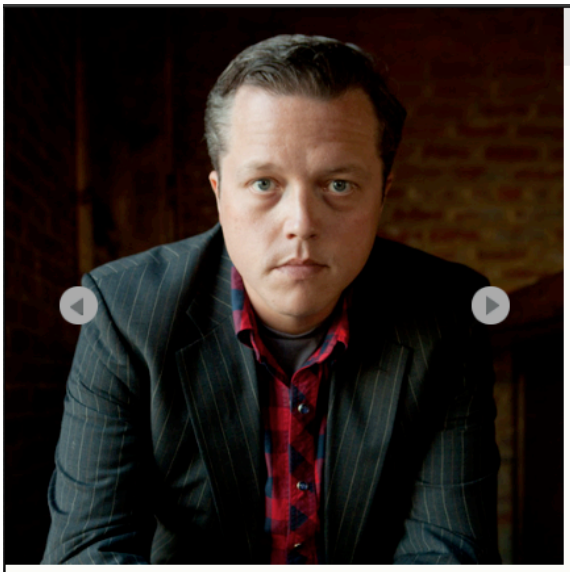
+ ELEANOR FRIEDBERGER • JAMES MCCARTNEY
Paste
ISSUE 96
JASON
ISBELL
"JESUS LOVES A SINNER, BUT THE HIGHWAY LOVES THE SIN..."



Jason Isbell

The Highway Loves the Sin

BY HOLLY GLEASON

"I remember that place being this mythical hellhole," Jason Isbell says quietly. He's not speaking of the addiction he's recently kicked, but the place of his father's employment, which gave his new album *Southeastern* its name. "When I was seven or eight, my father would go off to work there—and it was sort of scary."

A pall settles over the conversation, the silence of reckoning how the tool-and-die factory left its mark on both father and son. "It was terrifying," he says. "The only thing I had to go on when the day was done were the stories. To me, they were horror stories; but to him, just work stories..."

"Just work stories" echoes with a haunted sense of what was. For Isbell, and a lot of the kids he grew up around, that was how their daddies paid the bills. Hard, sweaty work, tough conditions, soul-killing and mind-numbing, it was the only option most of them had.

If it wasn't quite "Norma Rae" or the sweatshops in China or Mexico, it also wasn't a place where the humanity of the workers was recognized. You were a number. You did a job. When you couldn't, they replaced you. There was always a pair of hands and a strong back with kids to feed.

"Where my Dad was, a sliver of metal would get in [some worker's] eye," the songwriter remembers, "and instead of putting in a workman's comp claim, sending the guy home and to the doctor, the foreman just took a credit card out, would hold the eye open and scrape the eyeball. That was it."

For Isbell, who started sitting in with many of the famous Muscle Shoals pickers at various local clubs and restaurants as a young teen, he understood the reality of this tough blue-collar life. What waited was a daunting prospect. In many ways, it's one he still stands up to, considers and gives him a measure of what life can be. It's the reason he chose the name for his new record: to recognize the hells we deal with, the way they shape our souls and the grace we glean along the way.

"Those kinds of ghosts are good to take with you when you're trying to figure your life out," he says. "There was [a factory] down from that place my Dad worked. I was 19, 20 years old when I worked there. My Dad was 26, 27 when he was going in there. It's not an easy to thing to keep a family and to be a kid yourself, so you just do these jobs you can't imagine, and you make it work...and you don't think about the rest.

"It's a culture of work-and-don't-say-anything," he continues. "Where I worked, they'd work us eight, nine hours—and there'd be no sense of stopping. You'd go 'til they decided we were done. Someone asked us if OSHA ever visited, and no one knew what that was."

It's hard to believe conditions could be like that in America, but it's the reality for those who don't know their rights being disregarded by the people with power. We often ignore it because we don't know how to deal with whatever is wrong—whether you're talking about human rights or people's addictions. To stay silent, you allow the problem to become even more entrenched. To speak up, you can change everything.

