

MEN'S JOURNAL

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SPECIAL REPORT

BUILDING SUPER ATHLETES

The New Science of High Performance

THE YEAR'S BEST CAMERAS

From DSLRs to Phones

Natural Born Hell-Raiser

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NATURAL BORN HELL-RAISER

Blake Shelton may be best known as the vodka-drinking, alligator-skin-boot-wearing star of *The Voice*, but when he's not in Hollywood, the country singer goes off the grid — hunting and fishing on his ranch in Oklahoma.

BY JOSH EELLS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SELIGER

BLAKE SHELTON is cruising down Sunset Boulevard in the passenger seat of a silver Escalade, squinting in the California sun, when he realizes that he's lost. "Where exactly in L.A. are we right now?" he asks his tour manager, Kevin Canady, sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hollywood," Canady says. "The house is up that way" — he points to the Hills — "and there's Chick-fil-A right there."

"Oh, OK," says Shelton, regaining his bearings. "We had lunch there the other day."

Not every big-time TV star navigates Hollywood using chicken-sandwich franchises as landmarks. But Shelton is not your everyday big-time TV star. "I like California," he says, "but I'm dyed-in-the-wool Oklahoma. I see a deer in L.A., and everybody's standing around it taking pictures. Back home, that's the enemy!"

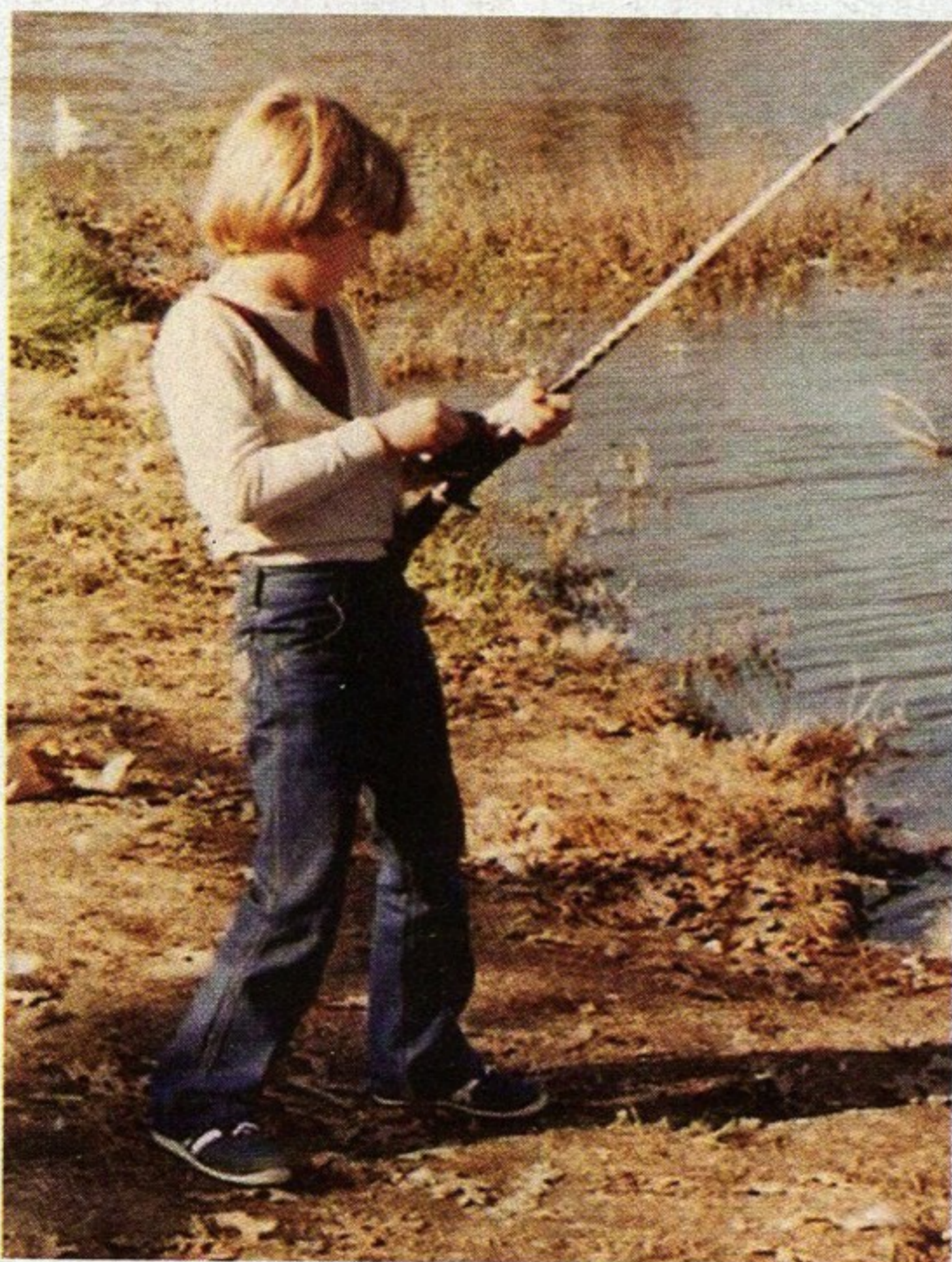
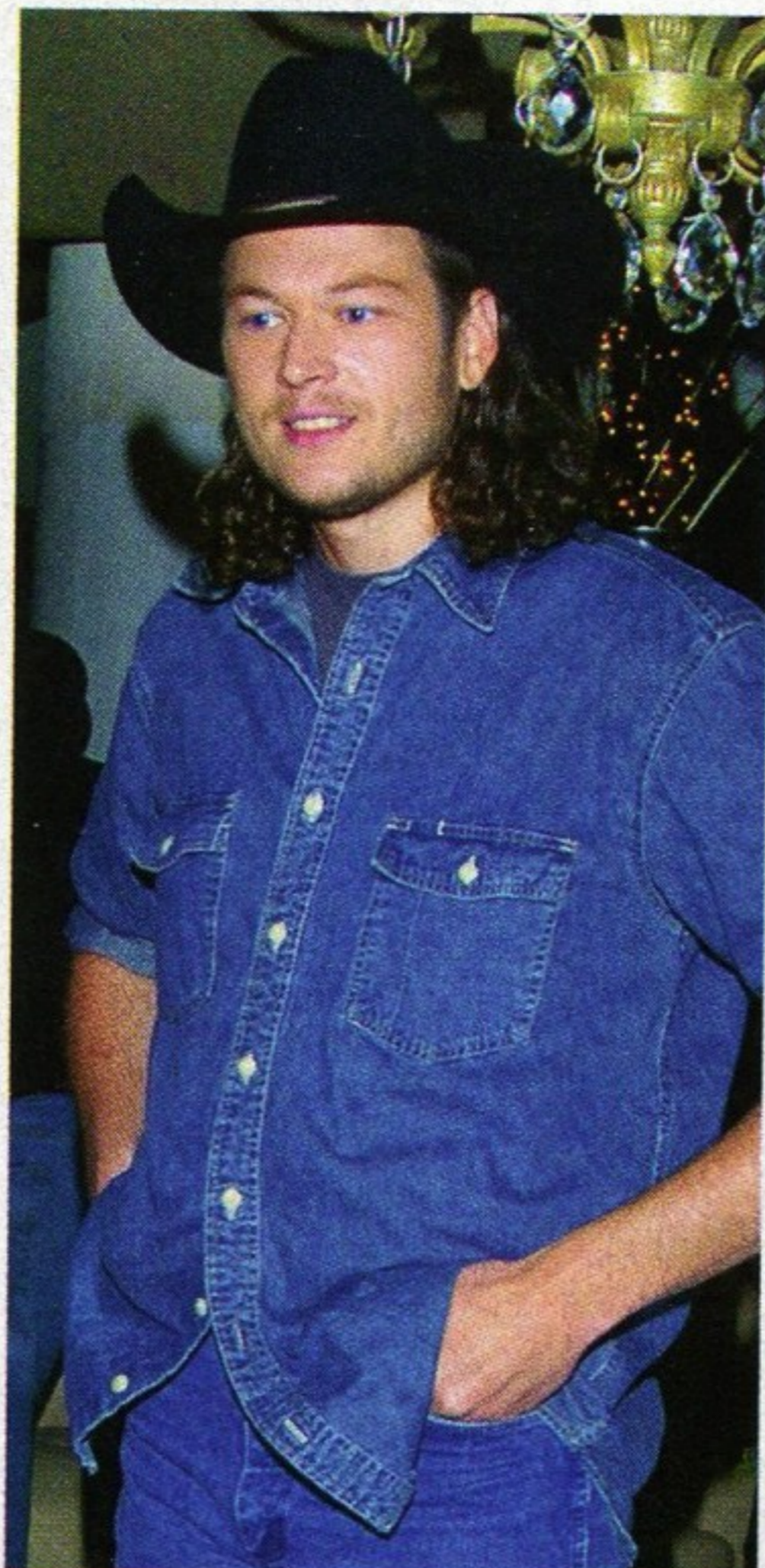
Shelton has been in L.A. since 2010, when he was cast on *The Voice* — NBC's smash-hit reality singing show, which knocked off *American Idol*





