

# JASON ISBELL

Music for the blues (and reds). BY ROB SLATER



**OVER THE LAST** four years, Jason Isbell has reinvented himself through

sobriety, marriage and, now, fatherhood. His most recent albums, 2013's *Southeastern* and 2015's *Something More Than Free*, explored those first two life benchmarks, and with his latest release, *The Nashville Sound*, he chronicles his world since becoming a father in late 2015. The Alabama-born Isbell, who currently lives in Music City with his wife, violinist Amanda Shires, recorded his new album at RCA Studio A, which is widely considered to be the birthplace of the Nashville sound.

"It made sense to me because Nashville sounds like a whole lot of different things now," Isbell says of the inspiration for the album's name, referring to the pre-Music Row days of the storied town. "I wanted to claim that title for somebody other than just what the town's been known for the last five or six decades."

While the title of Isbell's new, hard-rocking album with his band The 400 Unit—*Southeastern* and *Something More Than Free* were released under Isbell's name alone—addresses public perceptions of Nashville, many of the songs explore the challenges and questions facing America and the world today, particularly through the eyes of the newly minted family man.

A lot of these songs seem to be written from the perspective of a new parent bringing a child into the current global landscape. What sort of emotions and thoughts were you having about the world when you started to craft this album?

As far as I can tell, we're still doing way better than we've done in the past, as far as our particular country or the society that we're a part



of. There are still a lot of improvements that are being made. I feel like, recently, we may have taken some licks—fallen down the ladder a little bit—but I don't think we've fallen completely off.

There are a lot of people who say, "America's at its lowest point," and those folks really weren't paying much attention to the Civil War day in history class because we were in much worse shape then. Also, now we're able to communicate in a different way—a lot quicker.

In pervasive popular culture right now, there's a tendency to reward bad behavior that we haven't always had to deal with. So that makes raising a child a little bit tricky because the whole point of trying to be a good parent is determining what good behavior is and what bad behavior is, and encouraging the former and discouraging the latter. It's hard to do when people who behave badly wind up at the

White House or as heads of corporations.

And then you see people who have been underrepresented and who have a smaller voice in the world. You see their voices getting smaller and smaller and smaller, and those people being pushed to the fringes of society until they're ignoring everything except their desire for something different. It's difficult. I fear for my daughter, and I probably always will, but I think I would in any environment or any society. That's just the nature of being a parent.

Despite all of the darker themes, the last two songs—"Hope the High Road" and "Something to Love"—carry a more hopeful feeling. Was that intentional? It was. I don't want to send me off feeling *too* miserable, but if my problems were all solved and everybody else's problems were solved, it'd be hard for me to find anything to write about. I'm more drawn to sad songs.

That's the tradition that I find myself in as an artist, and probably always will.

On this album, I tried to effect at least a tiny amount of change. That might mean that out of the couple hundred thousand people that could potentially buy the record, or listen to the record, there might be five or six people that open their mind a little bit, or 10 people who are encouraged enough by some of the things that they're hearing to re-enter the society that they've left for whatever reason. And that's enough. It's kind of a zero-sum game. If you could better the life of *one* person, then you've probably done your job.

It was a responsibility for me to try and encourage people to be compassionate, and that's what a lot of artists are trying to do right now because things do seem hard to deal with. To me, it seems like I don't know the people that I grew up around and the people in this country—I don't know

them as well as I thought I did. That makes no sense because I toured for 16 years before making this album—before writing these songs—and before Trump was elected president. I thought, “Well, I know the people in Middle America, and I know people in the South—I know the people in the Bible Belt. I know the working-class folks; I grew up around them. They won’t overlook the bigotry and the fear that this man clearly displays. They won’t overlook that enough to elect him president.”

And they did. I’m sitting back, thinking, “Well, I didn’t know anybody as well as I thought I did.” So what I turn to in that situation is trying to make myself more empathetic, understand people’s perspectives a little bit better and encourage that in the people that are listening to my work.

How does that realization of not really knowing people you thought you knew affect you? It’s really the only heart-wrenching thing, isn’t it? As far as I can tell, that’s the only thing that has ever broken anybody’s heart: the difference between what you thought you knew about somebody and how very little you really did know about them. That’s the ultimate concern; that’s the ultimate problem with being a human, being sentient and being able to consider the feelings of the group, and not just “I’m hungry” or “I’m tired,” like another animal.

That’s the ultimate question to me: “What’s it like to be somebody else?” That’s what art is always trying to answer. Something needs to [answer it]—it needs to for me. It’ll probably steer my work for the rest of my life.

