

**A** FEW YEARS AGO, JASON ISbell was an ex-member of Drive-By Truckers, playing clubs and drinking way too much whiskey. Now, the Alabama native is headlining venues like Baltimore's 19,000-seat Merriweather Post Pavilion while turning out sharp country-rock story-songs. (John Mayer has called him "the best lyric writer of my generation.") Isbell's new album, *The Nashville Sound*, gets heavier and more political than 2015's *Something More Than Free*, which won Grammys, including Best Americana Album. On "White Man's World," he confronts the struggle his two-year-old daughter will face later in life, and "Cumberland Gap" captures the dismal anxiety of working in coal country. Isbell says his song-writing hot streak "had to do with when I got sober [in 2012]. That gave me a lot more time to work. I had more focus."

**You recently played the Outlaw Music Festival on the same bill as Bob Dylan. What did that mean to you?**

It was pretty incredible, and you can tell he's having a good time onstage right now. I actually have lyrics from "Boots of Spanish Leather" tattooed on my arm: "Just carry yourself back to me unspoiled, from across that lonesome ocean." That line always means something to me in different ways, whether I'm talking about a relationship or some part of myself that I want to remain intact.

**You had a great tweet recently. Explaining why you didn't play any Nashville CMA Fest gigs, you said, "The reason is because I did not want to do that."**

I don't like that kind of music at all. Sometimes I'll hear a song that I really like that's in that world. I like that song "Girl Crush." Some of Miranda Lambert's songs are really well-written. Stapleton's great. But most of that stuff is just real bad music to me. It also seems like a huge mess. I like Nashville when it's just regular old Nashville and there's not a whole lot going on.

**You live near a lot of mainstream country stars in Nashville. What happens when you run into them at the grocery store?**

I don't really get any shit from anybody. I own my record label. I have my own publishing. I do what I want. Nobody is selling a ton of records. Yesterday, someone tweeted the Garth Brooks *Chris Gaines* album sold 2 million copies. At the time, that was considered a disaster. Now, everyone would kill for that disaster. I don't even know if Chris Stapleton's *Traveller* is at 2 million yet. So we're all in the same boat.

# Q&A



## Jason Isbell

The Americana storyteller takes aim at Trump's Christianity and discusses why he's not afraid of alienating Southern fans

BY PATRICK DOYLE

**Your wife, Amanda Shires, is also a singer-songwriter. What's life like at home?**

We live out in the middle of nowhere, and we have all kinds of animals. We're building a chicken run because a fox got all our damn chickens. You think it's hard for conservatives and liberals to get along in this country? Try putting some free-range chickens and foxes together in Tennessee.

**On *The Daily Show*, you said Trump's election made you lose faith in the South. Did you catch heat from anyone in your home state of Alabama?**


Well, *The Daily Show* is the least popular television show on cable in the state of Alabama. I'm kind of surprised how little trouble we've run into. When some people first heard this record, they said that I was gonna alienate half my audience. Where do they get those statistics? Kendrick Lamar probably does not have a whole lot of conservative listeners. I might alienate six or seven percent of my audience. But I gain a whole lot more to make up for it. **What's surprised you most about Trump so far?**

The Trump presidency has convinced me that we are living in a post-Christian America. I could see how a lot of conservative right-wing Christian Americans would vote for someone like Mitt Romney, who seems like a stand-up guy. But Trump is obviously not a good Christian person. I think the fact that so many people voted for him means that there aren't that many good Christian people left in rural America. God is gone from those people.

**There's a line in "White Man's World": "Mama wants to change that Nashville sound/But they're never gonna let her." Are you writing about your wife?**

Some idiot country-radio guy said that women were "the tomatoes on the salad," meaning they were there to kind of decorate country radio's actual revenue stream. That got me thinking how little value is given to women in that world. I've seen it with Amanda. She writes her own songs and tours, and through her experience I've seen how much harder it is for her. You don't get the same respect. It is not a level playing field by any means.

**You're known as a great lyricist, but what's your worst lyric?**

My song "Cigarettes and Wine," where I sort of break character: "She kept me happy all the time/I know that ain't much of a line." It always bothered me, but John Prine loves it. If it's all right with him, I guess it's all right. 

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