and almost single-handedly changed the network's fortunes — and subsequently went from being a modestly popular country singer to the breakout star on the biggest show of the year. Nowadays Shelton spends about six months of the year here — along with his wife, Miranda Lambert, when she's not on tour — but he still couldn't get from the 101 to the 405. "I've driven in L.A. probably three times," he says. "I'm a slug in L.A. I literally leave the show, go to the house, and shut the gate. The only people's houses that I've been to in L.A. are [*Voice* star] Adam Levine's, [*Voice* star] Christina Aguilera's, [*Voice* executive producer] Mark Burnett's, and Michael Bublé's."

He doesn't like sushi and doesn't get yoga, but Shelton has made a few concessions to California living — like the cold-pressed green juice he drinks once a day, mostly so he can make jokes about his bowel movements. But he refuses to buy a



Clockwise from top left: Shelton in 2004, on the rise in Nashville; in 2011 with his father, Dick, who died a year later; with his wife, Miranda, at their wedding in Texas, where guests dined on venison they'd shot themselves; at age 8, bass fishing in Oklahoma

house here for the same reason he won't get a medical-dispensary card, even though he's not opposed to the occasional pot cookie or brownie. "That would mean I'd have to be a resident," he says. "And I can't bring myself to do that. There's something about owning a house here that makes it official. My buddy Cinco doesn't even call me Blake anymore," he adds ruefully. "He calls me 'Big City.'" And yes, Shelton is totally the kind of guy who has a buddy named Cinco.

Out on the sidewalk, a girl with bright pink hair is waiting for a bus in cutoff short-shorts. Shelton stares at her. "Look how skinny that girl's legs are," he says. "I wonder if that's her natural color."

Right now Shelton is on his way to lunch at his favorite Mexican place before report-

ing to the set of *The Voice*. The restaurant is on Sunset, right across from Guitar Center, and it's called El Compadre — "Home of the Flaming Margarita." Canady pulls the truck into an alley, and Shelton climbs out, a lanky 6-foot-5 in faded Wranglers and alligator-skin boots, with slightly graying hair that he refuses to dye. Shelton is one of those fortunate souls who looks better at 37 than he did at 26, the age when he came roaring out of Nashville as a cowboy-hatted pretty boy with blue eyes, a baby face, and long brown curls. He's grown into himself, and now looks a little like Leonardo DiCaprio's

redneck cousin. On his left forearm there's a tattoo that Shelton designed himself, one night when he was in no condition to be designing tattoos — they were supposed to be deer tracks, but everyone kept mistaking them for ladybugs, so he added some barbed wire to make it more manly.

Inside, Shelton orders huevos rancheros and a margarita on the rocks, which, as advertised, is delivered *en fuego*. ("Well, it is L.A. . . .," Shelton says, with a shit-eating grin.)

But this is also a working lunch: Two days earlier, an F5 tornado tore through Moore, Oklahoma, flattening the neighborhood where his sister used to live. "I spent three Christmases there," he says. "That elementary school" — the one where seven children were killed — "is the one my niece would have been at." As soon as he heard, he started organizing a benefit for the next week.

Shelton's big heart is one of the reasons viewers have fallen in love with him on *The Voice*. In the first season, when one of the kids he was mentoring reached the finals, and the dress she wanted exceeded

Contributing editor JOSH EELLS profiled Mark Ruffalo in the June issue.

