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DECEMBER 2012

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Blake Shelton

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COWBOYS

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By Joe Leydon

BLAKE SHELTON STILL REMEMBERS THE first time he got paid for doing what he loves most. “And by the way I reacted,” he says, “you’d have thought it was a million dollars.”

A native of Ada, Oklahoma, Shelton started singing at an early age and learned to play the guitar by the time he was 12. By his midteens, he was a regular performer at “a local Opry-type show” at the McSwain Theatre in his hometown.

“One day, after about the sixth or seventh time that I performed there,” Shelton recalls, “the guy that owned the show came up and handed me \$40. And I was stunned. I was just beside myself. I was 15, 16 years old—I can’t remember which—and I just stood there thinking, What the hell just happened? I just got money? Because, hey, I would have paid *him* for the chance to play there. It was a really big moment for me. And I don’t know if it ever crossed my mind that I could make a living doing it.

“But, yeah, I do think I’d already decided at that point that that’s what I was going to do with my life either way.” And that is pretty much what Ada’s favorite son has gone and done.

The son of a used car dealer and a beauty salon owner, Shelton received ample encouragement from friends and family when he was starting out. And whenever he thought the odds might be stacked

against a small-town boy like himself, he found inspiration in the ongoing success of another Oklahoma native: Reba McEntire.

“Where she was born and raised isn’t 35 miles from where I was born and raised,” Shelton says. “And while I was coming up, going to high school and being a country music fan, Reba McEntire was as big as you could get in country music, and as popular as you could be. And I couldn’t believe she grew up right there [in Kiowa], that close to where I grew up. I figured if she could do it, I could do it.”

Shelton can’t say enough about McEntire as “an inspiration and a template—somebody that I want to be compared to someday and be like one day.” If that day hasn’t arrived just yet, it’s getting close.

Shelton—who now counts McEntire as a good friend and her husband, Narvel Blackstock, as one of his managers—is a bona fide country music superstar with a passel of gold records, a string of No. 1 hits, and, arguably most important, a Grand Ole Opry membership to his credit. He’s the reigning ACM and CMA Male Vocalist of the Year and one of the four celebrity judges/coaches on NBC’s top-rated singing-competition show, *The Voice*.

And by the way: He’s also the husband (since May 2011) of Miranda Lambert, another country music artist you may have heard of.

C&I caught up with Shelton during a typical





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Blake Shelton brings his genuine brand of country charm to the table as a judge on *The Voice*.

stretch of multi-tasking, just as he was putting the finishing touches on his first Christmas album, preparing for the third season of *The Voice*, confirming dates on his tour schedule, savoring the success of “Honey Bee” (his first-ever digital platinum single)—and, of course, finding a way to spend quality time with the lovely and talented Mrs. Shelton.

