

MIRANDA LAMBERT EVOLVES ON HER NEW ALBUM 'REVOLUTION'
THE COUNTRY SINGER'S NEW SONGS TRANSCEND HER IMAGE AS
COUNTRY'S MOST VOLATILE WOMAN TO SHOW A SENSITIVE, FUNNY SIDE.

Miranda Lambert is chatting happily about her forthcoming album, "Revolution," due out Tuesday, while seated in a booth in a deserted hotel restaurant in Pomona a few hours before a performance at the L.A. County Fair.

At one point, she starts hemming and hawing about her abilities as a singer -- even though she's one of the Country Music Assn.'s nominees for best female vocalist for its upcoming awards -- sputtering out with halting pride something about the confidence she thinks is evident on the new record.

About that time, country singer Blake Shelton strides in and slides his 6-foot-5 frame into the booth next to that of his 5-foot-4 girlfriend of the last two years, and starts playfully giving her grief for her self-deprecating attitude.

"She's never had that much confidence in her singing, which is odd to me, because she's one of the standouts, in my opinion," says Shelton, who has racked up several No. 1 hits of his own, including "Austin," "Some Beach" and, last year, "Home," on which he was joined by Lambert.

"She's one of the ones," he says, "that when you're watching [country music awards shows], when it's Miranda's turn to come out and perform, you can almost take a deep breath of relief knowing that, 'OK, this one's going to make us look good. This one's



KEEP ON TRUCKIN': Lambert appeared at the L.A. Country Fair in Pomona recently. Her latest album, "Revolution," is due out on Tuesday.

not going to sound [embarrassing] on national television and make the whole country music industry a joke.' Miranda's one of the ones that brings credibility to us, as a writer and a singer, and is unique."

She pauses.

"We're going to do more interviews together," she says with a giggle. "I like this."

Smart starter moves

Lambert's evolution as a singer and songwriter is apparent on "Revolution," for which she wrote or co-wrote 11 of the 15 songs. Many reach beyond her "Kerosene," "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" and "Gunpowder & Lead" image as country's most volatile woman to show there's also a sensitive heart, and a sense of humor, lurking beneath the hair-trigger surface.

"I feel like I was getting dangerously close to being shoved in that box of 'She's that crazy girl who kills people in her songs,'" she says. "That's fine, but there's so much more to me than that; there's so much more to the great music that I love than one song."

"You listen to Merle Haggard and there's everything from gospel to songs about his mama and songs about being in prison," she continues. "Nobody says

he only sings about prison, or he only sings about cheating. On this record, it's the first time I really have a lot about every aspect of life, not just the get-even part of me."

She points out that for the new album, "I wrote a song called 'Love Song,' which is so out of character for me," she says. "I'm always the one singing the hate songs. I guess just being in love and being settled a little kind of opened up my mind to go there, so why not talk about it?"

Lambert wrote "Love Song" with Shelton and two other writers and it's disarmingly tender: "Everybody always sings about it/How they're never gonna live without it/We don't even have to talk about it/'Cause we're living it out."

"I'm not the crazy, wild-eyed kid I was for 'Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,'" she says. "It's just that life experience sets in. Of course, I'm still a kid: I'm 25. I've learned a lot, but I have a lot more to learn."

To do so, she took a break from the nonstop pace she's maintained since she entered the competition for "Nashville Star," country music's "American Idol," in 2003.

She wound up in third place during the inaugural season -- Buddy Jewell won that year -- but she considers

that a blessing, because the winner is automatically assigned to a preselected record producer and label. Lambert got numerous offers and was able to choose the team she felt would be in sync with the music she wanted to make.

She immediately went to work on "Kerosene," which upon its release produced her first top 20 country hit in the title track. She toured extensively, getting her first big slot opening for Keith Urban. Almost before catching her breath, she had to dive into writing and recording the follow-up, "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend."

"You don't take breaks when you're new," she says. "You can't, because then people will forget about you when the next new face comes along. Until you really get yourself established, I don't think it's smart to disappear."

She didn't -- but working on "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend," whose title song milked the vengeful persona she had established with "Kerosene," the combination of continued live performances, recording and various promotional appearances made it "a blur, the whole process," she says. "Obviously, it did me some good to have to do it that way."

"Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" has sold more than 800,000 copies, pretty close to sales of her debut, now just under 1 million. That's no easy feat for someone who came out of the gate as



successfully as Lambert did, selling better than many of "American Idol's" top five finishers.

"Her first record got a lot of acclaim and a lot of respect, so when it came time to do the second record, I think she got a little bit scared and started thinking 'How do I do that again?'" says Frank Liddell, the veteran Nashville producer and record executive who has produced all three of her albums.

Lambert had been familiar with Liddell's production work and insisted that he oversee her debut. Success breeds success, and they've remained a team ever since.

"We pretty much said on the second record, 'We can't go and make the first record again. Let's just take each song, treat them with the most respect and it will be OK,'" Liddell says. "I think she was nervous about beating what she'd done with the record before. I told her, 'Don't even think about it.'"

Stretching up

At the same time her career was skyrocketing, Lambert was growing up personally. She had been a teenager, still living with her parents and brother in Lindale, Texas, about 90 miles east of Dallas,

when "Nashville Star" began. In fact, she auditioned once and failed, but her mother persuaded her to give it another shot. The second time was the charm.

"Coming in third was perfect," she said. "I got all the same exposure the winner did, because I was on through the last episode. But I was 19. I needed more time. I wasn't ready to jump into the shark tank yet."

In her subsequent years on the concert trail, leading a band and finding her voice musically, she also grew in other ways.

Her tattoo, for instance.

"That's the first big thing I did without asking anybody, and it was the cause of the biggest drama in my life," she said of the wings-and-crossed-pistols logo she had inscribed on her left forearm after "Kerosene" went gold.

Her father, a police officer, didn't approve. She incorporated the incident into "Heart Like Mine" on the new album, a song that embraces her outside-the-box personality:

Daddy cried when he saw my tattoo

Said he'd love me anyway

My brother got the brains of the family

So I thought I'd learn to sing

"The only thing I regret is that it made my dad mad," Lambert says. "Not mad -- he absolutely disowned me for a week. He wouldn't even speak to me for three days."

That was rough on her, because she got much of her musical taste from him. An amateur musician who also writes songs, Richard Lee Lambert introduced his daughter to the music of esteemed folk-country singer-songwriters such as Steve Earle, Jerry Jeff Walker and John Prine, whose observational skills inform her best songs.

Lambert reinvents Prine's "That's the Way That the World Goes 'Round" on "Revolution," revving up his gentle acoustic-folk treatment with screaming electric guitars, and she recasts the lyrics to sing it from a woman's perspective. She's also covered songs by Gillian Welch, Julie Miller, Fred Eaglesmith and others outside the country mainstream.

"I don't ever do it the way you are supposed to do it," she says. "I never get pitch CDs from songwriters and pick from those. I always

end up finding songs because I already know them and love them. I'd rather cut those than something I just learned . . . I figure if I already love it and know it, it's part of me and I ought to go ahead and put it on a record."

Moving to the ranch

The second major decision Lambert made on her own was moving away from the longtime family homestead. She bought a farm in Oklahoma, a 700-acre spread that's about six miles from Shelton's. "It's only three hours from my parents' house, so we still see each other all the time."

She's recently bought a horse and taken up barrel racing, an activity she relishes because it allows her to be "just me, not Miranda Lambert," saying her full name as though the fame now attached to it has taken on a life of its own.

She's spent much of the summer on tour opening for Kenny Chesney, so she didn't get much chance to ride, or to splash around in the pool she had installed in April. But she did compete in a rodeo barrel-racing competition in May, accomplishing one of the goals she set for herself for 2009.

"I kept saying I wanted to learn, and Blake would say, 'You'll never do it.' I said, 'Just watch me!'"

It was a rarity that the couple's tour paths crossed in Pomona over Labor Day weekend. But they welcomed the opportunity to reconnect, even if they spent a bit of it with a reporter before taking a three-day break to log some time at home.

"If we were a Hollywood couple, we would have already broken up," she says. "We're so not into the scene. We don't care about that at all. People have started to call us a country power couple, which is so cool and so flattering . . . but it's not what defines us at all."

"Where we are the real us is at home -- at his farm or my farm. I'm glad we have moved past the glamour of it all and are just real people, especially together," she adds. "We're just two country people who really love our jobs and each other and everybody else can take what they want from that."