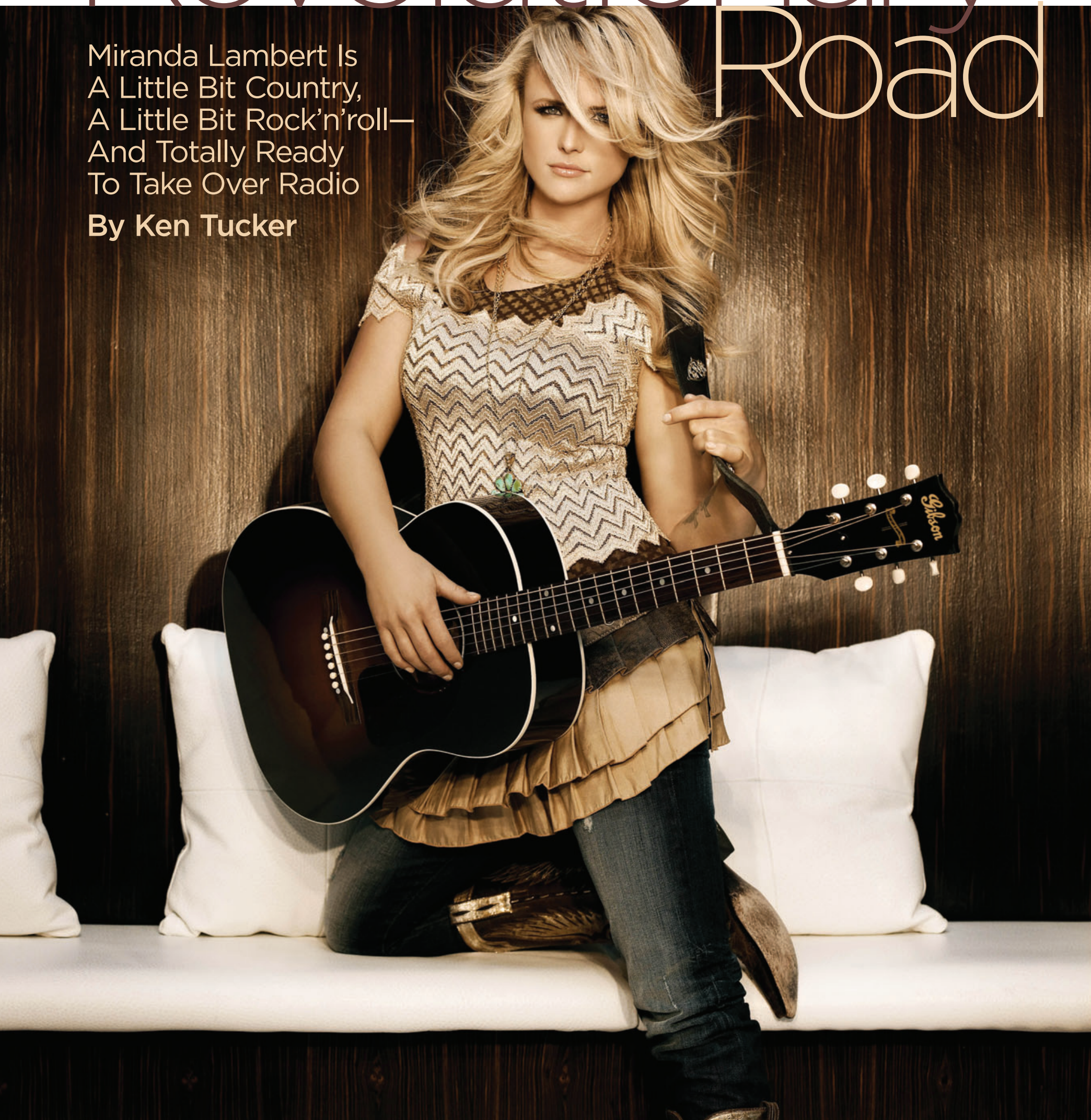


Revolutionary Road

Miranda Lambert Is A Little Bit Country, A Little Bit Rock'n'roll—And Totally Ready To Take Over Radio
By Ken Tucker



Miranda Lambert's set opens by proclamation: A warning siren roars from the loudspeakers as the house lights fall. A hip-hop track booms, its billowing bass and percussive clicks rattling the 20,000 or so fans who fill the Raleigh, N.C., Time Warner Cable Music Pavilion for Kenny Chesney's annual tour.

Lambert, second on a three-act bill, rushes onto the stage as the band cranks up, her smile beaming nearly as brightly as the sequined silver tank-top she sports over mildly tattered, wildly tight blue jeans. "How ya doing, Raleigh?" she asks, emphasizing the last syllable playfully.