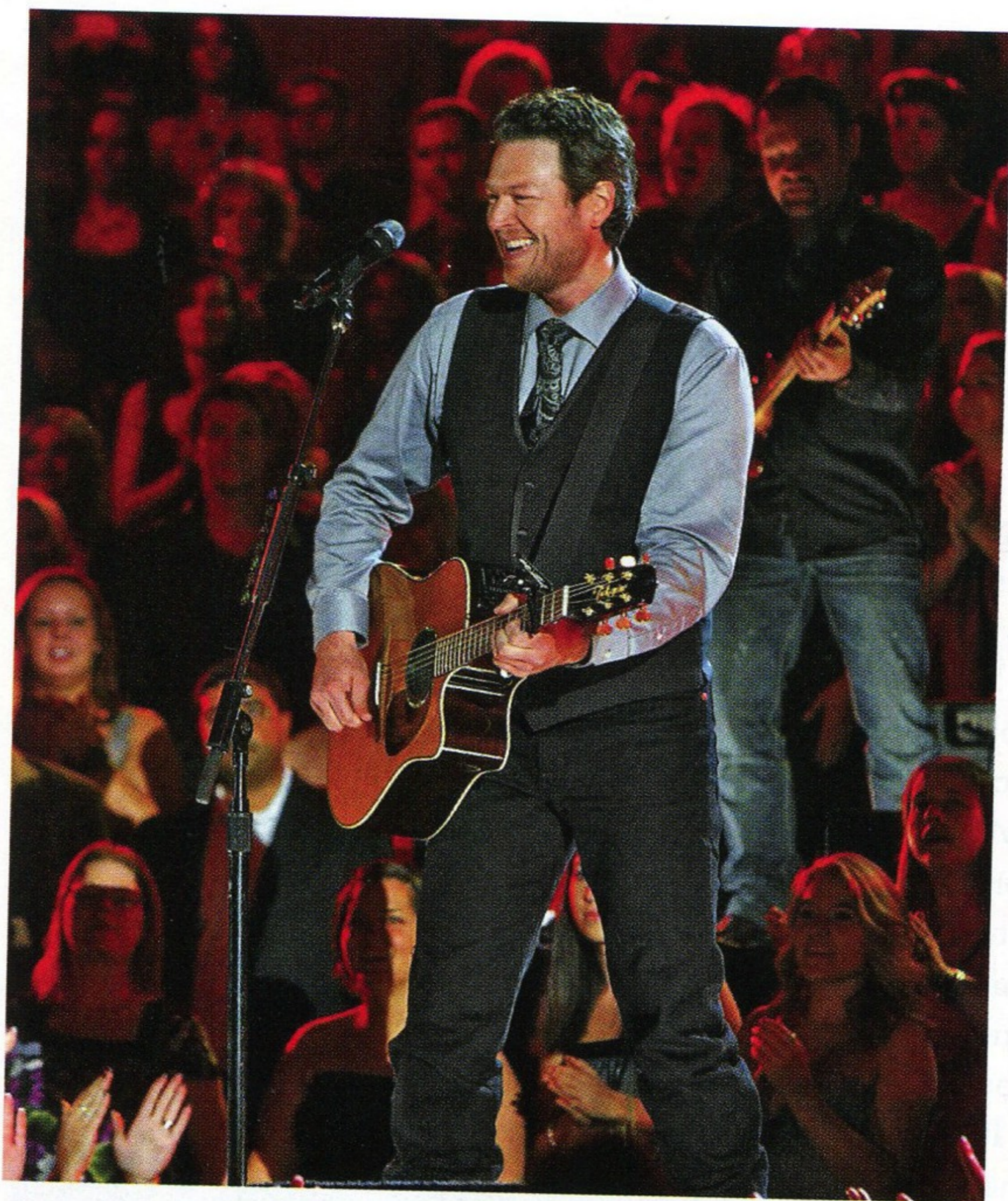
“I just left *Chelsea Lately*,” he said by way of greeting. “And I still got [bleep] to say. Bring it on.”

So we did.

Cowboys & Indians: *Some folks say that thanks to the influence of shows like The Voice and American Idol country has become more or less today’s pop music. Agree?*

Blake Shelton: Yes, I would say in some ways it is. You see, with country music, there’s two things about it. And I hear Cee Lo [Green] say this a lot, too, which is interesting because I would consider him a pop/R & B artist. Lyrically, country music is so in-depth. There are writers who spend days, weeks, months, sometimes a year on one song. And making sure they’re writing something special. Sure, sometimes it might only take 15 minutes. But they’re always making sure they’re writing something that connects with people. It’s not about a gimmick. It’s about things that are relatable for people that they can understand—it’s not over their heads.

And musically, it’s not over anybody’s head. It’s easy to sing along to, and it’s easy to understand. When you’re in your car and you’re driving from work back home, or vice versa, you don’t want to think too hard about what you’re listening to on the radio. You want to smile or have a moment when you go back to something in your life that you like to remember. I think with pop and rock these days the music gets away from that a little bit. Don’t get me wrong: I think there’s some great pop music overall. But I think there’s so much emphasis on the writing in country music. That’s the difference.



"I love music. Just flat-out love music," Shelton says of his varied career.

C&I: Do you think there's something unique about country music that allows you to express passions and sentiments—like you do in "The Baby"—that you can't in pop or rock or rap?

Shelton: Well, I think in country music, maybe the audience is just a bit more grounded. And they're more apt to relate to and understand and care about the lyrics to a song like "The Baby." I don't want to sound like I think people who listen to other genres of music don't care about things like that. But I do think that if you're at a place in your life, no matter what age you are, where if you can hear a song like "The Baby" and it hits you and it makes you cry—well, a lot of people don't want to hear a song like that. They don't want to acknowledge things like that happen in life. It's the country music audience that's more willing to face a thought like that. Or they've gone through something like that, so they can hear that and relate to it and cry. And think about it and express some emotion within themselves.

C&I: You're now in your third season of *The Voice* and the magic seems to still be working. A large part of the show's appeal is the camaraderie you appear to have developed with Christina Aguilera, Cee Lo Green, and Adam Levine...

