



August 6, 2016 | billboard.com



NASHVILLE ISSUE 2016

Make America Blake Again

Saving SFX?

Bankrupt dance promoter targets Randy Phillips as CEO

Song of the Summer? Not So Fast...

Sia ends Drake's 10-week reign atop Hot 100

SHELTON shoots straight on his heartbreak: 'I was at rock bottom'

MIKE DUNGAN leads Music Row's 50+ most powerful players

KACEY, MAREN and country's rising female stars talk Tomato-gate and Hillary

GARTH BROOKS on besting U2's box-office record: 'I'd like it for country music's sake'

The Nashville Issue

POWER STAR

Achy Blakey Heart

Beloved for his prank-playing, booze-celebrating, good-ol'-boy charm, Blake Shelton has earned 22 country radio No. 1s and an unparalleled pop-culture perch on *The Voice*. Now, sorting through the fallout from his divorce from Miranda Lambert and new romance with Gwen Stefani, Nashville's clown prince feels like he's starting from square one:

"I was at rock bottom, in the middle of hell"

BY ROB TANNENBAUM • PHOTOGRAPHED BY MILLER MOBLEY



Shelton photographed June 10 at Starstruck Studios in Nashville. Styling by Trish Townsend. Shelton wears a Calvin Klein shirt, Levi's jacket, Ariat jeans and Tony Lama boots. For an exclusive interview about the worst song he ever wrote, go to Billboard.com or Billboard.com/ipad.

“IT’S A STUPID SONG,” BLAKE SHELTON says with a shrug. “I know that.”

He’s finished singing “Boys ’Round Here,” his magnificently stupid 2013 hit, in the middle of a surprise set at a Nashville club one lunch hour in early June. During the annual Country Music Association Music Festival, about 150 people had crammed into The Stage, a bar on lower Broadway in Nashville, enjoying the AC and a cover band, when Shelton walked in the back door. He’s 6 feet 5 inches tall, so it was hard to miss him. Amid whoops and selfies, he commandeered the stage.

For about an hour, Shelton — country singer, star of *The Voice* and brand ambassador for HAVIN’ A DAMN GOOD TIME — plays unplugged, relying on the qualities that distinguish him from other Nashville singers: honesty, charm and self-deprecating wit. It takes a smart man to sing a stupid song.

He instructed the Stage staff to hand out free beers while he himself drained a couple of Coronas and pulled at a vodka-and-diet-soda mix in a coffee mug. He put a \$100 bill in the tip jar for the band he had displaced. He mock-grudgingly honored a request (“I’m going to do it so you quit whining”) for “Austin,” the 2001 tear-jerk smash that launched his career.

“I love you, Blake,” a fan shouted, inevitably. “I love you, too,” he answered. “We’re going to be in the tabloids, you and me. We’re having twins.” And Shelton, who has gained a few pounds recently, pointed at a belly bump filled with beer.

Shelton, who recently turned 40, became famous for doing unserious things, like giving out Maroon 5 singer Adam Levine’s cellphone number, or recording “Boys ’Round Here,” which one reviewer called “sexist, crude and jam-packed with country stereotypes ... an embarrassment to everyone involved.” For years, he has been the clown prince of country, a sentimental, amiable lug who loves booze, women and sarcasm. He’s the emotional center of *The Voice*, which, in its second season, helped catapult NBC from last in network ratings to first, eventually put *American Idol* out of business and enters its 11th season this fall. His last 17 official singles have all gone to No. 1 on *Billboard*’s Country Airplay chart, and he earns more than \$28 million a year, *Forbes* recently estimated.

“He has brought star power to country music that I don’t think it has seen in a while, and he has brought a bunch of new fans, too,” says singer Trace Adkins, a good friend. “He says whatever he wants to say, and it has turned into a gold mine. When I do that, I go to jail. Or rehab.”

“I tell him he’s the Dean Martin of

our generation — a handsome devil who comes across as lackadaisical even though he’s extremely driven,” says John Esposito, chairman/CEO of Warner Music Nashville. “His wit and charm translate to the music — you can see the twinkle in his eye, and you get sucked in.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get serious,” Shelton told CNN in 2011. “My heart and soul is being a redneck, and drinking, and being stupid.”

