

BLAKE SHELTON

by KIP KIRBY

When Country fans talk, artists listen. So when fans kept asking Blake Shelton when he was going to put out a new album, their hopeful refrain kept hammering away at him. After all, he hadn't released anything new since *Startin' Fires* in November 2008. Before that, there'd been a three-year lag between *Pure BS* and *Blake Shelton's Barn & Grill*. If things continued at this rate, Shelton half-joked, he might be eligible for Social Security before he'd get many more albums out.

At the same time, Shelton's producer Scott Hendricks was thinking along similar lines. With singles taking significantly longer to climb the charts (often the better part of an entire year) and album projects being delayed as a result, the Warner Music Nashville Senior VP of A&R wondered: What if there was a better way to market the music? What if there was a way to shorten the time between album releases and get new product into fans' hands faster? What if artists could release an abbreviated CD each time they came out with a new single? He believed Shelton's strength with radio and popularity with fans made him the perfect candidate to explore these ideas.

"I remember Scott first talking to me about the idea of an album with only six songs on it when he first came over to Warner Bros. as head of A&R," Shelton recalled. "He thought we could sell it for \$5 or \$6. He continued talking about it with me as album sales kept falling and singles were taking longer and longer at radio. I began to see the disconnect and the idea became more appealing. I realized, man, I could release a new album every time I put out a new single. I could constantly have new music out there and not wait. Finally I just said, hey, if it makes sense, let's do it."

Shelton's management team at Starstruck Entertainment saw the value of the gamble and opted in, as did his label, Warner Bros./Reprise Records. With the players in place, the stage was set for *Hillbilly Bone*, which is slated to be the first of two "Six Paks" Shelton will release in 2010, each hopefully fueled by a hit single at radio.

From an artist's viewpoint, said Shelton, "There's nothing worse than cutting an album and knowing it's gonna be another year and a half or two before you get to record again. By then, maybe you're singing better or people's mood is different, or you've written stronger songs or you've grown as an artist. But you can't go back and record — you have to live with your current album for the next 18 months. This way, publishers and songwriters can pitch me songs all the time. And a couple of months later I could have them out on a new CD. I wouldn't have to tie up songs on hold for eight months or longer."

Written by Luke Laird and Craig Wiseman and released the first week in November, *Hillbilly Bone's* title single was an immediate smash at radio, becoming Shelton's fastest-breaking career single and his sixth to peak at No. 1. The album scored too; spanning an emotional range from the cocky bravado of "Kiss My Country Ass," written by Rhett Akins, Dallas Davidson and Jon Stone, to the sentimental romanticism of Lee

Brice's, Jerrod Niemann's and Stone's "You'll Always Be Beautiful" in just a half-dozen tracks, it debuted at No. 3 on *Billboard's* Top 200, making it Shelton's highest chart debut to date, and No. 2 on its Top Country Albums chart.

Adding Trace Adkins to the song and the video was a no-brainer. "Trace and I have talked about recording together for years," Shelton said. "When I heard this song, it sounded a lot like something Trace would have done on one of his own albums, like 'Honky Tonk Badonkadonk.' First we just had him do the harmony part, but then the more we listened, the more we thought that was kind of stupid, that the song had a lot more potential as a duet than with just me singing on it. I don't know how well you know Trace, but when I called and asked him if he'd come back in the studio, he said in that deep voice of his, 'Well, hell, man. I've already been down there once — you know, you're getting on my nerves... OK, I'll come back.' It really made the record."

With a hit single on the charts, the next big question was how to position, publicize and promote the Six Pak. It was crucial that Shelton's fan base perceive *Hillbilly Bone* as a complete CD, his sixth studio album, with another following behind it by year's end.

Peter Strickland, Senior VP, Brand Management, Warner Music Nashville, and his team approached digital retailers individually, explaining the concept and asking for support and visibility. With brick-and-mortar accounts, they requested dedicated rack space for the Six Pak. The label also made sure that the CD's packaging and artwork featured the Six Pak logo and front stickering helped identify it to consumers. The game plan also called for holding back the single from online digital sites so the label could boost video sales first.

