

Bermuda's Laid-Back Allure Jason Isbell On Nashville's New Sound Summer Camp with Julia Reed

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**MUSIC
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Jason Isbell

isn't your typical country star or your
typical anything else, for that matter. But on his own terms,
he has quietly been leading a Nashville revolution

BY MATT HENDRICKSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL PARRY

KICKING BACK
Jason Isbell, photographed
at the shop Serenite Maison in
Leiper's Fork, Tennessee.



If you're worried about your arteries, don't dine with Jason Isbell.

Shortly after we place a late lunch order of deviled eggs, a cheeseburger (him), and shrimp and grits (me), the kitchen at Husk in Nashville sends out complimentary pimento cheese and crackers along with an order of grilled chicken wings. The one thing he wants, though, Husk doesn't have: Heinz ketchup. "I love this restaurant so much, but nobody makes great house-made ketchup," he confides out of earshot of the waitress. Condiments, though, are about the only thing going wrong for Isbell these days. He and his wife, Amanda Shires—a fiddle player and singer-songwriter who also plays in his band the 400 Unit—have moved to an eight-acre spread outside Nashville, where their toddler daughter, Mercy, can pedal around on her toy John Deere tractor. And his new album, *The Nashville Sound*, his third with the producer Dave Cobb, is arguably the most anticipated Americana record in years. His two previous highly acclaimed efforts—2013's *Southeastern* and *Something More Than Free* in 2015—were both released independently and proved that exceptional songwriting and a DIY work ethic can be commercially viable, akin to the rise of the Waylon and Willie–fueled outlaw country movement in the 1970s. He has already sold out five nights at the Ryman this coming October.

A native of northern Alabama, Isbell began honing his skills as a teenager by playing in local bars with some of Muscle Shoals' top session musicians. He went on to join the hard-charging Drive-By Truckers, spending six tumultuous years with the influential Southern rock band. Billed as a Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit album—unlike his last two—*The Nashville Sound* sizzles with a crackling energy you might expect from someone who grew up idolizing rock stars like Eddie Van Halen. But though he has a certain swagger, it's hardly the big-hair version. Wearing a dark navy jacket and black jeans, he looks like a roots music secret agent, the only flash coming from the red, indigo, and white on a pair of Givenchy sneakers. Over a two-hour booze-free lunch (he has been sober for five years), Isbell, who has never been shy about speaking his mind, weighed in on the new album's heavier edges, where he sees himself in the current Nashville scene, and why he still obsesses over music the way he did as a kid.

Nothing against your quiet songs, but I love that you turned it up on the new album.

I got lucky on this one because there were some songs that allowed themselves to be rock songs. I sort of gave up on writing those on purpose a while back.

Really? Why?

Just because it feels forced to me. When I started working on *Southeastern*, I stopped trying to write certain types of songs and just started trying to write the best ones I could. Then later on, we'll figure out what it needs to be. There were some that wanted to be rock-and-roll songs.

How do you know what a song wants to be?

Does Dave Cobb say, "Hey, let's get loud on this one"?

Melody. Where the tension is created. What sounds most natural in your head. I mean, usually, that's obvious. Sometimes Cobb will make the call. There are a couple tracks on this record where he did. Amanda, too. The song "Molotov" was a lot louder when we cut it the first time, a lot more rock and roll, but she asked if we could try it pulled back a little bit, and everybody knew that it worked.

Do you show Amanda lyrics that you're working on?

Oh yeah, the printer's in her office, so it goes to her first [*laughs*]. I'll think I'm done with something and she gets a pencil out, marks it up, and brings it to me. Sometimes she says this is great and sometimes she's like, okay, there's a lot we need to talk about here. The first few times that happened it was really difficult for my ego, but it's quite a resource. Songwriters don't have editors like novelists have. Most of the time, if you're writing and singing your own songs, you're not going to get any help, so I'm grateful.

