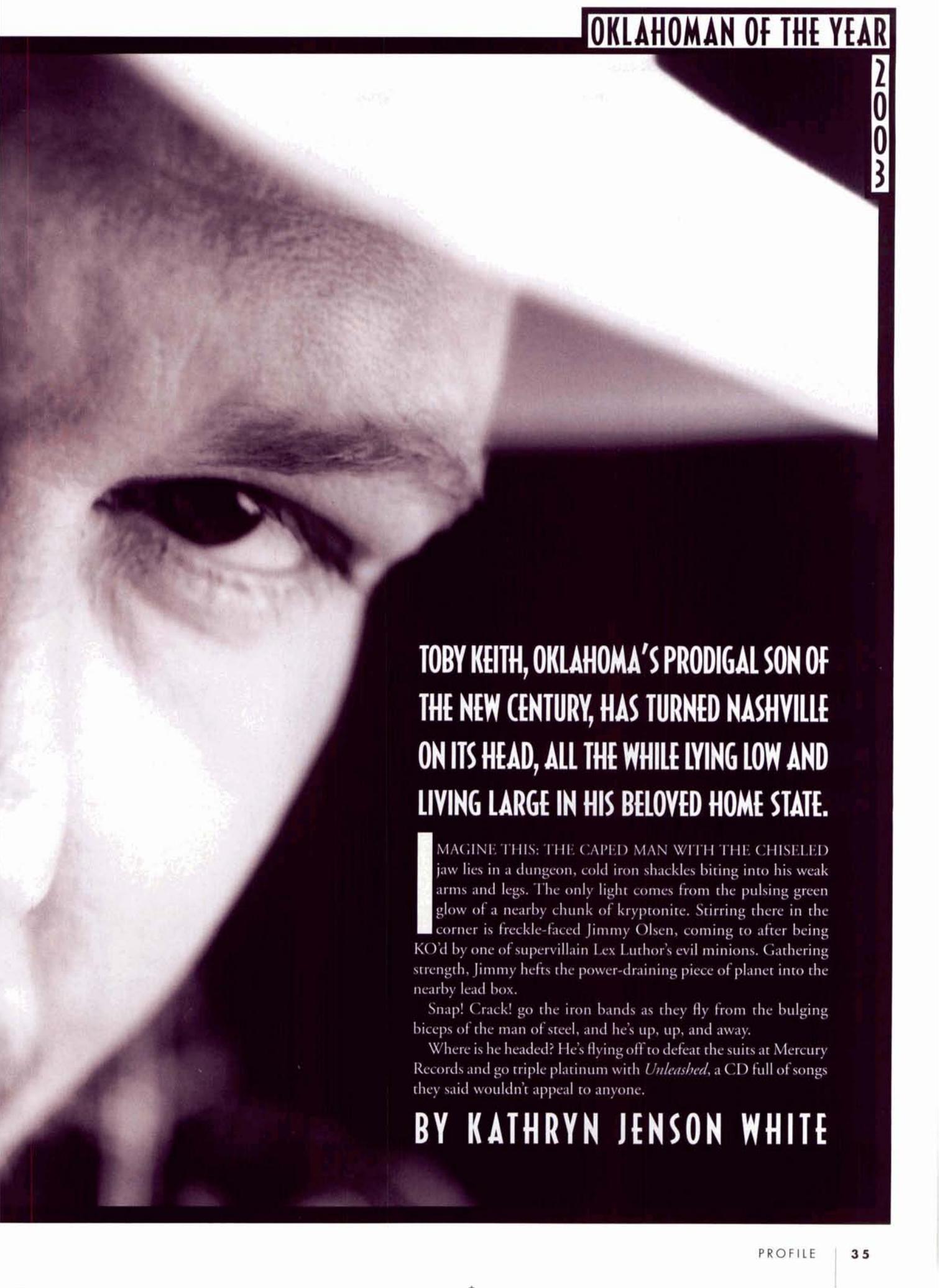


REBEL

WITH A

CAUSE





TOBY KEITH, OKLAHOMA'S PRODIGAL SON OF THE NEW CENTURY, HAS TURNED NASHVILLE ON ITS HEAD, ALL THE WHILE LYING LOW AND LIVING LARGE IN HIS BELOVED HOME STATE.

