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MAY 23, 2011

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(From left)
Blake Shelton,
Adam Levine,
Christina Aguilera
and Cee Lo Green

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BLAKE'S A MENTOR?

Surprise, surprise! Blake Shelton is helping mentor aspiring artists on NBC's *The Voice*.

story by
JESSICA PHILLIPS



Blake Shelton has guested on his share of late-night television gab-fests, co-hosted the Academy of Country Music Awards and even led a choir of fellow Oklahomans on NBC's *Clash of the Choirs* in 2007. But despite all that experience, Blake is still learning about what television can do.

Not long after his debut as a mentor and judge on NBC's *The Voice*, Blake was in the studio recording a new album when he decided to grab some grub. "I got out of the studio and went to the Tiger Mart by the Exxon station [in downtown Nashville] around 1 a.m.," he recently told reporters. "I grabbed a bag of Cheez-Its or something, and there was a cute girl running the register. She looked at me and she said, 'Aren't you the guy from that new TV show?' The girl said, 'I don't listen to country music at all but that's a cool show and you're funny on it.' It shows you the power of television," says Blake.

The Voice garnered 12 million viewers when it premiered in late April. Not quite an *American Idol* imitation, the

show pits Blake against pop singer Christina Aguilera, soul singer Cee Lo Green and Maroon 5 frontman Adam Levine. The four celebs compete with each other to build teams of eight vocalists and then perform dual roles as both coach and judge. The show's major twist is that the superstar

coaches/judges consider only a contestant's vocal skill when first selecting team members; the judges are seated with their backs turned away from the contestants. When a judge hears an impressive voice, he or she hits a button that swivels the judge's chair to face the selected contestant. While *American Idol* generally only allows vocalists in their teens through late 20s to audition, there are virtually no physical or age limits for contestants on *The Voice*.

"There were definitely times I hit my button and turned around and it was all I could do not to [say], 'Oh my God.' Their voice doesn't match the face," says Blake. "It's alarming." It's no secret that many of today's aspiring singers—in both country and pop fields—are awarded record-

BLAKE SHELTON BY LEWIS JACOBS/NBC

Former MTV host Carson Daly (center) joins (from left) Blake, Christina Aguilera, Cee Lo Green and Maroon 5's Adam Levine on the California set of *The Voice*.



BLAKE SHELTON CONTINUED

ing contracts on the basis of physical attributes rather than vocal prowess or an entertaining stage presence. Having weathered more than 10 years in the music industry, Blake knows one television show will not be enough to eliminate the importance of image from the music industry. But this judge and coach hopes *The Voice* will play a part in leveling the playing field a bit. "This lets people have the chance they deserve. Then it's up to them to make the most of it. If [you] need to get a haircut or shave, do it. But at least you're going to

get your shot based on your talent first. As singers in Nashville, you can be on your bus and somebody will come on television singing, and you'll say, 'Oh my God, they suck. Who signed them?' [and] 'It's because she looks good' or 'Well, he has muscles,'" reasons Blake. "*The Voice* eliminates all of this. Not to say that the winner or a lot of people picked [to compete] are not attractive, normal people, but at least it starts from having a talent and then we move on from there."

As Blake found out, picking contestants based solely on vocal talent levels the playing field not only for average-looking