"Your mother seems nice, I don't understand why she won't say anything / As if she can't see who he turned out to be"
—"Yvette"

Isbell had joined the Drive-By Truckers in 2001 after sitting in with them at a party during the tour for the celebrated double-disc haute concept *Southern Rock Opera*. But Isbell's divorce from Truckers' bassist Shonna Tucker and a deepening musical divide made it difficult to continue. In April 2007, he was gently told it was time to exit the freewheeling Southern rock collective.

He then spent time in Ryan Adams' band—and released several spotty solo projects that showed glimmers of brilliance, but collapsed under the sodden weight of too much, well, everything.

Southeastern could be called his sobriety record.

Made on the verge of his wedding to Texas fiddler/singer/songwriter Amanda Shires, he was approving final mixes from his honeymoon. If you like Hollywood endings, it's the happily-ever-after project where the hard-living hero gets the girl, gets redeemed and gets his just rewards.

But that's too easy. And *Southeastern* is far more than that.

"A heart on the run keeps a hand on the gun, you can't trust anyone / I was so sure what I needed was more, tried to shoot out the sun / Days when we raged, we flew off the page such damage was done / But I made it through, cause somebody knew I was meant for someone."
—"Cover Me Up"

Southeastern isn't a cry for help, nor a repudiation of what was. It's not a revelation or a phoenix rising from the ashes or the wreckage. Rather it's a clear-eyed assessment of a life lost and found, the vulnerability of not knowing exactly who you are, and needing to believe in something bigger.

"It's kind of an allegory," Isbell says shyly when the literary parallel to his father's body-breaking, soul-dissolving work is mentioned. "It's not that simple, but it's also about what you impose upon yourself. Addiction is one of them, narcissism, too. It's that dead, limp child you drag around into your 20s, even your 30s. The lack of responsibility you think is free, if you can luck into it—and you never realize you can never *be* an adult. But it's also alienating in terms of how you live your life."

"Damn near strangled by my appetite / In Ybor City on a Friday night / Couldn't even stand upright / So high, the streets girls wouldn't take my pay / She said come see me on a better day, and she just danced away..."
—"Traveling Alone"

"I'll tell you: Jason *had a problem*," says his wife Amanda Shires, an equally fine writer. "He said, 'I don't wanna drink, but I can't *not* drink.' And I said, 'You're telling the wrong person. You can tell all your friends, and they may not do anything. You say it to me, and I don't care what happens."

Somewhere between soundcheck and the final set in Missouri as part of Todd Snider's touring band, she remembers that moment—and she, like Isbell, is clear-eyed about the decision.

"Things were going really well with us, so I told him: 'You say it again'—and he did—'and that's that.' I made the decision to talk to his manager, to call his Mom ... and his friends. He knew it was going to kill him. Everybody knew [he was] killing himself with the drinking. So, it was just time."

Resolute and unsentimental, Isbell went off to meet his demons square, figuring out how to let go of something he'd done since he was young and grown increasingly dependent upon. He went through the process in a scant two weeks, not by choice, but necessity.

"It wasn't hard once I decided," he says. "The irony was my health insurance wouldn't cover it, so I had to pay for it. And it's *expensive*! [Fourteen days] was all I could afford.

"Then when I got out, my insurance company dropped me," he adds, "*for being an alcoholic*. Never mind that they'd insured me when I was out there drinking, not taking care of myself; do something to get better, that's when they pull the plug."

The changes are profound. Suddenly, there was nowhere to hide and a whole lot of to take responsibility for. "Amanda and I weren't engaged. I didn't know if she'd be there when I was done. A lot of it is embarrassing, but getting up in the morning is embarrassing. *Life* is embarrassing.

"It's the stuff I brought with me from childhood," he continues. "Owning your foibles and saying you're sorry instead of getting drunk and belligerent is a great change. You ask yourself, 'What kind of skin am I shedding?' I'm the kind of person who's just gonna beat themselves over their head with this stuff. So, to be able to let go of it? Put that down? It was a weight lost."

A day after being released, he was on a plane with Adams and Shires to New Zealand. Life goes on, tours are booked, music must be made. The blur of re-entry should've been enough to trigger a relapse, but instead it solidified his commitment.

