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Jason Isbell, Unloaded

By DWIGHT GARNER



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If you want to know how to cure a hangover, ask a musician, especially one who has recently been in rehab. “Pedialyte, that’s what you need,” Jason Isbell told me. He was standing outside a recording studio in suburban Nashville, lighting a cigarette. “It’s the stuff you give kids who are dehydrated from diarrhea. It’s like 10 Gatorades in one bottle.”

Isbell is big and gregarious — he’s 6-1, 200 pounds — with wary, deep-set blue eyes that flash and size you up at the same time. On this early afternoon in February, those eyes were puffy and red-rimmed. He had only three days to finish “Southeastern,” his new album. He had four days until his wedding. Like Ray Liotta in the third act of “Goodfellas,” he was manic and barely sleeping. “Coffee and adrenaline,” he said. “They’ll see me through.”

In the old days, this kind of stress would have sent Isbell, who is 34, into a tailspin. He found fame early and wasn't ready for it. When he was 22, he joined the Drive-By Truckers, the brilliant and hard-living Alabama band. He quickly wrote several of the group's signature songs, including the title cut of its 2003 album, "Decoration Day," and a beautiful bummer of a tune called "Goddamn Lonely Love." He almost as quickly burned out.

His first marriage, to Shonna Tucker, the band's bassist at the time, came unstitched in public. There were some ugly scenes. Isbell's fondness for Jack Daniel's did not become him. "Some people get drunk and become kind of sweet," Patterson Hood, one of Drive-By Truckers' principal singer-songwriters, told me. "Jason wasn't one of those people." Isbell left the band in 2007.

What followed was an unhappy period of wandering. He made a few mediocre solo records. He became bloated from drinking. Everyone who followed his work with the Truckers knew he was one of America's thoroughbred songwriters, with a knack for rueful melodies and the kind of grainy blue-collar detail that pins a song in your mind, like the character in "Outfit" who winds up back in "tech school/just to memorize Frigidaire parts." But he'd lost his way.

His resurrection began when his single, "Alabama Pines," won Song of the Year at the 2012 Americana Awards, which honor the kind of rebellious and pared-down roots music that used to be called alternative country. "Alabama Pines" is pure Isbell: elegiac and self-lacerating. "I can't get to sleep at night, the parking lot's so loud and bright," the song's narrator intones from a motel room. "The a/c hasn't worked in 20 years/Probably never made a single person cold/but I can't say the same for me, I've done it many times."

But his real comeback wasn't possible until February 2012, when his girlfriend (now wife), the singer and songwriter Amanda Shires, with the help of his manager Traci Thomas and the musician Ryan Adams, got him into rehab. Isbell spent two weeks in Cumberland Heights, an alcohol-and-drug-treatment center in Nashville. His head cleared. When he came out, the whiskey weight drained from his cells, and he shed 40 pounds almost overnight. Best of all, that summer he began writing the songs that make up "Southeastern." The record, which evokes powerful and intimate classics like Bruce Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love" and Rosanne Cash's "Interiors," is a breakthrough for Isbell — prickly with loss, forgiveness, newfound sobriety and second chances.

Standing outside the studio, where he was working on a few final tracks, Isbell stubbed out a third cigarette. "I'm lucky to have a second chance at all this. I don't remember a lot of the good times from my days with the Truckers." This time around, no Pedialyte will be necessary. "This time I want to remember it all."

"All right, hippies, let's nail this thing," Dave Cobb whispered into a microphone. He's the young Nashville-based producer who was brought in to work on "Southeastern" after Ryan Adams, with whom Isbell toured last year, dropped out of production duties at the

last minute, rankling some in Isbell's camp. Cobb's backyard studio, like most recording studios, put me in mind of a casino and an artisanal cocktail bar at the same time: dark at midday, air-conditioned, absent of clocks, with banks of colored LED lights.

Cobb may have been a last-minute fill-in, but he has produced albums by renegade country talents like Jamey Johnson and Shooter Jennings, and he had an easy rapport with Isbell. He rocked in his chair like a penitent, eyes closed, his long hair swinging, as Isbell laid down the guitar and vocals for "Different Day," a ballad on the new record. "I think we got it," Cobb said after the eighth or ninth run-through. Then he leaned into the microphone again to ask Isbell about a curious word in the song's lyrics. "What's benzodiazepine, anyway?"

Isbell's work is filled with references to prescription drugs — one of his finest songs, a kind of fiddle-strewn anti-waltz, is titled "Codeine" — and when I asked him later why this is, he hesitated for a minute. "I think I just love the *sound* those words make," he said. "Prescription drugs have never been seductive to me, but they put some realism in a song. More people are addicted to legal drugs than illegal ones."

Isbell is a slow, careful writer. He worries the little things. "What keeps me up at night is stuff like the consistency of pronouns," he says. He's a grammarian. "My dad, as much as I love him, has one of those signs — 'The Isbell's' — on his front door, and he's got the damn apostrophe in there. I haven't strangled him yet."