But that was in happier times, when he was six months into his marriage to Miranda Lambert, the corking good country singer. He has twisted his jester reputation on his latest album, *If I’m Honest*, which debuted at No. 3 on the *Billboard* 200 in May and has sold more than 300,000 copies since, according to Nielsen Music. In July 2015, Shelton and Lambert — who were routinely described as the “king and queen of country” — announced they were filing for divorce, igniting a series of tabloid covers. Four months later, after rumors and coy hints on Instagram, one of Shelton’s representatives acknowledged that he and *Voice* co-star Gwen Stefani were dating.

If you listen closely enough to *If I’m Honest*, says Shelton, “you can learn some facts of my divorce. Maybe not specifics, but you can get a general idea about it. It is my divorce record, but maybe even more than that, it’s my happy, falling-in-love record too.” Emotionally, it’s Shelton’s richest album. The divorce (his second) has given him more feeling and depth. It’s almost enough to disrupt his self-described reputation as a stupid redneck.

“CAN WE DO THIS INTERVIEW LYING down, like therapy?” Shelton asks, slumping on a sofa at Starstruck Entertainment, a white-gloss, shockingly modern three-story palace in the heart of Music Row in Nashville. He’s sipping from a big plastic cup of at least 12 ounces of vodka and diet soda — a boozy Slurpee.

Shelton sequenced *If I’m Honest* in a way that simulates a “very specific time frame” in his life. It opens with “Straight Out of Cold Beer,” a backwoods party song that represents his carefree mind-set at the start of 2015. Then, he says, “the bottom drops out” of the album as it proceeds into the spring. “That’s when it became painfully obvious that it wasn’t going to work out in my marriage,” he says.

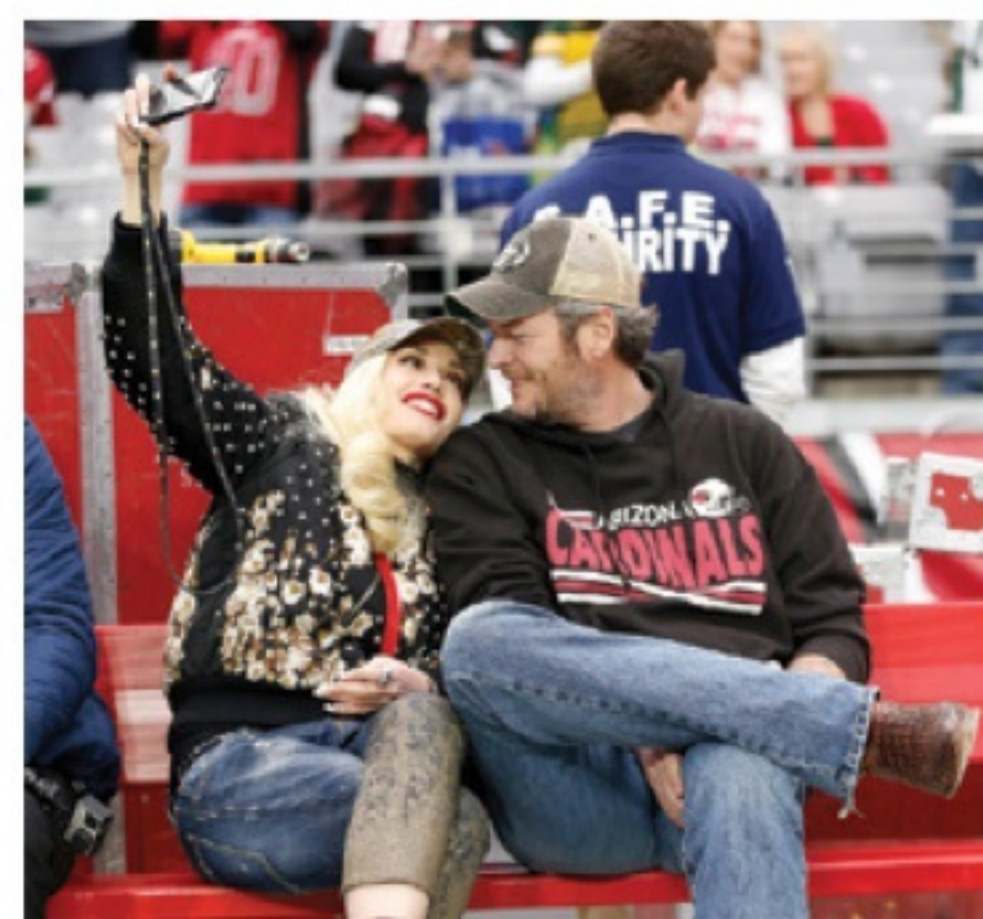
The second song, “She’s Got a Way With Words,” humorously but bitterly recalls a lover who cheated and lied. Shelton didn’t write it, but if you want to assume it describes some of the facts of his divorce, he won’t stop you. Then the album “stays in that lull for a while — that sad, dark place.” A few funny songs balance out the album, including the winking double-entendre “Doing It to Country Songs.” Shelton always has done those songs well, but more impressively, he sings his ass off on the heartache ballads.