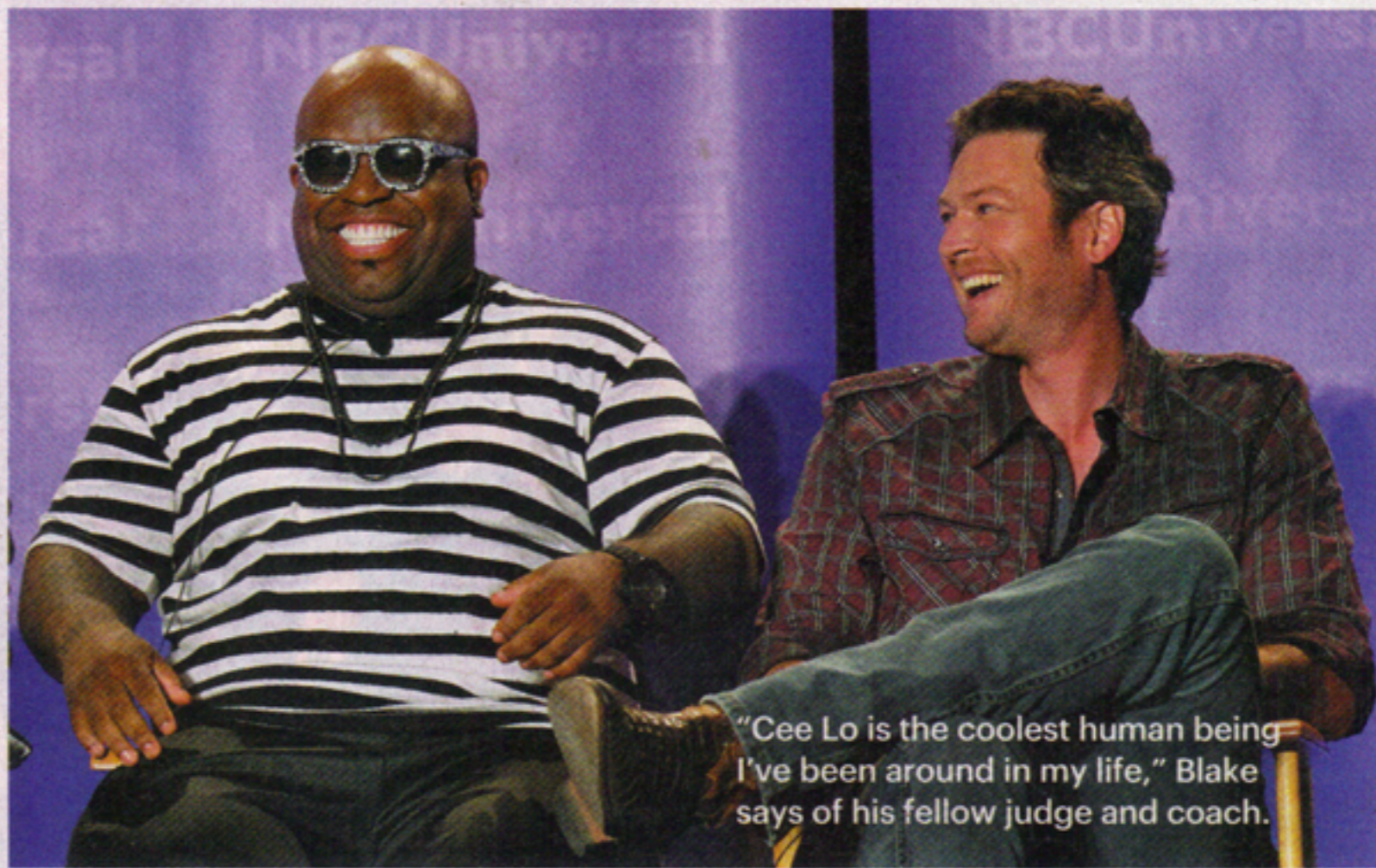
contestants, but for those of exceptional beauty as well. "I never thought of it from this angle, but there was a girl on there who was drop-dead beautiful," he says. "She got picked based on her talent, not her looks. She was as emotional as anyone that she got picked, because I think for the first time someone paid attention to what she wanted them to. It was interesting to see what that meant to her."

Blake hopes that *The Voice* will garner notice from reputable industry managers, marketers and record label execs who will then take interest in working with the contestants. Blake knows as well as



Known for his sharp wit, viewers can bet that Blake Shelton's antics and wisecracks will make for some quotable moments during the premiere season of *The Voice*.

any artist that having a solid support team can make a difference. "The right guy [can record] the right song at the right moment and it becomes a hit, but if he doesn't have the right team around him that is passionate and will fight [for him], it won't last," says Blake. "I was that guy at first when I hit town. The right stupid kid from Oklahoma got the right song and it was a hit," he says of his No. 1 debut single, "Austin," from 2001. "Then I floated around Nashville having some success now and then but not kicking the door in by any stretch of the imagination." Blake became one of Nashville's most underrated hitmakers throughout most of the next decade, with songs such as "Ol' Red," "The Baby," "She Wouldn't Be Gone" and "Home." It wasn't until changes were made in management and at his record label, Warner Bros. Nashville, that Blake went from having an occasional hit to being named the Country Music Association's Male Vocalist of the Year, earning the Vocal Event of the Year award for "Hillbilly Bone" from the Academy of Country Music and earning an invitation to join the Grand Ole Opry.



