

A close-up portrait of Michael Bublé. He is wearing a dark, high-collared sweater and has his hands clasped near his neck. He is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is plain white.

Getting to the bottom
of Michael Bublé

CANADA'S FAVOURITE CROONER WEAKENS KNEES WITH HIS OLD-FASHIONED CHARISMA BUT CAN'T KEEP HIS FOOT OUT OF HIS MOUTH. HE JOKES LIKE A FRAT BOY BUT PINES LIKE A TRUE ROMANTIC. HE LOVES THE LIMELIGHT BUT HATES THE FAME. WRITER OLIVIA STREN PUTS THIS MASS OF CONTRADICTIONS ON THE COUCH.

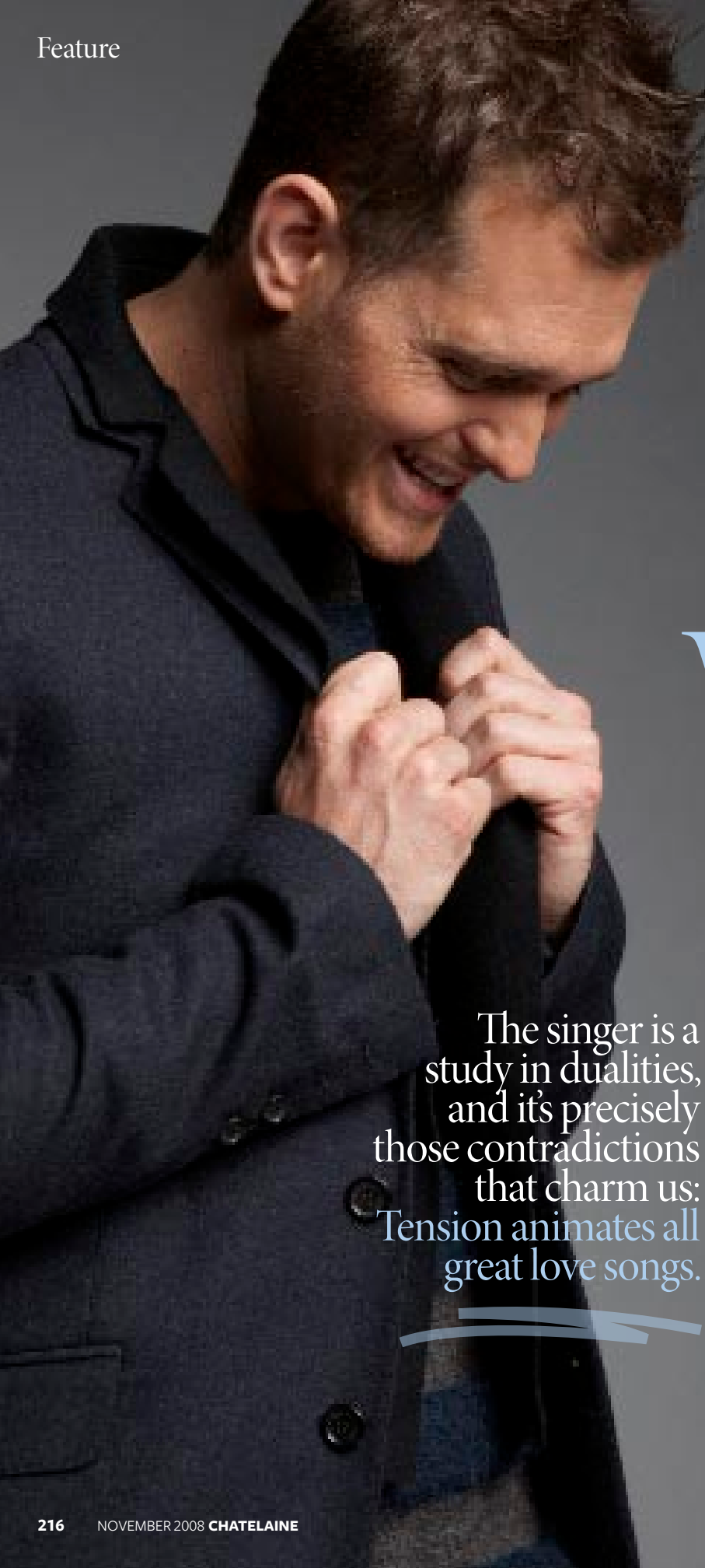
photography by Miguel Jacob

It's 10 a.m. in West Vancouver, low-hanging summer clouds are skimming the postcard peaks beyond, and Michael Bubl  and I are eating rosemary chicken wings for breakfast in the kitchen of his seaside mansion. He bought the house, a stormy grey with crisp white shingles, less than a year ago with his now ex-girlfriend, the actor Emily Blunt. From the outside, the place has all the salt-air freshness you'd expect of a West Coast retreat, complete with pool and panoramic views, but inside there's a *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* opulence: An enormous chandelier dangles over a coiling staircase in a soaring entryway, and there's a second living room that Bubl  admits he's barely visited.