IMAGINE THIS: THE CAPED MAN WITH THE CHISELED jaw lies in a dungeon, cold iron shackles biting into his weak arms and legs. The only light comes from the pulsing green glow of a nearby chunk of kryptonite. Stirring there in the corner is freckle-faced Jimmy Olsen, coming to after being KO'd by one of supervillain Lex Luthor's evil minions. Gathering strength, Jimmy hefts the power-draining piece of planet into the nearby lead box.

Snap! Crack! go the iron bands as they fly from the bulging biceps of the man of steel, and he's up, up, and away.

Where is he headed? He's flying off to defeat the suits at Mercury Records and go triple platinum with *Unleashed*, a CD full of songs they said wouldn't appeal to anyone.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE



Toby Keith and Willie Nelson performed together at Nelson's 70th Birthday Concert in April 2003 in New York City. In June 2003, the duo's song 'Beer For My Horses' hit number one on the country charts, giving Nelson his first successful single since 1989. Much like Nelson and other country outlaws such as Waylon Jennings, Keith strives for independence and control over his music. Right: Toby with his mother Joan.



Didn't know that he of "truth, justice, and the American way" had a recording career? Replace tights and cape with well-worn jeans and an untucked shirt, make Jimmy into James Stroud, president of Nashville's DreamWorks Records, and see kryptonite as the tendency of major record companies to demand music in the mold of what demographic research says will sell, and the comic book scenario becomes the Toby Keith story in a nutshell. He's a Sooner country star ascending into a constellation already asparkle with the likes of Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, Vince Gill, Ronnie Dunn, and others too numerous to mention.

Keith chose a different metaphorical self for the cover of *Unleashed*, the three-million-selling CD he boldly bought back from Mercury Records in 1999 and sold to DreamWorks so he could write and sing the kind of songs he wanted to. The idea's the same, but his self-portrait springs from the edgy, often self-directed sense of humor he's known for.

Unleashed's cover depicts a vacated doghouse, a dangling heavy-duty lock and chain, and a bent-back metal fence—clearly the scene of a great escape. These images signify that the man who refers to himself as Big Dog—and to the twelve thousand or so adoring fans who belong to his official fan club as Big Dog Warriors—is on the loose.

The six-foot-four-inch, curly-blond-haired, guitar-playing hunk is a man who would rather gnaw off a limb than be trapped into becoming what others think he ought to be. Like Frank Sinatra before him, this young blue eyes does it his way.

Tellingly, the Clinton-born singer/songwriter became Big Dog after he referred to America as the "big dog" who would "fight when you rattle his cage" in "Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue (The Angry American)," the seriously-ticked-off-stage-of-grieving song that has proved the most controversial of many controversial Keith creations. That direct identification of himself with his country suggests what a man of place Keith truly

is, and even a short conversation with him or those close to him indicates just how deeply this state is his truest place. The singer may be an angry American today, but he was an outright Oklahoman long before his musical response to September 11 hit the airwaves in 2002.

"Toby is an Oklahoman to the core, and that goes back to his amazing loyalty," says Kay Johnson of Rockford, Illinois, president for ten years of the official Toby Keith International Fan Club. "He loves the state. I think it says a lot about the way he is as a person that he didn't want to get into the Nashville mainstream. He's rooted in the Oklahoma clay."

The man born Toby Keith Covell in 1961 to H.K. and Joan Covell is rooted now in the clay of Norman, where he lives with his wife of nearly twenty years, Tricia, and their three children, Shelley, Krystal, and Stelen. The Covell kids have all attended Oklahoma public schools, and Keith's mother and sister both live nearby.