"Cee Lo is the coolest human being I've been around in my life," Blake says of his fellow judge and coach.

"Now I've got that team around me and look at what a difference it has made in as little as two years," he says. "The hardest thing to do is revive somebody's career in Nashville and make it seem new, and that's what is happening to me right now."

Blake is quick to point out that although the show is called *The Voice*, he's no vocal coach. "I didn't pick anybody

that I felt like I could teach them how to sing," he says. "I want to help them with their song choices, the keys that they sing their songs, how they approach performing onstage. I want them to know they have someone in this business who is on their side. They have my phone number and can call me anytime, because the position they are in is a tough one," contends Blake. "I couldn't have been

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Before production began on *The Voice*, "none of the [judges] knew each other at all," Blake reveals.

BLAKE SHELTON CONTINUED

a brand-new artist onstage in front of millions of people watching at home. [I would have] had a panic attack. It's a lot of pressure. My thing is letting them know that they have someone in their corner and [I] will pull strings and favors for them when they need it."

It's natural that Blake should feel comfortable in that judge's seat in front of millions of television viewers. He served as a judge on *Nashville Star* in 2007 (wife Miranda Lambert is a *Nashville Star* alum) in addition to his other television appearances. Still, Blake had at least one nervous moment before the show began taping, being the only country artist alongside a trio of pop/rock artists including Christina Aguilera, Maroon 5's Adam Levine and Cee Lo Green. "I felt very insecure going for the first meeting of the show," he says. "I just thought, 'I'm the country-singing guy.' I was very nervous about it 'cause I wanted them to at least give me a chance. Come to find out, none of the four of us knew each other at all. That surprised me; I figured the other three would have crossed paths at some point before."

For Blake, spending time with his

co-stars gave him a chance to see past some of the stereotypes that surround recording artists. "Before I got to know Adam Levine, my assumption was that he would be [the typical] rock dude, maybe kinda dark, not saying a whole lot. Actually, he's a bigger smartass than I am, and he's hilarious to be around," says Blake. "Cee Lo is the coolest human being I've been around in my entire life. I've never been around anyone who can walk into a room and people are knocking over stuff just to [get to] stand by him."

As for *The Voice*'s arguably best-known judge, Christina Aguilera, Blake says she lives up to her title of "diva" in some ways. "When Christina walks in and sits in her chair [in the television studio], I swear I've seen grown men weep when they look at her. Girls just crying and reaching for her. I've never been around someone who has that kind of effect on people," Blake admits. "It's got to be hard for her to be under the kind of pressure that she's under all the time, but I do think she handles it all pretty well."

"I think people assume a lot of things about her that aren't true because there is so much focus on her," he continues.

"If I was a bad enough dude that when I walked into a room women [started] crying and fainting like when that happens to her, you know, I'd probably try to keep to myself, too, a little bit," he muses. He's quick to say that the Grammy-winning singer's sometimes reserved nature doesn't mean she's an ice queen. "She won't take crap from anybody, but she's fun to be around, and she's hot."

While the first seven or eight episodes of *The Voice* were recorded before airing, Blake will spend a good deal of time in California when the final episodes are aired live, as millions of viewers vote for their favorite voices and help decide who will become *The Voice*. Blake is set to reside in a rented house in California in June for the last of the episodes. As a judge, he doesn't necessarily have a more educated guess as to who will win the competition. "Your guess is as good as mine," says Blake, though he is sure of one thing. Once this Oklahoma man settles into his California home, Blake says, "I'll be pissing people off when I'm out there in the yard shooting pigeons [and] squirrels, 'cause I know there's a bunch of tree huggers out there." You can take the man out of the country . . . **CW**