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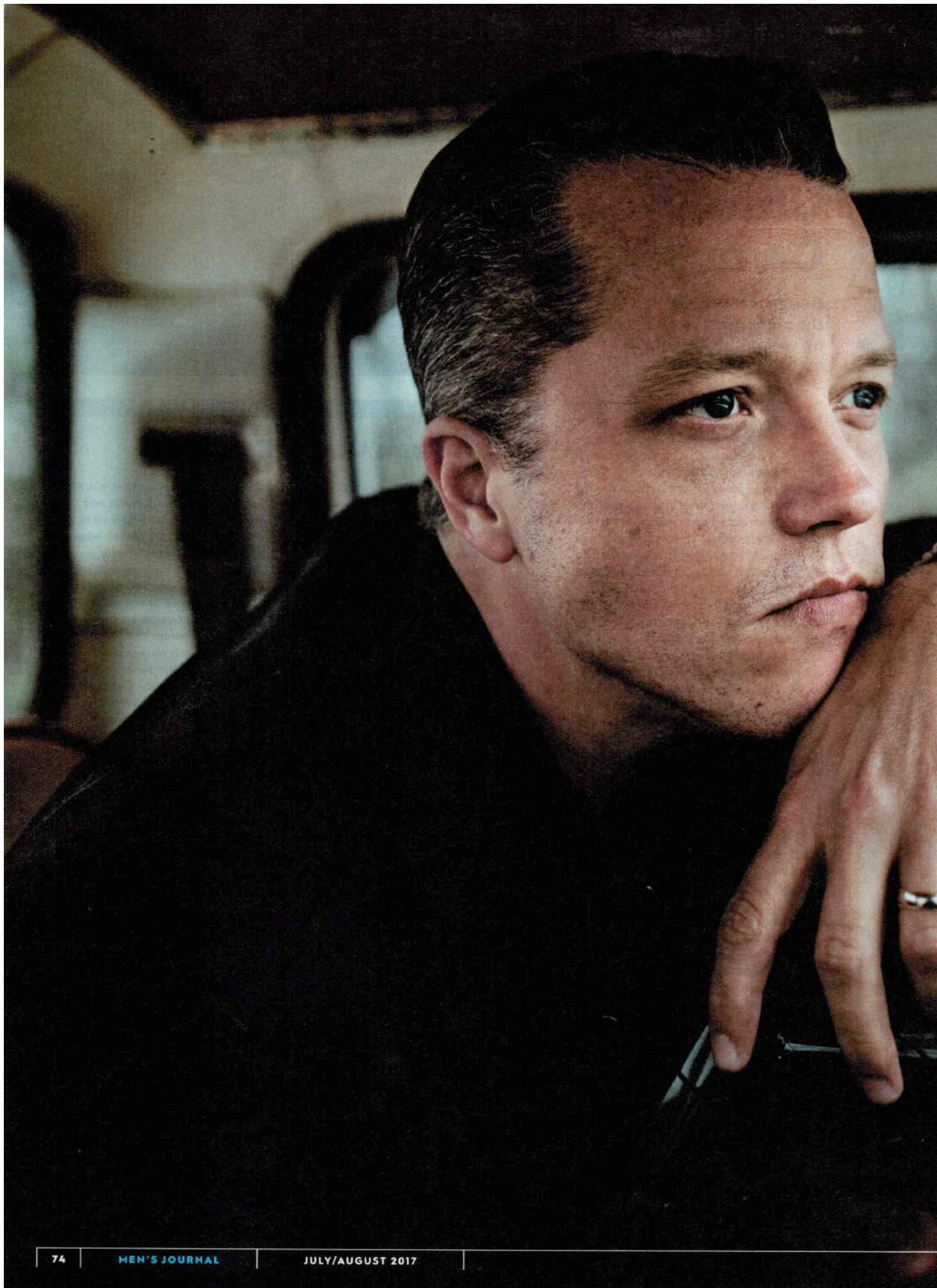
The Oldest Young Man in Country

Jason Isbell nearly flamed out before he even started. Instead, he survived — and became Nashville's new poet laureate of lessons learned the hard way. **By Larry Kanter**

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BY LARRY KANTER

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH GOLEMAN

ON THE THIRD FLOOR of Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, across the hall from a replica of Taylor Swift's tour bus, the singer-songwriter Jason Isbell is standing in front of something he still can't quite wrap his mind around: an exhibit of his own. It's small, not much more than a head shot and a few artifacts — a worn sheet of paper with some lyrics scrawled on it, his beloved Duesenberg Starplayer semi-hollow-body. It's not quite Hank Williams' cowboy hat or Loretta Lynn's sequined gown, but there it is nonetheless: the official seal of approval from Nashville's country music mainstream.