"We left on a Wednesday, and our ticket [out of Australia] said, 'Friday.' We thought we'd get a hotel and a shower, a meal, then start over the next morning. Instead we lost Thursday altogether. Just touched down and headed to the next gate. For one second, I veered off to the airport bar, but she grabbed me by the neck and gently steered me to the next gate. You'd hardly notice. It was just a second, but..."

"Take my hand baby, we're over land / I know how flying over water makes you cry / Where's that liquor cart, maybe we shouldn't start / but I can't for the life of me say why..."
—"Flying Over Water"

All it takes is second. You get that sense listening to the carefully turned minatures Isbell has crafted on *Southeastern*.

Whether it's the raucous "Super 8" with the chorus protestation, "Don't wanna die in this Super 8 Motel..." over churlish electric guitars and a fat wad of bass notes landing like melodic shrapnel; the dry vocal demi-doppelganging Southern gothic "Live Oak," where the singer owns the duality of who we are and who we're hiding; or the tumbling recognitions of a teenage girl on the run, peddling sex and benzodiazepine, trying to make ends meet, and the man actually outrunning his demons and staring down a dead end he's avoided in "Different Days," Isbell embraces those moments when everything can change, weighing what's in the balance. Often he makes better choices than he might have once done.

But just as importantly, he writes with a light touch and a sureness of words that shows the talent DBT songs like "Decoration Day," "Goddamn Lonely Love" and "Outfit" hinted at. His lyrics owe as much to his strong literary sense—the conversation is littered with references to Denis Johnson, Peter Matthiessen's *Shadow Country*, Colum McCann's *Let The Great World Spin*, Jennifer Egan, Junot Diaz and even *War & Peace*—as they do the precocious poetry of a dreamer on the fringe.

"My Mom used to tell me: 'You have the same number of hours as Picasso or Van Gogh,' so I should be able to be as productive as they are," Isbell recalls.

"I think [his writing grew] because he had more time in the day to dedicate to the writing," Shires affirms. "Before it was you're not awake very long before you're drinking, so there was maybe 10 percent of the day where he was cognizant of words where he wasn't slurring."

Shires, who releases her own *Down Fell the Doves* in August, is getting her Masters of Letters at Sewanee's University of the South. She takes words and poetry seriously. After returning from the New Zealand/Australian post-rehab tour, the two began blending their lives: finding a home in the neutral ground—and creative hotbed—of Nashville.

Knowing albums needed to get done, they arrived at the concept of writers' days. Each would go to a separate room and remain until they had a song. It did not have to be perfect, or with an objective in mind; it did have to be complete.

It not only raised the bar, it deepened their connection at a time when vulnerability was already at a peak. "Cover Me Up" is a renunciation and a pledge to a new life. "Songs That She Sang In The Shower" offers a detail-driven, blow-by-blow denouement of a relationship's death and the purposeful song of surrender to something more than the road's footloose nature. "Stockholm" shows a man finding his way and acknowledging the transformation. But the process also allowed the young lovers to speak to each other beyond even conversation.

"You'd spend six hours, really pulling it out of your well," Shires says. "This is all that, the emotions and the writing. And you play it for each other. It deepens your communication, shows things you might not see. It's how to be kind, to show someone how to understand you better, and it *really* helps you listen."

As much inter-personal revelation as went on in *Southeastern*'s dozen songs, there were also the characters brought to life against hushed arrangements and vocal tenderness. Each song starkly lit, caught in harrowing consequences and doing the best they can.

There's the battered victim of incest in the tautly played "Yvette," the girl the narrator is going to avenge by "cleaning my Weatherby / I sight in my scope and I hope against hope." There's the pair of lost souls in the loosely strummed and brutally frank "Elephant," one eroded by cancer, the other melting into booze, who make dark jokes while staring down the inevitable by pretending it doesn't exist.

"I have felt a lot for the characters I've created for this record," Isbell says. "That couple in 'Elephant' never really existed, at least in that form. I cried for them. 'Yvette' the same way… and the girl in 'Different Day.'"

He pauses again, weighing the conversation. This is deeper than boy-meets-girl, *really*-falls-in-love, has-a-hard-time, girl-steps-in, boy-emerges. Life is more complicated, and music is a more complex container. Beyond the characters introduced, there's the aesthetic reality conjured.

