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'A Guy With A Girl' Makes A Personal Statement For Blake Shelton

In the middle of a knock-down, drag-out presidential campaign, **Barack Obama** held the final state dinner of his administration at the White House on Oct. 18, and who should appear? **Blake Shelton**.

He was, of course, the guest of **Gwen Stefani**, the night's scheduled entertainment, and before it was all through, Shelton ended up onstage with her, performing "Go Ahead and Break My Heart."

"That was a pretty neat deal," says Shelton. "Luckily, I've got a girlfriend that's cool enough to get invited to those things, and I just tag along with her."

It's one of numerous occasions when Shelton or Stefani brought the other onstage in the last year. They have performed that duet during her shows in Los Angeles, Dallas and Virginia Beach, Va., and at his shows in Oklahoma City; Peoria, Ill.; and — on his 40th birthday — at the Country Jam in Grand Junction, Colo.

So when Shelton's new single, "A Guy With a Girl," pops up on the radio, it's easy to associate the storyline — in which a man goes unnoticed next to his female companion — with their relationship. Shelton pretty much expects that response, too.

"'A Guy With a Girl' is my life right now," says Shelton, who sees his life reflected in the first-verse references to tractors, concert stages and hanging with his buds. "Out on the farm or touring, [I'm] that guy, and then at the end of the day, when it's time to have a life and go to a party or something, I become the guy that's with Gwen. It's pretty cool."

"A Guy With a Girl" sounds tailor-made for Shelton's current status. But in truth, songwriters **Ashley Gorley** ("You Should Be Here," "T-Shirt") and **Bryan Simpson** ("Yeah," "I'll Just Hold On") had no particular artist in mind when they wrote it in late 2014 or early 2015 at Gorley's office on Music Row. Instead, they were simply mining their own personal experiences. Both of them have, as Simpson puts it, "married up," and they're often reminded of that when they venture out with their wives.

"When I enter into a room, she thinks everybody wants to talk to me," says Simpson. "And I'm like, 'No, no, no. The truth is when they take a look at you, I'm just a guy standing there with a girl. They want to know who you are. They're intrigued by you.'"

As Simpson related that experience to Gorley in the songwriting session, Gorley zeroed in on the "guy with a girl" phrase as a potential title. In less than three hours, it was a finished song.

After laying out the guy's status in the first verse, the chorus came kicking in with the title, "I'm just the guy with the girl everybody wants to know." In an insecure man, that scenario might create turmoil in a relationship. But here, the guy looks at her with pride: "Ain't. She. Beautiful."

Gorley spit that phrase out — with dramatic pauses between each word — audibly emphasizing the character's admiration. Simpson calls the change in phrasing a "classic Ashley Gorley" approach.

"He has this inspiring ability to grab moments like that," explains Simpson. "That little melody thing is such a cash grab, you know. You want to hear that a few times over and over."

Simpson, in fact, chimed in right behind the "ain't she beautiful" line with an uncommon rhyme — "I'm invisible" — summarizing the whole song in a mere five words.

"By the end of the first verse and chorus, we definitely knew we had tapped into what we were trying to say," recalls Simpson.

Though Shelton wasn't necessarily on their minds at the start, they began to think of him as a potential voice for the song. "He is always in our heads, because he's one of the biggest people in the format," says Gorley, "but this was more about getting the lyrical idea correct. It had a melody that a few people could do, and it ended up sounding more and more like him as the song went on, but it definitely wasn't just a straight shot at Blake."

At the time, Shelton was married to **Miranda Lambert**, and it suited him in that situation, too. They sent it his way, and Shelton instinctively put it on hold.

"It kind of had the feel of 'Honey Bee' for me," says Shelton. "I just thought it was a cool song, and I'd consider it, think about it."

Thus, "A Guy With a Girl" was in his possession as he split with Lambert and the new relationship with Stefani unfolded. As he recorded a new album, *If I'm Honest*, Shelton decided to build it around the transitions in his life, and "A Guy With a Girl" rose in stature.

"We were trying to wrap up the album at the beginning of the year, and all of a sudden, this song is a true story for me," he says.

Shelton and producer **Scott Hendricks** (**Dan + Shay**, **Jana Kramer**) recorded the instrumental tracks in Nashville, adhering closely to the original demo while adding a little more motion to the background parts with layers of guitars and an active bassline. Drummer **Nir Z** heightened the snap in the production, too. Shelton sang his final parts in the evenings after working on *The Voice* during the day in Los Angeles, using a closet in his Hollywood Hills home as a glorified vocal booth.

"He comes home, and we just sing until he's tired," says Hendricks.

Stefani sat in as an observer for many of those vocal sessions, including the work on "A Guy With a Girl."

"She loved the song, and she was really interested because it's such a different way to make a record than how they make 'em in the pop world," notes Shelton. "So she didn't miss much of the vocals that I did for the album."

"When Gwen's sitting there beside me, he tends to want to sing better," adds Hendricks. "So we may just have to [always] have her sit there when he's singing."

"Come Here to Forget," a post-relationship hookup song, was the first single from *If I'm Honest*, becoming Shelton's 17th straight No. 1 on Country Airplay. Follow-up "She's Got a Way With Words" was a bitter kiss-off that peaked at No. 7. "A Guy With a Girl" was a logical third single, counter-balancing the previous releases as the public relates his music to his life story.

"The first two singles off this album were a little bit darker lyrics," he says. "This is country music, and people like to hear about the shit that you're going through, but I think sometimes you've got to change it up and show 'em the good stuff that you're also going through."

Warner Music Nashville released "A Guy With a Girl" to radio via PlayMPE on Sept. 26, and it's already at No. 19 in its fourth week on Country Airplay, underscoring the positives Shelton feels as the guy with Gwen Stefani.

"Everywhere we go, whether it's my hometown in Tishomingo [Okla.] or some fancy party in Hollywood, when she comes around, it's like people just stop," he says. "And I don't blame 'em." ●



SHELTON, STEFANI