“When we recorded the vocals for some of these songs, I was only six months removed from when all the crap went down,” says Shelton. “When you have a broken heart — at least, when I do — you got to get it out of your system. You want people to sympathize with you. I was at rock bottom, in the middle of hell.” For a while, Shelton stayed with Adam Levine. “As close as we have been, we got even closer.”

When *The Voice* began to shoot season nine in the spring, he decided to tell everyone at the show. Though he and Lambert hadn’t announced their divorce, he knew it would be final by the time the blind auditions were broadcast in September, and he didn’t want his producers and fellow judges to refer to Lambert as “Blake’s wife.”

Shelton and Stefani had met two years prior, when she joined *The Voice* as a coach in season seven. But she recently had given birth to her son Apollo, and Shelton “never really got to know her, other than small talk.” When Stefani didn’t return for season eight, Shelton assumed he would never see her again. So the way she reacted to his news was surprising and memorable. “I won’t forget that day,” he says. “I looked over at Gwen — who I

Below, clockwise from left: Shelton stubbornly sported a mullet in 2003; got romantic with Levine on *The Voice* in 2014; and caught a football game with Stefani in December 2015.



“Next thing I know, I wake up and
Gwen’s all I care about, and I’m
wondering if she feels the same about
me. She saved my life.”

—Shelton



didn't really know — and she had these huge tears in her eyes. I thought, 'Wow, she feels super bad for me!'

It wasn't only empathy. Though she, too, hadn't announced it, Stefani was in the process of separating from her husband, Bush singer Gavin Rossdale, after 20 years together and three kids. Later that day, she asked to talk with Shelton, alone.

"I thought it was going to be another one of those things-are-going-to-be-OK talks," he recalls. "She didn't tell me much, because we didn't know each other at the time, but she said, 'I'm going through something very similar to what you're going through. I understand. And I hate it.' That's kind of how our friendship and bond started, that day. It went from that, to checking in on each other once a week through email — 'This shit happened to me, what happened to you?' — to maybe three times a week, then every day, to 'Hey, here's my phone number if you ever want to text.' Next thing I know, I wake up and she's all I care about, and I'm wondering if she feels the same about me.

"Gwen saved my life. Who else on earth could understand going through a high-profile divorce from another musician? You can't even imagine the similarities in our divorces."

After lingering in misery for a while, *If I'm Honest* starts to lift and turn, most notably with "Go Ahead and Break My Heart," an unlikely duet between Shelton and Stefani. Shelton, who isn't prolific, began to write about his new relationship to woo Stefani. He sent the incomplete song to her as a voice memo and invited her to help write it; she twisted it in a different direction, from his tentative optimism to something more blunt ("Thought I was using you just to get me through") and scarred. "She wrote a verse that was brutally honest and didn't really go with my verse. I was writing about her, and she made it about us. I was so taken aback by it. F—, she's awesome." They debuted the song, a week before Shelton's

Blake's Sidelines

He once sang demos and moved furniture; now he moonlights across entertainment platforms



album release, live on *The Voice* while "making bedroom eyes at each other," as one newspaper described it.