Nashville is full of musicians, producers, and songwriters who spend years dreaming of just this moment. Isbell is not one of them. "It's a little weird because I didn't grow up wanting to be a country singer, and I still don't really see myself as one," he tells me, speaking in an affable Alabama drawl. He's a big guy, maybe 6-foot-1, still baby-faced at 38, with weary blue

eyes and greased-back, vaguely rockabilly hair that's starting to go gray. "I mean, I don't feel like I have much in common with those folks. Their job is to sell out arenas. Mine is to make art. Big difference."

Or perhaps not. Isbell's experience suggests that even here in Music City, the gap between art and commerce may not be so unbridgeable after all. His 2015 album, *Something More Than Free*, topped the country charts and won a Grammy for Best Americana Album. The lyrics on display belong to "24 Frames," which captured a Grammy of its own for Best American Roots Song. And it's not like Isbell pulled any punches — "You thought God was an architect, now you know / He's something like a pipe bomb ready to blow," he sings in the song's chorus.

And then there's the title of Isbell's new record, his fifth as a solo artist, *The Nashville Sound*. On the one hand, it's a tribute to where it was recorded: RCA's historic Studio A, the birthplace of iconic hits by artists like Dolly Parton, Eddy Arnold, and Charley Pride. At the same time, the title is a cheeky rebuke to the town's hidebound traditions. ("Mama wants to change that Nashville sound," Isbell quips in one song, "but they're never gonna let her.") It's also a way for Isbell to claim a part of Music City as his own.

He's lived here for the past five years with his wife and sometime bandmate, the fiddle player and singer-songwriter Amanda Shires. Their daughter, Mercy Rose, is almost two. Not long ago, the family moved into a home in one of the horsey, stately neighborhoods in the rolling farmland that surrounds the city. The exact location is something Isbell prefers to keep secret. When I ask him where it is, he shakes his head and puts his fingers to his lips, allowing only that it's the most modest place in a fairly exclusive burg. ("A lot of musicians live out there" is all he'll say. "I'm not the most famous person at the grocery store on Sunday afternoon.") There's space for Isbell and Shires to have an office, a climate-controlled cabinet for his 30 or so guitars, a yard for Mercy to run around in, and room for the grandparents. This weekend, Isbell's father is up from Alabama to help build a chicken coop.

If Isbell seems a tad overprotective of his good fortune, it's hard to blame him. He knows he's lucky to be here at all. In the early 2000s, as a member of the southern indie band Drive-By Truckers, he developed a reputation as one of rock & roll's hard partyers, poisoning himself, almost nightly, with

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ungodly amounts of Jack Daniel's, occasionally accompanied by a small pile of cocaine. Isbell's first marriage, to the Truckers' then-bassist Shonna Tucker, blew up; he got fat, and his chops grew slack; and eventually his exasperated bandmates booted him. Finally, in 2012, Shires and a few friends, including Ryan Adams, dragged him into rehab.

Newly sober, Isbell commenced one of music's truly inspiring second acts. *South-eastern*, released in 2013, and *Something More Than Free* are full of sharply drawn, empathetic accounts of what happens when one bad decision after another leads to the kind of epiphanies most of us would prefer



▲ Isbell with his wife, Amanda Shires, at a Tennessee music festival in 2016

to avoid. *The Nashville Sound* has its share of these kinds of stories, though this one is different. It finds Isbell looser and harder-rocking and gazing outward as often as inward. In songs like the stomping, angry "White Man's World," he takes on racism. ("I'm a white man looking in a black man's eyes, wishing I'd never been one of the guys who pretended not to hear another white man's joke.") And when he turns introspective, the stakes seem higher than ever, as in the tender "If We Were Vampires," whose narrator is so devoted to his wife and daughter that he hopes to die first. "I'll work hard to the end of my shift," he sings. "Give you every second I can find and hope it isn't me who is left behind."

It strikes me that these last three albums serve as a kind of user's guide to being a man, a primer on achieving adulthood. "I don't disagree with you," Isbell says when I suggest as much. "I guess that's anti-rock & roll in a lot of ways, but I don't think I'm going to find a way to keep from getting older, so I might as well keep looking for a way to do it better."