You cut the record in three weeks, and in your shows, you have full command of the stage. Where do you get that confidence?

When it comes to being onstage and playing my songs, I've never really been afraid of it, never had any kind of stage fright or anything like that. But I started out in somebody else's band for a long, long time, playing guitar, singing their songs. Every once in a while, I would step up and sing one of my own, and there was just a really comfortable environment for that. A lot of people when they're building a career, it's like you're thrown into

the swimming hole before you learn how to swim. By the time I started this band, I had played a lot of shows. Six years, a couple hundred shows a year or more, so I was very familiar with being onstage.

Yet you have a song on the album called "Anxiety," so it can't always be easy.

No, but also, I'm not always the person speaking in the songs, keep that in mind. But there's the kind of anxiety that gives you attacks, which I don't have. And then there's also the kind associated with neuroses, the constant summation and judgment of every situation you're in and every reaction you have and analyzing yourself ad nauseam. I think that's more my issue than anything else. I just worry too much.

I think most good songwriters spend a lot of time self-analyzing.

You learn those techniques as a writer, probably, starting by paying attention to things that other people don't necessarily notice. Then when you turn that on yourself, it can sort of be a weapon. I think that's probably something that all different kinds of writers struggle with. But when I'm onstage, I'm definitely my most comfortable. That or at home with family. A lot of times in those early days with the Truckers, the stage was really the only place we could hide. There wouldn't be much of a dressing room. You were out drinking with the audience that was there for the show or you were onstage. We played for three hours in those days, and a lot of that was out of necessity, like, "What's going to happen when we get off this damn stage and are we going to survive it?"

Happy fifth sober anniversary, by the way.

Thank you. Yeah, it's huge. It's more important than my birthday and way more important than my age. It has changed everything, and it's a line of demarcation for me between the time when I didn't really spend a lot of time trying to understand myself and the time when I got to know myself as an adult in the world. Because that was a huge part of getting sober for me, dealing with the reasons that I drank as much as I did to start with.

The new record has some particularly topical lyrics, which, knowing you, is perhaps the most unsurprising part of the album.

One of my beliefs is that I have to talk about my beliefs.



STANDING STRONG "I don't make country music. I don't make pop music. I make folk music, really, with varying degrees of volume."

Hair and makeup by Marwa Bashir

STRIKING A CHORD

"It's important to me for people outside of Nashville to understand that there's a whole lot more happening here now than popular country music."



So you don't subscribe to what Travis Tritt said recently, that artists should just stick to their art?

No, I don't subscribe to Travis Tritt. I like the new, improved Travis Tritt: Chris Stapleton [laughs]. I think that maybe in Travis's case, he should keep his mouth shut, because Travis is not a songwriter. Not really. Travis is not paid for his thoughts. He's paid for his voice, and in the nineties he was paid for the tightness of his pants and the luxuriousness of his haircut. My mom had the life-size cardboard cutout of Travis. She loved Travis. I saw Travis touring with Marty Stuart. Marty's the real deal. He's one of the great country musicians, writers, performers, singers, interpreters. But all that said, I do think that it's part of my responsibility to tell people what I believe because I'm trying to make art. I'm not trying to make something disposable. I'm not satisfied with just having my name out there, and I'm not satisfied with having more money. I don't think being famous on a big scale would satisfy me. I think the more I have gotten to know myself and what it's going to take for me to be all right in this world, I'm going to have to use the talent that I have to try to make a connection with people and maybe push the world in a tiny, tiny, tiny little bit of a better direction.

The songs are topical without being confrontational, though.

Yeah, there you go. I think there's a time for being confrontational. But I want the experience to be a good one. I don't make protest music, not in general. I don't make country music. I don't make pop music. I make folk music, really, with varying degrees of volume. But it's still folk music. And I want people to listen to the record and find it beautiful. Because [Bob Dylan's] "Blowin' in the Wind" is beautiful. If you don't speak English, you could listen to "Blowin' in the Wind" and find it beautiful.... Most of what I believe is built on empathy, and I try to stay away from fear as much as possible.

