

ANDREW BIRD

Breaking out with his barn, his band, his baby and his books

AFTER A LONG STRETCH OF WORKING MAINLY SOLO, singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Andrew Bird was in a more sociable mood while making his latest album, *Break It Yourself*. It's easily Bird's most collaborative effort in years. He recorded the 14 songs during two week-long stints playing with his band in a barn on his family's farm in Western Illinois. "We hung out for eight days under one roof and jammed, which we haven't done as a band before," says the Chicago area native. "Usually it's me going into the studio having hashed over the songs over a couple of years and having maybe one other person in the band as a sidekick." There



Cameron Welling

was very little hashing over anything this time. The group nailed most of the songs in a handful of takes, which lends the music an airy, spontaneous feel. In fact, the band learned to play the songs while recording. "We set it up like, 'We're not making a record, we're just learning these new songs and we're going to roll tape at the same time,'" he says.

The changes in Bird's recording process follow changes in his life outside music. Now married with a baby boy, the singer found his lyrics were becoming less oblique. "I think the lack of directness in the past led to a lot of interesting writing, but something happened with me. I'm a much more direct person now," says Bird, 38. "I was coming out of a pretty dark time and finding ... not complete satisfaction, but the closest thing I've ever come to it."

That's not to say that Bird doesn't revisit some of his favorite topics on *Break It Yourself*: the isolating effects of technology,

for instance, as well as his fondness for history. "Lusitania" was inspired by the British ocean liner of the same name, torpedoed by a German submarine in 1915. "I like reading dry histories, because my imagination creates a novel out of it," he says. "We have all of human history to talk about, and yet pop music seems to be fixated on the last 30 or 40 years. I make an effort to break out of that cycle."

When he wasn't jamming in his barn or reading history over the past few years, Bird was writing for films. He scored the 2011 movie *Norman* and contributed the song "The Whistling Caruso" to the soundtrack for *The Muppets*. "I wrote four or five songs for them and that's the one that got in," he says. "I don't know how much they wrote that scene around what I was writing, but it seemed like it was back and forth. I just read the script and thought it was funny and had a nice subversive quality."

—Eric R. Danton