As Shelton has acknowledged, the couple "could not be, on paper, any more different" — a country singer who plants corn on his Oklahoma farm and bow-hunts white-tailed deer, and a glam-packed California vegan who started her career in a ska band and has her own fashion empire. She's *Vogue*, he's *Field & Stream*; he's a tractor, she's a Porsche.

A few months ago, Shelton was in his truck, driving to pick up Stefani at an airport in Oklahoma, when "It's My Life" came on the radio. (He also rents a home in Los Angeles, where she lives.) "I thought, 'Man, that sounds like Gwen.' And sure enough, the DJ said it was No Doubt. I was like, 'What the f—?' I didn't know that was her song. I'm still learning, I guess." While she visited him, the couple ate at a Dairy Queen and shopped at a Dollar

1. TV
The *Voice* coach (with Cassadee Pope, left) also judged on *Nashville Star* and *Clash of the Choirs*.

2. MOVIES
For his first role in an animated movie, Shelton voiced Earl the pig in May's *Angry Birds*.

3. ADS
Shelton has endorsed Gildan brand underwear and Pizza Hut's special barbecue pies.

"When you're sad, that's the best time to sing sad songs," says Shelton. "When it still hurts." With Lambert in 2012.



General in Tishomingo, a short drive south of Ada, where Shelton grew up. Her very presence in those Middle American institutions made national news.

WHEN HE ARRIVED IN NASHVILLE AT 17, married to his hometown sweetheart (they divorced in 2006), Shelton had a good line of patter he had inherited from his dad, Dick, a used-car salesman who died in 2012. (His mother, Dorothy, "the hardest-working person I've ever known," owned a beauty shop. Shelton has an older sister and brother, Richie, who died in a car accident when Blake was 14.) Shelton also had a tangential connection to Mae Boren Axton, a fellow Oklahoman who wrote Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" and knew everyone in Nashville. He took odd jobs, painting or moving furniture for \$100, while making \$300 a week as a staff songwriter and another \$40 each time he sang a demo for someone.

A songwriter who worked with Shelton played their songs for Bobby Braddock, who wrote George Jones' "He Stopped Loving Her Today" and Tammy Wynette's "D-I-V-O-R-C-E." Braddock wrote "Same Old Song," a tart diatribe against modern Nashville, and everyone in town wanted to record it. You can have the song, Braddock told people, only if you sign Blake Shelton. Giant Records signed him in July 1998, but for years the label didn't release any of his and Braddock's songs. In April 2001, Giant released "Austin," then folded. Warner Bros., which bought Giant, halfheartedly picked up Shelton's contract.

Success came and went, and in 2008, Shelton's fifth album flopped. He figured his singing career was over. Then, during the next few years, a few things changed:

1) He cut his mullet. He had kept it until 2005, partly to defy and piss off everyone who told him to cut it. Then he traded cowboy hats for dark colors, suit jackets and vests.

Timeline

TV-Made Country Stars

Shelton's *Voice*-aided fame places him in a long tradition

1956

Patsy Cline's rendition of "Walkin' After Midnight" on *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* was so well received she quickly recorded the song, which became her first radio hit.



1967-1974

Dolly Parton made her name on *The Porter Wagoner Show*, turning out hits with the host until breaking away to focus on her own career. She wrote "I Will Always Love You" about him.

1967

Lynn Anderson was a regular on *The Lawrence Welk Show* before releasing her hit version of Joe South's song "(I Never Promised You A) Rose Garden" in 1970.





2) He found a new producer, Scott Hendricks, who cut away the corn and devised a more modern sound, with less overemoting and more rhythmic singing — not quite rapping, but a casual, half-spoken style, known in the 19th century as *Sprechgesang*, that acknowledges the pervasiveness of rap without emulating it. In 2009 Hendricks and Shelton cut the country-as-cow-dung hit “Hillbilly Bone,” Shelton’s first of 22 singles to reach No. 1 on the Country Airplay chart, making him, after many years, a model of consistency.

