

BLAKE SHELTON

STARTIN' FIRES

With the success of his 2008 chart-topper "Home," Blake Shelton took a long career step forward. With the release of *Startin' Fires*, he leaps to a whole new level.

"Home" took Shelton into new musical territory, stretching him vocally and stylistically, helping him expand his audience to include those who might have missed the more traditional approach he'd taken to that point. *Startin' Fires*, his fifth album, completes that journey, establishing him in the process as one of country music's most talented and versatile song stylists.

"This is something I've been wanting to do," he says, "exploring richer melodies and challenging myself as a singer."

Perhaps nowhere is his success more evident than in the project's first single.

"'She Wouldn't Be Gone' is definitely not the typical cut you'd hear on one of my albums," he says. "It's got a lot of minor chords and a unique melody for country music. Vocally, it's one of the tougher songs I'll ever sing and I love that. You have to have the right song and the right timing to do that, and 'Home' kind of opened the door for me."

Long-time fans will find that Shelton honors his roots as well. Long known for the way he wraps his rich baritone around both emotion-laden ballads like "Austin" and "The Baby" and light-hearted party anthems like "Some Beach" and "The More I Drink," he tackles songs about country life and attitudes with more joyful assurance than ever, bringing his personality to bear on the record as never before.

"I think this album is probably more autobiographical than anything I've ever done," he says. "While *Pure BS* was a kind of reflection of what I was going through at the time, this album is a reflection of who I am and the things I love and always have--driving back roads, drinking beer, being outdoors. Hell, I finally found a song that has deer in it and that tickled me. People know these things about me, but I've never really had that in my music, and I'm finally dumping myself onto my album. It's about who I am personally, and I hope other people can relate to it.

That autobiographical tone kicks off the album in the rollicking Craig Wiseman/George Teren barnburner "Green."

"That's what I do," he says of the song's rural images. "I sit with my guitar, plant corn and watch the deer and hawks. When I left the house this morning, there was camouflage hanging on the clothesline--as redneck as it gets. And it's funny, the lifestyle I've lived for years and years has become the new green movement. It's my favorite song on the album because I can sing that with a big smile on my face, confident that people are getting a hundred percent who I am as a person."

The album has plenty of all the elements that make Shelton the multidimensional artist he is today--soaring melodies, passionate lyrics, a bit of romance, and songs that celebrate the country life.

"I think this album takes things a step above where they have been," he says. "It shows me as the artist I've always wanted to be, which is somebody with a fresh sound that when you hear it, you think, 'That's got Blake Shelton's stamp on it.'"

To that end, songs like "She Wouldn't Be Gone" and "I'll Just Hold On" are twin showcases for the challenging vocal approach Blake is taking, while "100 Miles" has its own riches both vocally and emotionally. Blake is at his romantic best in "Here I Am," which he co-wrote with Dean Dillon, and "This Is Gonna Take All Night." The classic sound that has nailed down his country bona fides is evident in "Never Lovin' You," and there is his trademark down-home wit and the celebration of the country life in songs like "Home Sweet Home" and "Country Strong."

"Good At Starting Fires" will be widely seen as an ode to girlfriend Miranda Lambert, but it is on the album's closer, "Bare Skin Rug," that the musical riches inherent in that relationship--and the irreverence of which they are capable--get their first full workout following Miranda's splendid harmonies on "Home."

"Everyone expected us to come out with a big power ballad and we did just the opposite," he says. "Obviously, we want to write and record together--we'd be crazy not to. But we certainly wanted to approach it in a way that isn't cheesy. I can get away with things--people expect about anything from me--but Miranda protects her image fiercely. She's the tough girl in country music. We ended up writing a song about a couple of hillbillies who meet up in the mountains. They're young, they're virgins, and, damn it, they're tired of waiting. That's what it is. And we decided, 'Let's just do this how we wrote it.'"

The result, recorded live in front of a friendly campfire, is a modern redneck classic.

Taken as a whole, *Startin' Fires* is a richly nuanced look at one of this generation's most engaging singers and certainly one of its most interesting characters. Last year's star turn on the NBC miniseries *Clash of the Choirs* and Blake's appearance as a judge on *Nashville Star* have helped raise his profile across the board, introducing his irreverently skewed personality to millions of new fans.

It's a long way from Ada, Oklahoma, where he dreamed early on of a career in music. In fact, he once got a bit of inspiration from the man who produced *Startin' Fires*.

"I remember seeing a story on an Oklahoma City TV station about Scott Hendricks," he says. "They said he was an Oklahoma guy who had moved to Nashville and made good, making these huge albums on big artists. I used to think, 'It would be so cool to meet him some day. Maybe he'd give me a shot.' Then, not long ago, he fell in my lap when he became A&R chief at Warner Bros. We decided we wanted to make this record together, and I'm really glad we did."

Blake cut his teeth on the Oklahoma City club circuit while still in high school. He was part of the entertainment for an event in Ada honoring Mae

Axton, writer of the Elvis classic "Heartbreak Hotel." She saw him perform and told Blake she thought he could get a record deal if he moved to Nashville and that she was willing to help. That convinced him to move just two weeks after graduation. He worked with Hoyt Axton, Bobby Braddock and Earl Thomas Conley, among others, en route to his record deal, and his debut single, "Austin," shot him straight to the top of the charts. It also became his first #1 video, a group that would ultimately include "Heavy Liftin'," "Goodbye Time," "Home," "Nobody But Me," "Some Beach," "Don't Make Me," "The More I Drink" and the song that still gets as passionate a reaction as any.

