

BACK

in the country fold

James Blundell has made his own way in country music and helped pave the way for the international success of other Aussie singers. Now he's back on the road and heading to WA. **Ara Jansen** reports.

James Blundell has a lot to answer for. He's known to many as the singer who single-handedly turned young Australia on to country music.

As a bright-eyed singer-songwriter and drover from Stanthorpe in Queensland, Blundell was the first Aussie country act to make an impact on the charts with *Way Out West*, a duet with James Reyne. It was one of the highest-selling singles of 1992.

He's got as many Golden Guitars as fingers and was also the first Australian country act to sign to a major American label, paving the way for the eventual acceptance of artists like Keith Urban and Kasey Chambers.

Blundell released a handful of albums to mounting sales before following a lead from his rebel

heroes like Waylon Jennings and Kris Kristofferson and largely turning away from the industry which gave him his start. Blundell had spent time in Nashville and hated the place because it was too saccharine. If he knew then what he knows now, he would have high-tailed it down to Austin, Texas, where the real rebels of country music live.

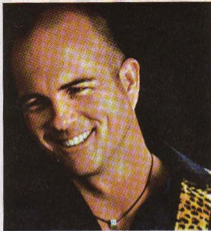
Six years later and what feels like a lifetime in music, the 42-year-old with easy good looks, a million-watt smile and a heart as big as the Great Australian Bight, has re-embraced the industry which launched him and has a new album in tow.

Blundell is the first to admit he can be downright stubborn when it comes to getting what he wants. But it's also the way he has managed to weather the shifting tides and flavours of the

Australian country music industry to keep making records, even when he was releasing them himself and touring largely under the radar to a dedicated legion of fans.

Now with a new record company behind him — his first since the turn of the millennium — Blundell's been willing to loosen the reins a little and let someone else take care of his business while he takes care of getting back on the road, touring and simply making music.

"My career in recent times has been interesting because parts of it have been fantastic and parts of it are dysfunctional," says the much-loved singer. After not trusting anyone else to manage his career for far too long, Blundell finally met someone who offered to "put it all back together and clean up the mess".



My songs tend to be hard-bitten. I've had and lost great love and it's something you must nurture and look after.'

→ With the new system in place, Blundell got to work on *Ring Around the Moon*, his recently-released ninth album. It's filled with the songs of a troubadour who observes life at home and far from it.

"I think it's quite amazing that the sounds on the record come from me and five players," he says. "I'm really fussy about players but I worked with these guys and they were such

professionals and it all came together beautifully. That experience has engendered a lot of faith in the industry again and there wasn't one day when I didn't look forward to going to the studio."

It's the singer's deep rumbling, comforting voice which makes the point of difference on *Ring Around the Moon* while hiding in the background there is always a bit of Blundell's trademark dry

humour and that smirk on his face which is never far away.

He and the band worked hard together to give the album an easy, relaxed vibe. Blundell's formula is simple: great songs and great musicians to play them. This time he didn't even pick up a guitar in the studio, which was liberating and helped him focus on the songs and his voice.

"I've been blessed to make music for a living for 22 years," says the dad to five-year-old Travis and eight-year-old Bria. "Life is what gives you colour and if things are too easy, you get too comfortable. I'm always driven to write about something, no matter what is going on in my life or around me.

"Take a love song, for example. Radio plays too many love songs which send the wrong message about the romantic, 'it'll-all-be-OK' love. My experience of love isn't like that, so my songs tend to be hard-bitten. I've had and lost great love and it's something you must nurture and look after. My songs reflect that.

"There are times in your life during a crisis when you remember a lyric from a song and that helps you along. Every

songwriter hopes they have a few of those."

With his rediscovered faith and return to the fold, Blundell feels that music and the industry around it are finally moving back towards what he calls music with integrity. A supporter of file sharing and music downloading, long before it was fashionable, he says it has paved the way for people to find their own way to the music they like.

"People are reigniting their own interest in music as opposed to being told what's cool. It leaves music out there to be discovered by someone who loves it.

"I said it ages ago: when people have the ability to compile their own albums, then the industry can't stop them looking at all different types of music across the palette. People now listen to a song and if they like it they might go searching for more and they no longer have a fear of genre boundaries."

James Blundell is joined by Felicity Urquhart and Anne Kirkpatrick for Tamworth on Tour around WA in April, May and June. Dates and venues at www.jamesblundell.com.au.