

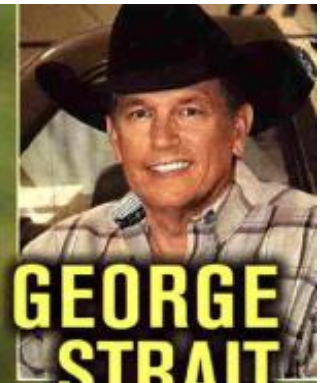
TIM MCGRAW RUNNING FOR GOVERNOR?

COUNTRY

WEEKLY

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JANUARY 26, 2009

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GEORGE STRAIT

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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SAFE HOME

His career is hotter than ever, but what Blake Shelton really cherishes is his precious time at home in Oklahoma with family, friends and girlfriend Miranda Lambert.

STORY BY CHRIS NEAL

When Blake Shelton released his fifth album, *Startin' Fires*, in late November, he did everything he could to let the world know it was out there. He did interviews with all sorts of TV shows, magazines and radio stations, sang on the *Today* show, toured with girlfriend Miranda Lambert—the whole nine yards.

Once that work was done, he disappeared.

For two quiet and peaceful weeks in early December, Blake laid low at his ranch in Tishomingo, Okla., a little town of 3,000 souls located 25 miles above the Texas border and 40 miles below Blake's hometown of Ada, Okla. During those two weeks he got up in the morning, went deer hunting, then came home and did it all over again the next day. "I went into hiding," he confesses. "I didn't even go to the grocery store."

Today he's back at work, going full-tilt in one of the noisiest, most

high-energy cities on earth: Las Vegas, where he's set to perform at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo later tonight. He's not interested in gambling during what little free time he'll have during this visit. "I found out that when I gamble, I just end up drinking a bunch," he admits. "These days, instead of finding an excuse to drink a bunch, I'll just say, 'Tonight I'm gonna drink

a bunch.' I can either spend my money and at least have something in my hand or just throw it completely away." However, he has taken note that there is a Bass Pro Shop here at the Silverton Casino Lodge. "I'll lose more money at a Bass Pro Shop than I will at any craps table," he declares with a chuckle.

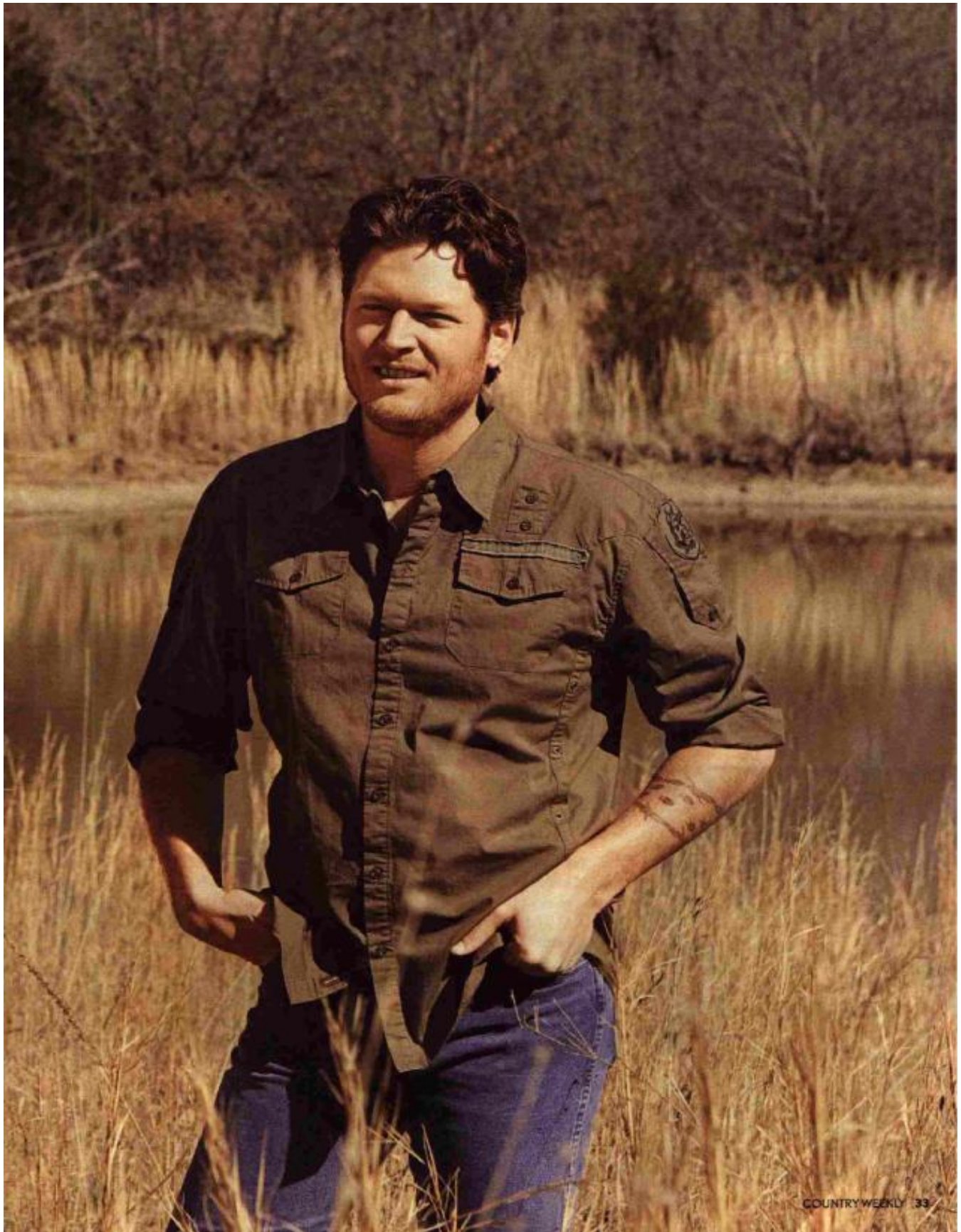
These are the extremes of Blake's life: One minute he's in the stillness of the great Oklahoma outdoors, and the next he's surrounded by ringing slot machines and excited fans. Blake is happy to be playing shows at a time of year when most artists have shut down their operations for the holidays. He's eager to continue the unprecedented career momentum he's built up over the past year—first with his stint on TV's *Clash of the Choirs* in December 2007, then with the No. 1 status of "Home," one of the biggest hits of his career, and the success of his follow-up, "She Wouldn't Be Gone."

