

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2015

ALBUM OF THE WEEK

Jason Isbell gives his poetic soul 'Free' rein

JASON ISBELL ★★★★★

Something More Than Free FOLK
DOWNLOAD *If It Takes a Lifetime*, 24
Frames, *Something More Than Free*

"I keep on showing up, hellbent on growing up," Jason Isbell sings on the lead track of *Something More Than Free*. That's exactly what the Alabama-born, Nashville-based singer-songwriter seems to be doing on his fifth and, arguably, finest album.

On each album, Isbell has figured out a little more about how to tell his stories. Finally, he has developed into one of the great American songwriters, one who harks to the days when country songwriters including Kris Kristofferson, Tom T. Hall and Joe South also were poets.

In a world where most pop songs are lies, Isbell is determined to find truth. The subjects of his songs live in a place that's never far from sadness but never quite out of sight of joy.

Isbell's arrangements — usually subdued, with nuanced dynamics — leave plenty of room for his voice. As sweet as the aching melodicism of *The Life You Chose* or the slide guitar of *24 Frames* and *Speed Trap Town* can be, the detail-packed lyrics deserve the attention.

The title track, a tribute to his hard-working, blue-collar father, begins with a couplet any Nashville songwriter would kill for: "When I get home from work, I'll call up all my friends/And we'll go bust up something beautiful we'll have to build again." Though he finds himself too tired to attend church, the song's protagonist

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looks forward to a heaven as a place with "no more holes to fill and no more rocks to break and no more loading boxes on the trucks for someone else's sake."


In the reflective *Children of Children*, which sounds like Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young without the harmonies, Isbell goes through the family photo album and realizes how his arrival irrevocably altered the story arc of his mother's life.

Isbell's acclaimed *Southeastern*, named the Americana Music Awards' album of the year in 2014, was widely hailed as his post-rehab record. If that's true, *Something More Than Free* is his working-the-steps album.

He sings of taking life second by second in *24 Frames*, realizing circumstances can shift just that quickly, but in *If It Takes a Lifetime*, he takes the long view. In *Flagship*, perhaps the album's most touching song, he learns lessons about setting and re-setting the course of a relationship by watching other people's lives pass before him.

Throughout those songs and others, *Something More Than Free* is about the ways lives change and how to live with the results.

Brian Mansfield

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DAVID MCCLISTER

Jason Isbell's fifth album, *Something More Than Free*, is due July 17.