"When I listen to music, I like when it creates an entire place and time that you visit," Isbell says. "*Sticky Fingers* was like that; you go there when you listen. I've tried to create that."

"The Truckers," he says, "it wasn't necessarily Muscle Shoals or Athens, Georgia, but it was a very real place. You could feel it, sense it, go there in your mind. Calexico, too. They took the culture where their music comes from, those influences and created a place you can go when you hear it."

Producer David Cobb—who says with a laugh, "I was the second choice"—spent more than a decade in Los Angeles, where he worked with outlaw progeny Shooter Jennings, old-school Music Row rebel Jamey Johnson and post-mortem Waylon. The ragged fringe suits Cobb, a Georgia boy who'd recently relocated to Nashville.

No stranger to rock, he knew intimacy was going to be the key to *Southeastern*. "I wanted him to feel exposed. Those songs are *so* personal, that's what you want… almost a view into his house when he was writing.

"He came in with these demos that were so endearing and crushing in their intimacy. He was just so calm, even with his marriage about to happen. There was no self-consciousness."

With his drummer and keyboard player onboard, Cobb lobbied for live vocals as the tracks were going down. "Those vocals are what the band's reacting to, and it gave the album a seamlessness."

Cobb pauses, "There was a track on *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, 'The Only Living Boy in New York,' that we were chasing, that feeling. Jason would just walk out there—middle of the day, light a cigarette, get a cup of coffee and nail it. We'd be in the control room going, 'Jesus, you just melted everybody's soul.' … You *knew* it was that good. And it was like that throughout."

The only sticking place—ironically—was "Traveling Alone," inspired by his love for Shires and one of the first written for the project. Cobb remembers they'd tried a few times, but it never clicked. "The energy in the room changed as soon as she walked in," Cobb says. "We needed her to complete the picture of it."

Shires is almost school-girl giddy talking about that time. Admitting, "I sometimes live in a fantasy world," she and Isbell had spent the morning with Todd Snider, who would officiate their wedding the following day, working out the service and their vows.

Though the last song to be recorded, "Traveling Alone" in many ways had been a talisman of their fledgling relationship. "When he moved into the house we're living in, he came in with a verse and a chorus," she says. "Even before there was furniture and we were still sleeping on a palette, that song was there… and we started playing it out on the road. But in the studio, it really opened up. The first time you hear a whole band play it, a song becomes something else—and that one surely did."

Shires' violin laces mournfully through the confession of how hard the road can be, the melody rising as the singer finds a deeper reason for living. When her vocal meets his, it isn't merely vocal alchemy, but an enduring pledge.

"There was 10 percent of him I was completely in love with," Shires says of how she stayed with a man Patterson Hood once described saying, "Some people get drunk and become kind of sweet. Jason wasn't one of those people."

Her faith (and as Isbell says "our tastes are very, very similar—books, movies, music—and that's hard to come by") staked a claim big enough to survive the shifting. His songs show a man who recognizes the power of the love he's encountered, and it tempers what's emerged as his masterwork.

"Chuck Close said, 'Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us show up and go to work,'" Isbell says, then draws closer. "You know, there's no *one* rule for love. It amazes me how all these thousands of years later, we're putting people in space, but we still can't figure out how to get this relationship stuff right."

He laughs a bashful laugh. This time, love means something to him. These songs emerged from getting truthful, facing past and letting go, but also finding peace, accepting his humanity and tumbling head first into the kind of love people dream of.

"Falling in love is way scarier than anything," he concedes. "Way scarier than getting sober. If the sober thing doesn't work out, you know where the bar is. Jack Lemmon is right: No matter how curmudgeonly or leathery your heart is, love can turn you around. It makes everything new and fresh and exciting."

Just as the treacle starts hurting the teeth, Cobb acknowledges the obvious. "It's like grade school, such a beautiful thing [to watch them]. It's so innocent, just her way of making him feel. They text each other: 'Do you like me?' and 'Will you hold my hand?' It's sweet.

"We captured what was happening in the moment," he adds. "You couldn't get more immediate or true than this. They recorded 'Traveling Alone,' went home and got up the next day and got married."