STYLING BY ANNIE PSALTRAS FOR THE WALL GROUP & TRISH TOWNSEND. GROOMING BY AMANDA LEIGH CRAIG. PROP STYLING BY ANDY HENBEST FOR FRANK REPS. PRODUCTION BY RUTH LEVY. PREVIOUS SPREAD: BLAKE WEARS SHIRT BY LEVVIS. JEANS BY ARIAT. THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARK SULLIVAN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY BLAKE SHELTON; ROBERT EVANS; COURTESY BLAKE SHELTON

the wardrobe budget, Shelton paid for it himself. "Yeah, I spoil them pretty bad," he says. "But, shit, man, this business is hard. And I've been real lucky." America also loves Shelton for how much of a shit he *doesn't* give. This bow-hunting, tractor-driving, straight shooter who spikes his on-camera Starbucks cup with a splash of vodka and isn't afraid to admit that his wife is tougher than he is, has charmed his way into the nation's living rooms like no male country star in recent memory. On a program with no shortage of outsize characters, Shelton's laid-back antics steal the show, like a guy who wandered onto the set after a few drinks at happy hour and decided to stick around a while. "The guy is just pure positive energy," says Levine. "He has this kind of punk-rock mentality, where he's not afraid to speak his mind, not afraid to say the wrong thing. It's a huge part of his success: What you get is different than what you're expecting."

Back in the car on the way to the studio in Burbank, he hops on the phone with the benefit's producer to start nailing down the lineup. "I don't want it to be, like, depressing," he says. "More triumphant — something heartwarming." He also wants to keep it all Oklahoma country artists if they can: "Carrie [Underwood] said she wants to do it," Shelton says. "And I sent you an email — we need to get Garth." The producer says they're also talking to Toby Keith, but he's potentially doing a benefit of his own. "Tell Toby I'll do his concert if he'll do mine," Shelton says. Then he mentions that Usher might be interested, too, although he's neither Oklahoman nor a country artist. "I'm not that smart," Shelton says, "but I'm smart enough to know that if Usher wants to help you, you let him."

A few blocks from Hollywood High, the Escalade passes a big billboard for *La Voz Kids*, a Spanish-language children's version of *The Voice* that airs on Telemundo. One of the stars, a Mexican singer with a beard and a cowboy hat named Roberto Tapia, seems to bear a striking resemblance to his gringo counterpart. "He looks a lot like you!" Canady says. "He might be a little thinner, though." In the passenger seat, Shelton cracks up. Then the light up ahead turns red, Canady slows to a stop, and a Starline Tours van pulls up alongside the SUV, with a dozen camera-toting tourists in the back. "Aw, shit," Shelton says, and slinks down into his seat.

BACK IN HIS TRAILER, Shelton mixes himself a drink: vodka and club soda in a red Solo cup, with a couple of drops of stevia for sweetener. He prefers diet cherry 7-Up, but Lambert encouraged him to switch a

couple of weeks ago. "She says it's healthier," he shrugs. On the show and in real life, Shelton's drinking is a running joke; he's happiest when he's got a buzz on, but he often plays it up for comedic effect. ("He likes to make people think he's drunk, but I've never seen that boy drunk in my life," his mom says.) Shelton says he's just trying to do his part. "I get frustrated with Adam because, to me, rock stars are supposed to be drunk all the time. But he's very healthy. He takes care of himself. And it drives me crazy, because I want him to be more like me. Drunk all the time."

Though the kids competing are the nominal draw, Shelton and Levine's playful rapport is the real star of the show — Simon and Paula, but actually funny. They're a great odd couple: the tattooed rock star with his collection of Harleys and the drawling country singer with his beat-up Chevy pickup. "But here's the difference," Shelton says. "I can change a flat."

"ONE THING SPECIAL ABOUT ME," SHELTON SAYS OF HIS POPULARITY ON THE VOICE, "IS THAT I SEEM FAMILIAR. PEOPLE FEEL LIKE I LIVE NEXT DOOR."

Shelton grew up in the small town of Ada, in south-central Oklahoma. His dad, Dick, ran a used car lot. His mom, Dorothy, owned a beauty shop. Shelton liked to hang out when he was young, teasing and flirting with the customers. "That's where I learned to bullshit with girls," he says — although his sister, Endy, remembers things a little differently. "He didn't look quite like he does now," she laughs. "He was a little chubbier, he had a mullet going on, glasses. He didn't have too much success."