All the same, he's always glad to come home to Oklahoma. He moved



Young Blake with mother Dorothy

PHOTO: LUCY FORT/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM; GROOMING: JESSICA WATSON/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM





SINGING IN SIN CITY

Last spring Blake was riding high with his hit cover version of the Michael Bubl  pop tune "Home," and both men had been invited to sing the song as a duet at a Las Vegas tribute to producer David Foster. (That show is now available on CD and DVD as *Hit Man: David Foster & Friends*.) Blake was still at work on his new *Startin' Fires* album at the time, so he and his own producer, Scott



probably the allergy capital of the world. Every time you get in the studio there you're popping Sudafeds and crap like that," he says. "Here it was awesome. My throat was clear, and my sinuses were all open. I really think the things that I sang out here are the best vocals I ever recorded."

Hendricks, set up shop at a Vegas studio for a week to record a few vocals.

Suddenly free of the allergy-inflaming pollen for which Nashville is notorious, Blake was singing better than ever. "It's amazing that the country music capital is also

allergy capital of the world. Every time you get in the studio there you're popping Sudafeds and crap like that," he says. "Here it was awesome. My throat was clear, and my sinuses were all open. I really think the things that I sang out here are the best vocals I ever recorded."

BLAKE SHELTON CONTINUED

back to his home state three years ago after spending more than a decade in Nashville, and the change has created a comfortable barrier between his business and private lives. "I meant to do it a long time ago," he says. "I first moved to Nashville in 1994 and the last thing I told my family when I left was, 'I will be back. I'm not moving out there to live, I'm just moving out there to give this country music career thing a shot.' Time got away from me, and I ended up living there a lot longer than I thought I would."

Growing up in small-town Oklahoma



Blake as a boy in Oklahoma. Below, the Shelton kids pose for a family portrait: (from left) Richie, Endy and Blake.



had an enormous impact on Blake's identity and personality. For example, he notes the "laid-back sense of humor" he shares with fellow Oklahoma natives like Vince Gill and Carrie Underwood. "We don't take ourselves all that seriously," he says. "I'll constantly make fun of myself. If I don't do that, then I'm not being honest. That's just who I am."