IF ISBELL'S WRITING tends toward the heavy, in person he is anything but. He's open, easygoing, and — thanks to a southerner's gift of gab mixed with the unsentimental honesty of a recovering addict — a world-class talker. As soon as we move on from his own tiny exhibit, whatever reticence Isbell has expressed recedes and he seems less an acclaimed artist than an excitable fan. He spies a beaten-up acoustic guitar in a display case — "Oh, man, look at that! A Martin, a '57 D-28. I've got a '56." We pass an exhibit dedicated to the songwriter and producer Jim Lauderdale: "Man, that Jim Lauderdale always looks good — he's got more western suits than anybody."

Moving on, he notices a pair of Miranda Lambert's high heels, intricate and bejeweled and equipped with tiny gun holsters. "Oh, I like those," he says. "Randy Travis also had some awesome sneakers on the night they opened this exhibit a couple of weeks ago. I didn't know Randy was a sneakerhead."

I glance down at Isbell's kicks. He's dressed unassumingly in jeans and a black T-shirt, but his sneakers are like nothing I've ever seen. They're made by Givenchy, brightly hued and feature an elaborate silver mesh.

"Those are pretty flashy," I say.

"I got these in Vegas," Isbell says. "Instead of gambling, I blew my money on tennis shoes."

"How much?"

"About 800 bucks. But I'm proud of 'em. And I would have lost more than that gambling, so I figure I made it out on top."

The museum is filling up, getting crowded and loud, and I suggest that we check out another floor. As we wait with a crowd of tourists by the elevator, a security guard approaches and silently signals us to follow him. He unlocks a pair of doors and leads us down a quiet hallway, where we step into the service elevator.

As we thank the man, it occurs to me that he's the only person here who has noticed that the Hall of Fame is being visited by an actual Hall of Famer.

THE EXHIBIT ON THE second floor is called "Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats," showcasing the largely unsung producers and session players who backed up artists like Dylan, Paul McCartney, and Simon and Garfunkel when they began heading to Nashville to record in the 1960s and '70s. A couple of those players were house musicians down in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where folks like Aretha Franklin and the Rolling Stones recorded — and not far from where Isbell grew up, the son of a house painter barely out

of his teens. "It was the middle of nowhere," he says. "Cows in the backyard, no traffic lights. I was talking to my dad about it last night. He calls it 'country ghetto.'"

Isbell started playing guitar when he was about seven, and by the time he was 12 or 13, he was sitting in with some of those Muscle Shoals session players. "I got really lucky," he says. "There were no real bars in Muscle Shoals — by law, you had to sell more food than alcohol — so it was all restaurants. My parents would drop me off on a Friday or Saturday night, and I would sit there listening to set after set of soul covers played by some of the genre's finest musicians."

"When we would leave the bandstand for a break, he would get up and start picking around on the guitar," says one of those musicians, David Hood, who played on songs by Etta James and Percy Sledge, among others. "That's not really a cool thing to do, but he impressed all of us." So much so that soon Isbell was performing with them.

A few years later, Hood introduced Isbell to his son Patterson, who had a band of his own called Drive-By Truckers. When the Truckers' third guitar player went AWOL in 2001, Hood asked Isbell to take his place. At that point, Hood and the rest of the Truckers were in their mid-thirties, road-tested, and grizzled. Isbell was 21, one phys-ed credit shy of a degree in English at Memphis State, and had scarcely stepped foot out of the South.

It was a volatile combination: The band had just released its masterpiece, *Southern Rock Opera*, was playing more than 250 shows a year, and opportunities for debauchery abounded. But Isbell says he has no regrets. "There were more positives than negatives by a long shot," he says. "You know, to go in and be accepted by that band, to be doing something that was really magical, weird, violent, vulgar, extreme..." He lets the thought finish itself.

Isbell contributed some of the Truckers' most beloved tunes — "Outfit," "Decoration Day," "Danko/Manuel" — but after five years of increasingly bad behavior, he was out of the band. After releasing a couple of middling solo records and getting through rehab, Isbell was back in Alabama trying to write. "I lived above a bar in a town where there wasn't a whole lot else to do," he says. "It wasn't the safest place for somebody who was trying not to drink." He was also getting serious about Shires, who convinced him to move to Nashville.

By now, we've moved on to the museum's permanent collection, packed with ephemera belonging to Lefty Frizzell, Chet Atkins, and other heroes from Nashville's golden age. If the museum was crowded before, it's now absolutely packed, so we decide to get a bite to eat. As we look for an exit, that same security guard somehow reappears to whisk us back into the service elevator and out to Demonbreun Street.