She starts quickly into "Kerosene," her first major single, holding the microphone like Mick Jagger, jumping a bit and stomping a lot.

Lambert gives a dynamic, smart performance that mixes rock's certitude and country's sensitivity. It's a fitting representation of her third album, "Revolution," due Sept. 29 on Columbia Nashville—itself a seductive mix of spirited rock and heartfelt country.

While Lambert's first two albums were defined by in-your-face songs like "Kerosene" and "Gunpowder & Lead," "Revolution" reveals—like her new campaign as the face of Cotton Inc.—a softer side. It's a musically adventurous album that sets Lambert up for success in one arena she hasn't yet conquered: radio. And that's still the main channel where country fans get their music.

Lambert has released 10 singles to radio. Four have reached the top 20 on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart: the incendiary "Kerosene" peaked at No. 15 in 2006, "Famous in a Small Town" hit No. 14 in 2007, and the vulnerable "More Like Her" reached No. 17 earlier this year. Her biggest chart hit was "Gunpowder & Lead," which peaked at No. 7 last year. The first single off "Revolution," "Dead Flowers," reached No. 37.

But just because Lambert hasn't had a major radio hit doesn't mean programmers don't appreciate her.

"There are some artists that you 'believe' more than others," says Scott Lindy, PD of Atlanta's WUBL (the Bull). "To truly be successful, an artist needs to be vulnerable when they perform, showing their true self with little or no fear of what the audience thinks. Her fans—and 99% of all listeners—don't follow the charts and don't care about album sales."

Lambert doesn't sound overly concerned, either. "I would absolutely love to have a top five [hit]," she says, "but I've had a great career and so I'd rather keep it the same than try to do something different and not have it work at all."

Lambert's major-label debut, "Kerosene," released on Epic Nashville, has sold 976,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan. When Epic closed Lambert moved to sister label Columbia Nashville, where her second album, "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend," sold 794,000.

Beverlee Brannigan, PD at KFDI Wichita, Kan., says Lambert stands apart from other females in country. "Miranda has a rock edge to her, where some other females in the format are more pop-leaning," she says. "Yet, even with her edge, Miranda has a very strong country sensibility."

Like Lindy, Brannigan is fine with Lambert's lack of a major radio hit. "Two million sold is impressive with or without radio airplay," she says. "Everyone's in a hurry for a hit, but what's wrong with a career that builds slow and steady?"

Lambert hopes that her sales history will buoy the new di-

rection she takes on "Revolution." "I'm expanding in who I am as a person and my career and my personal life," she says. "I was ready to come up with some new sounds."

Those sounds include the punkish drum and raw guitar-driven "That's the Way the World Goes Round," the hill-billy hybrid "White Liar" and "Maintain the Pain," which owes less to Johnny Cash than the Clash. "Time to Get a Gun" is a throwback to '70s country-rock with more than a dash of B-3 organ.

Lambert shares credit for her sound with producers Frank Liddell and Mike Wrucke, who have been with her from the start. "Those guys are unbelievable," she says. "I knew before I even got a record deal who I wanted to produce my first record. I did the politically correct thing and met with a lot of producers, but I knew in my heart who I wanted. I've always been about no rules in the studio and they keep innovating my sound. They get me."

Lambert's recording process starts when she plays her songs for Liddell and Wrucke. "I don't have work tapes or fancy demos," she says. "They build this amazing music around my lyrics."

Love Stories

Miranda Lambert And Boyfriend Blake Shelton Team On Songwriting—And Twitter

"Falling in love is awesome but it's horrible for songwriting," Miranda Lambert says—except, of course, when you can corral your significant other into writing with you.

Lambert's boyfriend is fellow country star Blake Shelton, who co-wrote three songs on Lambert's "Revolution." "I like the sad, cheating, mad, killing-people songs, and that's what I'm drawn to, whether I'm singing them or not," Lambert says. "This time around I was OK with having a few songs that were love songs. He had so much to do with that."

On the found-her-mate-cheating-and-made-him-pay song "Sin for a Sin," Shelton "started writing from a girl's perspective and was even saying things

that a girl would say when we were sitting there writing," Lambert says. "It was a really cool bonding experience for us."

Meanwhile, "The House That Built Me," a powerful song about revisiting a childhood home and all its memories written by Tom Douglas and Allen Shamblin, was originally pitched to Shelton. "It sounds like someone wrote it for me, but I found it riding around with Blake," Lambert says. "He had [it on] a pitch CD—I started balling when I heard it. He said, 'So I guess you want that song?'"

Lambert and Shelton co-wrote "Love Song" with Lady Antebellum's Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood. "I got a call at about one in the morning from Blake

and Charles and Dave. I think they'd had a few martinis and had this big plan to come down and write," she says. "I thought they'd forget about it, but they came down two weeks later." The song is uncharacteristically lovey-dovey for Lambert—but it made the album.