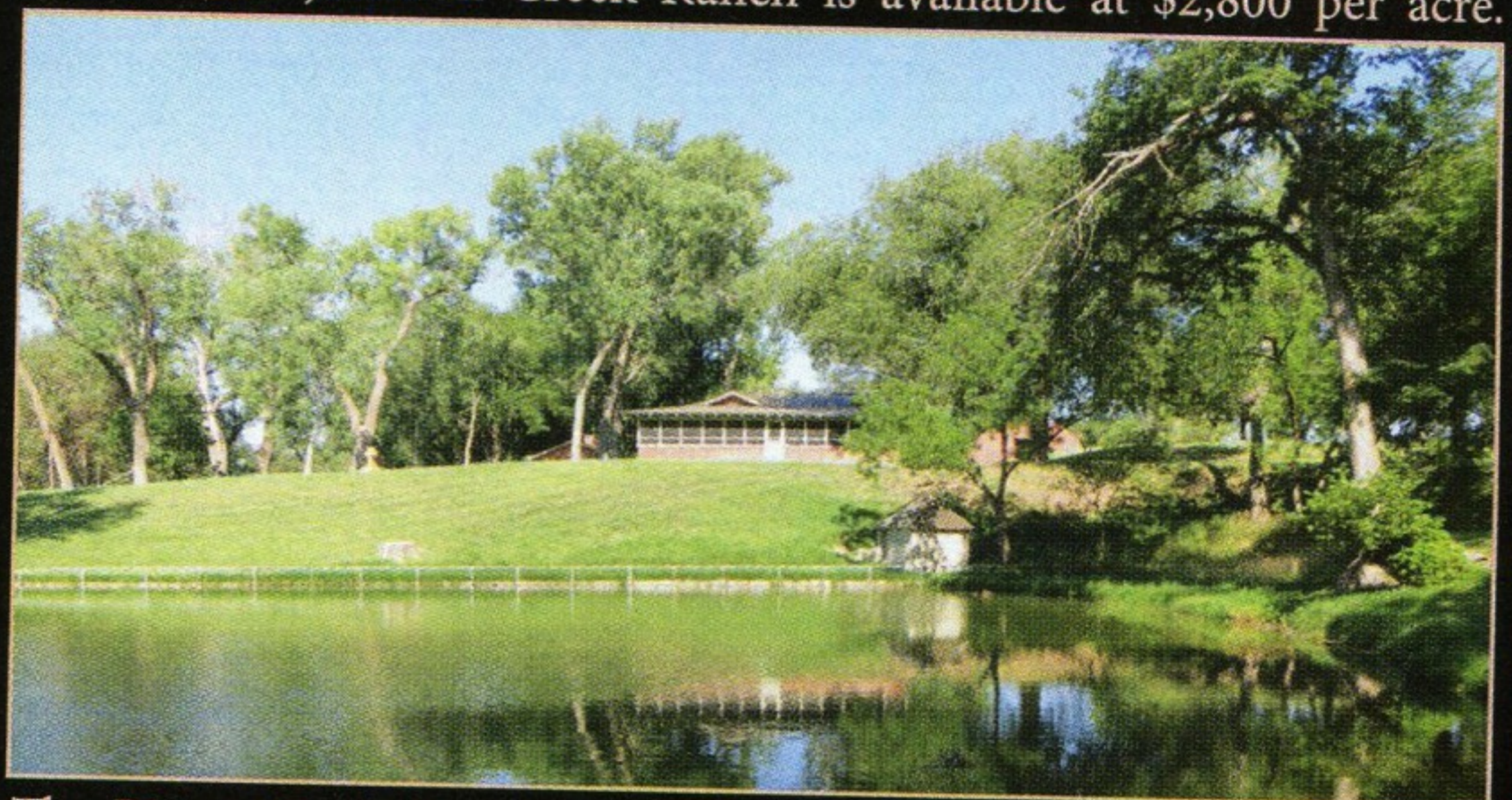
Shelton: I don't think it was until about the end of the first season that it dawned on me that it had. I think that as much as country singers are stereotyped, I think I was as guilty of doing that with those three artists. Because I thought, Aw, they're going