For a lot of us, there’s a line of delineation between what happened late last year and what lies before that. For a lot of artists, that’s the point where you wake up and say, “I didn’t know a goddamn thing about anybody!” As we move forward, get older and continue trying to work, there will always be a well there. If you can go back

in time to where you were in November, I think there’ll always be a well to draw from because you can always say, “I wasn’t as wise as I thought I was.”

Father John Misty’s new album, *Pure Comedy*, and *The Nashville Sound* touch on similar themes. Is this a trend you think many artists will follow, and how does that relate to the responsibility you mentioned earlier?

It’s going to polarize musicians and entertainers. There’s going to be people who are on that side of the line and people who are on this side of the line. As long as we can stay alive, keep the planet from getting too terribly damaged, keep women in decent health—because that’s most certainly a question—and keep minorities as represented as possible until somebody’s in power who can speak for them a little bit stronger, this could potentially give society a little bit of a boost.

I don’t want to sound like Susan Sarandon and say, “It’s great that [Trump’s] been elected because now we’re going to have the revolution we’ve always needed,” or whatever the hell she said. You’re missing a lot of the point there if that’s how you feel. I don’t think it’s a good thing, but I do feel like if enough people work together and really focus on finding different ways to express the frustration that goes along with being out of control and living in the face of people who are so afraid that they become selfish, [then] I think that we could probably push forward *maybe* at a greater rate than we would have otherwise.

I like [Josh] Tillman’s work a whole lot. He attacks popular culture in a way that I’m not really interested in, probably because he’s younger than me. He certainly makes references that I don’t always understand. But, at the root of it, we’re probably trying to say the same thing. He’s a really smart guy, and I like most of what he has to say.

A lot of people who are used to being on the fringes of art and entertainment might rise

up and shine a little bit now because there are ears that are hungry for people to put things a certain way and explain all this. Everybody wants an explanation. We’re trying. I don’t know if we’ve got any more insight than anybody else as artists, but, in the process of explaining these emotions to ourselves, we might be able to turn on a little bit of a light for somebody else.

You’re an interesting case in all of this because you do have a large fan base in states that voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump.

That’s the job. The rest of my day ain’t very hard anymore, so it’s not like I can sit back and say, “Oh, I work all day digging ditches,” and somebody comes along and yells at me because it’s not deep enough. I have to go to the gym at the hotel to get exercise. I’ll be fine with a few assholes yelling at me on Twitter.

It’s my responsibility to attempt to change those people’s minds. You don’t change *one* mind without hearing from a *thousand* stubborn ones, especially not these days, but I’ve always been in that situation.

I grew up in Green Hill, Ala. I was always a weirdo. I didn’t play football; I played the guitar. I was in bands, and my opinions were different. I read when other kids watched stupid movies, and that’s who I’ve always been, so that’s probably who I’ll always be.

I think a problem that we’re facing is that people who consider themselves to be intellectuals are underestimating the intellectual abilities of the working class. The states don’t vote. The state of Alabama did not vote for Donald Trump. The state of Georgia, the state of Tennessee—those states didn’t vote for anybody. That’s not how it works. There are a lot of people in Tennessee—a lot.

I’m not played on the radio. I’m not a celebrity or a household name, and there are a lot of people who work hard every day, and whether they agree with me or not, they can

still appreciate the craft. They can appreciate the live show that we put on and the work that I put into writing these songs.

You don’t have to agree with what the narrator is saying for a song to be good. That can be very frustrating to me because you don’t see people listening to Johnny Cash when he sings, “I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die,” and then say, “That song sucks! Who would shoot an innocent man just to watch him die?! That song’s terrible! That’s the worst song I’ve ever heard!”

So why do they listen to my rantings and ravings and judge the songs based on that, rather than judge it based on the craft of songwriting? If people are too dumb to hear whether or not a song is good outside of its subject matter, I don’t need them to be my fans.

What is your relationship with John Prine—on and off the stage?

We’ve done a lot of shows together over the last three years, and our family has gotten to be good friends with John and Fiona [Whelan, Prine’s wife] and their family. It’s the kind of thing that I wouldn’t have even known to dream about.

When I was a little kid, some of the first songs that I heard were John’s songs. My mom would play them for me when I was a baby, and some of the first examples I had of songs were John’s. I never would have imagined that, at this point in my life, I would get to say that I’m his friend. He’s just as inspirational in everyday life as he is onstage. He’s the same person onstage and off; he’s witty and kind and generous to us all.

It’s just a blessing to know the guy because it explains a little bit more of the mystery to me and, as a songwriter, I’ve always been trying to figure out what it is that makes certain songwriters great. I think John just keeps himself open and vulnerable, and really tries to pay attention to the details. He’s still, to this day, as sharp as he’s ever been so I’m fortunate to be able to call him my friend, that’s for sure. 🍷