An inveterate horseman, seven years ago Keith built Dream Walkin' Farms, a Pauls Valley thoroughbred breeding and training facility equipped with forty stalls and a seven-eighths-of-a-mile track. Cactus Ridge, a colt bred there, was undefeated and slated to run in the \$1.5 million Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile at California's Santa Anita Park, the nation's richest and most prestigious race for two year olds, on October 25, 2003. Although a knee injury kept the colt from that race, Keith has reportedly turned down \$1 million for him. He makes it clear he's happy at home and hooked on his horse.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

KEITH—AND MOST EVERYONE WHO TALKS ABOUT HIS journey to superstardom—agrees its first few legs were traveled on a washboard dirt road. While music was always around him, he was also a sports-loving Oklahoma high school boy who wrestled, played football, and worked as a rodeo hand. He followed his father into the oil fields after graduation and then played football with the Oklahoma City Drillers of the American Football Association, a semipro organization.

When the Drillers dissolved in 1983, Keith shifted his focus to tackling a serious music career. The road didn't get a lot smoother, though his drive for success did kick into a high gear when he and his band, Easy Money, began to play a demanding regional bar circuit in the mid-1980s.

Tour manager and close friend Dave Milam has worked for Keith since 1993. He says Keith's early years were often uphill travel.

"He had some real lean times when he and Easy Money were a road band, just five or six guys in a van," Milam says. "They had to wire open the back doors to the van to get a breeze through it. They took turns sleeping and drove all the time. He traveled from Oklahoma to Texas to New Mexico to Arizona and back to Arkansas. He took about a six-week circuit, then started all over again working five or six nights a week in honky-tonks. The alignment was so bad on their old equipment trailer that they bought a \$15 tire to carry with them. They knew they'd blow one; it was just a matter of where.

"We've gone through all the steps. We've played the bars.

We've played every small county fair where you had three hundred people at two shows a day on a four-inch slab. We slowly became a support act, moving into the big venues with the Brooks & Dunns and the Rebas headlining. Now we're doing it, but it didn't happen overnight. Toby's been at it a lot of years, and we've taken baby steps up to here. We haven't really skyrocketed. He's done it one or two songs at a time, elevating us a little more each album."

Keith began writing songs and honing his performance skills in high school, long before a coveted record deal led to his 1993 debut CD *Toby Keith*, which went platinum and produced the iconic hits "Should've Been a Cowboy" and "A Little Less Talk And A Lot More Action." *Billboard* named him Top New Country Artist that year.

In 1995, he received the Country Music Association's "Triple Play" Songwriter Award (given to any artist who achieves three number-one songs in a year), but it would be another five years before he took home any more significant industry recognition, though his CDs continued to go platinum. In 2000, he received two Academy of Country Music Awards. A year later, he took home the CMA Male Vocalist of the Year trophy, and his blockbuster "How Do You Like Me Now" received a CMA nomination for Song of the Year.

T.K. Kimbrell, Keith's personal manager and good friend since 1995, attests to Keith's sometimes frustrating but always dogged march toward industry recognition. Without the work ethic Kimbrell says the singer learned from his father, he might not have made it.

"It did not come easy for Toby Keith," he says. "He's had to overwork for everything he's accomplished. Some people come to town, and everything is given to them. For whatever reason, a person can become the industry's favorite child, and they give them everything. It wasn't that way with Toby."

Keith says his decision to stay rooted in Oklahoma explains in part his longer, more winding road. But, he points out quickly, he wouldn't have done it any other way.

"If you move to Nashville as most people do when they're nineteen or twenty-one, you make connections," he says. "By the time you're twenty-five or twenty-six, you create some kind of network. When you stay in Oklahoma like I did, you don't have that day-to-day contact. We were more concerned with working on the road, making money, and feeding family rather than living some sort of dream that likely would never come true. So instead of hitting it when I was twenty-three, I hit it when I was twenty-nine. But I had such a great group of songs written, so much more maturity, and I was so much more ready for it that when we hit, we hit pretty big with that first album. That was the kickoff to a really good career. It was tough getting there, but we did."

They surely did.

