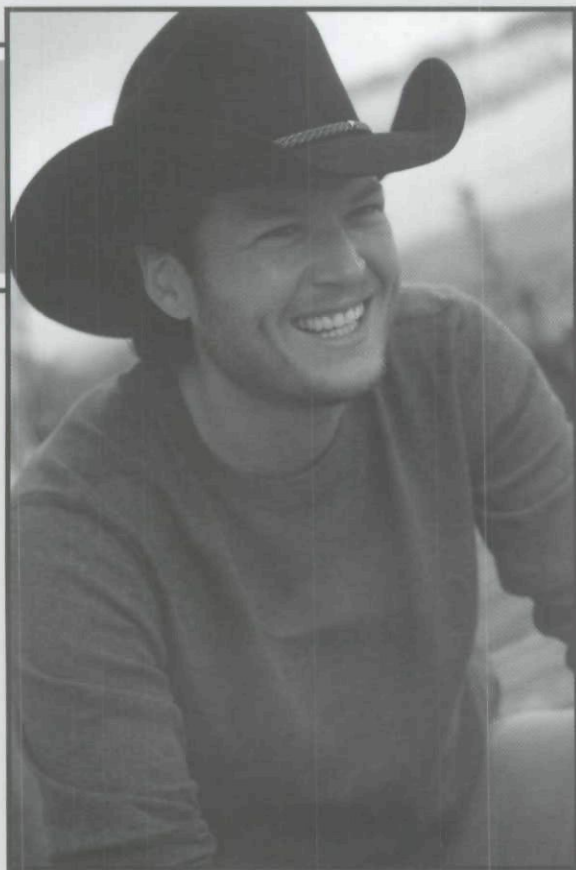
Miranda Lambert

important to each other's careers."

It would be true to say that Bobby is also very important to Blake Shelton's career. But in the past year or so another country music performer has also played a major role in Blake's career and his personal life. That person is singer Miranda Lambert who is now his significant other. Like Blake, she is clearly rooted deeply in traditional country music and very focussed on her career.

"Yeah, she really is," Blake agrees. "I wish I'd been that, disciplined and focused when I was her age. Miranda's only 23 years old. By the time I was 23 I could barely even keep a job. She works so hard on the career that she's got going, she believes in her music that much."

"There's two different types of artists out there, there's those that are writers and then there are guys like me, that write a little bit but more than anything is just a country music junkie. I'm a huge country music fan and I'll never get over it. I love to write a song and I just love performing so much. People will come to my shows and to begin to wish I'd done more of my own stuff, but I'm just, I'm so wrapped up with country music, it's all I think about. Whether or not I'm successful, I'll still be sitting on a bar stool one day playing some of my own favourite songs, for tips if I have to, it's always going to be a part of me. Miranda, she's just as happy sitting down and writing a song for herself that nobody will ever get, as she is performing and selling millions of albums."



Blake Shelton

Blake doesn't sound anything like Earl Thomas Conley. But when he sings heartfelt ballads such as *Don't Make Me, What I Wouldn't Give* and *I Have Been Lonely*, there's that same soulful, bared-bones country emotion that elevated Earl Thomas Conley's records above the norm.

On his latest album Blake has stretched out both vocally and in the choice of song material. There's more of an emphasis on a more personal, almost intimate

approach in several of the songs and for the first time, he's worked with different producers, bringing in Brent Rowan and Paul Worley (Warner Bros Nashville label chief) to supervise some of the tracks alongside Bobby Braddock.

"One of the reasons that Paul and I decided to work together was because he and I didn't really have that great of a relationship," Blake discloses. "We'd definitely had some low points together, as he was one of the executive people over at Warner Bros, and you know there were times when Paul and I weren't even speaking to each other. So, when making this album, I thought this would be a good time to spend some time together and get to know each other. The one thing I do know about Paul is that he loves music and I love music, so let's make music! So we went in and cut three songs and I'm thrilled that we did that. I got to know Paul, and I've got a lot of respect for him. I actually think he's a great guy, and it's a shame that business can sometimes put people against each other like that, but music can fix things. There were a lot of mis-understandings along the way, but these days I consider him my friend; he can call me anytime."

Following all the upheavals of the past few years it seems as though finally Blake's career and personal life are in good shape, but he acknowledges that you have to work hard at both to keep them in good shape. This is especially true when it comes to his on-going relationship with Miranda Lambert.

"It's just how serious you take it," he says. "We're taking it pretty slow right now, we're not in a big rush to go anywhere with the relationship. We can find time to see each other, for instance say we spent a day together or a day and a half together, because her bus is going one way and mine is going the other. If we go too long without seeing each other, if she has a couple of days off, we might go to Nashville and stay for a few days. So we do find time to see each other."

Unlike most country singers, neither Blake or Miranda call Nashville home. Blake has a place in Oklahoma and Miranda lives near her parents in Texas, but Nashville is a useful base to conduct music business and if they can share some time together while dealing with the business, then it's an ideal solution.

"I've spent a lot of time in Nashville as it is and in Oklahoma," he says. "I would say it's probably 50/50, especially if I'm out East which is more or less most of the time anyway. So if I'm out East and have a few days off, I'll go to Nashville and get as much work done as I can and visit with key people that I need to catch up with. For me, what I found living in Nashville, it is useful to be near to people that you work with, but you don't need to be around them all the time. It's good to have a break from that get away from it in a way where they can't get to me even if they want to."

Touring is important to Blake's career development at this time in his life. It is essential that he gets out there and takes his music to the country fans, whether that be opening for such major acts as Toby Keith or headlining club dates in his own right. It takes a hard work ethic, as he knows all too well. When it come to the fickle public, you're only as good as your last big hit. Surprisingly, Blake had never really considered the international market for his music.

"I've never been approached by anybody to do that sort of thing yet," he admits. "It would certainly be something I would think hard about if there was ever an offer out there. To be honest with you, it's not something I've ever considered, just because I've never been approached about it." **Alan Cackett**

One of the country singers that Blake rates very highly is the oft-forgotten Earl Thomas Conley. A highlight of his career was the co-writing with Conley of *All Over Me*, one of his earlier hits. Throughout the 1980s Conley was rarely off the country charts, yet nowadays the majority of country listeners don't even know who he is.

"Oh, I definitely think he's underrated," Blake says. "I was looking up his career, the guy had sixteen number one hits in a row. I think he had twenty-one altogether in his career, which is, you know, that's not something you can just write off. That's a big deal."

Though Conley enjoyed a remarkably consistent run of chart successes, he never played the Nashville political game. He was too busy out there on the road performing for his fans to worry about back-slapping and partying with the Music Row wheelers-and-dealers. As well as being a superb song interpreter, Conley was a talented songwriter who penned many of his own hits. Vocally, he was up there with the likes George Jones, Vern Gosdin and Conway Twitty, and though he still tours, he has never received the accolades he deserves.

"There was one song that he did, toward the end of his RCA days, called *What I'd Say*. I swore he was crying while he was singing that, it's still painful to listen to it. That's what I love about him. His voice, the recording, the sound and the emotion, I don't know how he did it. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. You know what I mean; he's the guy that I wanted to be like and sound like."