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THE Arts

Jason Isbell

“Something More Than Free”
(Southeastern/Thirty Tigers)

Jason Isbell begins the title track of his new album, “Something More Than Free,” picturing the end of a day’s labor, his voice set against the lonesome strum of an acoustic guitar. He’s in character, as somebody in the construction or freight-loading trade, drawing his only comfort from a blunt sense of purpose and the hope of eternal reward. “I don’t think on why I’m here or where it hurts,” he cries in the chorus. “I’m just lucky to have the work.”

This feels like a pointed bit of role-play for Mr. Isbell, whose songs often abut the confessional, musing on where it hurts and whence he came. A former member of the great Southern rock band Drive-By Truckers, he famously hit rock bottom and lived to tell the tale, emerging into newfound sobriety with a clearer



command of his art.

There’s more distance now from the darkness — he’s expecting a child with his wife, the singer-songwriter and violinist Amanda Shires — so it stands to reason that his music would reflect the change. It does, and what’s impressive is that Mr. Isbell, working again with the renegade country producer Dave Cobb, has maintained a taut precision in his new songs.

The best of them glow with bitersweet empathy: “Children of

Children” considers the burdens of a young mother, and “24 Frames” is a dose of dark philosophy with the cadence of a how-to guide. “Speed Trap Town” brings heartbreaking specificity to the shopworn trope of the highway’s salvation. “Flagship” is a song of earnest devotion whose spark of being is the sight of an old couple in the bar of a faded hotel, “sitting there a thousand miles apart.”

His band, the 400 Unit, sounds more deeply engaged on this album, with rugged arrangements sweetened by Ms. Shires’s violin, or by a Mellotron. (They’ll play Celebrate Brooklyn! on July 24.)

And while Mr. Isbell’s music might owe something to past hardship, it’s also the product of honest work. He’s firm on that point: the jaunty opening track, “If It Takes a Lifetime,” is another character study, but it resonates with his own story. “My day will come,” he sings, the song unfolding as a fulfillment of that pledge.

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