In 2003, a year in which he verbally duked it out with ABC newscaster Peter Jennings over a rescinded invitation to sing "Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue (The Angry American)" on a network show and with Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks when she spoke out against the song, he was named the Academy of Country Music's



Entertainer of the Year. Always more adored by fans than admired by music critics and those who hand out awards, Keith left the November 5 CMA Awards show empty-handed. However, he had been nominated for the most awards of any honoree that year, seven: entertainer, male vocalist, song, single, album, vocal event, and music video of the year.

With "I Love This Bar" at number one on *Billboard*'s country chart the week of November 22, *Shock'N Y'all*—a typical Keith wordplay both on his own image and the Bush administration's "shock and awe" description of the Iraq invasion—is destined to be another blockbuster.

The proof? Keith's new album not only topped the country charts but also hit number one on the *Billboard* 200, besting such mainstream favorites as Sheryl Crow, OutKast, and Sting. Meanwhile, his previous CD, *Unleashed*, was number four on the country album chart the same week. While critical response to *Shock'N Y'all* was mixed, Keith said in October that the CD had sold more than 800,000 units before being shipped.

Pollstar, a music industry data service, named Keith the number one ticket-seller in country music for 2002 and number seven overall for the year. In yet another sign of industry status, VH1 is preparing a Keith biography, slated to air early in 2004.

THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME

WITH HIS CAREER NOW CRUISING ALONG SEVERAL MILES per hour above any posted speed limit, Keith talks freely about this strange trip he's on and why no matter where he may roam, he plans on coming back.

"I live in Oklahoma," he says simply. "I can get in my truck and go into town. I don't hesitate going somewhere to eat or to shop. I can't do that comfortably anywhere else.

"Norman's traffic rush in the mornings and evenings is

twenty minutes rather than two hours. It's not too crowded. Other than a big, professional sports franchise, we have it all. When I travel across the nation, I run into people all the time who say, 'I went to Oklahoma one time, and the people down in that part of the world are nice.' Oklahoma is my home. I'm a loyal Sooner fan. I grew up selling Cokes in Sooner stadium. That's my backyard."

H.K. Covel, who died in a car accident in March 2001, was born in Lindsay, as were Keith's paternal grandparents. Joan, his mother, is from Arkansas, but, Keith notes, "western Arkansas, just over the Oklahoma line." Keith's sister, Tonnie Moore, was born in Ardmore, and his brother, Tracy, in Oklahoma City. H.K. moved the family from rig to rig across the state before settling in Moore, where Toby graduated from high school.

Keith consistently names his father as a major personal influence while tipping his hat to Merle Haggard as a musical mentor and to Spavinaw-born Mickey Mantle as a major-league role model. He says H.K. embodied the qualities he finds most appealing about the Sooner State and those that have determined the kind of songwriter and performer he has become.

"My dad had a great wit," he says. "He had a unique way of piecing words together. His tombstone says, 'A man of original wit.' He was old school and he was country and he was intelligent. He wanted to come off as this simple cat, simple-minded. But you knew after you talked to him for a little bit that you could never fool him."

Deborah Evans Price, a *Billboard* senior writer whose focus is country and Christian music, has followed Keith's career from the beginning with Mercury Records. She says Keith's own wit is central to defining the man and his music.