When Isbell was young, his father, Mike Isbell, worked as a house painter in Greenhill, which is in rural northern Alabama. There wasn't much to the town but liquor stores and speed traps, Isbell says.

Mike's advice for his son is immortalized in Isbell's anthemic song, "Outfit," written while he was with the Truckers. The song's crucial observation comes when Isbell's father warns him away from the indignities of his own profession: "Don't let me catch you in Kendale, with a bucket of wealthy man's paint."

The Isbell family lived in a trailer when Jason was born. Within a few years they graduated to a one-level Farmers Home Administration house. Isbell got his first electric guitar, an Electra MPC, at age 7 or 8. By the time he was a sophomore in high school, he was so adept with it that his mother would drop him off at bars to sit in with local bands.

These weren't just any musicians he was jamming with. Isbell grew up near Muscle Shoals, where artists like Aretha Franklin, the Rolling Stones and Paul Simon made classic records with a tight-knit group of soulful session musicians, white guys who sounded black. These men included the bassist David Hood, the father of Patterson Hood, with whom Isbell would later play in the Drive-By Truckers.

"Those older guys would record behind other people during the day and go out and play these intense R.&B. covers at night," Isbell says. "They took a real interest in me. They taught me a great deal."

Isbell wasn't especially popular during high school. He looked like a football player, but he wasn't interested in the sport. He played trumpet and French horn in the marching band instead. He was a sensitive kid who was usually mistaken for something else. "Every time I'd get a job, they'd say: 'You'll be good at loading trucks,'" he says. "I couldn't explain that there was more to me than carrying things."

Later, after a long day of recording, Isbell was sitting at the kitchen table in the unassuming duplex apartment he shares with Shires on a run-down street in Nashville. There were guitars and books all over the place. Isbell attended the University of Memphis on an academic scholarship. He studied creative writing to help his songwriting and published a few poems in small literary magazines. He read a lot of Faulkner and Welty and Denis Johnson and Cormac McCarthy. So their apartment looks like what George Jones and Tammy Wynette's apartment might have looked like, if George Jones and Tammy Wynette had gone to the Iowa Writers Workshop.

Isbell was beginning to dive into the story of how he found himself playing with the Drive-By Truckers when Shires shuffled down the carpeted stairs in her pajamas, yawning, and snuggled onto his lap. She's tiny, with brown hair and fine features. Shires, who grew up in Lubbock, Tex., is a prodigiously talented singer, songwriter and fiddle player in her own right. She joined the Texas Playboys, the former backing band for the Texas swing legend Bob Wills, when she was 15. She has released three increasingly fine albums. Her song "When You Need a Train It Never Comes" was ranked the fifth-best song of 2011 by American Songwriter. It ranked No. 1 among the songs I found myself playing over and over last year. Isbell and Shires have become a kind of power couple in Nashville, though you get the sense they would react to this notion, if proposed, as if someone had just flecked them with chicken feces.

Shires gave Isbell a kiss and headed back up to bed, after bringing us two RC Colas and a couple of Moon Pies. The next morning, they would race into Nashville in his pickup truck, an Obama/Biden sticker affixed to the bumper, to get a marriage license. That night, he watched her go with a sheepish grin and said, "I used to think that only stupid people could love each other this much."

Isbell never did graduate from Memphis. He left one physical-education credit shy of a diploma. He returned to the Muscle Shoals area in 2001 and began to play in a band that included Shonna Tucker, whom he'd known since he was 16. The band's demos got Isbell noticed by F.A.M.E. Publishing in Muscle Shoals, which signed him to a songwriting contract at \$250 a week.

He also began playing the occasional show with Patterson Hood, who along with Mike Cooley makes up the brain trust of the Drive-By Truckers, a band they founded in 1996. Hood and Cooley grew up near each other in Muscle Shoals. One night at an important house party the Truckers were scheduled to play — a journalist and a photographer from Spin magazine had flown in to do a feature on the band — the band's third guitarist, Rob Malone, didn't show.

“Jason happened to be there that night, and we had an empty chair,” Hood says. “He ended up going on tour with us.” Within two weeks, Isbell had written “Decoration Day” and “Outfit,” the songs that defined his tenure with the band. “I knew we’d struck gold,” Hood says. “This chubby kid — he was 22 but looked like he was 15 — was going to be one of the great songwriters of our time.”

It was an auspicious moment to join the band. The Truckers has just released their third record, a double album titled “Southern Rock Opera” (2001), which became a major statement and breakout success. Rolling Stone gave the album four stars. The online music service Rhapsody ranked the album No. 6 on its list of “Rock’s Best Albums of the Decade.”

Twelve years later, “Southern Rock Opera” remains a masterwork, a record that bridged what seemed like an impossible gap between alternative country music and heavy rock. The lyrics, which evoke the dirty South of writers like Barry Hannah, Larry Brown and Harry Crews, are obsessed with race and class and everything from the ghosts of Lynyrd Skynyrd to what Hood refers to, in one song, as “the three Alabama icons” — Bear Bryant, George Wallace and Ronnie Van Zant.

