

By Lloyd Sachs

Even more than (forgive the comparison) Billy Joel's "Honesty," Jason Isbell's "Anxiety" is such a lonely tune. Nuzzled against his lover, the song's first-person narrator seems free of serious relationship worries. But the world around him – the Trumpian world, that is, in all its rotten injustices and imbalances – has him feeling like he's trapped in a bad fantasy. "I'm wide awake and I'm in pain," he sings.

If there's a word that best reflects Isbell's state of being these days, though, it's consistency. As has been widely reported and won't be rehashed here, he suffered through times of great tumult and inconsistency as a result of serious substance abuse – so serious it got him kicked out of Drive-By Truckers a decade ago, capping a six-year stint with the great Southern rock band. Now, having straightened himself out in impressive fashion, he's a model of dependability, priding himself on his ability to go out night after night with his 400 Unit and deliver a memorable show.

The 38-year-old native of rural Alabama, who has always considered himself a guitar player "first and foremost," also is proud of his continued growth as an instrumentalist. So it was a dream come true last July – a "huge event," as he put it – when Martin Guitar unveiled the Jason Isbell Signature Edition D-18. Isbell thrilled to the moment not only because Martin has been so admired over so many years – hello, consistency – but also because his association with the company brought him back full circle to his earliest days as a guitarist.

While his parents were at work, unable to afford day care, he spent days with his paternal grandfather, a Pentecostal pastor who played a Takamine in the church band. At the tender age of 6, Jason started learning how to play from his grandfather as well as his granduncle, who played a Martin D-28 Herringbone in a cover band he led.

"My grandfather was a great teacher," said Isbell who after being taught a few basic chords played rhythm for his grandpa in his church band. "If I would play gospel with him for a few hours, he would play blues guitar for me. He would lay the guitar on his lap and with open E tuning play slide with a pocket knife."

What clinched his deal with Martin was the opportunity for him to "do stuff" on the model, including but hardly limited to, having one of his tattoos inlaid on the fretboard. "I wanted to make the loudest D-18 we could make," Isbell, who had fallen in love with the D-18 Authentic model with which he toured, explained. "When I was starting out as a musician, the louder guitars always got the most respect. They were the banjo killers, the ones that got heard.

"But if a guitar is going to be loud, everything has to be in the right place, working as it is supposed to. I was confident Martin would deliver on that. [For those hungry for specs, Martin provides these details: "The model boasts a pre-aged Vintage Tone System (VTS) Adirondack spruce top, mahogany back and sides, and rear-shifted scalloped bracing which produce more natural volume and a clear powerful tone. Similar to Martin's

Authentic series, Jason's Custom is constructed using hide glue, which unlike newer synthetic reproductions, dissolves into the grain of the wood and creates more resonance throughout the instrument."]

"Anxiety" notwithstanding, these are good times for Isbell, who lives in Nashville with his wife and band-mate, fiddler Amanda Shires, and their 2-year-old daughter. He and his 400 Unit are riding high with their widely acclaimed album, *The Nashville Sound*. The group is packing them into venues like the Chicago Theater, where Isbell and I chatted before the first of two concerts there in early September. And he is getting heaps of media attention, performing on all the late-night talk shows (and NPR's popular *Tiny Desk* program) and chatting with PBS host Charlie Rose and the *Daily Show*.

(Isbell, one of rock's major wits, more than held his own with Noah. "It's not Alabama that hates you, it's the people who live there," he quipped, responding to Noah's plea for help in breaking the *Daily Show* into the Cotton State.)

For all of his success, there's no chance that another "c" word, complacency, will get in his way. Isbell (pronounced Isble, not IS-bell) is too committed an artist and too determined to pull back clichés and gaze into the zeitgeist for that. (In his passion for reflecting American life, warts and all, he's solidly in the mode of Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young.)

*The Nashville Sound* was recorded in Music City in RCA's famed Studio A, operated in the mid-'60s by Chet Atkins and "countryopolitan" producer Owen Bradley and frequented by such legends as Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton. Produced by longtime Isbell associate and right hand man Dave Cobb, who has helmed projects by Sturgill Simpson and Chris Stapleton, the album is a headlong dive into our clashing cultures and Isbell's own struggles with identity.

"White Man's World," told from the point of view of "a white man looking in a black man's eyes/wishing I'd never been one of the guys," spits in the eye of country music (and other types of) conservatism with its timely takes on white privilege, racial prejudice and patriotism. "Cumberland Gap" is a hard-bitten lament for a coal-mining town: "Soon as the sun goes down/find my way to the Mustang Lounge/If you don't sit facing the windows, you could be in any town."