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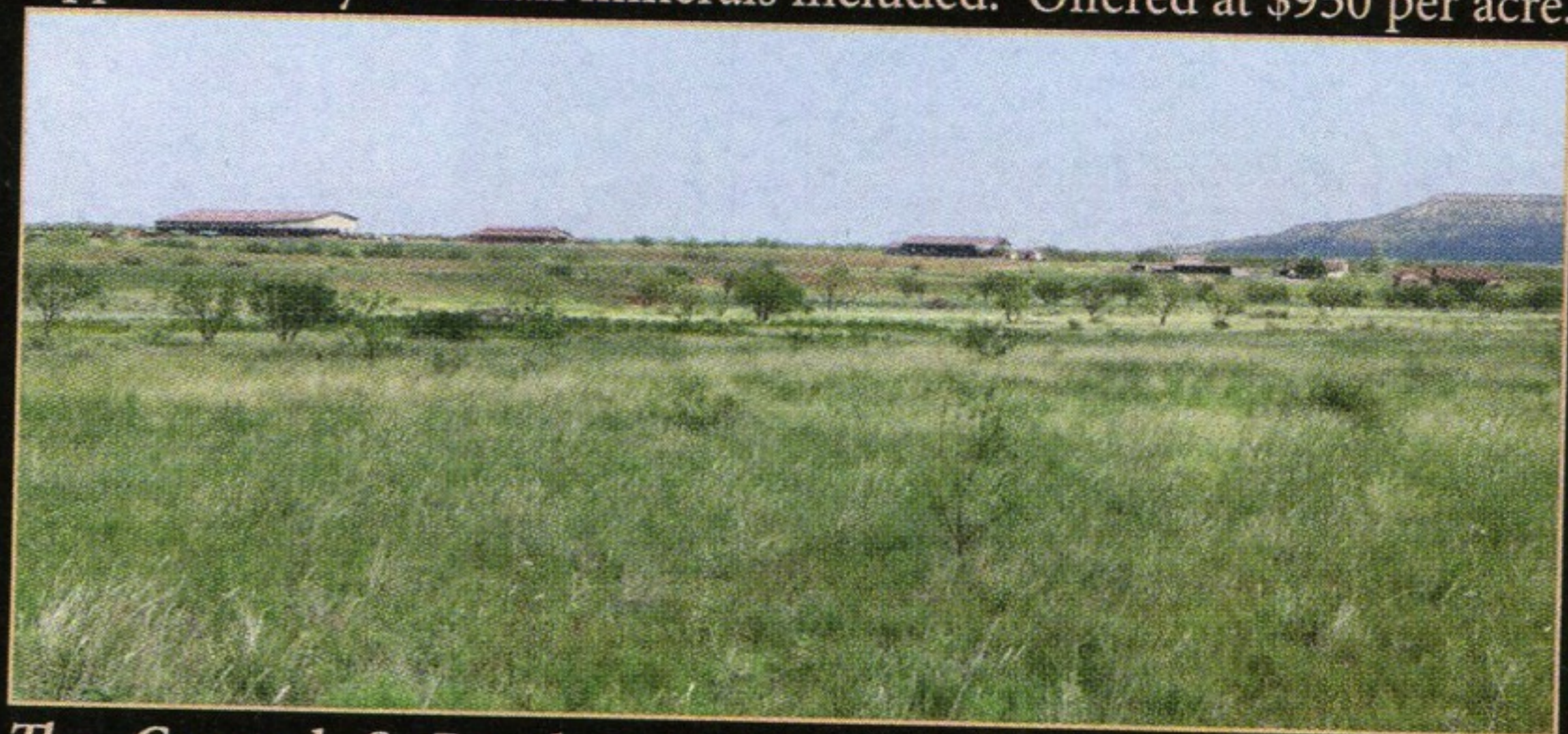
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Cheers, It's Christmas

WHY BLAKE SHELTON SWEARS THIS IS THE ONLY YULETIDE ALBUM HE'LL EVER MAKE.

Blake Shelton made a list—and checked it twice—before settling on the final song list for his first Christmas album, *Cheers, It's Christmas*. The lineup includes several classic yuletide tunes that have touched Shelton over the years and a few new compositions. Many of the tracks were recorded at the storied Capitol Studios in Hollywood with full orchestral accompaniment.

"I'm probably the biggest Christmas-music fan that you've ever had on the other end of the line," Shelton said during a recent telephone interview. "You can ask Miranda and she'll tell you: I listen to Christmas music in April. And loud. I don't care if it's Larry the Cable Guy's Christmas album, or Anne Murray's Christmas album, or George Strait or Alan Jackson or Michael Bublé. There's something about the stories in those songs and the melodies in those songs—they just take me away from everything. More so than what I hear on country radio or just on the radio in general. It takes me to another time, back to being a kid. It really does."

Ever since he decided he wanted to be a singer, Shelton says, "I always had it slated that at some point in my life, I wanted to make a Christmas album." But only one Christmas album. "I wanted to do one, do it once, and do it right. Because it should matter that much. And that's how much thought I've put into it."

That goes for all the artists he sings with on the CD, which is being released in early October. "That's how I chose them—they're important people in my life. For one reason or another, they've had an impact on me as a person. That's why there are so many duets on the record."