Huge construction cranes dot the skyline, evidence of an economic boom that's seeing

as many as 100 people a day relocating to Nashville. Tour buses roll up to the Hall of Fame's entrance — THE REDNECK COMEDY BUS TOUR, one advertises. Almost as ubiquitous are the so-called pedal taverns, combination bicycle-bars, a sign of Nashville's newfound status as the bachelorette party capital of America. One rolls by — NASHVILLE'S NUMBER 1 PARTY BIKE! its sign says — piloted by a dozen or so hooting, hard-drinking young women in Day-Glo wigs and feather boas. One of the group, the bride, sports a veil.

Isbell and I watch it pass. I think we both sense that they've come to Nashville for precisely the opposite reason as Isbell. "I'm just glad it's the *number one* party bike," he finally deadpans. "I mean, wouldn't it suck to only be on the fourth-best one?"

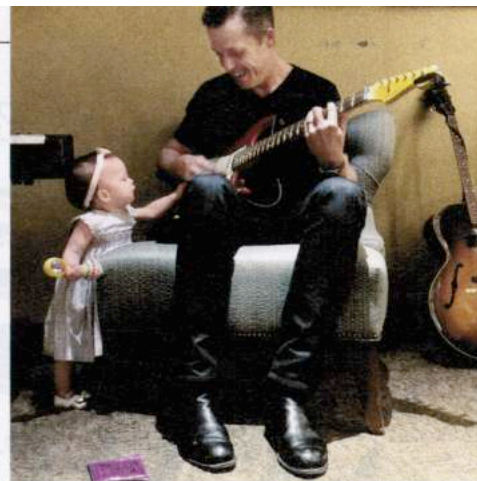
WE CLIMB INTO ISBELL'S CAR, a BMW X1 crossover, and head across town to Brown's, a diner and dive bar that dates back to the 1920s. It's in an old, beat-up trolley car, and the place is empty, save for a handful of barflies drinking Bud in bottles. We grab a table in back, and Isbell orders some hush puppies and a hot dog. "By the time I get home, the whole family already will be back from the meat-and-three," he says.

Isbell is still growing accustomed to his new life as a relatively prosperous father, husband, and homeowner, and he's careful not to take any of it for granted. "I like not having to worry about paying the bills," he says, "but I

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have to watch myself because I don't come from money. Sometimes I leave an encounter or a conversation hoping that I didn't come off as above my raisin' — hoping that I didn't make somebody feel bad for not having as much as we're fortunate to have."

I ask him how he manages the logistics of parenting and performing. Isbell plays about 100 shows a year. If Shires is also on tour, as is often the case, Mercy comes with Dad.



Clowning around with daughter Mercy Rose

It's a no-brainer, he says. "I'm in a bus, and Amanda is in a van. And it's safer in the bus."

I notice that this is the second time in a few minutes that he's used the word *safe* and ask him about it. Isbell takes a bite of his hot dog and thinks a moment. Working on that chicken coop together, he says, he and his father have been kicking around old stories, not all of them happy. He tells me one. "I was about five years old, and I was flying a kite in our backyard, and it went over the fence. Our neighbor, this old guy in overalls, came out yelling at me, saying he was going to whup my ass." Hearing the commotion, Isbell's father came out, and an argument ensued, until the neighbor announced that he was going inside to get his shotgun. "My

dad grabbed me, ran into the house, gave me to my mom, and grabbed his shotgun. He stood in the backyard thinking, 'Well, you know, if he comes out of the house, I'm going to have to shoot him.' I remember standing at the window trying to get a better look and my mom just holding me back."

Fortunately, it didn't come to that. A few hours later, the neighbor knocked on the Isbells' door. "He gave my dad a camper shell to make up for it. He never really said he was sorry. He said, 'I got something that might fit your truck. If you want it, you can have it.'"

I ask Isbell if he'd do the same thing to defend his daughter, and he doesn't hesitate. "Yeah, if I needed to. I have a shotgun." He pops the last hush puppy into his mouth.

"But we live in a little bit of a different neighborhood than I grew up in, so I don't think I'd have to."

"Who are your neighbors?" I ask.

"Um, well — a couple of them have helicopters," he says, a tad sheepishly.

We pay the bill, say goodbye to the barflies, and head out into the late afternoon sunshine. Unlocking his BMW, Isbell grows reflective. "It comes down to the difference between what you were planning to do and what life throws at you and you have to end up doing," he says. "The one who knows how to improvise is the one who comes out ahead." 