"Molotov" is one of the most affecting tunes about holding oneself to account: "I broke a promise to myself/to ride the throttle 'til the wheels came off/burn out lie a Molotov in the night sky." And over what critic Robert Christgau, referencing the Beatles, tags the "'I Want You (She's So Heavy)' boom" of "Anxiety," Isbell lets it rip in browbeating his pained mental state: "How do you always get the best of me?/I'm out here living in a fantasy/I can't enjoy a goddamn thing."

Isbell's refusal to settle for standard instrumental solutions – certainly not Southern rock ones, as strong as his ties are to that genre – is reflected in the eerie sonic textures and

chordal effects on "If We Were Vampires," created by propping three hollow-body guitars against turned-up amplifiers and manipulating the feedback.

With former Drivin' N Cryin' guitarist Sadler Vaden as his terrific foil, he also turns "Anxiety" into a bold, sweeping, powerfully lingering epic with its blues-drenched, storm cloud guitars. In concert, the effect is carried to even greater extremes via waves of feedback, recalling lead Trucker Patterson Hood's lyric, "You lean back under the microphone/And turn your demons into walls of goddamned noise and sound."

For Isbell, those demons "are never the enemy if you stay focused on a kind of creation. Achieving that stays on the top of the priority list. Everything else will let you down, including the trappings of success."

A major gearhead and restless inventor of sounds ("All he used to do at home was play and eat snacks," joked Shires. "Now he just plays"), Isbell shared with Charlie Rose his attraction to "twisting knobs and turning amps up." More recently, in a promo video he shot for Magnatone, he talked up the company's Twilighter amplifier (which Shires gave him as a Christmas present).

"I was looking for something a little bit different, what combination of different amplifiers and pedals are gonna give me the 10 or 12 tones I really need," he says in the video. "Basically, it's a really well-built boutique amplifier but with a vibrato from the early days. It doesn't really sound like anything else as far as amplifier vibrato goes. And I think that shifting the pitch actually adds something to the texture of the tone that you don't get otherwise."

"It sounds way bigger than the amp actually is," he adds. "I did originally get the idea of using a lot of small combo amps from watching Neil Young, who's been doing that for a long time. You can get a huge sound out of a small amplifier."

Playing the guitar, Isbell said to me, is "more than working a machine. There are a whole lot of little details involved, like how the sounds vibrate, how they create visions through the little bit of synesthesia we all seem to have."

Inspired by such guitar gods as Duane Allman, Ry Cooder and Lowell George, Isbell first started playing slide at the age of 11, on his grandfather's Truetone Western Audio acoustic guitar. (Truetones were made by the Kay Music Instrument Company for Sears & Roebuck and sold by Western Audio stores.)

Playing slide, Isbell told *Guitar Player*, was like "learning to drive a car with no brakes." But he stayed with it, learning licks off recordings by Delta blues heavies like Elmore James and Robert Johnson. "My grandfather overdubbed recordings by Robert Johnson onto cassettes from a boxed set, leaving off the racier stuff," he said. "I played the heck out of those tapes."

Isbell characteristically found ways to personalize his slide technique. Emulating blues-rock queen Bonnie Raitt, a favorite of his mother's (his mom also introduced him to singer-songwriter favorites of hers including John Prine, James Taylor and Kris Kristofferson), he wore the slide on his middle finger (Robert Johnson wore his on his pinky). That made his fretting hand more versatile.

What made his approach rare among slide players was his ability to achieve effects in front of the slide. On "24 Frames," from his great 2015 album, *Something More Than Free*, he affects a three-fret "pull-off" in the main riff with his pinkie out in front. Sonny Landreth, among others, is known for his pinkie playing, but from behind.

The first "really awesome" electric guitar Isbell had was the thin-necked 1961 Gibson ES-335. Noted Nashville luthier and prized instrument repair man Joe Glaser re-fretted the Gibson and put on an easily adjustable bridge for super-high action. Isbell was later drawn to the Goldtop Les Paul by the playing of Allman Brothers legend Dickie Betts and Marshall Tucker Band ace Toy Caldwell, whose unique tone on the instrument is still a mystery to him. "Was there something about the amps Capricorn used?" he asked, referring to their record label.

(Years later, he jammed with Jack Pearson, a member of the Allman Brothers in the late '90s. "I learned so much from him," Isbell said. "He never plays out of boxes or positions. He plays like the kitchen floor caught on fire. He just fired out. He could play anything that popped into his head. I want that kind of fire.")

Isbell also plays Dusenberg and Telecaster models. He said a performance by Telecaster master Redd Volkaert at Austin's Continental Club made a deep imprint, as did the recordings of the late Danny Gatton, a Telecaster player whom Isbell tweeted was his favorite guitarist.

And then there is the hollowbody White Falcon guitar that Shires talked John Prine, with whom she toured, into giving to Isbell. "It took me eight nights of buying John White Trashes [vodka and ginger ale], but he finally broke down," she said with a laugh. "It's a big guitar with a big sound and he mostly plays acoustic these days. He knew what good use Jason would make of it."