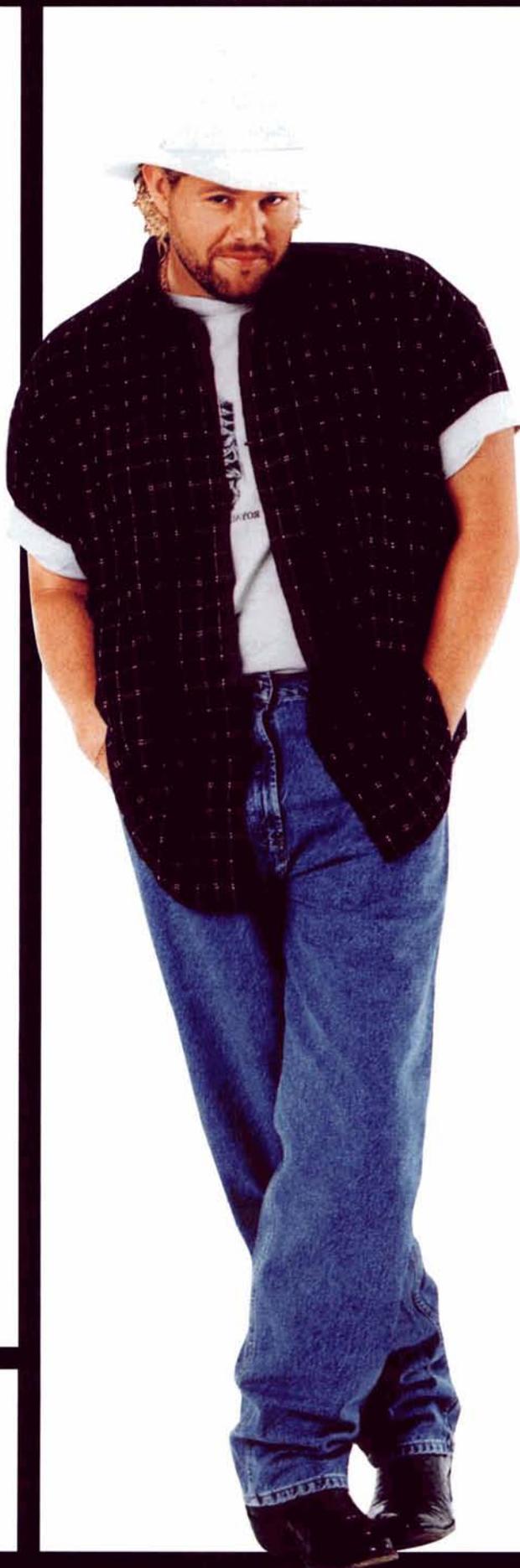
"He's got an amazing sense of humor," she says. "He takes his art and what he believes in very seriously, but he's not afraid to poke fun at himself or this industry and others in it."

The singer himself says that while he likes soulful ballads like "Who's That Man?," he loves the lighter stuff.

"I prefer the up-tempo, attitude songs with some wit," he says. "I like to stamp a little humor on it, something clever. I like the edgy ones: 'How Do You Like Me Now,' 'Who's Your Daddy?,' 'Beer for My Horses,' and 'A Little Less Talk And A Lot More Action.'"

Dave Murray, a twenty-one-year veteran of country radio and the Dave half of Dave & Dan on Oklahoma City's country format 96.1 KXY-FM, remembers a time when Keith's sense of humor topped his own well-developed humorous approach to life.

"When they dedicated a street in Moore to him, Toby Keith Avenue, Dan and I emceed that dedication," Murray says. "Officials were also going to give him a key to the city. For the week



Toby Keith and his wife, Tricia, above, married in 1984 and live outside Norman. 'Having a jet makes it pretty easy to get somewhere and get back,' says Keith, who cites Garth Brooks as a fellow country star residing in Oklahoma. 'Living in Oklahoma helps me keep a normal life. Everyone knows I live here, and that makes it easier. There's no treasure hunt to find me.'

leading up to the ceremony, I joked around on the air every day, saying, 'I was born in Moore. I'm a star. I have no key.' Someone heard me, and they gave me one. I told Toby, 'See, I've got a key, too.' He took it from me, autographed it, and wrote on it, 'But my key's bigger than yours.'"

The creative spirit that manifests in both his serious and not-so-serious art was nurtured at home and, as Keith points out fondly, in a Moore schoolroom.

"I had a teacher in elementary school in Moore who, when I turned in my work, sat me down and said, 'Toby, you do really well in school, but the one thing you're really gifted at is creative writing,'" he says.

"She created this one-hour creative writing class on Fridays. We worked real hard in the mornings, had a recess break, then came back. The last hour before we went home, she said, 'Write until a story's done.' We had to do at least one page. Most of the kids would write their one page quick and be done for the day. I would go the whole hour. Even the book-brained girls would be done, and I'd still be writing. She told me, 'Your stories just roll and roll. You're a great storyteller.'"

