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# The New York Times Magazine

M U S I C

I S S U E



## 25 SONGS THAT TELL US WHERE MUSIC IS GOING

FEATURING...  
'BODAK YELLOW' BY CARDI B

N O .

1 0

**Song: 'If We Were Vampires'**

**Length: .....3:35**

**SONGWRITING FROM THE RIGHT  
SIDE OF ADDICTION AND RECOVERY.**

**B Y**

**W I L L H E R M E S**

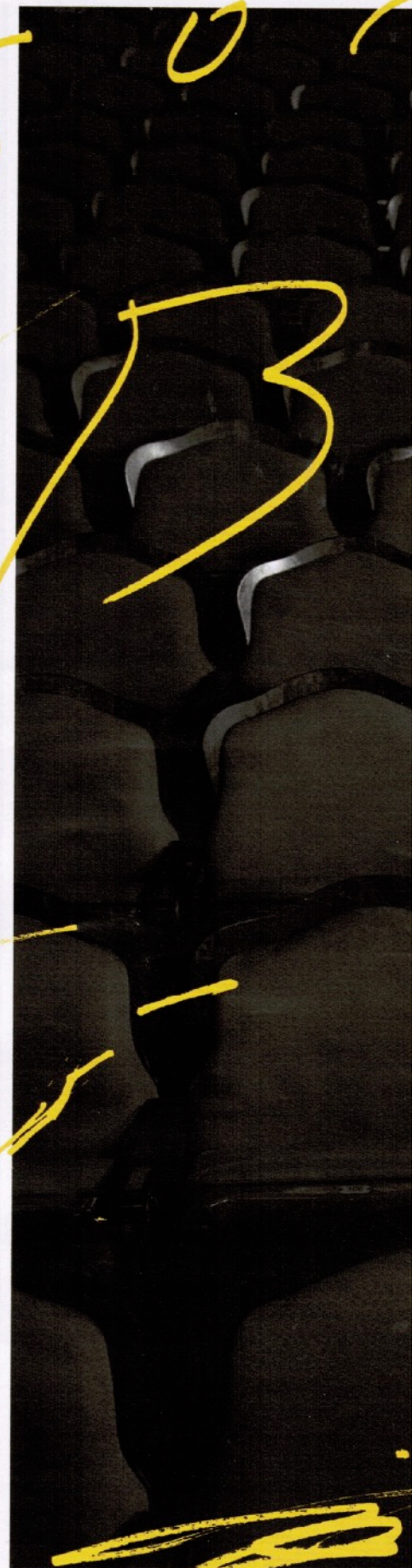
**P H O T O G R A P H B Y D A N N A S I N G E R**