From almost the time he could walk, Shelton loved being outdoors, catching bugs, digging under rocks. The Sheltons lived on five acres, with a creek running through the back, where Shelton used to catch turtles and crawdads. He brought home so many frogs that his mom started calling him Toad. (Sometimes she still does.) "We had to drag him into the house at night," she recalls. "He loved all animals: grasshoppers, locusts, lizards, snakes, worms. One time I had a flyswatter and I killed a fly, and he cried." In junior high, Shelton had two pet raccoons. His mom thought he'd grow up to be a veterinarian or a forest ranger.

Shelton was the baby of the family, and he loved being the center of attention. He played a lot of pranks — like propping a

roadkill deer in the driver's side of his buddy's pickup — and was repeatedly voted class clown. He never played sports ("I'm too big of a puss, man") and never got into trouble ("I was too afraid"). At school, he used to waltz into shop class singing Christmas carols at the top of his lungs, even in May. When he was 15, he got invited to perform at a weekly revue at a theater in downtown Ada, where he learned how to work a stage and to sell a joke. "Being in front of an audience never fazed him," his sister says. "The way he is on camera now is exactly the way he was when he was 10 years old."

For a while, Shelton figured he'd go into construction after graduation — "I was always fascinated with backhoes and bulldozers and shit like that" — but by the time he hit 17, there wasn't even a Plan B. "I was just focused on being a country singer." Two weeks after his high school graduation, Shelton piled his possessions into the back of a pickup and moved to Nashville. "It was

a cold shock," he recalls. "It was the biggest city I'd ever been to." He got a \$300 apartment and a job painting signs; some family friends had to cosign for his gas and electric hookups, because he was too young. Eventually he started getting work singing on demo tapes for other songwriters, which made him enough money to pay rent and buy beer, which was all he needed. He finally got a record deal of his own, five years later, in 1998. His first single, the tearjerker "Aus-

tin," went to number one on the country charts for five weeks straight. "That song came out, and I was like, 'Fuck — this is easy!'" Shelton says, laughing. "And then the next single came out, and it died a horrible death."

Shelton plugged away for the next several years, never the biggest star but always working, a Nashville journeyman with a string of lighthearted hits like "Some Beach" (say it with a drawl) and "The More I Drink" (next line: "... the more I drink"). "I've only had one platinum album, and it's *Red River Blue*," he says — the first released after *Voice* mania took off. "I've always had just enough success to buy me some more tour dates and another record. I was always this close to going to the next level, and I owe it to the show for sure."

When the producers of *The Voice* first approached Shelton's agent, after seeing him do some funny guest appearances on another reality competition and some awards shows, Shelton turned them down flat. He only relented when he heard Christina Aguilera had signed on. "I was like, 'Fuck, who am I to be the holdout?'" he says. "I'm the country guy nobody's ever heard of." He credits his breakout success to the fact that you don't usually see good old boys like him in network TV's New York- and L.A.-centric

world. "Sometimes I think they don't know who all of us are in the middle," he says. "If there's one thing special about me, it's that I seem familiar. People feel like I live next door."