3) He found a visible way to express his big personality. When *The Voice* debuted in April 2011, Shelton’s presence as a coach indicated to viewers who didn’t know country that he was a star on the same level as Levine and Christina Aguilera. Three

months later, Shelton had his first No. 1 album on the Billboard 200.

Shelton believes NBC picked him because “they probably saw how unfiltered I am on Twitter and thought, ‘We need somebody that’ll shake things up.’ In country music, everybody falls in line,” he says with a sigh. “I am who I am. Sometimes that gets mistaken for ‘Blake Shelton is an asshole.’ I’m not. I just don’t want to be dishonest with anybody.”

“He’s always going for the joke,” says Adkins. “Blake has been sending me pictures every time he shits in the woods. Luke Bryan’s probably getting them too.”

One of Shelton’s favorite gags is about booze, like his ongoing series of “I’m so drunk” tweets (“I’m so drunk right now I just pissed my shirt pocket”). Last September, when a tabloid reported that he was in rehab, Shelton sued for defamation, and, in a sworn statement,

Shelton’s mother encouraged him to enter the talent portion of a beauty pageant when he was a boy. “My mom could get me to do anything with bribes,” he recalls. “If you do it, I’ll get you that mouse you wanted.”

said he hasn’t been to rehab — and “I also do not have a drinking problem.” The jokes, he added, are “part of my shtick.”

Most country singers represent a specific image of the South: humble, not profane, odorless. Shelton acts more like a rapper would, spouting off at will. People expect attitude from him. The night before we met, around midnight, he addressed “haters” on Twitter: “Have yourself a nice warm cup of camel balls...” (“Go to bed, dad,” one follower helpfully advised.)

“In country music, we’re so politically correct and so afraid to possibly upset someone,” he says. Recently a tea party website announced, “Blake Shelton Sides With Trump on Issues of Political Correctness,” dubiously trying to claim him for the right wing. Does the singer support Donald Trump? “I’m not going to have the political conversation with you about Trump, or about Hillary Clinton, but I will tell you this: Whether you love him or hate him, he says what he thinks, and he has proven that you don’t always have to be so afraid. A lot of people are pulling for him, no matter how much Hollywood fights it. I see people who don’t like him go and beat up people that do like him. You tell me, who’s crazy here?” Shelton, who says he will vote in November, adds, “I probably wish there was another option, but there’s not.”

As the conversation comes to a close, Shelton asks merrily, “Did you get some good career-ruining shit on me?” For the most part, he’s exactly as expected: funny, footloose, as honest as a divorce settlement will allow. There has been only one surprise: Around noon, he passed up a shot of whiskey when it was offered to him. “Shit,” he moans, “I hate shots. That’s for college drinkers. I’ve never said, ‘Thank God I did that shot!’” Of all the things Shelton has done and said, this might be the most shocking. If this gets out, it could ruin his career.

“You know what?” he says with a shrug. “I already made it. I’m too old to worry about it anymore.” ●

POPE, TYLER COLEMAN/NBC/GETTY IMAGES; LAURET, FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES; BARTON, MICHAEL DOUG/ARND BRONKHORST/GETTY IMAGES; CAMPBELL, CHRIS/GETTY IMAGES; UNDERWOOD: NEVIN WINNER/GETTY IMAGES; TIMBERLAKE: IMAGE GROUP/LAURET/GETTY IMAGES.



1969-1972

Glen Campbell had hits before and after *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*, but the variety show, with guests like Johnny Cash and Cher (left), helped bring him to the peak of his fame.

1990

Six years before winning the best new artist Grammy at age 14, LeAnn Rimes appeared on *Star Search*, where she reigned as champion for one week, then began performing in Texas.

2005

Carrie Underwood won *American Idol*'s fourth season and quickly released her debut, *Some Hearts*, which went on to become *Billboard*'s No. 1 Country Album of the Decade.

2016

Chris Stapleton's debut album, *Traveller*, re-entered the *Billboard* 200 at No. 1 after his performance with Justin Timberlake on the CMA's *Country Music Awards* in April.

Underwood with *Idol*'s Ryan Seacrest.