

GARDEN & GUN

Talk the of South

JUNE-JULY 2013

Fresh Start

Songwriter Jason Isbell charts a new course
by MATT HENDRICKSON



CLEAR AND CLEAR
Isbell at Long Hunter State Park, just outside Nashville.



Jason Isbell's Fresh Start

by Matt Hendrickson - Tennessee - June/July 2013

The songwriter charts a new course with *Southeastern*

Inside the Square Room, in Knoxville, Tennessee's Market Square, beer cans crackle as they hit trash cans and conversation flows loudly, punctuated occasionally by a giant belly laugh. But when Jason Isbell steps to the microphone, the crowd quickly falls silent.

Through his career as a member of the Southern rock legends the Drive-By Truckers, fronting his own band the 400 Unit, and as a solo artist, Isbell has grown into one of music's most brilliant songwriters, filling his stories with unparalleled description.

There are audible gasps in the audience as Isbell plays a few tracks from his new album, *Southeastern*, a deeply personal effort that has its foundation in his more-than-yearlong sobriety and his recent marriage to fellow musician Amanda Shires. The devastating track "Live Oak" sums it up with vivid lyrics such as these:

There's a man who walks beside me, he is
who I used to be,
and I wonder if she sees him and confuses
him with me

And I wonder who she's pining for on

nights I'm not around
Could it be the man who did the things
I'm living down

A power drinker since his teen years, Isbell, who is now thirty-four, came to the realization last year that he needed to make a change. "Unfortunately, as a musician you can drink yourself to death before you drink yourself out of a job," he says, adding that he harbored fears about calling it quits, feelings he put into songs such as "Live Oak." "I was worried how my life would change," he says. "Would I be a less interesting person without a drink in my hand?"

Certainly not to Shires. The couple made it official earlier this year, and without her in his life, Isbell says, he couldn't have written *Southeastern*.

A native of the Muscle Shoals area in northern Alabama, Isbell moved to Nashville last summer, in part to be with Shires. "Once I quit drinking, I ran out of things to do in Alabama," he says with a laugh. At their home outside of the city, the pair have writers' days when they each retreat to a separate part of the house, work on a song, and meet in the late afternoon to critique each other's work. "We each have to finish a song," Isbell says. "It could be great, or it could be complete s**t. I've never been as prolific as I am now." At night, they go out to dinner or host friends, including fellow songwriters Justin Townes Earle and Cory Branan, for a meal and a mean game of Scrabble. "We're pretty competitive," Isbell says. "That's what you get when you put a bunch of songwriters together."

As his career has progressed, Isbell has garnered a collection of rabid fans, including David Letterman, who was turned on to him by fellow artist Patty Griffin. Since then Isbell has played Letterman's show a number of times, and has flown out to Letterman's Montana ranch to perform at his annual Fourth of July bash. Letterman builds a giant stage for the show, which is attended by his family and friends as well as locals from the neighboring town. "He's a great guy," Isbell says. "After the show, he came backstage and pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar bills and gave some to each band member, saying, 'You buy the liquor, you buy the cigarettes.' He got to me and said, 'Your voice is too good for cigarettes, and don't buy the booze.' I promised him I wouldn't."



David McClister