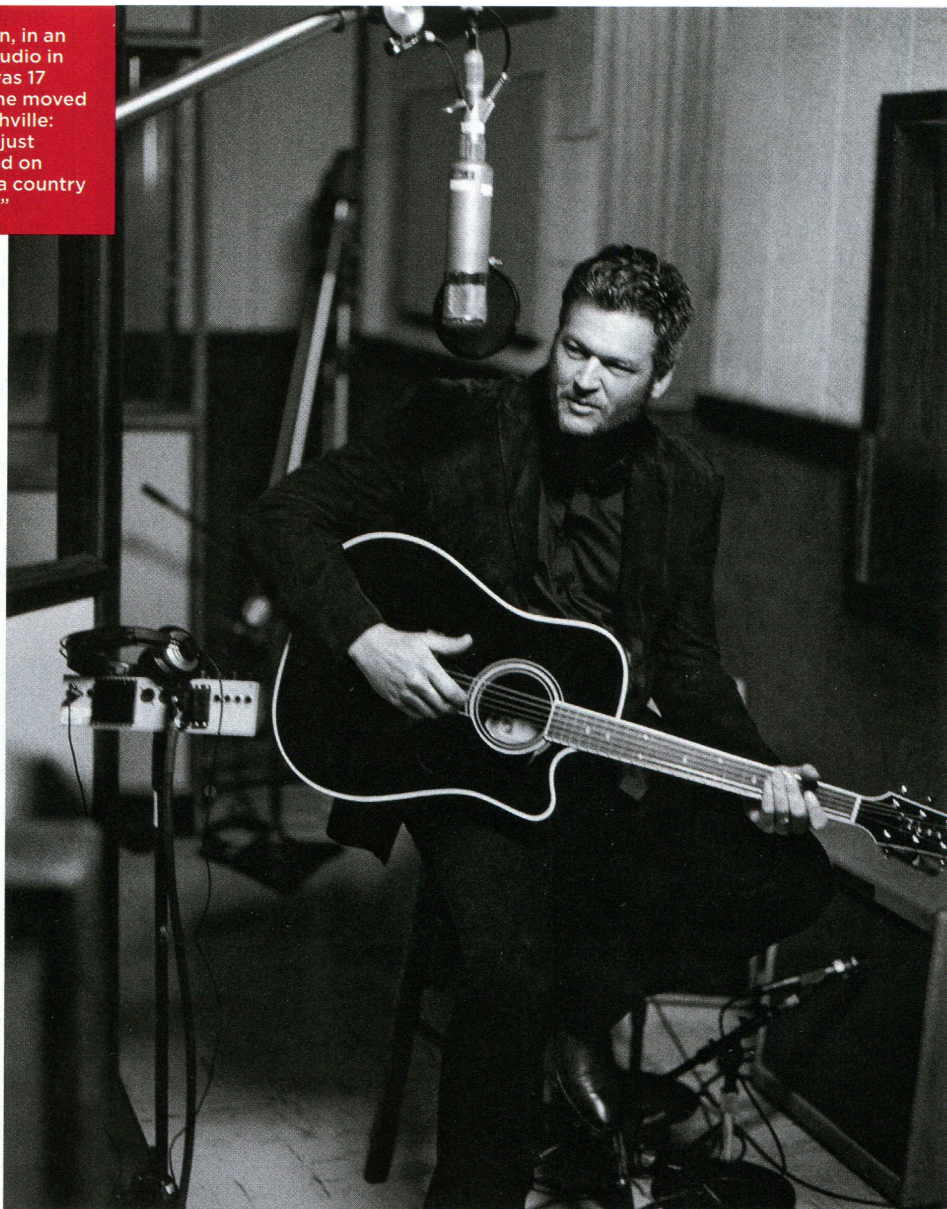
Shelton represents a kind of modernized throwback — an open-minded country dude who takes you quail hunting, and then comes home and cooks the quail with biscuits and gravy. "Not many men in this world know how to make gravy," says Jayson "Buck" Gray, who's been friends with Shelton since he was 10, when they would go bass fishing at a pond near Shelton's house. Later, Shelton was a groomsman in Gray's wedding; Gray still laughs about how Shelton drove overnight from Wisconsin to Oklahoma after a show, just in time to make the wedding, jumping out of his truck to ask, "Hey man, you got some black socks?" He's one of the last country musicians who "really bought into the idea of the cowboy hat," Gray adds. "He knows when to wear a felt hat and when to wear a straw one."

A few weeks after he left home and moved to Nashville, Shelton got a letter in the mail from his dad. "It was like five pages thick," he recalls. "The first couple lines said, 'Hey, I didn't get a chance to tell you some things that I wanted to tell you about entering the world,' and as soon as I read that, I folded it back up." He had a great relationship with his dad, but he was a headstrong teenager, and wanted to make it on his own. "I didn't want to hear it," he says. "I was 17. I didn't want to be told what to do."

Shelton tossed the letter aside and forgot about it, and eventually lost it. But as he got older, he thought about it a lot, and how he'd do anything to be able to read it. Then last year, his father died, after a long battle with lung disease. "It got to the point where he was choking to death," Shelton says. "One day the doctor came in, and Dad said, 'Can you make me go to sleep and not wake up?' So they took him off the ventilator and gave him some morphine for pain. They said it could be a couple of days. But he went to sleep and died in like three or four hours."