The album opens with "Last of My Kind," a contemplative song about looking at the past and thinking that things were better years ago.

The people I grew up around, a lot of those folks felt like they were being left behind by time. I think things have been moving very quickly from their perspective for a long, long time, and that song is me trying to speak

from maybe that eight percent of me that is still the rural Alabama man who's looking around and wishing everything would slow down a little bit so I could raise my children in the 1940s. With progress comes a lot of fear that we just have to learn how to conquer and how to overcome. But I know a lot of people who are still stuck in that "the country's gone to hell" feeling, and you try to remind them, "Well, what about the Civil War? You must have missed that day in history class, because there were a lot of people watching from the bleachers as soldiers shit themselves to death." This is not our lowest point. But I guess I was trying to understand the minds of folks who feel like they don't belong in the universal city that we sort of all wound up in.

What was the thinking behind calling the album *The Nashville Sound*?

The title of the album refers to a few things, one thing being [recording it in] RCA Studio A, what they call the home of the Nashville Sound. But then I started thinking about it in the context of what we're doing. It's important to me for people outside of Nashville to understand that there's a whole lot more happening here now than popular country music. I wanted to claim that. I think I've earned the right, because I think I have as much to do with the way Nashville music sounds now as any of the pop country acts do. I think Sturgill [Simpson] does too. I think Miranda Lambert rides that line. She makes some really popular music, but there's also substance in a lot of those songs. I like that what we used to call outlaw music was also really invented at the RCA Studio. Waylon and those guys wanted to make records there rather than where their label told them they had to make records, and I can see why. That room is beautiful and it's huge and it sounds great, and you feel like you're making a real Nashville album when you're in there. So I wanted to be respectful of the town, the history of the music here, and at the same time, I wanted to say, "All right, it's ours now."

Have you been approached by other artists to write songs for them?

Not really. I think they know I don't want to do that. They probably think that I would just be a total asshole, which I probably would not be. Some people just take music differently, and maybe it does make me the asshole for taking it so damn seriously. But

that's just how I grew up. It was really, truly an obsession for me. Learning to play the guitar, learning to write songs. It became so important to me that I wanted to do it differently. From an early age, I started thinking, okay, what I hear on the radio, some of this is not as good as the rest of it. And I started differentiating that early on and developing taste based on the standards that I still have. Lyrically, if somebody points out something that I haven't thought of before, it makes me sort of sit back and think about what they just said, like if you're reading a book and you have to stop to digest it. Or if a rhyme falls just the right way and you hear the mastery in it. Or just great musicianship, great melody, great performance. A lot of that goes by the wayside when you start to consider really popular artists. Some of them are great, but some of them aren't. I still see that for the same reasons that I saw it when I was eight years old.

What has been your most indulgent purchase since *Southeastern*?

Most indulgent purchase? These shoes were eight hundred dollars. I bought them in Las Vegas last week because I decided I needed them. I really like sneakers.

How many pairs do you have?

A lot. I've got some Bapes and some hard-to-find Jordans, and I always go to those shops in New York like Kith and... what is the other one? Flight Club? But yeah, I like sneakers. And I don't know if it's because when I was a kid, I caught some hell for having cheap shoes at school, you know? I remember one situation in particular where my parents had gotten me some shoes to wear to school, and I just caught total hell the first day and never wore them again.

One last question: What is the most Southern thing about you?

My eating habits. Has to be.

Favorite dish? The last one before you die?

If it's going to kill me anyway, probably a cigarette and a glass of whiskey is what I would have at the end. No, if it's going to be a food, though, my wife makes this étouffée that's pretty incredible. Years ago in New Orleans I brought home Chef Paul [Prudhomme]'s cookbook, and she started making étouffée and has gotten it just perfect. That's about as good as anything in my opinion. 🍷