That helps explain the lyrics, but what about the music? Keith, sometimes alone and sometimes with another songwriter, creates both.

"My grandmother got me a guitar when I was eight," he says. "In addition to a father with that wit, I had a mother who could sing like a bird. Her mother could sing and play piano. That's in my pedigree. And I had that encouragement to write creatively. I guess that all made me what I am."

Kimbrell says he went to work for the singer primarily because of those strong creative bloodlines.

"He's a great songwriter," Kimbrell says. "I knew he'd be a long-term artist because he's so in control of his music. People who don't write their songs have to go out and find them. They're at the mercy of others. When you write your own songs, you're in control of your career."

KXY's Murray agrees.

"I admire the heck out of him," he says. "He was ignored for a long time, and I think it sort of hurt his feelings. But rather than do nothing more than just sing songs, he's taken his career in his own hands. He's decided he's going to be a star. He's in control of his own destiny."

HOW DO YOU LIKE HIM NOW?

ABOUT EIGHT THOUSAND MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN—many wearing or waving American flags—attended Keith's Wichita Falls, Texas, concert October 18, 2003. The Wichita Falls *Times Record News* reported that some fans had waited in line five days to secure good tickets. Angry letters to the editor complained that Internet ticket sales had made it tough to do even that. As his sixty-five-person, five-bus, and six-truck entourage of crew and equipment set the stage for the Ford truck-sponsored show, the fans milled outside in the early autumn heat of a dusty Texas town to the booming sounds of a live radio broadcast.



Wearing a T-shirt with "Who's Your Daddy?" on one side and a bulldog's face with "Big Dog Warriors" above it on the other, Broken Arrow resident Shirley Wheeler stood with her husband, Steven. They had driven 250 miles for the show, their first. Tamra Cotton and her thirteen-year-old daughter, Kara, had driven 155 miles from Clyde, Texas, just outside Abilene.

The four waited impatiently to get the shindig started. Kara was antsy with excitement. She had won the online Meet and Greet Lottery the Toby Keith International Fan Club sponsors for each concert, so she was headed backstage before the show to talk to her idol. Her mother had been to five Keith concerts since March.

"He's got that good ol' boy self that appeals to me," says Tamra Cotton. "My husband's in the Air Force, so when all the stuff with 'The Angry American' came out, I thought he was just awesome. But I liked him long before that. 'Should've Been a Cowboy' came out when I was a Texas girl living in California and missing my Dallas Cowboys, and he just won me over with that one."

Kara, petite but wearing a big cowboy hat, says she liked "The Angry American" because Keith was so honest in it.

"I wanted to do the same stuff he was singing about," she says with eighth-grade sincerity. "He really lets out his emotion and speaks his mind."

Shirley Wheeler explains her interest in Keith: "He's very patriotic, and I like it that he says what he thinks. He doesn't hold anything back, and he doesn't care if you like it or not. Some singers are very politically correct because they're afraid of ostracizing some of their fans."

Steven Wheeler feels about the same way.