A few days later, Shelton was going through some of his things when he found a relic from his Nashville days. "It was one of those cans you get at Christmas, with four different types of popcorn. And if I did one thing right when I was 17, it was saving

Shelton, in an L.A. studio in May, was 17 when he moved to Nashville: "I was just focused on being a country singer."



that letter inside that can." Shelton sat down to read the letter for the first time. A lot of it was practical, nuts-and-bolts stuff: how to save money, how credit cards work. "But there was also a lot of shit about how to treat people," he says. "How to get respect. How to look people in the eye and how to shake their hand. Basically, how to be a man in the world." As Shelton read the letter, full of things his dad never would have said in person, he was floored. "It was like I was having a conversation with him I never had."

Shelton says nothing made his dad happier than feeling like he was helping somebody out. "It just gave him a burst of energy," he says. Near the end, when the pain was getting to be too much to take, he and Lambert had gone to visit him at the hospital. "I remember him laying there in the bed, and he really couldn't even talk," Shelton says. "And Miranda was standing there, and he was trying to get her attention — and I really

don't even know how he said it. But he got her down there, and he whispered: 'Don't forget to renew your tags.'"

SHELTON AND LAMBERT met at the taping for a TV special in 2005, when Shelton was still married to his first wife, a girl from Ada he'd known since he was 17. ("Looking back, it was just the wrong thing all around," he says of that first marriage. "I married my buddy.") They're a funny couple in person — Shelton is a full foot taller, and Lambert's melted-butter face looks way too sweet for his devilish grin — but she loves his sense of humor, and he loves her peanut-butter pie. Shelton also knows how to handle Lambert, who's famously sung about setting a cheating ex-boyfriend on fire and menacing an abusive one with her shotgun (a song she wrote in her concealed-handgun class). "I don't give her too much shit," he

says, smiling. "That's like poking a bear."

But he says he was never intimidated by Lambert, despite her fiery rep. "She's as lovable as can be — until you cross her. She'll go from zero to 100 real quick. If Miranda has an inkling you're saying something hardass to her, it's gonna be a problem." Recently, Shelton says, she got into it at a Nashville bar with someone he'll only identify as "the lead singer of a very popular rock band." The guy was drunk and said something out of line to Lambert, and she threw a drink on him. Shelton quickly got in between them, but insists no actual punches were thrown. "I'm a lover," he says, "not a fighter."

Shelton proposed to Lambert during a fishing trip in 2010, on his property. They were both wearing camo. They got married the next year at a ranch outside San Antonio; the bride wore her mom's white wedding gown and cowboy boots, and the groom wore a new pair of Wranglers. They exchanged vows under an archway made of antlers and, at the reception, dined on venison they'd shot themselves, washing it down with Champagne in Mason jars. They honeymooned at Shelton's ranch, where they went bass fishing again. Afterward, they gave their wedding photos to *Us Weekly*, which put them on the cover.

Now the Lambert-Sheltons live in Johnston County, Oklahoma, near a small town called Tishomingo, or Tish for short. It's 45 minutes from Shelton's hometown. "It's pretty sleepy," Shelton says. "There's the Dollar General, on Main Street, and a Family Dollar. And if you can't find what you need there, you're fucked — the closest Walmart is in Madill, 15 miles away." Shelton moved there in 2006, after 12 years in Nashville. He and Lambert have built up a small prairie fiefdom: a 1,200-acre ranch that they live on, a 2,100-acre ranch nearby, and the 700-acre ranch over in the next zip code that Lambert bought when they were dating. Lambert also owns a clothing and antique shop in downtown Tish, called the Pink Pistol, and recently bought a two-story building across the street, which tabloids reported she's planning to turn into a bed-and-breakfast. "When that story came out, I remember reading it like, 'Man, look at this bullshit,'" Shelton says. "And she was like, 'That one's actually true.'"

These days the couple are tabloid fixtures, to Shelton's dismay and occasional amusement. "Did you know we're having twins?" he asks, guffawing about the latest cover scoop. Still, they try to keep as low a profile as possible for a Kim-and-Kanye-level power couple. A hot date means throwing a cooler in the back of the pickup and driving around the property clearing brush and singing to the radio, or watching *Flip This House* (if

she's got the remote) or *The Golden Girls* (if he does), or else having dinner at the all-you-can-eat rib buffet and dessert at Dairy Queen. On a really big weekend, they'll take the boat out on Lake Texoma. "When we get home, we like to be *home*," Shelton says. "We turn the TV to one of those music channels, *Willie's Place* or whatever, make drinks, and just talk shit about people."

