

REVIEWS



JASON ISBELL
THE NASHVILLE SOUND
(SOUTHEASTERN/THIRTY TIGERS) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

THE TITLE OF THE latest album by Jason Isbell and his Alabama-based wrecking crew The 400 Unit is both promise and provocation. It's partly a shot across the bow of Music City's current hit-makers, but it's also Isbell's solemn vow that he's going to do his damndest to live up to the city's legendary songwriters and performers, the ones who put authenticity and integrity before flash and artifice.

Those forebears should be proud that they have someone like Isbell carrying on their tradition, because *The Nashville Sound* is another triumph in his incredible hot streak. The return of the 400 Unit adds might and sweep to crunching rockers like "Cumberland Gap" and "Anxiety" and nuance to mid-tempo numbers like the soulful "Tupelo" and the melodic "Molotov." Isbell also stretches his musical boundaries to surprising effect, as on the hushed "Chaos And Clothes," which nails a haunting Elliott Smith vibe.

Isbell writes material that addresses our bewildering times while referencing timeless themes. "White Man's World," a fierce Muscle Shoals slow burn, insightfully addresses the marginalization of women, blacks and Native Americans from the perspective of one from the most fortunate demographic group. "Hope The High Road" drips with defiance; when Isbell shouts out, "Last year was a son of a bitch," you feel his empathy, but when he later promises, "There can't be more of them than us," you believe that there is a way forward for all the world's strung-out hearts and souls.

Domesticity features on two of the finest tracks on an album without a weak spot. "If We Were Vampires," with wife Amanda Shires on tender harmony vocal, muses on how love may be forever but life is fleeting, while "Anxiety" details how getting everything we want only makes us worry we'll lose it. On the closing track, Isbell sings the praises of family, humility and music, all while wishing his audience finds "Something To Love." Giving them *The Nashville Sound* fulfills that wish and then some. — JIM BEVIGLIA