On one track, Shelton joins forces with Michael Bublé—a longtime friend and his new advisor on *The Voice*—for a holiday-centric version of a familiar song. "I had a hit with a song that he'd had a hit with a few years back, a song called 'Home,'" Shelton says. "So I got in touch with Michael and I said, 'Hey, man, I know you're busy—we all are—but is there any chance you could rewrite 'Home' and make it a song about going home for Christmas?' And he immediately answered back: 'I'm on it.'"

About a week later, Shelton got an e-mail from Bublé with brand-new lyrics for "Home," the Christmas version. "He came in and sang on the record for that song. It was amazing to me how that all fell into place."

Shelton's run of good luck continued when he was able to find just the right song—"Oklahoma Christmas"—to perform with fellow Oklahoman Reba McEntire. "It was the perfect lyric, it was the perfect melody," he says. "And it was kind of Western swing, which is what Reba cut her teeth on in music."

What's his absolute favorite track on the album? That's easy: "Time for Me to Come Home," a song Shelton sang and cowrote with one of the most special women in his life: Dorothy Shackelford, his mother. "It's basically a song about a guy who's in the city, and it's Christmas time," Shelton says, "but it doesn't feel like it until he gets that call from his momma asking him when



he's coming home for Christmas. That's when that Christmas feeling starts for him. And that's when it all of a sudden *becomes* Christmas for him. He hears his mom's voice, and he goes home to be with his family."

For Shelton, that's what the celebration of Christmas is all about. "It's about being around the people that you love. So we wrote the song together, and [my mom] actually sings on the record with me. It's one of the coolest things I've ever gotten to be a part of as a recording artist."

But don't expect a sequel. Shelton insists *Cheers, It's Christmas* will be a one-time-only thing. "Really, I can't imagine ever doing another one," he says. "Of course, I've said dumber things before and have had to eat my words. But I just want this one to sound timeless, because I want it to be timeless."

—J.L.