It was in Oklahoma that Blake discovered his love for music, under the spell of his older brother, Richie. "His room was straight across the hallway from mine," Blake remembers. "He'd be in there cranking up anything from Ted Nugent all the way to Waylon Jennings, Hank Williams Jr., Garth Brooks, Joan Jett—it was all over the map. He loved 'U Can't Touch This' by MC Hammer. I can't tell you how many times I heard that damn song coming out of his room! He wasn't a singer or guitar player or anything, but he was the biggest fan of music that I've ever met, still to this day.

"He could do no wrong in my eyes.

He was my hero, so I thought, 'if he loves music that much, that's what I want to do.' If my brother Richie thought it was cool, then that's what I had to do. I think it started there."

Tragically, Richie didn't get to see the seed he planted grow into country stardom for his little brother—he was killed in a car crash at age 24. During Blake's recent two-week hunting vacation, he was joined for a few days by his father, Dick. "He and I talk about what I do a lot, but we've never had that reflective conversation until this year," Blake muses. "He said, 'I wish your brother could have seen [your success]. My brother would have taped CD covers to the side of his truck and driven all over town pointing at them. He would have freaked out.'" Blake's self-titled 2001

For more on Blake Shelton, go to countryweekly.com



LAS VEGAS: BOB D'AMICO/GETTY IMAGES; CHICKADEE PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLAKE SHELTON; BLAKE CHILDREN: CHRIS HOLLOWAY/PHOTOGRAPHY

debut was dedicated to Richie's memory.

These days Blake is keeping his family closer than ever. "I know it sounds weird, but my stepfather lives with me," he notes with a laugh. "Miranda and I are gone so much that we've got to have somebody watch the places and do the work for us. So we hired my stepdad, and he takes care of both of our farms." His mom, Dorothy, remains in Ada while a house the couple is building on Blake's 1,200-acre property is completed. Older sister Endy Intriери is a jewelry designer



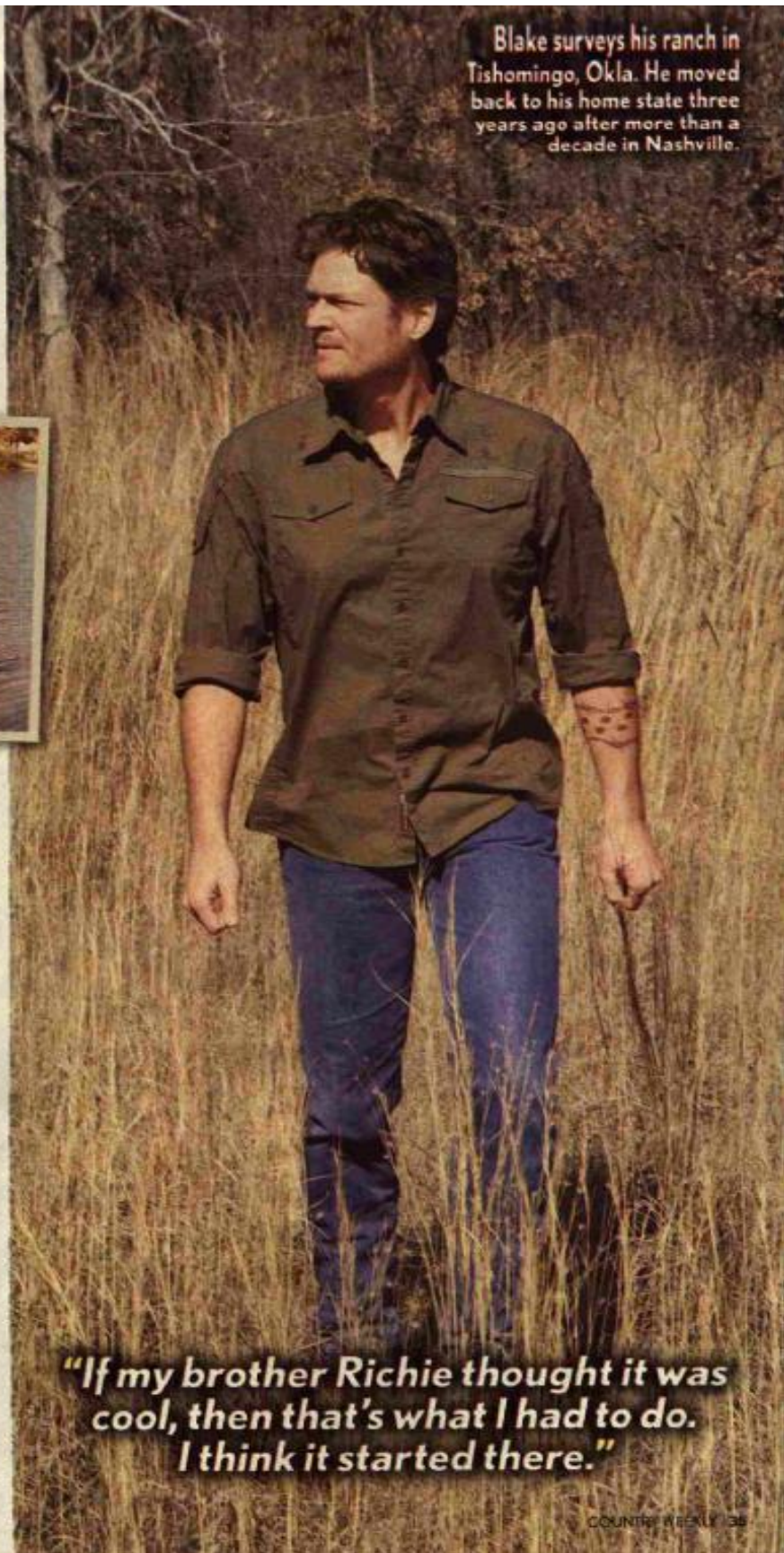
in Moore, Okla., whose wares you can see at endydesigns.com.