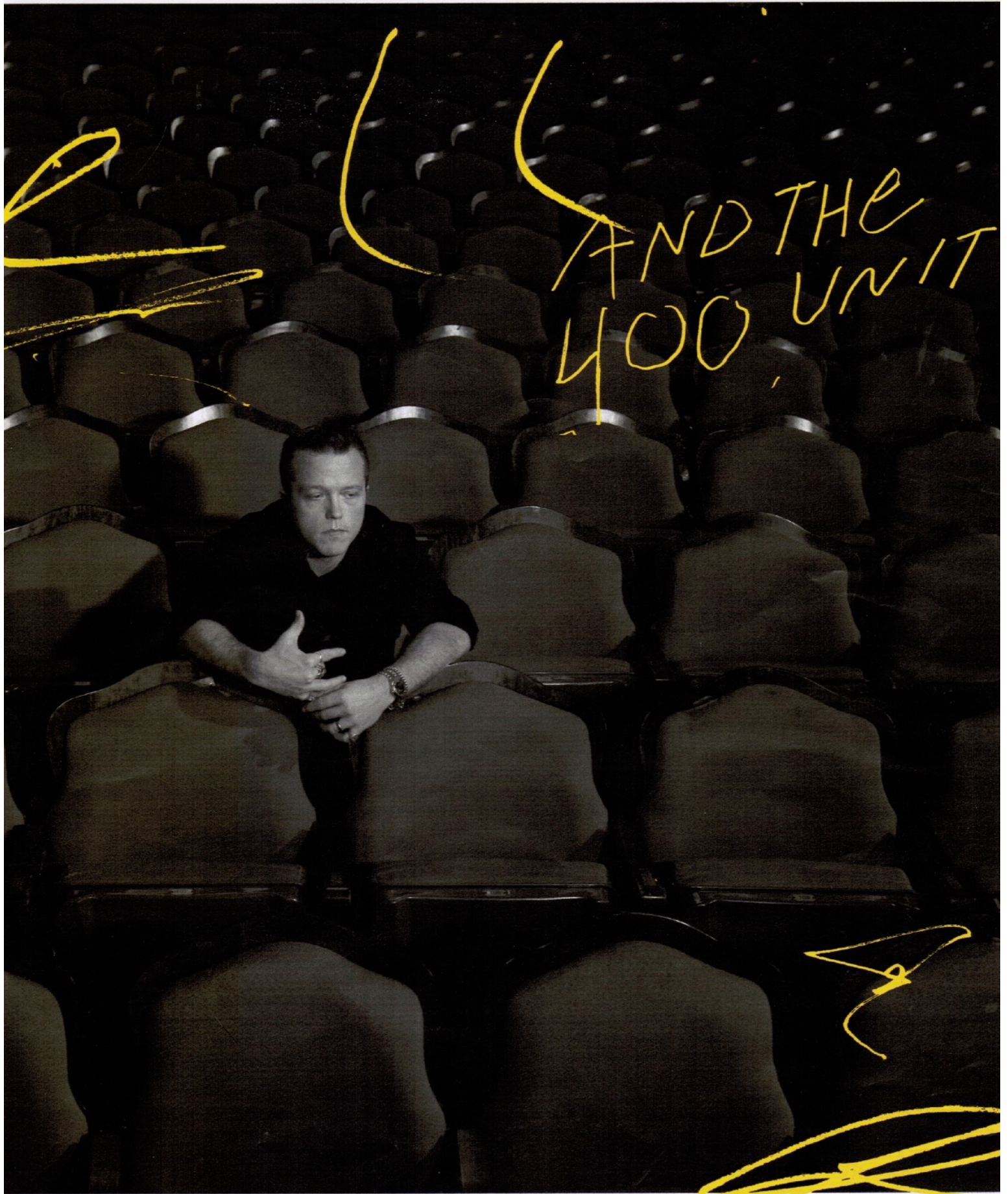
Although he had pretty much quit smoking, Jason Isbell stood on the sidewalk in Troy, N.Y., six hours before a show across the Hudson River, in Albany, enjoying the one daily cigarette he'd been allowing himself since falling off the wagon not long ago.

This was relevant for two reasons. One is that, three days earlier, in late January, Isbell won a Grammy for "If We Were Vampires," in the Best American Roots Song category. (He and his group, the 400 Unit, also took home

the Best Americana Album award for "The Nashville Sound.") In the song's titular couplet, Isbell sings: "If we were vampires and life was a joke/We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke" — an image that suggested itself because he'd just quit and was thirsting, mightily. "It wasn't subliminal, that line," he recalled. "It was the absolute foremost thing on my mind. I wanted a cigarette."

The other reason, most Isbell fans know: his personal and artistic narrative of addiction and





AND THE  
400 UNIT

recovery, specifically to and from alcohol, which he quit five-plus years ago after being forced out of the critically lauded, Alabama-rooted Southern rock band Drive-By Truckers. Sobered, he found a successful solo career and recognition as one of America's most inspired songwriters, a triumph that informs both his lyrics and his working-class-hero persona.

The title of "Vampires," with its echoes of Buffy and Bela Lugosi and "Twilight," is actually a bit of a feint. "Vampires" is a quietly gripping song about mortality. It contrasts simple, unshakable images of human need — a "hand searching slow in the dark," "nails leaving love's watermark," the urge to hold on to another — with the immortal undead, who can afford to laugh at those of us whose days are numbered. The scene recalls the restless spirits in George Saunders's recent "Lincoln in the Bardo" (a novel Isbell adores and whose author he's now friendly with), and the idle amaranths of Jim Jarmusch's "Only Lovers Left Alive" (a film Isbell also admires).

His song, however, was spurred by something more prosaic. One afternoon, Isbell was sitting on his bed, watching the reality show "Hoarders" — recovery narratives, basically. His wife, Amanda Shires, and bandmate and also a gifted singer/songwriter, was annoyed; she was working hard in another room, trying to finish her poetry M.F.A. from the prestigious program at Sewanee. "You're making your record next week," she scolded. "You need to be writing. Anybody can watch 'Hoarders.'" Chastened, Isbell turned off the set, and after a few hours of work he announced that he'd finished a song, which he then played for Shires, haltingly. "He started crying," Shires recalled. "Then he said: 'I'm an idiot. I'm crying at my own song.'"