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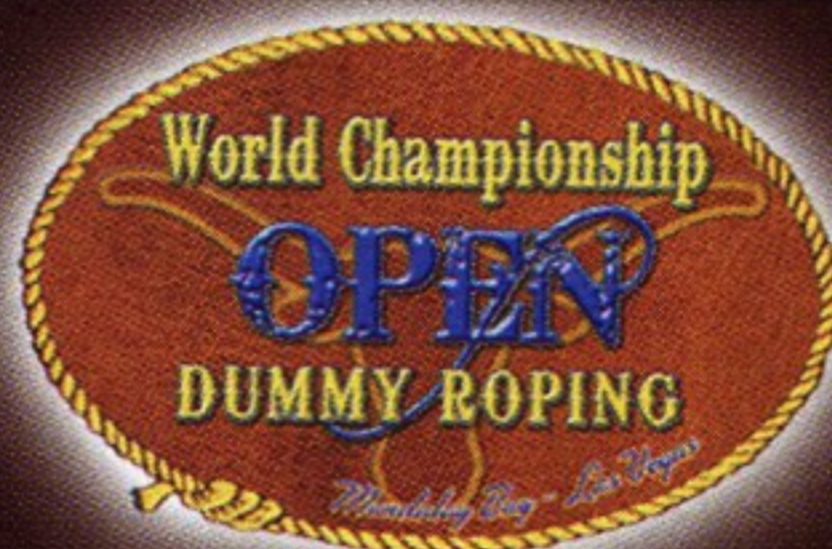
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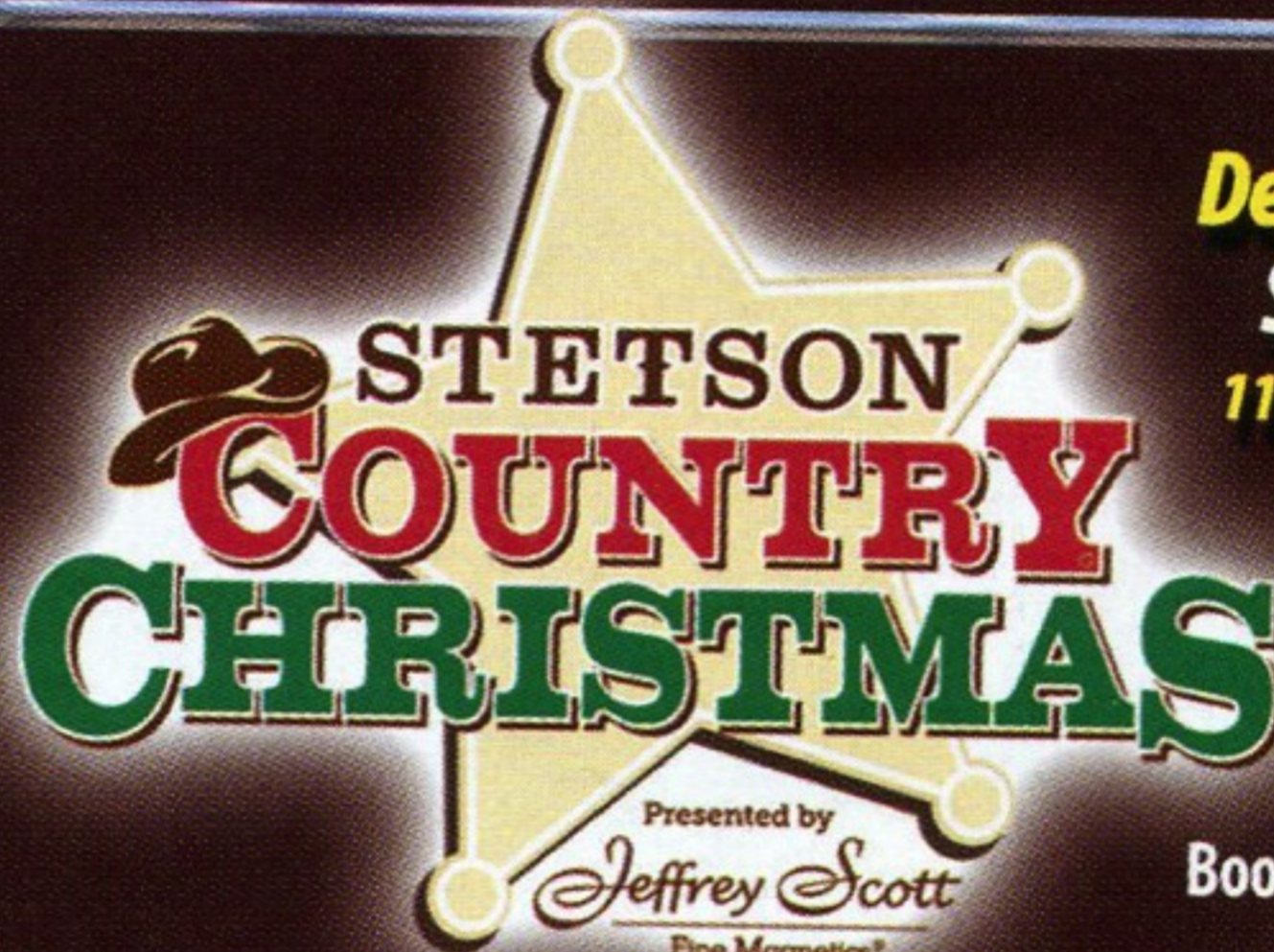
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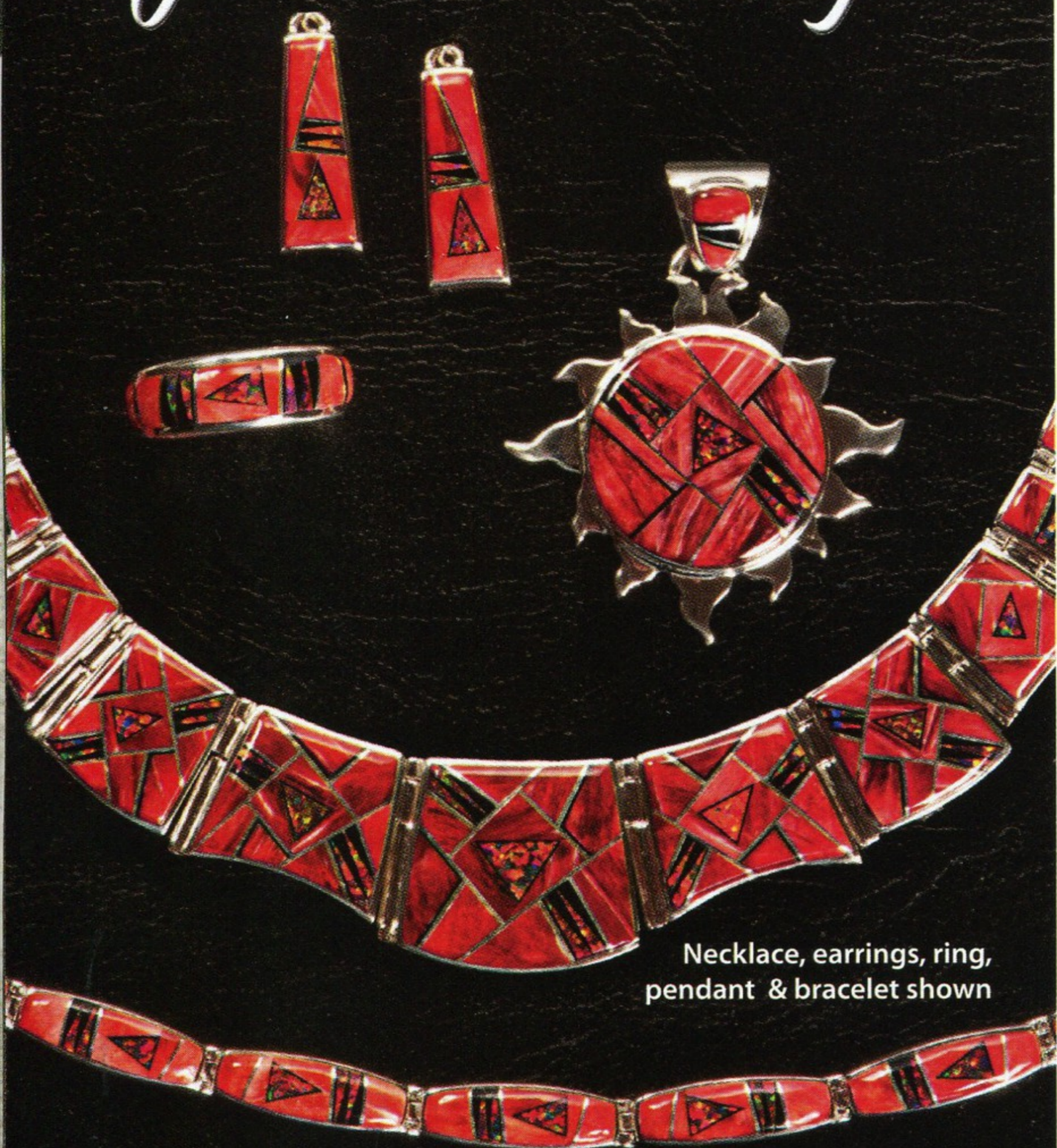
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Shelton sang "America the Beautiful" with his wife, Miranda Lambert, at Super Bowl XLVI last February.

