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Jason Isbell

Southeastern

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By Stephen M. Deusner; July 11, 2013

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ARTISTS:

Jason Isbell

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In recent interviews with the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Wall Street Journal*, Jason Isbell has been admirably forthcoming about his alcoholism, admitting that he can't remember much of the time he spent with the *Drive-By Truckers*, who decided to move on without him after several attempts at rehabilitation. Isbell's solo albums, especially his 2009 self-titled LP and 2011's *Here We Rest*, ended up sounding cursory, as though he was trying too hard and not hard enough; there were too many go-nowhere genre excursions and not enough focused storytelling. It didn't help that the music sounded too polished, too polite, too professional, with too little grit and personality.

Fortunately, Isbell's story appears to have a happy third act. His friends confronted him about his drinking and checked him into rehab, and he emerged sober, determined, and newly focused. He got married (to the fiddler/songwriter Amanda Shires, who spearheaded his intervention), stayed clean, and recorded a new album, *Southeastern*. To his considerable credit, Isbell has very little interest in recounting his long fall or his darkest moments. This album doesn't wallow in alcoholic squalor; its real subject is not what it means to hit rock bottom, but what happens after you pick yourself up. How do you allow yourself any kind of contentment or security when you've done such bad things? How do you live with that dark half lurking just offstage?

Isbell the storyteller knows this is rich subject matter, as the day-to-day conflict of not taking that next drink or not falling back into old ways proves much more compelling and humanizing than the non-conflict of simply bottoming out. That approach makes *Southeastern* his most gripping and his most personal album to date. "Live Oak", the dark heart of the album, opens with Isbell singing a cappella: "There's a man who walks besides me, he is who I used to be / I wonder if she sees him and confuses him with me." It's a deeply revealing line, but "Live Oak" isn't a direct confession from Isbell. Instead, it's a piece of fiction about a murderer wandering Pre-Civil War America who finds tentative redemption with a forgiving woman. It does not have a happy ending.

Isbell inhabits similar men throughout *Southeastern*, and there's a new clarity in these characters to match the new vigor in his voice. To an extent they become proxies to recount Isbell's own recent transformation, which prevents the album from becoming too hermetically introverted. As a storyteller, he has a generous empathy toward the people inhabiting his songs, most of whom display a hard-won humanity despite the extremes of their situations.

On "Elephant", a barfly tries to comfort a friend dying of cancer, unsure what to do but finally understanding that just being there and raising a toast is enough to ensure she doesn't die alone. It's an epic rebuke of those hideous cancer ballads that infected mainstream country music for so many years; when **Rascal Flatts** hear a line like, "There's one thing that's real clear to me: No one dies with dignity," they ought to just pack in their Ed Hardy shirts and head home. An emotional kneecapping, "Elephant" is a standout on *Southeastern*, but for once it's not one of two or three. Rather, it's a crucial part of a statement album, one that draws as much from literary influences-- Peter Matthiessen, Shelby Foote, Colum McCann-- as from musical ones.

Southeastern is easily Isbell's best solo album-- his most richly conceived and generously written. If it's not quite the album that lives up to his considerable talents, it's mostly the music that's to blame. The production, courtesy of Dave Cobb, tends to buff away the rough edges of Isbell's songs, which can rob his stories of impact and nuance. It's not the 400 Unit backing him this time, but this group of musicians can't sell the rocker "Super 8" or give it the boisterous urgency it demands. It threatens to become make-do country rock, lacking the specificity and idiosyncrasy of Isbell's songwriting. Perhaps it's fitting that the one instrument that stands out is Shires' fiddle, which eddies and shimmies throughout "Traveling Alone" before adding a solo as eloquently understated as Isbell's chorus. Of course they have chemistry.