

Blake Shelton

The Business Of
Having A Ball
... Or Three

Arguably the breakout star of the breakout show that's leading NBC-TV's breakout resurgence, Blake Shelton is charting new ground for country artists. Serving as a primetime television personality while leading a music career that's riding seven consecutive No. 1 singles is an unexplored challenge. In fact, just finding time for this interview required navigating tapings of *The Voice* Season 4, shooting live shows for *The Voice* Season 3, work on his NBC Christmas special and recording his next album. Ultimately, the discussion was squeezed into downtime during an appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Apparently, Shelton's balancing skills are superb, if last month's CMA Entertainer of the Year honor is any indication. Here, he speaks at length about the business of Blake, Inc.

Country Aircheck: What's your role in your business? Are you the CEO? COO? Just the talent? How involved are you?

Blake Shelton: When it comes to the actual nuts and bolts of things, I try to stay in the loop, but really

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try to wait to the last minute to get involved. Anytime there's a contract or offer, if it's something management knows I have no time to do or it's not worth my time, I don't ever hear about that. But the bigger things like whether or not we're going to tour or do a television show, those things they leave up to me. It's my life and those are the things I have to live with, and I have to decide what I can be best at, too.

How deliberate was your move into television over the last few years?

It wasn't planned out. Ironically enough, over the years of being a Nashville country artist, I always had people tell me, 'Hey, you should be on TV. You need to be a comedian or something like that.' But it was never something I pursued or talked about with management or even my agents. When *The Voice* just kind of fell into my lap, I don't know if I'm one of those people who believes in meant-to-be or not, but it sure seemed like that's what it was, because it does feel natural for me to do this.

And thank God for having someone like Narvel [Blackstock, his manager] who has a lot of background in television. Without his input on this, I could have had a good career either way, but because of having him I've had a great career now. Knowing which television opportunities are important and which ones aren't makes a difference. Even different from Reba's television career, I'm kind of in uncharted territory for a country artist. Every decision is something we all have to sit down and think about for a long time.

How important was Twitter in developing or offering a platform for Blake the personality?

Way more important than people I'm associated with even want to acknowledge. I was told many times, "You've got to get off Twitter. You're saying things that are just ... you're destroying your career ... what's wrong with you ... you sound crazy." Really? Because I'm just having fun. I'm not saying anything on Twitter that y'all don't hear me saying in the office when we're in here bullshitting.

I finally got to the point where I just decided, man, if I can't be this guy on Twitter then what has happened to country music or entertainment,





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even? If it's about songs, then okay. But if it's about artists and people getting to know them, like I thought country music was supposed to be about, then I'm going to get on here and talk about the fact that I just went deer hunting. Or that I'm drunk. Or make jokes. I want to have a personality. The last thing I want to do is not offend somebody.

How do you matter if you don't stand for something? You're not contributing anything if you're afraid all the time that you're going to offend someone. For every person I offend for saying I deer hunt, I gain another person's respect. And I'm trying to gain respect, not just be middle-of-the-road.

We can go as far back as your CRS New Faces video and some of the subsequent clips you've done in terms of this evolution or realization over the years that there was a quality – can I call it smart-ass, for lack of a better term? Does that at some point become a strategy to pursue that aspect of your career?

I just think I can't help it. And it's an asset more than it is a liability. I want people to remember me. If I was still trying to break in as an artist in this business, that's what I would be trying to figure out a way to do. For me, being

middle America and those types of values. I'm a country artist first and just happen to be on television doing it.

How many scenarios did you plan for in terms of, if it's not a hit, if it just goes a season or two and that's it, or if it ends up being as big as it's been?

We never really thought about it blowing up huge. Our thoughts were, "What if we start this show – it kind of sounds ridiculous anyway with these chairs and hitting buttons – and it's a flop?" We decided it's still worth it because it's television. Especially being a country artist, we just don't get that many opportunities. If two-million people watch and they cancel it, that's two-million people who probably never heard of me anyway. It's no different than being on an episode of a talk show.