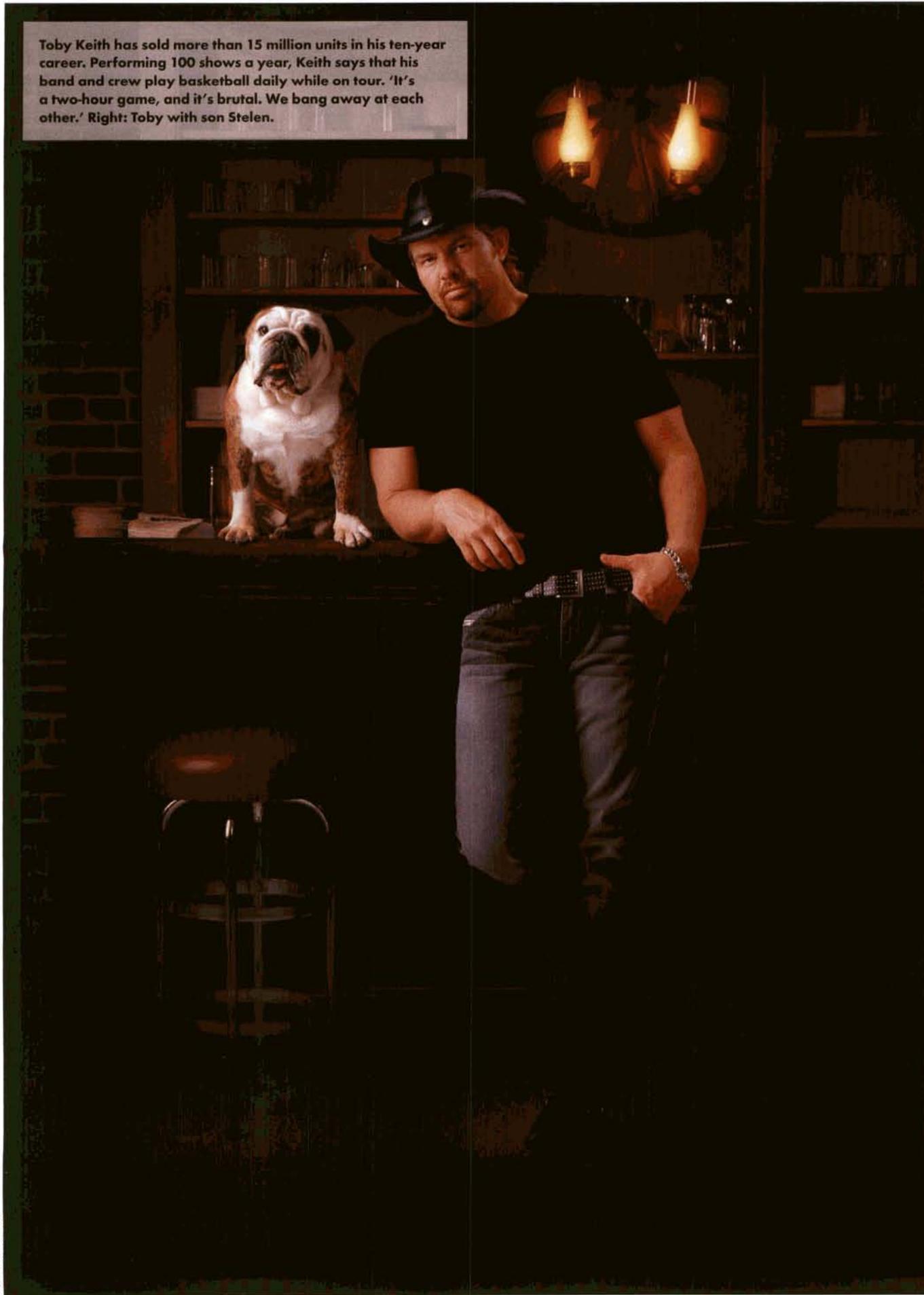
"What appeals to me most, too, is his attitude," he says. "The biggest thing over other acts is that I get the feeling I'm seeing the real person up there, not some Hollywood fake image. With Toby Keith, I get the feeling that's him. His music speaks a lot of what I



The 1979 Moore High School graduate added another trophy to his case on November 16, 2003, when he won the American Music Award for favorite country music album with *Unleashed*. Two weeks earlier, he picked up his seventeenth number-one single with 'I Love This Bar.'

REISIG & TAYLOR

Toby Keith has sold more than 15 million units in his ten-year career. Performing 100 shows a year, Keith says that his band and crew play basketball daily while on tour. 'It's a two-hour game, and it's brutal. We bang away at each other.' Right: Toby with son Stelen.



RICHARD MCLAREN

would like to say but can't put into words the way he does."

Billboard's Deborah Evans Price has heard this same kind of response from Keith fans for years. Attitude, they all say, is a good thing; bring it on.

"Toby's strengths are his honesty and passion," she says. "He's one who never shies away from saying what he thinks in song and in interviews. That can be a double-edged sword, of course, but I know his fans admire his guts and how far that attitude has taken him. Country fans don't want someone who puts himself on a pedestal. They want a good ol' boy they feel they can hang out and have a beer with."