"Typically, we like to make our music available to consumers the minute they hear it on a TV show or on radio," Strickland noted. "We want them to have the ability to go to any of our digital partners and purchase it immediately. In this case, though, we held the single back and released the video first. Based on the music and the guest star in the video, we thought we might get the opportunity to sell through some videos, which usually isn't a strong point with any digital partner. Videos don't typically sell all that well. Only a handful do, and they usually aren't Country unless you're Taylor Swift. We released the 'Hillbilly Bone' video the same week in November that the single went to radio. It worked extremely well. It put us in the Top 5 videos of all genres, which then got us on the main page at iTunes and is Blake's top-selling video to date. We gained visibility where we wouldn't normally have had any."

The record company let the video sell all the way up to the Tuesday before Christmas before releasing the digital single just in time to cash in on gift card purchases. The plan worked beyond all expectations, according to Strickland.

"Blake got great visibility across the board with all our digital partners, and his single debuted with more than 71,000 units the very first week. If we'd done it the traditional way, we *might* have seen 2,000 or 3,000 a week until radio momentum eventually kicked in. But by holding the single off for six or seven weeks and coming with the video first, we saw huge impact. It could have taken an extra five to 10 weeks to get the same results if we'd done it the traditional way."

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4 | cma close up

BIG PLANS in SMALL PACKAGES THE STORY BEHIND HILLBILLY BONE

By the time the *Hillbilly Bone* Six Pak was released March 2, Shelton's single had already cracked the Top 5. The artist had been personally talking up the project with his fans for months through social networking sites, Twitter and his own Web site. In mid-February, BlakeShelton.com offered fans a limited window of opportunity to preorder the Six Pak with bonus perks. They could purchase the "BSer Hillbilly Bone Premiere Pak" with a one-year fan club membership, exclusive T-shirt and autographed Six Pak CD (\$34.99); the "BSer Hillbilly Bone" package with one-year fan club membership and autographed copy of the Six Pak (\$24.99); or the "Tee Pak" version which came with an autographed CD and a T-shirt (\$18.99).

Nashville record labels have released six-track EPs in the past, but *Hillbilly Bone* is competing with full-length albums and listing on Nielsen SoundScan as a regular Shelton album. "We may be the first ones in the market to try this," WMN's Strickland observed, "but other people are watching our effort closely. There are a lot of eyes on this project to see how it works."

Hendricks likens the Six Pak to giving fans a "Value Meal," where price is lowered to entice people to purchase more items, more often. "Fans are a lot more apt to let go of \$5 or \$6 than \$10 or \$11," he reasoned. "We're hoping that rather than only buying the single, they might say, 'Hey, for a couple more dollars, I can get a value here' and buy the CD. Even if they're not already a Blake Shelton fan, for just \$3 or \$4 more they get to test out this artist and see if they like him. And if they do like what they hear, we can engage them again with another CD in just a few months."

"The goal here is to sell more albums," Strickland noted. "If we find we're selling the same amount of Six Paks as we would a full-priced album, then it becomes a matter of half the music at half the cost. So then we have to sell twice as many to generate the same revenue. The good thing is, we have a lot of flexibility built in — if consumers don't react right away, we can come out with another Six Pak. Or we could combine both Six Paks and put them out as a full album."

Meanwhile, no one is more excited — or more focused on success for his Six Pak — than Shelton himself. "I think this could completely change the business model of how we release Country Music and how we sell it," he said. "This is a way to put out new product continuously and keep it fresh. Publishers are gonna love it. Songwriters are gonna love it. Fans should love it because by the end of a year, they could have three of my albums, which is 18 new songs. I can't imagine it not working."

BlakeShelton.com



BE ANOTHER YEAR AND A HALF OR TWO BEFORE YOU GET TO RECORD AGAIN." — Blake Shelton

cma close up | 5