

To shoot this Mount Rushmore of literary-level country songwriters, we got Stapleton, Isbell, and Simpson to take a break from their respective tours and gather in a Seattle alley.



The New Indies

Indie rock may be dead, but the spirit has moved on to rebel uprisings in country, jazz, and hip-hop

The Country Insurgency

CHRIS STAPLETON, JASON ISBELL, AND STURGILL SIMPSON

If you feel like real country music died with the 1970s and gave way to a genre that's the musical equivalent of Walmart—monolithic, cheap, and eroding the soul of small-town America—we've got badass news for you. There's a new gang of outlaws on the make.

In 2013, when Jason Isbell was newly sober from years of rock 'n' roll excess as a member of the Drive-By Truckers, he self-released *Southeastern*. The album was easy on the ears but tough on the psyche, as he dragged whole battalions of skeletons out of his closet and cataloged

every rotting bone in rhyme. (Prepare for songs about rehab and cancer.) The production, by Dave Cobb, was as raw as the writing—and the songs connected in a way that Nashville's music-industrial complex never expected. Soon, Isbell's intensely personal lovers' anthem, "Cover Me Up," was winning him thunderous standing ovals at holy temples of American music, from the Beacon Theatre to the Ryman Auditorium. His 2015 follow-up, *Something*

More Than Free, hit No. 1 on the rock, country, and folk charts.

Turns out Isbell is not a one-man insurgency. In fact, it feels like there's a twangy riot going on. The second shot was the release of Sturgill Simpson's *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, also produced by Cobb. Simpson grew up in eastern Kentucky, the groggy-eyed son of an often absent undercover narcotics officer, like Waylon Jennings, Simpson has a singing voice that's beautiful but hard-edged and country as hell, and he writes like a

psychedelic warrior-philosopher. *There's a gateway in our minds*, Simpson sings, *that leads somewhere out there, far beyond this plane*. "I want all that dirt and grime and life-sauce," Simpson says of his sound. "A lot of my favorite old soul records have it, but you don't hear it on country records anymore."

Yet if there's one guy who is accelerating the crossover of this new kind of old country, it's Chris Stapleton. The week before November's CMA

Awards, the long-haired Kentuckian with the Ronnie Van Zant voice sold about 3,000 copies of his debut solo album, *Traveller* (produced by, you guessed it, Dave Cobb). The week after the awards, he sold over 150,000 copies and shot to No. 1. What happened at the show is Stapleton and his buddy Justin Timberlake tore down the house with an odd-couple medley of drinking songs—and then Stapleton took home Album of the Year.

While it's hard to imagine mainstream country radio broadcasting Isbell's

chemo stories, or Simpson singing about reptile aliens, Stapleton—whose songs have been cut by Kenny Chesney, Tim McGraw, and Adele—could be the gateway guy who lures people away from impersonal beer-commercial country with a taste of the hard stuff. "This is the highest-level group of hillbillies you've ever put in GQ," Stapleton says with a laugh. "I'm sure of that."

—WILL WEICH