It's not like I moved to L.A. to try to be an actor. That wasn't my goal, so anything that happens along these lines just falls out of the sky. It's crazy not to jump at these opportunities. I didn't spend a bunch of time trying to get there, and if I fail as a television personality, well fine. First, I'm a country singer. So I don't care. Now that it's taken off big, I'm seeing opportunities that wouldn't have been here for me. You realize, I've got this relationship with NBC and I've got a Christmas album coming up. I know

careers as music did because, I think, they were just going with the flow and not being afraid. That's the worst thing you can do in this business. If you're brave enough to make that move to Nashville, why would you want to be a chicken-shit now and not swing for the fence or stand for something? For the life of me, I'll never understand how you can be an artist but not want people to understand who you are as a person. Actually, let me just say that I actually hope they never do. I'd like to be the only one.

What are the logistics now? How do you balance recording, taping, live shows, touring?

We're at the mercy of NBC when we look long-term. And I feel sorry for them trying to put together four different artists' schedules to get us all together at one time for a TV show. We just have to look at possible scenarios. People think I don't tour at all, which isn't true. We toured arenas from January to April. And this summer I hit every festival and fair that would have me. We played a lot of shows this year. The most important thing is that nothing overlaps. That's where I can't take it, and I learned that the hard way.

The very first season of *The Voice* just kind of happened how it happened, and none of us were prepared. I had already signed-on and was happy to be on tour with Brad Paisley that summer. Next thing I know I'm finishing up a live episode of *The Voice* and hauling ass to get on a jet to get to a concert somewhere, sometimes that night. And it's like, okay, this isn't making sense. Not only is it not fun, but this is where people get into real bad habits. I can understand now how that happens to some people. We decided we were going to have to do these in separate segments, even if it means we miss a couple weeks here and there because we're not totally sure about schedules. It's still worth it not to have them overlap.

So is there a lot of push and pull with the network, the label, your agents?

Absolutely. And rightfully so. We get a lot of pressure from Warner Bros. to get out there and tour, and they're right to expect that. So I try to do as much of it as I can. But they also understand the value of this television show and how it's, basically, changed the amount of records I sell. It all works together, but you have to manage it.

Does the scrutiny that comes with the TV gig give the network more influence in your decision process? Does it ever temper you on Twitter?

They really don't, and I don't know that I could do this with any other network. NBC really wants me to just be Blake. For some reason, when they signed on with me, they signed on with *me*. And I'm grateful. It's worked out for both of us. I've never heard a peep out of them about my Twitter account, because even if I say something controversial it goes back to that saying that there's no such thing as bad publicity. It's just my mouth. I'm not trying to hurt anybody. They let us get away with a lot, and

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a smart-ass, or quick witted – I read that about myself, but I'm not sure I'm that quick – if those are things I can do naturally that are valuable, why wouldn't I use them?

So it's not calculated, it's more a reflex than anything else. The fact that I'm not afraid to be myself is just out there now that we have Twitter and I'm on TV. I'm not going to take shit from anybody and I'm going to give it right back to them. And I expect them to do the same to me. We're adults and we're having fun. I'm having a ball and don't take myself seriously at all. And I'm not afraid to express that.

What are the decisions you made as you looked at getting deeper involved with television, whether it was co hosting the ACMs, doing NBC's Clash Of The Choirs or getting into The Voice? What are the things you worried about?

More than anything, I worry about losing my spot in country music because that is easily the most important thing in the world to me when it comes to my career. And when it comes to my personal life, even. God-dang-it, country music is my heart. That's always the thing that has been in the back of my mind. Am I spending too much time with television? But the CMAs this year shook me up a little bit with the Entertainer award.

What we envisioned early-on with this was that I would still be a country artist but be seen by a lot more people. Instead of doing 12-month tours I'd doing six-month tours, but be in people's living rooms two nights a week every week or more. When Entertainer happened it was like, "Oh, my gosh, we shouldn't be afraid to keep going down this road!" Just because nobody else is doing it this way doesn't mean it's wrong. That's what we're figuring out, more than anything.