"'Ol' Red' was not a huge hit at radio," he says, "but it's my signature song. To this day, that's the one people hold up signs for in concert."

Thanks to those songs, Blake's stature as a singer has grown steadily through the years, and his presence everywhere from network television to Youtube has raised his profile even more. Now, with the release of *Startin' Fires*, Blake steps into the forefront as both one of the country's premiere vocalists and one of its true personalities. It's a position he declares himself grateful to be in.

"I think," he says with his trademark smile, "that I've got the best of both worlds."

BLAKE SHELTON

Startin' Fires

Song by Song

GREEN—George Teren, Craig Wiseman

Even before I heard the first full line on the demo, I heard Craig Wiseman's voice and it got my attention. When you get songs from Craig, you'd better pay attention, and it was almost as if he sat down and wrote the song about my life. Everything in that song is me, outside of skinny-dipping, which I don't do because of shrinkage.

GOOD AT STARTING FIRES—Sherrie Austin, Will Rambeaux, John Stephan

We laughed when we first heard this song because we knew they'd say it was about Miranda. In fact, when the studio engineer got done mixing it, she said, 'We can make a Youtube video that superimposes you on the "Kerosene" video and my CMA performance, putting out the fires.' It actually reminded me of a 2008 version of "Baby's Got Her Blue Jeans On," the old Mel McDaniel song. I just thought it was a throwback to the music I grew up on.

SHE WOULDN'T BE GONE—Jennifer Adan, Cory Batten

This and "I'll Just Hold On" are the two coolest songs I've ever cut as far as being unique and from a fresh place as far as country music. I love to sing songs about regret--always have--and mistakes you make along the way. It's extremely emotional and has a little different slant on things the guy could have done right along the way.

I'LL JUST HOLD ON—Ben Hayslip, Troy Olsen, Bryan Simpson

There's a little touch of Glen Campbell to that song. Melodically, it really pushes me as a singer. When we got into the studio, Scott Hendricks and I started talking and decided we wanted to try a sitar as the lead instrument in the intro, and that just put a whole different spin on it. It's a real standout and a bright spot for me.

100 MILES—Chris Stapleton, Craig Wiseman

When I heard that song, I stood up and was yelling at people in the room, "Damn it! Do you hear that?! That's awesome. That's the kind of song I want to cut. That's what I want to do." It has the regret I want to sing about, it showcases me as a singer, and it's a throwback--it sounds like it came from a different era.

NEVER LOVIN' YOU—Kendell Marvel, Chris Stapleton

This sounded to me like a song Merle Haggard would have written or recorded, and that was enough for me. I told Scott when we went in to cut it, "Man, I feel like I'm honoring all my heroes by recording this one." Even the intro sounds vintage, and as far as the track goes, that phase shifter on the guitar makes it sound like the song came from Waylon or Merle in 1978 or 79.

COUNTRY STRONG—Rhett Akins, Dallas Davidson, Ben Hayslip

My friend Rhett Akins co-write that. I got a little bit of resistance on it and ended up fighting for it and winning. Yes, you can say you've heard a lot of songs like it, but that song is who I am and who my friends and family and the people I hang out with are. That's our lifestyle and what we do, and that's what I wanted for this album. That's probably the most fun song on the record, just an uptempo feel-good song that stands for who I am.

HOME SWEET HOME—Rhett Akins, Dallas Davidson, Ben Hayslip

This is the other song Rhett co-wrote. Listening to it for the first time, I could feel that stamp of me and my personality and what I love, so much so that after I cut it and had it on the CD listening around the house, Miranda made a slide show on her computer for me with that song as the music and pictures of me and my dad and friends deer hunting and me and her on her farm. It was everything that song is about.

THIS IS GONNA TAKE ALL NIGHT—Chris Dubois, Ashley Gorley

I loved that song for a couple of reasons. First of all, it's just fun to listen to and sing along with. Then, there's a lot of romance to it. It's a pretty sexy song for being so uptempo. I'm definitely trying to explore that part of myself too, the romantic side, and see how people react to that, but this song is just a lot of fun.

HERE I AM—Blake Shelton, Dean Dillon

That's a thing I wrote with Dean Dillon a few years back. I've always loved the song, but we've always been so ballad-heavy on albums I just never put it on record. We discuss it every time I go into the studio but we never got around to it. I promised myself I was going to cut it on this album. Here again, we've got a love song and I'm trying to gear myself toward that, especially the older I get.

I DONT CARE—Casey Beathard, Dean Dillon

This was on the *Pure BS* album. It was one of the ones we wish we could have gotten to as a single, and I knew we'd be kicking ourselves in years to come

if I didn't. We decided to put it on this album as a 12th track, and try to get to it as a single.

BARE SKIN RUG featuring Miranda Lambert—Blake Shelton, Miranda Lambert

We recorded this track sitting around a campfire. It's just me playing guitar and singing and Miranda singing her part. It's not dressed up, tuned or overdubbed. It's just as raw as it can be. People are interested in us and they really want to know what we're like. That's it. That's as raw as it gets, as real as it gets. Scott had a couple of boom mikes set up overhead and that's it. You hear the crickets and the fire just the way it was.