(continued from page 131)

to be all Hollywood. They're all going to have their entourages. They're going to be like people I've never met before. But as it turns out, we all have so much in common, it's frightening.

I'd say we all let our guards down about halfway through season one. And now, especially that we're into season three, I've never seen the four of us closer than we are now and working as well together. We really are all good friends off-camera. And there's a reason why we all hang out together a lot and we have parties and stuff. Those aren't requirements—those are things that happen because we're friends and we like to be around each other. It's fun. And we have a lot to talk about. Yeah, you do see us fight and argue a lot on-camera. And we do really get [mad] at each other—it's not a joke. But I don't know anybody who's been friends with somebody who didn't do that. It just so happens that we do it in front of the camera.

C&I: You were already well-established on the country music scene when *The Voice* came along. But it wasn't until you were showcased on the show that you charted your first No. 1 album, *Red River Blue*.

Shelton: That's very true.

C&I: On *The Voice*, of course, you judge and coach other people's voices, but let's talk about your own music. What really stands out on your greatest-hits CD, *Loaded: The Best of Blake Shelton*, is the variety. Do you think the diversity of your songs might have kept people from figuring out what you're all about earlier on?

Shelton: [Laughs.] I have no doubt—no doubt—that me being all over the map musically is why I've had so many ups and downs in my career. But it's also what's kept me around. And it's also what probably kept radio [station programmers] at least interested in me, to see what I was coming up with next. Whether they loved it or hated it, there was always just enough success now and then for them to be interested.

C&I: But you have no regrets?

Shelton: None. Yeah, I was all over the map. And I think in some ways I still am. I think they've just accepted that that's who I am. You know what I mean? See, I love music. And I didn't grow up with just one favorite singer. I didn't even grow up with one favorite genre. There was a time when I was younger when I liked what my brother liked. And a lot of that was Van Halen and AC/DC. And then when he kind of got

off that and started listening to Hank Williams Jr., I listened to Hank Williams Jr. So by the time I got to high school, pretty much all I listened to was country.

But it was because of all those different influences, and things that I learned because I was so interested in music, that I couldn't imagine having just one sound or one style. So that's why I ended up with a song like "Austin," which is a contemporary type of country love song, and then having a hit with a song like "Ol' Red." And "Some Beach," which is basically a novelty song. All these early hits I had because I was trying all kinds of things. The last thing I wanted to do was copy myself because that wasn't interesting to me. I didn't really feel I was accomplishing anything by doing the same thing over and over again. I wasn't

going to do it, even though it almost took me out of the game.

