

## Isbell nails follow-up to career-making disc

By DAVID BAUDER Jul. 14, 2015 9:26 AM EDT

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In this May 19, 2015 file photo, American singer-songwriter Jason Isbell poses for a portrait in... [Read more](#)

NEW YORK (AP) — His mother's tears upon hearing Jason Isbell's new song "Children of Children" were evidence that he'd nailed the complex emotions involved.

The song about sacrifices made by a teenage mother is also the moment where the new album, "Something More Than Free," becomes something special, when it is clear that the career-defining achievement of Isbell's 2013 disc, "Southeastern," wasn't a fluke. The new album comes out Friday.

The narrator singing about "all the years I took from her just by being born" isn't just telling a story. It's Isbell's story. His mother was 17 when he was born and his father was 19, and he was raised in Greenhill, Alabama.

"The older you get the more you realize the stuff that my mom missed because I was there, because she chose to put all her energy into raising me," said the 36-year-old Isbell. "Obviously, I don't feel like I'm to blame for that, but still there's something in there that I feel a little apologetic for."

Isbell and his wife, singer-songwriter Amanda Shires, are expectant parents themselves. That forced him to change one line in the song from "never had a baby" to "late to have a baby on the way."

"Children of Children" is one of several finely etched new stories he tells in song. There's the son of a dying state trooper, itching to leave his "Speed Trap Town"; the man grateful for, but trapped in his menial job; the couple sitting in a hotel lobby "a thousand miles apart"; a man pining for an old love while recognizing he's "a victim of nostalgia, maybe Tanqueray."

"Southeastern" wasn't Isbell's first solo album. It was his fourth, but the first sober. While fear of losing Shires led him to rehab, what made it stick was how it changed his life. In the old days, he'd try to fit three or four hours of work between his hangover and return trip to the bar.

"Before that happened, I thought the music business, the climate, was keeping me down, that I was as good as anyone out there and I wasn't getting what I deserved," Isbell said. "I didn't realize that there were many more layers to writing songs that I could unearth if I actually spent the time on it."

The songs on "Something More Than Free" show that effort, the polish on a turn of phrase, the relatable images.

Isbell swept the Americana Music Association's big awards last year, winning album and artist of the year, and best song for "Cover Me Up." The album sold more than 150,000 copies, solid for a "non-commercial" artist. His concert audiences increased by about 60 percent and, for the first time, Isbell heard more enthusiasm for his solo songs than for the handful in his set he wrote as a member of the Drive-By Truckers.

Now he's playing in theaters, with better equipment.

"We have sound people and good monitors," he said. "That sounds sort of basic, but it's a big thing for me. Being able to hear what I'm singing and playing each night is a really, really big deal. That's the thing I'm most excited about, everything else I can handle. I was getting to the point where if I had to scream in rock clubs anymore, something would have had to change."

Isbell put out "Southeastern" on his own label, striking his own distribution deal. Its success brought offers from major labels. Isbell considers himself a rock artist, but with his Alabama accent and the way that mainstream country has absorbed the rock sound of a band like the Eagles, it's not hard to imagine him in that world. He said no.

"I don't have that ability to pander to an audience and for that reason, I'll probably never be a big star in any format," he said. "I just can't do it. What else would be the reason? If I did what people told me to do, I'd be a huge star. I firmly believe that, but I don't want that."

He believes a major label deal would have compelled him to repeat "Southeastern," only a slicker version with choruses and bridges exactly where a listener would expect them. He'd have people questioning what topics he could address.

"He's more Neil Young than he is Jason Aldean," said Jed Hilly, executive director of the Americana Music Association. "He's a fine artist and not a commercial artist."

He credits his former partners in Drive-By Truckers for teaching him to stand up for himself. He's glad he was a member of that band and equally glad he left. Being constantly drunk and in a crumbling marriage with the bass player wasn't a recipe for long-term success. Isbell would also probably forever be the George Harrison in the band, the junior partner to the older, established team of Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley.

"Personality-wise, I was more like John (Lennon) on a bender," he said.

Don't schedule any benefits, though. By owning his work, Isbell can earn more money than some artists who sell more discs while on major labels. Come up with the goods and integrity can pay off.

Isbell, who lives in Tennessee, is quietly proud of how he responded to the challenge of following up what had been his best work.

"I wanted to surprise people by making a record that's just as good or even better," he said.

"Nobody thinks that's going to happen, right? So I just said I'm going to do more work."

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