During the season, Shelton gets home every chance he gets, taking a private jet back to the little airstrip in nearby Durant, where he parks his truck. "As soon as we're

got to school and Dad pulled me out of class, I thought, 'Oh shit. *That's* what I heard.'" As it turned out, Richie had been in the car with his girlfriend when they slammed into the back of a school bus. "One of those things," Shelton says. The girlfriend was driving, Richie was in the passenger seat, and her four-year-old son was in the back. "It was a three-casket funeral," says Shelton, a catch in his throat. "They buried him on his fifth birthday."

Shelton's dad always said he should write a song about his brother, but Blake was resistant. "He thought it was tacky," his sister says. "He didn't want to exploit it." But one day Shelton and Lambert happened to see a TV biography about Shelton. She started asking some questions about his brother, and pretty soon, they were crying and writing a song about him. "I can hardly even remember writing it," he says. In the end, he decided it would be too hard to sing on-stage every night. Lambert recorded it instead, and put it

out when Shelton's dad was still alive. "So he got to see it going up the charts," Shelton says. "That was pretty cool."

His friends and family say that's the kind of influence Lambert has had on Shelton. "That's probably Miranda's doing," his sister says. "Getting him to show a little bit of a softer side, be more emotional. Not just be the funny guy all the time."

A FEW DAYS LATER, Shelton is backstage at the show, wearing a baseball cap and drinking a green juice. He'd been back in Oklahoma all weekend working on the benefit. Underwood wasn't coming ("When I read she donated a million dollars, I was like, well, that's *her* part"), and neither were Toby Keith or Garth Brooks, but he'd lined up Reba McEntire and Vince Gill, and had a ringer in Lambert. (When the show aired live two days later, it raised more than \$6 million.)

But mostly, Shelton spent the weekend driving around the property, spraying his garden with weed killer and planting alfalfa. "It's still too wet to plant, really," he says. "But alfalfa's just little tiny seeds, so you can plant it and hope it don't wash away." He says he's never been too good at planting. "I'm better at soybeans, squash, corn — stuff you can't really fuck up." He's hoping to get some sorghum in by the end of the year, and a bunch of watermelons, "just 'cause they're fun to plant. I read about how you're supposed to plant them," he says. "These fucking mounds. But that's too complicated. I just plow the ground and sling the seeds out there, and about half of them come up." He nods, satisfied. "I can live with that." **M**

HIS FIRST SINGLE WENT TO NUMBER ONE ON THE COUNTRY CHARTS. "I WAS LIKE — THIS IS EASY!" SHELTON SAYS, LAUGHING. "THEN THE NEXT SONG DIED A HORRIBLE DEATH."

done on Wednesdays, my ass is on the plane," he says. Just setting foot in Oklahoma is an instant refresher: "It's just like plugging in your phone," he says. "I get in my truck, I see the fields, see the cows." He'll play with the dogs Lambert has rescued from the side of the road (upward of six, at last count, including a new one she just named Sasha Fierce — "She worships Beyoncé"), or check on the horses and pigs she keeps at their place. He goes from his truck to his tractor and back again.

"When he's home, he's just this normal good ol' country boy," says his mom, who lives on their 1,200-acre ranch and makes crafts for Lambert's store. "He helps do the dishes. He'll sweep the floor. He doesn't ever comb his hair. He's just regular Blake."

Levine visited once, and Shelton took him out riding four-wheelers and shooting guns. "I was on my way to this fancy chichi island vacation," he recalls. "And afterwards, I realized I had so much more fun playing beer pong and driving quads with Blake than I did at this five-star resort."

One night, Lambert shows up with Shelton on the set of *The Voice* to perform a tribute to the Oklahoma tornado victims. The song they're singing is one they wrote together, called "Over You," about Shelton's older brother, Richie, who was killed in a car accident when Shelton was 14.

"The guy was my hero," Shelton says. "Talk about worship — he was the coolest guy on Earth." Richie took him fishing and gave him his collection of old country 45s.

Shelton can still remember the exact moment of the accident. "I was standing outside, waiting for a buddy to pick me up for school, and I heard all these ambulances go by. I didn't think anything of it. When I