

JASON ISBELL

Welcoming sobriety, the former Drive-By Trucker digs deep

"USUALLY, I WAS TOO DRUNK TO READ, MUCH LESS WRITE," says Jason Isbell. "The biggest difference in making this record is that I had more time and energy. I knew all along what I needed to do to make the songs better, but it's hard when you've got that nagging feeling telling you to drink."

The 34-year-old singer-songwriter has been sober for nearly a year after entering rehab in early 2012. When he completed the program, Isbell began writing for *Southeastern*, a deeply personal album. "These songs have more to do with my own life than anything I've made in the past," the former Drive-By Trucker explains. "I wanted



Michael Wilson

to make an album that was just me and an acoustic guitar, maybe some piano, but I got bored. There are enough of those albums in the world."

Isbell chose Dave Cobb (Jamey Johnson, Shooter Jennings) to produce the album, thanks in part to the work Cobb did on *Squidbillies*, an animated TV series for which Isbell has also contributed music. "Dave had produced George Jones' version of the *Squidbillies* theme song," says Isbell. "He managed to incorporate each era of George's career into a two-minute song. That impressed me."

It was Cobb's decision to include a number of live vocals, something Isbell hadn't done in the past. "Doing it Dave's way was hard for me because I obsess over my vocals," he says. "But I'm glad we did it because I think we got more emotion and honesty."

Isbell finished recording *Southeastern* during a whirlwind week in which he married fiddler Amanda Shires and left for a Costa Rican honeymoon. There he continued working on the album, though it

proved more difficult than usual. "I took a cab into town and bought headphones that fell apart before I got back to the hotel. There was one spot, about 5 foot square, where I could find a WiFi signal to download mixes so I could listen to them."

Despite the struggles, the finished album is a stunning collection of songs, frequently heartbreaking, and none more devastating than "Elephant," a character study that finds Isbell singing, "There's one thing that's real clear to me / No one dies with dignity / You just try to ignore the elephant somehow."

"I built those characters around people I know," Isbell says. "It's important to build characters and allow them to behave naturally. It's not a happy song, but I think as far as songwriting goes, it's about the best I can do right now. I feel like I'm in a good place. Hopefully I'll continue to improve as a writer."

—Juli Thanki