In some ways, the house is a bit like Bubl : part down-home kid from Burnaby, B.C., part high-gloss megastar. In the kitchen, a constellation of fire-red pots that look as if they've never met a stovetop hang above the kitchen island, which today is decorated with the intriguing breakfast spread Bubl  has laid out for us: cold wings (he made them last night, he explains proudly), coffee and a plate of crackers, cheese and caviar. The diet, apparently, of a heartbroken man. These days, Canada's favourite crooner has the weary, hollowed-out look of the lovesick, those once-cushiony cheeks sunken by recent weight loss. The place is immaculate, with no ostensible traces of Blunt, and Bubl  looks drained.

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Like any true romantic, Bublé is indulging his sadness, almost revelling in the pain. There's as much poetry in despair as there is in happiness; it's the raw stuff of love songs. And Bublé's radio-friendly melodies and jazz standards are the go-to soundtrack for first-date seductions and newlywed dances. Still, a love-starved Bublé feels somehow wrong, like a stressed-out Dalai Lama. But then, the singer is a study in dualities: He obsessively pursued fame only to loathe it; he's a frat-boy joker and a tender Zen seeker; a charming throwback and a modern celebrity, as cocky as he is vulnerable. And it's precisely those contradictions that charm us: Tension animates all great love songs.

When we first met, the day before at a photo studio in Vancouver's Gastown, Bublé dispensed with small talk. We'd barely said hello before he told me about his recent split with Blunt: "I feel like I've been sleeping for the past 31 years, and since the breakup, I feel like I'm finally waking up." He blames this 30-year slumber on a deep restlessness, a chronic inability to live in the moment. He's survived the demise of his relationship, he says, only thanks to *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle's book about the urgency of living firmly in the present, which he displays prominently on his coffee table.

"The breakup was a catalyst. In a weird way, I was glad for the opportunity to re-evaluate my life and to breathe, and to take some time to myself," he says. "I had a really terrible habit of always looking ahead for the next shot of joy, no matter what I was doing." He's now struggling to quiet this compulsion. "I used to be relentless. It was about never, ever, ever being happy or satisfied. I'd hear, 'You're number one in America,' and I'd go, 'For how many weeks?'"

This dissatisfaction with the moment even chased him onstage. While audiences of thousands were swooning to his voice and suave, hep-cat persona, Bublé admits, his mind was elsewhere: "I got very bored

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onstage. Halfway through the show, my mind would start to wander, and I’d think, ‘I’m hungry – I could go for, like, a seafood and crab sub from Subway right now.’”

Still, this greed for life’s next crescendo has had its upsides; success comes from a desire for it. “I’m thrilled that that’s who I was, because it drove me,” he admits. “There was really a deep-seated hunger and, by the way, an insecurity, a need to show people.” As a kid in Burnaby (his father was a salmon fisher; his mother looked after Michael and his two younger sisters), he always knew he wanted to be a famous singer. And it was an innate craving for the limelight that kindled his ambition for a bigger life, not the modesty of his upbringing: “I wish I could tell you I grew up in a ghetto so my story would sound fuckin’ awesome. No, we were a middle-class family and there was a ton of love.”

After years of performing in small-time gigs (lounges, suburban malls, cruise ships), Bubl  sang at Brian Mulroney’s daughter’s wedding, where he caught the attention of the Canadian-born super-producer David Foster. Bubl ’s self-titled first album, released in 2003, showcased his swelling, velvety vocals and was a huge success. He’s since sold more than 11 million albums, won six Juno Awards and a Grammy and performs in mega-stadiums.

It was his grandfather, Mitch Santanga, a plumber and music lover, who introduced him to the songs of Frank Sinatra and Bobby Darin. Bubl  was immediately drawn to their melodies and their romance. “They had a mellifluous quality,” he says, “and they were about love.” He loves love songs (singing them and listening to them), and if you ask him to list his favourites, he sighs heavily before choosing Ray Charles’s immortal “You Don’t Know Me.”

“Is there anything worse than loving someone who doesn’t love you back? It’s so sad!” he says dramatically, putting his hand to his chest, as if tortured by the thought of it. “It gives me goosebumps.” He then picks another time-honoured tear-jerker, Billy Vera & the Beaters’ “At This Moment,” treating me to a bar (“What did you think I would do at this moment”)



The one who got away: Bubl  with actress Emily Blunt, at the 2007 Oscars.

in his rich, smoky tenor. With my mouth full of caviar and Bubl  singing to me on his couch, I’m both uncomfortable and thoroughly delighted. The *fromage* potential of the couch-side serenade is, let’s face it, high. (Don’t try this at home.) But Bubl , a serenader par excellence, nails the clich .

iven his power to weaken knees, it’s no shocker that Bubl  has become an international heartthrob, claiming a ridiculously broad fan base, from schoolgirls to soccer moms to grandmas. In a recent Australian poll, he was up there with Brad Pitt and George Clooney as the ultimate-fantasy sex partner.