Lambert can also thank Shelton, a Twitter user known for his out-of-left-field tweets, for introducing her to the microblogging tool. "Blake taught me how to tweet, which is funny because he's so not technically inclined," she says. "It's just fun. It's an outlet where I can say random crap. What I didn't know was that people would be interested in that random crap." —KT

Liddell says the system works. "Once you hear something presented in a certain way, your mind is set. If it's just a guitar-vocal [setup], there are fewer preconceived notions about how it can sound at the end. You can take it wherever you want it."

Unlike her second album, which was rushed because of her success after the first, Lambert set aside time to write songs for "Revolution." "I took some time over the Christmas holidays and in January to really focus on songwriting," she says. "I can write on the road, but the best place is my farm." That farm is in Oklahoma, a few miles from that of beau Blake Shelton, with whom she co-wrote three songs (see story, above).

"Revolution" also includes covers from John Prine, Julie Miller and Canadian alt-country artist Fred Eaglesmith. And Lambert says she's forgoing mechanical royalties on three of her solo songs so that the album can include 15 tracks. "We made this record as a whole album," Lambert says, "and if we took even one song off, it wouldn't be complete."

It was the right decision, she believes. "I've had some great success and a steady career, but I feel like this is the one to take me to the next level. I'm glad I took the time because I have a great product."

Building A Brand

While Lambert tries to conquer radio as an artist, she's already making a name for herself as a brand.

"People know what they're getting when you say there's a new Miranda album coming," says Tanya Welch, senior director of artist development for Sony Nashville. "She's had an elevated profile because of things like the ACM [Academy of Country Music] album of the year, even when we haven't had the radio success we would have hoped for. That brings partners to the table like the Cotton deal and [the Recording Academy], who wanted her to participate in the Grammy in the Schools project."

Sony is still making plans, but Welch says retail has been eager to support Lambert's new album. "Because of her track record, the accounts are thinking out of the box and bringing us opportunities," Welch says. "They know that a 15-track collection is a tremendous value for the consumer's money."

Fans who pre-order "Revolution" on iTunes will receive a bonus track, "Stay With Me," which is lifted from Lambert's Country Music Assn. Music Festival appearance. And a four-song EP, "Dead Flowers," will be available exclusively at Best Buy Sept. 8. Lambert also shot a performance for Wal-Mart's "Soundcheck" program.

The label will use Twitter, YouTube and social networks to reach Lambert's core fans as well as those who became aware of her through critical praise or her ACM album of the year nod.

Lambert will be featured in People's fall country special, as well as in Country Weekly, an Us Weekly fall fashion feature and Maxim. She'll also do a round of TV, including ABC's "Good Morning America" on the day of the album's release.

Lambert will play Dallas as part of the Texas State Fair, Chicago's Country Music Festival and Minneapolis the week of release, since all are historically strong markets for her. She'll headline a handful of dates the rest of the year and tour to support a headline in January.

In March she'll head out on her own again, playing 3,000- to 5,000-seat arenas and theaters. "We're building her into a hard-ticket act and that's the game plan for the next 12 months," 360 Artist Agency principal Joey Lee says.

Lambert says she's learned from Chesney during their recent tour. "He's got it down for sure," she says. "I really needed to be in front of as many people as I could, and what better way to do it than be on the biggest tour in country."

One eagerly anticipated performance is Sept. 24 at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, where Lambert will play her new album

beginning to end, then finish with a few surprises. "It's hard to play Nashville," she says. "People don't say that, but playing any music town is hard. People are jaded. They don't come to the shows as fans like we're used to on the road."

Lambert's Nashville show will be sponsored by Cotton Inc., which recently launched an experiential marketing promotion focused on Lambert, Zoey Deschanel and Jazmine Sullivan. The promotion offers mall shoppers a chance to peek into closets filled with the kinds of cotton clothes worn by the singers, as well as a chance to try their hand at recording their own versions of "The Fabric of Our Lives." The cotton promotion will visit 15 markets through Nov. 1, including Boston, Chicago, Las Vegas, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Atlanta, Nashville and Baton Rouge, La.

Back in Raleigh, Lambert struts her stuff onstage, shaking her blue-jeaned rear at the crowd while singing in front of four cloth banners covered in sketches of ivory-handled pistols. She's doing what she loves, and the audience is feeding on the energy.

"In 20 years I hope I'm talking to you about my new album and tour," she says with a laugh. "Music is what I do; I can't do anything else. I don't have any other skills." ■■■

Additional reporting by Grayson Currin in Raleigh, N.C.