Don't expect the family to expand anytime soon, though. Asked if he and Miranda have seriously considered marriage, Blake lets loose an embarrassed laugh and pauses while considering how to answer. "It's stupid to say I haven't thought about it, but we're not going to do that anytime soon," he reveals. "I love the spot that my life is in right now. I can't speak for Miranda—she may tell you it sucks—but it's the best that it's been for me."

Besides, he figures, "I don't know why I would be in any hurry to do that, and Miranda shouldn't be either. She's 25 and she's still learning a lot about herself right now. I'm 32 and still having fun with my life at the moment. I don't want to change anything right now."

Blake and Miranda have grown comfortable with one another's families. Indeed, Miranda—who hails from Lindale, Texas, about 150 miles south of Tishomingo—is at home with Blake's family members "to the point where now they argue," he observes. "When you get to that point in a relationship where you can get pissed off at each other and

Blake surveys his ranch in Tishomingo, Okla. He moved back to his home state three years ago after more than a decade in Nashville.



"If my brother Richie thought it was cool, then that's what I had to do. I think it started there."

"HERE COMES BIG SEXY!"

You might think that life would have changed for the better for Blake since he was named one of *People* magazine's "Sexiest Men Alive." But he says that girlfriend Miranda Lambert was unimpressed, and his female fans seem no more ardent than they had been.



In fact, the main difference Blake has seen is that his male friends and family members have been enthusiastically giving him a very hard time about his new status as official prime beefcake. "Now they say things like, 'Oh, well, back up everybody! Look how sexy this guy is! Don't make eye contact with him!'" Blake explains with an exasperated laugh. "I'm no longer 'Blake.' It's, 'Here comes Big Sexy!'"

It's, 'Blake, you'd better not go hunting, you can't get mud on you!' It's pretty bad. As far as they're concerned, there may as well be a picture of me kissing Richard Simmons on the cover of *Country Weekly*."



BLAKE SHELTON CONTINUED

yell, then you're family. Same way with her parents. Her mom and I have little arguments over stupid stuff all the time." Blake has the remedy for that: "I've learned that if I ever want to suck up to Beverly Lambert, I have to go and buy banana Laffy Taffys. When I say something stupid and she gets mad about it, I'll bring her a Laffy Taffy and everything's good."

Make no mistake—Blake thoroughly enjoys his musical career, and speaks hopefully about having a long run like George Strait or another famous Oklahoman, Reba McEntire. "I hope we get to do this interview 10 years from now and we're talking about what I've done from this point until then," he says. "I'll do whatever I've got to do to nurture my career and keep it going. But the fact is that I've accomplished a lot of the things that I wanted to accomplish when I set out to do this, and everything from here on out is just gravy."

"I love what I do and I'm thankful for it, but it's not the thing that makes me happy. Being home is what makes me happy." **CW**



BLAKE SHELTON: MICHAEL LAWRENCE/GETTY IMAGES; MIRRORS: JEFFREY MAYER/REX USA; TRACTOR: JEFFREY MAYER/REX USA