

# SPIN

## Jason Isbell, 'Southeastern'



"Saw my guts / Saw my glory / It would make a great story / If I could ever remember it right," Jason Isbell hollers toward the end of "Super 8," his new album's most vivid remembrance of ugly benders past. But the dozen painfully lived-in and painfully recalled songs on *Southeastern* put the lie to that notion.

Each of Isbell's solo records has made mincemeat of its predecessor, and the same goes for this one, his fourth since 2007's messy divorce from both Southern-rock icons Drive-By Truckers and their bassist, Shonna Tucker; it's also his first since sobering up and marrying Texas singer/fiddler Amanda Shires. That's a lot of emotional freight, and the result courses through these songs with excitement for new love and regret for past misdeeds.

Producer Dave Cobb (Shooter Jennings, Secret Sisters, and other twang-friendly acts) couches Isbell's voice in sturdy, non-showy roots-rock arrangements, the better to hear the vocals. Much of *Southeastern* is downright subdued, especially "Yvette," a waltz so pretty you might not notice the horrific storyline about the young narrator turning vigilante sniper against a female classmate's abusive father. "Live Oak" is an old-fashioned murder ballad, much of it a cappella; "Traveling Alone," a downcast lament of the single life, sounds as if it's rising out of a fog-shrouded body of water.

But the music is secondary. Isbell is among the finest lyricists working today, excelling at wordplay in the purest sense of the term, finding the music in language, how it sounds and flows and fits within the surrounding sounds: "And the church bells are ringing for those who are easy to please / And the frost on the ground probably envies the frost on the trees." He makes painting verbal pictures seem easy — not many writers can rhyme "sixteen" and "Benzodiazepine" without coming across as an annoying show-off.

So just about every song here has a couplet Elvis Costello would be proud to call his own, and the money shot "Elephant" has several: It's a wrenching three-and-a-half-minute movie, vividly describing what it feels like to watch someone you love die a horrible death from cancer, surrounded by family but still alone. "I'd sing her classic country songs / And she'd get high and sing along," Isbell declares in his straightforward drawl. "But she don't have a voice to sing with now." You can almost smell the antiseptic fear permeating a hospital room full of people who "try to ignore the elephant somehow." Every time that phrase comes up in the chorus, Isbell echoes the catch in his voice on his guitar, a perfect understated touch that speaks volumes. It's the little details that ring truest, one true line after another.

by David Menconi



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