The chorus repeats:

It's knowing that this can't go on forever  
Likely one of us will have to spend some days  
alone  
Maybe we'll get 40 years together  
But one day I'll be gone, or one day you'll  
be gone

When they write, Shires and Isbell act as each other's sounding board and editor, reviewing word choices and refining their work. This time, though, Shires said: "That's perfect. You don't need to touch it."

**After lunch at** Troy Kitchen — a business incubator in a revitalized neighborhood that lets cooks develop restaurant models as food stalls — Isbell and I headed for Collar City Sweet Shoppe. A former iron-and-steel town, Troy is known as the Collar City for its standing in the detachable-shirt-collar trade. "It reminds me of Birmingham a lot," Isbell says, referring to the once-booming steel city in his home state of Alabama. "Birmingham" *(Continued on Page 56)*

## ISELL

*(Continued from Page 34)*

was a big deal for a time. But then the business went elsewhere."

Isbell's upbringing was working class. His parents had him in their teens; his father painted houses. Isbell is finally doing well for himself, and it shows in his presentation: hair trimmed, stylish sunglasses, neat beige overcoat, wool Stetson ivy cap and immaculate bright-purple terry-cloth Tretorn hightops, which, he noted, were designed by a fellow Southerner and musician, André Benjamin, of Outkast. Isbell's roots, though, are still evident in his songs. In "Vampires," he rhymes the central conceit of "maybe time running out is a gift" with "I'll work hard till the end of my shift."

He also considers broader contexts. "Hope the High Road," from "The Nashville Sound," stakes out emotional common ground in a divided country. ("I know you're tired and you ain't sleeping well/ Uninspired and likely mad as hell" are lines that likely resonate on both sides of the aisle.) Another song on the album, "White Man's World," is about privilege and demonstrates how vexed it has become to hear the phrase "white man," which seems to get more traction as a supremacist's affirmation or an activist's pejorative than as a simple statement of fact. "And therein lies the point," Isbell said, chuckling. "That's why you have to say those words. And it's interesting to me how often the 'man' part goes unnoticed in that song. I'm talking about, among other things, the way women's issues and the issues of black people intersect, y'know? I'm singing just as much about one as the other."

Isbell tours states red and blue, playing cities large and small. At the Palace Theater that night, following a set by James McMurtury — one of Isbell's songwriting heroes — a gentleman, seemingly a few drinks in, hollered at the empty stage: "Hurry up! I gotta be at work tomorrow!" Soon Isbell emerged with the 400 Unit, a Southern version of the E Street Band: airtight, versatile, featuring a hotshot guitarist (Sadler Vaden)

and the bandleader's mate (Shires, in this case on fiddle). The couple sang "Vampires," looking into each other's eyes. On the Truckers' song "Decoration Day," five voices rose in unison on the line "I got dead brothers in East Tennessee." During "White Man's World," a few people in the overwhelmingly white male audience ducked out, for whatever reasons; those remaining sat curiously still. Isbell hopes to open a few minds in his audiences, which seem split between presumably liberal indie-rock stalwarts and presumably conservative mainstream country fans. But he concedes that, like many of us, he still lives and works in a bubble, and if certain fans are put off, so be it. "If somebody decides to get up and walk out on that song," he says, "I don't really care, y'know?"

Backstage in their cramped, shared dressing room after the show, Shires removed her makeup with a cleansing pad; Isbell managed to wedge his head into the tiny sink, rinsing sweat and Kevin Murphy styling cream out of his hair. He was looking forward to a day off the next day — his 39th birthday. He was scheduled to be in Providence, R.I., where his plan was simply to relax and maybe shoot some pool. Back when he was drinking, he often played for money, but when he got clean, pool halls became "a little bit of a trigger," so for a time he avoided them.

There'll be cake, of course, with his bandmates, his wife and their young daughter, Mercy. Thanks to a nanny and a dedicated "family bus," Mercy can travel with her parents when they're on the road together, though they weigh the pros and cons of touring with their little girl. On the downside, there are the risks of hours spent in motor vehicles. On the up, there's all that beauty and human diversity to experience in the wide world. Mercy is just 2, but "she'll remember things," Shires said, especially "all the different kinds of people she'll meet."

Isbell agreed. After all, our kids' minds are the ones most available to us for opening. Maybe she won't be so scared, "like everybody in America is," he said, "because she's meeting all kinds of people." ♦