



How Jason Isbell Broke the Rules of Nashville

He's up for Album of the Year at the CMA Awards (airing Nov. 8 at 8 p.m. on ABC), and he got there without the support of country radio or a major label. The singer-songwriter, 38, reflects on his acclaimed LP *The Nashville Sound*. **BY MADISON VAIN**

Congratulations! Album of the Year is a big nomination. How did you and your band, the 400 Unit, react to the news?

Thank you! We're definitely grateful. It's weird: I don't really see myself as a country musician. [Laughs] I see what we do as rock & roll. But when you're from Alabama and you have a Southern accent and you sing about rural things...

Was there a particular artist who showed you that major success was possible on an indie label?

Patterson Hood [of Drive-By Truckers, Isbell's former band]. We had one cell phone that we were all sharing, and most of the time he was on it booking shows. It showed me that it's not a win-or-lose proposition. If you have something special and you're willing to work really hard, you can make a living at this.

Do you hope to inspire others to find unconventional paths to success?

I'm mainly focused on having a career where I continue to make music that I think needs to be made. But I think people would love to hear great music on the radio if it was being played, so I would be happy to be a part of giving them better music, even if it's not mine.

***The Nashville Sound* is a very socially conscious record, examining privilege and inclusion in a changing society. What led you to those topics?**

The music that was made around Muscle Shoals [in Alabama]—the Staple Singers, Otis Redding—changed everything for me. When you hear that, you think, "There's got to be more to the world, because I don't have the blues like this." Once you start questioning how deeply other people have the blues, that's when your mind starts opening up.

What are the best perks of your job?

Being able to sit down and have dinner with [musician] John Prine and talk about sobriety with [Eagles'] Joe Walsh or hang out with somebody like [author] George Saunders—it's more than I could have dreamed of. Other than taking care of my family, that is probably the most valuable part of all of this.

Who's the most surprising person to emerge as a fan in recent years?

When we played in L.A., Bradley Cooper and Kevin Bacon were there. They didn't come together, which I feel like I need to clarify, but they were at the show. My daughter really liked Bradley Cooper, as most people's daughters do, I guess. [Laughs]

Wait—your daughter is only 2!

Yeah, two years is all it takes.