



Jason Isbell

The Heart of Dixie

Jason Isbell continues his ascent toward the pantheon of roots-rock songwriters

BY MARC GREILSAMER

From the time he joined the Drive-By Truckers in 2001, Alabama-born Jason Isbell has shown more than a few flashes of brilliance, thanks to his razor-sharp songwriting and aching, lived-in tenor voice. With 2013's *South-eastern*, it all came together in impressive fashion: well-crafted, convincingly delivered songs full of fine detail and emotional resonance.

Something More Than Free, the follow-up, is just as compelling. With Dave Cobb once again at the production helm, the new album is in a similar vein, though not entirely so. For one thing, the instrumentation here is more fleshed-out (though far from heavy-handed), judiciously utilizing the talents of Isbell's 400 Unit band and putting these new songs on a bit of a grander scale. For another, there appears to be a tad more sunlight peeking through the shades this time around.

A classic '70s-style country-gospel progression propels the sanguine opener, "If It Takes a Lifetime," though harsh reality never falls too

far behind. "You thought God was an architect, now you know, he's something like a pipe bomb ready to blow," Isbell sings on "24 Frames," which calls to mind the spirit of Bruce Springsteen. "Flagship," a haunting, low-key slice-of-life tale set in a deteriorating old hotel, serves as a cautionary tale for potentially jaded lovers: "Baby, let's not live to see it fade."

Elsewhere, Isbell lights out for fresh sonic territories. The brooding "Children of Children," with its distinct CSNY vibe, swirling string arrangement, and penetrating slide guitar, builds to a powerful crescendo. On "The Life You Chose" ("Are you living the life you chose? Are you living the life that chose you?"), Isbell rides a soaring pop melody that belies the song's sobering intent.

"Speed Trap Town," reminiscent of Steve Earle, speaks of cheap roses, high-school football, and pickup trucks—more a dismissal than celebration of life in the sticks. While the reflective "Hudson Commodore" hews closely to the



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acoustic-folk template, "Palmetto Rose" is gritty, electric swamp blues. Closing track "To a Band That I Loved," what Isbell has called a "eulogy" for fabled Texas band Centro-matic, is as warm and genuine a moment as you'll find here.

While these songs are perhaps more ambitious and farther-ranging than Isbell's past work, they maintain a rock-solid foundation built on unpretentious lyrical themes and straightforward acoustic guitar. These are songs for working folks—heartfelt, direct, hopeful, and plainspoken. Yet, there's an undeniable dramatic sweep at work here, giving his vivid imagery and insightful reflections more weight.

Isbell is an artist who seems to have found peace, uneasy as it may be, by letting go of life's tougher questions and just living day to day, finding a way to move forward no matter the obstacles. The yearning title track best exemplifies Isbell's newfound brand of optimistic fatalism: "I don't think on why I'm here or where it hurts; I'm just lucky to have the work." **AC**