



THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 10, 2013

POP NOTES

DIRECTION HOME

BY BEN GREENMAN



Jason Isbell was one of the mainstays of the Drive-By Truckers during their glory period, sharing songwriting and guitar duties with Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley. When Isbell left the group, in 2007, he quickly released a solo album, “Sirens of the Ditch,” though he just as quickly returned to the comforts of a band, putting out his next three albums under the name Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit.

Isbell’s newest release, **“Southeastern”** (Thirty Tigers), finds him as a solo artist again, though it features instrumental support from members of the 400 Unit. The difference in billing is instructive. “Southeastern” is a solo album in feel, powerfully personal both in sound and in story. The record opens with “Cover Me Up,” a spare ballad in which Isbell, singing as well as he ever has, gestures toward a lifetime of drinking and various other questionable choices, ending on a note of equivocal hope (“Cover me up and know you’re enough to use me for good”). The rollicking, despairing “Super 8” also gestures toward a lifetime of drinking, opening with perhaps the most reasonable request ever committed to tape: “Don’t wanna die in a Super 8 Motel / Just because somebody’s evening didn’t go so well.” Isbell has been sober for more than a year, and songs like “New South Wales” and “Relatively Easy” are exercises in perspective.

There are moments where Isbell, mostly via duets, softens the mood slightly. Kim Richey appears on “Stockholm,” a touring ode to the “frozen old city of silver and stone.” And Amanda Shires—Isbell’s wife, as well as an established solo artist who has also performed with Todd Snider, Justin Townes Earle, and others—contributes violin and vocals to “Traveling Alone,” which isn’t as ironic as its title suggests. Over a melody reminiscent of Joan Baez’s “Diamonds and Rust,” Isbell and Shires harmonize: “I’ve grown tired of traveling alone / Won’t you ride with me, won’t you ride?” It’s a romantic question that’s appropriate for a mate but also a creative one appropriate for an audience. ♦