That's what they got in this Baja, Oklahoma, concert, a stop on the Shock'N'Y'all Tour in support of the new CD but consisting mostly of songs from *Unleashed* and earlier works.

The show begins with a video that depicts the Keith controversy. Told from the point of view of an English bulldog with Keith's unmistakable baritone voice and a rap-star-sized, bling-bling dog tag with "Toby" on it in diamonds, the video showcases that sometimes boundary-pushing Keith sense of humor and his acting chops: He's played himself in a TV movie reunion of *The Dukes of Hazzard: Hazzard in Hollywood* and appeared on *Touched By An Angel* in the program's highest-rated episode of the 2001 season.

A few clips from his award-winning music videos and snippets from his popular commercials round out the production: He's a singing spokesman for Ford trucks, a golf and poker-playing proponent of 10-10-220 phone service with Terry Bradshaw and Mike Piazza, and a Coors promoter. The beer company sponsored his 2002 *Unleashed* tour.

As the video ends, the sound of a powerful engine roaring to life booms out over the sound system, and an onstage Ford F-150 unfolds like a transformer bot to become a ministage. Keith appears in a cloud of exhaust smoke. The mostly standing fans start immediately to sing along with all of Keith's hits. They

scream, whistle, bang the backs of their chairs, clap their hands, and stomp their feet.

Fire belches upward from onstage pipes, signaling that those who can't stand the heat better get out of the arena. And heat there is, with some too-hot-to-print language, some incendiary comments on the current political situation, and a couple of "bus songs" that will never make it to the radio.

When he sings "I Love This Bar," Keith adds "Oklahoma Sooner fans" to the list of the bar's patrons. Even in Texas, they love it. With hit following hit, Keith transports every person attending from the converted ice hockey rink of the cavernous Kay Yeager Coliseum to the intimate warmth of a local honky-tonk. The bodies may be standing on a cement slab, but the spirits are two-stepping around a sawdust-covered floor.

That ability, according to Milam, is another of the reasons Keith rocks the country charts.

"When I met Toby, I was in the bar business," he says. "With a bar band, you get people on the floor and burned up and ready to buy beer and whiskey. He could take a crowd and make them do just that. He could fill the dance floor and work the crowd. That's why I wanted to work with him. It's something he still goes after every night."

Watching explains why he thrives onstage. Listening explains why he also takes pleasure in the writing process. Asking explains why recording—a necessity Keith takes care of in the four or five months each year he's not on the road doing his hundred concerts—doesn't feed his spirit in quite the same way.

"The least favorite thing I do is go in the studio," says Keith, who records in Hawaii, Key West, or Miami, but rarely Nashville. "Sitting in there working on a record is time consuming and slow. In the studio, you grind away and piece things together. You don't get as much satisfaction as when you've finished a song. Writing a song you know is a great song, the light is shining bright inside you. That's a great feeling. Walking out onstage and lighting the crowd up, that's a high."

Onstage, Keith mugs and jokes and improvises along with his band and a trio of backup singers. As the crowd responds, he ramps it up. As he ramps it up, the crowd responds. It's quite a show, right up to the fireworks and unfurling of the humongous American flag and banner of Uncle Sam with Keith's guitar around his neck that accompany the final song, "Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue (The Angry American)."

Keith leads into that musical slugfest with the show's only two cover songs: the famous Jimi Hendrix "Star Spangled Banner" guitar solo and Haggard's "The Fightin' Side of Me." Almost five minutes of hysterical noise after the last notes, back he comes for his encore of "How Do You Like Me Now," a musical question there's really no need to ask.

Despite the valleys of the early years and the dells of controversy, Keith is high not only on the charts but in the esteem of his industry. He seems destined to continue his ascent. Pick your metaphor: Either you can't keep a Big Dog down or no one's going to ground this Sooner superman. One thing is clear, though: While Oklahoma's Sooner hero may still be headed up, up, he's not flying away. 