And now that I look back, I figure that's the reason I am where I am now—because of my willingness to keep looking for what the next thing is. But I also think that's what took me so long to get here. Because it's hard to develop that hard-core fan base when they can't figure out what in the hell it is you stand for. [Laughs.] I think the message with me is, what I

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stand for is, man, I love music. Just flat-out love music. All kinds of music. And if I can sing it, and I feel like I can sing it good, then I'm probably going to try it.

C&I: Last year, a couple months after your marriage to Miranda Lambert, you were profiled in *The New York Times* during a particularly busy patch in your life. In that article, there was an account of your sitting down to consult with your managers and saying: "I've got to spend some time with my wife." And one of them said, "It's probably only going to get worse from here." Well, did it?

Shelton: No. And that was probably the worst thing he could have said to me at the time. Because it made me think, You know what? I'm not in jail. I'm not going to let this thing control me. I'm going to control it. And anybody who doesn't see it that way or doesn't agree with it, they better find somebody else to work with. Because, you know, this is my life. And I don't want to die next week and think, Aw, [bleep], I didn't do all the stuff I wanted to do. I didn't spend some time with people I wanted to spend some time with because I was so wrapped up in trying to be the most popular person in the world.

I think I even said in that article that I'm not willing to do the things that it would take to be the most popular artist in the world. Hell, no. That's just dumb to me. That means I don't have a life. That means my career is my life. And my career is not my life. Music is important to me and it's what I do. And it'll always be what I do. But I also have friends; I also have family. I also have hobbies and things that keep me sane and grounded. Those are important to me, too. And I just won't let this take over my life.

C&I: What, never?

Shelton: [Laughs.] There are months when it does. But there are other months when they can't find me on the phone. They don't know where I'm at. And I don't care how important the conference call is that they have lined up for me. I couldn't care less how imperative this meeting is that they need. Because that's for them. That's not for me. If I can't be found, if I'm off doing something that I want to do—that's what's important right then.

C&I: It must be great to share your life with someone who knows exactly what pressures you're under, and how many demands are placed on your time. On the other hand, are there ever times when one of you is singing about having a fight with your lover, or cheating on your spouse, or wanting to shoot your significant other, and you're tempted to ask, "Uh, honey, is there something you want to talk to me about?"

Shelton: Not at all. There never have been those moments because we know who we are, and we know who each other is. When Miranda writes a song, she pulls from a lot of different things that she's seen happen in her life. And that's impressive. It's great that she didn't necessarily have to go through those things in order to write about them and still be

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close to them. As a matter of fact, Miranda will be the first to tell you that she's full of [bleep] a lot of times in her songs when she puts herself in the first person. But she still means what she has to say. That's no different from me with "Ol' Red" —I never went to jail. Or with "The Baby" —my mom never died. But I've had a lot of loss in my life. And that's how you connect with a song. You put your situation into whatever the lyrics are.

C&I: You were quoted in the same New York Times profile as saying, "If you're not polarizing, you failed." What did you mean by that?

Shelton: All of us as human beings have certain things that we believe in, that are important to us, that the next person could take serious issue with. Whether we're talking about politics or gun rights or abortion. Whatever it is, we have our opinions that the person next to us probably disagrees with. And I think as artists—if you're going to *be* an artist—if you take the time to walk the line and straddle the fence, then what the [bleep] are you ever doing it for? Are you doing it just to hear yourself on the radio? Are you doing it to try and make some money? Because guess

what? You won't. Because people aren't that dumb. You're not becoming a person that anybody can relate to. You're just becoming background music.

C&I: What would you suggest to somebody stuck in that rut?

Shelton: Well, you have to ask yourself: How do you in any way, shape, or form make a difference to anybody—whether it be for your audience or yourself? What are you doing? Why are you doing this? Think about the artists who made you want to make music at some point. Think about what they stood for, and what the important songs they ever did were, and why they mattered to you. That's what I mean by "you've got to be polarizing."

Look, some of my favorite artists are people like Hank Williams

Jr. I can't think of a more polarizing artist. And, hell no, I don't always agree with everything he stands for or what he has to say. But I'll be damned if I don't respect him for standing up and being who he is. You know what I mean? That's what I mean by being an artist. If you don't stand out, then you're going to blend in. And there's nothing worse than blending in if you're trying to be an artist.

"I've had a lot of loss in my life. And that's how you connect with a song. You put your situation into whatever the lyrics are."

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