My career is kind of an oddity, but I think deep down people know I'm an expression of the country lifestyle,

I've got their attention a little bit, maybe they'll take a meeting and talk about doing a special on TV. That's how that stuff happens.

Now that you're deep in it, what didn't you know back then that you wish you'd anticipated?

The biggest surprise to me, in representing myself in a way that's true to who I am, is when corporations want to be involved with me. Whether it's JCPenney, Samsung or other cool things I've gotten to do with corporate America. I don't have any business doing that. But through the show and a connection I've made with the audience out there, I've been lucky enough to have them come to me and ask me to introduce their new telephone product, or be the voice of a charity project through JCPenney. Me? Really?

You told us for our CRS issue that you thought Glen Campbell was the template in terms of balancing TV with being a current country artist. How do you think you're measuring up?

I don't know. It's definitely a different day and time. It would be like comparing a NASCAR driver from 30-years ago with someone from today. It's a different game altogether. The heart is the same. I know Glen could do all kinds of things and loved doing it. I don't know that I can do all kinds of things, but I'm loving everything I'm getting to do right now. What's important to me is what it shows to people who are tuning into *The Voice* or watching the Christmas special. I want them to say, "That that guy is absolutely having the time of his life." If nothing else, I want that to come across.

I think that came across with Glen, Dean Martin and people like that who were singers, artists and just personalities. Personality carried them as far in their

they probably think the show wouldn't be as interesting if they tried to tamp us down.

How does being CEO of a TV career differ from when you were just CEO of a country singer's career?

It doesn't, really. All that really changes is simple things like getting out of the house and going somewhere. My profile is just way up there. As a CEO, I just get out there and do my job. I count on having good, smart people around me making good decisions that put me in the right situations. And they have faith in me to let me go for a couple hours, whether it's onstage or in front of a camera, that I'm going to be the guy who gets us the next gig down the road. That's my job. I'm supposed to be good at connecting with people. I'm not going to spend a minute more of my time reading through contracts because that just sucks out the good part of what I do. Now that I'm at this level, I take the luxury and time to just have fun with it. Because I'm doing that, it's feeding the fire even more. It allows me to just be me.

Do you see yourself as an inside advocate for country music with the network? For instance, getting NBC to go for the Christmas special?

Sure I do. In fact, if I have one responsibility, it's to show the world that, yeah, we're country and we sound like it, but we're smart people. Nothing frustrates me more than the stereotype attached to country artists. I listened to a guy interviewing Kenny Rogers on NPR and got so pissed off because he kept referring to him as a "country and western artist." I wanted to go, "Man, you're the one who doesn't belong on the radio if you're not any better at your job than that. You need to do your homework."

We represent ourselves pretty well. We're up to speed on what's going on in the world. We can be on TV, have

fun and not take ourselves too seriously. We're not going to be a pain in the ass to the network. We're going to show up on time and work. This is what we do and we're good at it. When the next guy comes along, I want the network to go, "I worked with Blake Shelton and he was always on

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time, he wasn't a diva, he didn't throw fits. He just did his job and got out of the way." That's the legacy I'd like to leave behind because I want to see a lot more country artists get the shot. I'm tickled to death to see Keith Urban on *American Idol*. Maybe, just maybe, they saw the success of *The Voice* with a country artist and think they can piece that together, too. Maybe I had something to do with it, maybe not. But either way, it's exciting that it's happening.

You're working on an album now. How has that process been going?

My part is done, so now we're all sitting around staring at [producer/label exec] Scott Hendricks waiting for him to get his part done. Now that Tree [Paine, his publicist] is out of the room, I'll tell you that we'll have a single sometime in January. The album will come a couple three months after that. I don't know if they have an exact date. I'm pumped about it because I thought *Red River Blue* was a good as I could do, and I honestly think we beat it. And I don't know how.

One thing that has happened – and it happened during *Red River Blue*, as well – is a benefit of being busy. Not having as much time on the road to listen to songs over and over again, and completely overthink them – which I've been guilty of in the past – has helped. I'd think, "Well,



a lot of times I didn't have the chance to play a song on national TV – like on an awards show performance, which I couldn't get for a long time.