G Bubl  does, in fact, hold much the same appeal as Clooney: Both exude the chivalrous dash of the old-fashioned leading man, and they charm with a boyish, playful twinkle. Bubl , with that joint citizenship in a more romantic past and a youthful, buoyant present, even looks like a kid, with a tiny button nose and a round doll’s mouth.

But his reaction to his status as dishy boytoy is to mock it. “When I get home, I’ll just stare at myself for hours and hours – I *do*. If you look at that mirror, you’ll find little kiss marks. I’ll sit there and say, ‘You sexy man, Michael Bubl ! Oh, God, if I could split into two, I would have you so fast, Bubl !’ No, I sit on the couch with my gut hanging out and I say, ‘What a load of crap.’” Clearly enjoying this line of conversation, he adds, “Listen, if I looked like Brad Pitt, I would be naked all the time, I would be doing this interview with no clothes on, I would be flexing my shit for you.”

And yet, at the photo shoot for *Chatelaine*’s cover, Bubl  doesn’t hesitate to do just that. He pouts and smoulders for the camera like a seasoned *GQ* pretty boy, and when the stereo blares 1950s soda-fountain rock, he hams it up, twisting and hip-swivelling without a hint of self-consciousness. If this is as much a role as his anxiety-addled, self-doubting everyman, Bubl  plays both convincingly. Just when I’m beginning to wonder where the sad Bubl  disappeared to, or if he really exists, he makes a sheepish return, asking the crew

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As it is with many of those who've chased the spotlight, Bubl 's ego and self-regard are matched – or threatened – only by the depth of his insecurities, both sides of his personality locked in a chronic codependent two-step. Between takes, he talks quietly to me about his breakup with the fragility of the just-burned. But later he loudly shares his thoughts on Alanis Morissette: "I've always thought she was hot." Someone challenges his view, citing Morissette's recent weight gain, and he rebuts: "I don't care if she gains weight. Her boobs just get bigger. And I like that!" The locker-room quip is so obnoxious and inappropriate that it's refreshing – especially in the land of the famous and carefully packaged, where bluntness of any stripe is provocative.

Most A-listers know, or at least try, to avoid foot-in-mouth. But Bubl , not wired that way, is completely reckless with the rule book: Celebrity has not cured him of his candour (mercifully for me; there is nothing more irritating than a mute subject and nothing more fun than interviewing the loose of lip). "We've learned that we can't control Michael Bubl 's mouth," says his publicist Jo Faloon, who talks about him as if he were as incorrigible, and irresistible, as a puppy. Back at his house, as I sit with him in one of his various living rooms, Bubl  chats with me as though we were long-lost friends having a marathon catch-up.

M"Fame is the worst thing that has happened for me. I always wanted it – badly. But it's not what I thought it would be." Presumably, he didn't imagine it would involve a total loss of privacy. He doesn't spend any time at his condo in downtown Vancouver because of the paparazzi, who managed to capture him, post-breakup, consoling himself with an assortment of local bombshells. But what's hardest for Bubl  is how fame commodifies: "You're not a person anymore. People will say things to you, like, 'You're uglier in real life,' or 'I think that show was shit.' They feel like they can say anything to you," he says with disarming vulnerability. "Now that you're famous, [they think]




Once restless onstage, Bubl  says he's "learning to enjoy the moment."

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his summer, Bubl  headed into the studio to record a new album. He's hoping to continue writing catchy numbers (like "Home," which he penned for his ex-fianc e Debbie Timuss, and "Everything," which he wrote for Blunt). "It's important for me to write pop hits. It allows me to show a little more versatility and to not

be labelled as the crooner, the interpreter," he says, cramped by the pigeonhole. But mostly he'd like his music to continue growing into something more authentic. He likes to sing with a group, recording live on the floor, instead of having someone amalgamate different takes of his voice, a strategy that can drain music of emotion and sincerity.

But, for Bubl , authenticity, emotion, sincerity are hardly in short supply. His songs (polished, feel-good) and his image (suave, invincible, larger than life) present a prettier veneer than what roils beneath: Unlike music, real life and true love can be most compelling when they're mapped with dissonance. About an hour into our chat, Bubl  tells me again about his plan to indulge in the present: "I just thought to myself, maybe I have a chemical imbalance. Maybe this will be my whole life: I'll just never be happy in the place I am... But I'm learning and, not to sound like a dorky hippie, I'm learning to enjoy the moment."



“I always wanted fame – badly. But it’s not what I thought it would be. People feel like they can say anything to you. Now that you’re famous, [they think] you’re Teflon.”