On a song called “Do It Yourself,” about a friend who committed suicide, Hood sings the lyrics that, for me, sum up this band’s power: “Everyone has those times when the night’s so long/The dead-end life just drags you down: You lean back under the microphone/And turn your demons into walls/Of goddamned noise and sound.”

So it was an intense band that Isbell found himself joining. The songwriting competition was intense, too. In Hood and Cooley the band already had two of the best singers and songwriters working in America. With Isbell, the band became a three-headed monster, one of the rare triple threats in rock since the days of Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds.

Isbell wasn’t a frontman on a level with Hood and Cooley. “I sang my few songs a night and got in the shadows and played guitar,” he says. But his songs had a sensitivity and lilting quality that Hood’s and Cooley’s mostly lacked.

“Even back when I first met him, when he was dripping with that Southern rock, Skynyrd-is-cool attitude, he had the ability to pull these beautiful songs out of his pocket,” his friend Justin Townes Earle says.

Isbell married Tucker in 2002, and she joined the band as its bassist in 2003. By 2007, the band was in disarray. “We had gotten to the point where we just hated being around each other,” Isbell says. His exit from the band was carefully stage-managed. It was said to be about creative differences among friends, and about Isbell’s desire to go solo because he was writing more songs than the band could handle.

But the reality was more complicated. Hood called Isbell and suggested he take some time off and get his life together. Isbell replied that if the band was going to tour under the name Drive-By Truckers, he wasn’t going to miss even one show. Cooley then called

Isbell and said, as Isbell recalls, “that isn’t going to work for us.” He was forced out. “It was heartbreaking,” Isbell says. “I couldn’t picture what I was going to do. But now I can’t picture things having gone differently. I love those guys, but I’m glad I’m not playing with them anymore. I think they’re glad of it, too.”

On a bright afternoon in Nashville, Isbell was standing outside Cobb’s studio again, taking another cigarette break and telling me about the years following his breakup with the Truckers, wincing as he did so. On one occasion he was arrested for public drunkenness. He remembers waking up in strange places with no idea of how he got there.

These days Isbell is a popular and witty presence on Twitter, but in January 2012, a drunken tweet led to a feud with the country singer Dierks Bentley. Isbell claimed that Bentley’s single “Home” sounded too much like “In a Razor Town,” from Isbell’s 2007 album, “Sirens of the Ditch.” Isbell consulted a musicologist, who ultimately absolved Bentley and his co-writers, Dan Wilson and Brett Beavers, of plagiarism; the whole incident would end up costing Isbell a few grand in legal fees.

After that, Shires finally got him into rehab. “She got on the phone and called my mom and called Ryan Adams and called my manager and called a lot of other people whose opinions I respect and told them that I really wanted to do it this time, and to hold me accountable.”

Newly sober, Isbell is looking forward to touring behind “Southeastern” along with his band, the 400 Unit. He was funny talking about the almost-comic indignities that can befall a midlevel performer at large in America circa 2013. He mentioned the gruesomeness of a “pentagram tour.” When I asked what that was, he replied: “It’s when all your shows are spread out geographically, like the points of a star. There’s a lot of driving to do. You get rid of that booking agent real quick.”

He used a single word, “evil,” to describe Spotify, the online music-streaming service. “I think Spotify is honestly just another one of Sean Parker’s ways of ripping musicians off,” Isbell said, referring to the Napster co-founder who has a stake in Spotify. His comic mini-rant about Parker was so expletive-filled that, to paraphrase Mary McCarthy, even the words “and” and “the” from it are not printable here. But the gist of his complaint is this: “People can listen to your album over and over on Spotify, and you don’t really make anything on it.”

Isbell reserves special scorn for people who record his shows on cellphones and post clips to YouTube. “It’s an intrusion because I’m not performing for documentation’s sake, I’m performing for people’s ears and their eyeballs,” he said. “I don’t mind the scrutiny of it. We’re good every night. I just feel like people aren’t participating in the community of the room when they’re behaving that way.”

He shook his head. “My favorite thing about going to concerts has always been looking around and thinking that there’s a lot of people in here that are very much like me, a lot

of people in here I could have a full conversation with. I might even get laid in this room. You're not getting laid if you're standing there with your cellphone."

Then he laughed and said: "I can't get too mad. I would have done the same with Neil Young when I was a kid, if I could have."

Jason Isbell's redemption on "Southeastern" is one of the best stories American music has to tell in 2013. In the album's opening track, "Cover Me Up," he declares that "I sobered up and I swore off that stuff, forever this time." But at heart the song is a flat-out love story. Isbell sings:

*Girl, leave your boots by the bed we ain't leaving this room
Till someone needs medical help or the magnolias bloom
It's cold in this house and I ain't going out to chop wood
So cover me up and know you're enough to use me for good.*

Talking about the record, Justin Townes Earle said to me: "You know, when I sit around and talk with Jason, he can sound, just as I can, like a dumb redneck. But put him on paper, or behind a guitar, and he can fly."



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