Plus, I'm on national television just being myself. I didn't come out here to try to get a job as a character in a sitcom. We're on this show being who we are as musical people, so when people watch, they're seeing us do what we do. There isn't that disconnect between who we are on the show and who we are in our other careers.

You mentioned backstage at the CMAs your willingness to try things, even if you don't know if they'll work. And you cited the "Six Pak" projects. What did that experience teach you?

I don't know that it actually taught us anything other than that if you do something new, you'll get a hell of a lot of publicity for it. From that standpoint alone it was probably worth it. But I actually think it goes back to the song, me and Trace [Adkins] doing "Hillbilly Bone." If you'd put those two Six Paks together and had "Bone" as the first single, it probably would have accomplished the same thing.

In your acceptance speech for Entertainer, you referenced some of the other nominees, a couple of whom are selling out stadiums. Do you feel you're, in some way, re-writing the criteria for that award?

I guess I already have, and I'm sure some people aren't really happy about it. I'm sure there were several people after that was announced who were not exactly pleased. But there are a lot of different ways to reach people. And I guess we'll find out next year whether people agree with this new definition. Is being Entertainer something that should focus on being out there on the road all year, or should we take all these other ways of reaching people into consideration? So at next year's show I guess we'll see what people think about all that.

I know for me, it sure feels different than it ever did before. You realize how much something like *The Voice* puts you out there in ways nothing else really can. Like, walking into a supermarket and seeing a tabloid with my picture on it. And Miranda's picture on it. And a headline that says we're pregnant. And I know that's not true and I'm like, "Where are they getting this stuff?" I'm realizing that I'm now in this world where they do that kind of stuff to people, which is really kind of exciting because now I'm thinking about how we can use this to say something crazy and have some fun with it. Like, why can't they say I have three balls?

And on that note ... now that you're in that world, having that platform of *The Voice* and forging this new path, where do you go next?

Not having really calculated getting here, I think you just stay the course and see where it takes you. Whatever it ends up being, I think TV is going to be in my future for a while anyway. And it's working for me. Man, this is the first time that things have really been clicking consistently for me. I've been lucky all along, but this is the first time that things have really been clicking. I didn't plan on it happening like this and neither did anyone else in my camp. We knew where we wanted to get and were lucky enough to make the right decisions along the way to get us here. But a lot of it just fell in my lap, too, to be honest. **CAC**

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I don't know if I should sing this song about my grandpa because he's dead." That's kind of dumb to think like that, but if I've got enough time, I damn sure will. So with the last album and now this one, if I love a song in the first two or three times, I just cut that damn thing.

That's how we ended up cutting "Honeybee." That's not brain surgery, it's just a fun, feel-good song. Same thing with "God Gave Me You." Even though it hit me like it did the first time I heard it, it would have been real easy for me to question whether it made sense to do a Contemporary Christian song. People might say I'm a sellout. So not having the time I used to have to overthink some of these songs has actually worked out.

How important is touring when you can get in millions of living rooms every night and, conversely, do you worry it goes someone less incentive to see your show?

I do worry about that, and I did. But one of the things that makes me not worry so much is seeing Adam [Levine] put together this new tour for Maroon 5 and the

whole thing sold out in, like, a day. So being in people's living rooms isn't hurting. And it's not like those people who watch the show are really getting to experience our music. Someone might sit at home wishing Adam would sing "This Love" or one of their other hits, but that's not what the show is about. People still have to come out to a show to experience what we do in terms of music.

It's always tough for actors or people with success in another area to add a country career because they're doing it part-time versus so many who are working overtime. Being pulled in the other direction, coming from country into a television career, are there competitive issues that you worry about, or does being country's face on television compensate for that?

Oh, it definitely does. You know, getting the chance to introduce a new song on national television is a pretty big deal. The network will come and ask if we want to play "Honeybee" on the show, and we've gotten to do that with "Over" and some others, too. You know, there were

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