Isbell and Shires are bonded by many shared influences, including Southern writing. He has a deep attachment to such fiction greats as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Cormac McCarthy and Larry Brown. She has a Master's in poetry. The couple also related from the start, she said, because they were both "coming out of the role of being side people." She played with the Texas Playboys as a teen phenom on the way to recording such acclaimed solo albums as *Carrying Lightning* and *My Piece of Land* and winning the 2017 Americana Award for Emerging Artist of the Year.

Isbell and Shires also are both devoted followers of lap steel innovator David Lindley, whose blinding solo on Jackson Browne's sort-of-live "Running on Empty" – in a

*Fretboard Journal* Q&A with Lindley [FJ #11], Ben Harper called it "the slide-guitar shot heard around the world" – opened Jason's ears to a new way of playing.

"His solo felt like a statement to me, not just a series of licks," said Isbell, who first heard the recording via his mother's vinyl copy of the album, *Running on Empty*. "It was a melodic statement in and of itself. I've been trying to emulate that ever since. The choices Amanda makes remind me of David. I hear what she does as a statement rather than as an individual instrument. Some strings box you in, locked into patterns. Her approach to the fiddle is more open."

Shires said, "I love David's sonic texture and his command of space – he knows when not to play, and how to make the instrument sound like it's part of the scene."

As skilled as Isbell was on guitar from an early age, it was his songwriting that attracted the attention of established musicians like fellow Alabaman Patterson Hood. Isbell had reached the point of knowing that with all of the great and amazing guitarists out there, he would need to develop his songwriting skills if he wanted to have a sustainable career. "None of us gets very far just playing guitar," he said.

As a songwriter and third guitarist, Isbell was a perfect fit for Drive-By Truckers, who were coming off their breakthrough album, *Southern Rock Opera*. He contributed such stellar compositions as the dark, autobiographically tinged family saga, "Decoration Day," which he still performs, and "The Day John Henry Died." After making some troublesome adjustments on guitar, he boosted the band's sonic attack.

"They played everything a whole step down, which took some getting used to," Isbell explained. "And the three guitars frequently were all playing the same riff at the same time. There were times I knew I was going to be out of tune. But the Truckers were such punk rockers at heart, that really didn't matter. I was glad to play all that guitar, and the wall of sound they created was really fun."

After being booted from DBT in spite of his desperate attempts to talk his way into staying, Isbell was understandably inconsistent in the studio as a "solo" artist, dealing as he was with intense personal problems including splitting from his first wife, Shonna Tucker, while she continued playing bass with the Truckers. His recordings were pretty hit or miss. But with the encouragement and support of people close to him including Shires, whom he met in 2011 and married two years later, he got through those nightmarish times.

Playing with friends who knew him on a personal level also helped him get well and lift his sound. "I like to feel that I've joined a band, and that I'm a member of the band, not separate from it," he said. "That my bandmates knew what I had gone through, knew where I was in the moment, made a tremendous difference in the way they understood and related to the songs. It was really like being surrounded by family."

His 2013 breakthrough album, *Southeastern*, which chronicled his struggles, established

him as an artist to contend with in his own right in the great big expandable (and some would say goofy) world of Americana. Released on his own Southeastern label, it won Album of the Year, Artist of the Year and Song of the Year (for "Cover Me Up") at the 2014 Americana Music Awards.

That album's successor, *Something More Than Free*, which featured Shires as part of the studio band, more than lived up to the promise of *Southeastern*, in more relaxed fashion: less strain in Isbell's vocals, more power in understatement. There isn't a less-than-compelling moment on the album, and several of the tunes are near-perfect.

*The Nashville Sound*, the first album credited to Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit since a self-titled 2009 effort, is both an homage to the studio in which it was recorded and a demonstration of how far from country music tradition a Nashville artist can get while still honoring the memories captured in that room. The album completed Isbell's transition from heartfelt first-person statements to complex character studies.

Isbell mostly writes his songs from the guitar down. "Figuring out how to play and structure a solo helps shape the melody and verse and chorus," he said. There are many first-rate singer-songwriters who play solid guitar, but those who play killer lead are a select bunch. Richard Thompson, Brad Paisley and Chuck Prophet come immediately to mind. Isbell is in that group.

For Isbell, rock guitar begins and ends in the South. "English bands did their best to recreate Southern blues styles," he said. "Some of them were lucky enough to make the right mistakes. But when you listen to someone like Cedric Burnside, RL Burnside's grandson, play solo acoustic blues, that lineage of authority is immediately apparent. [Cedric Burnside, a Mississippi native, is also the son of drummer of Calvin Jackson and first became known as a drummer himself, replacing his old man in the bands of his grandfather, Junior Kimbrough and others.]

Growing up near Muscle Shoals, Isbell absorbed the work of great session men like Steve Cropper (whose book on guitar, *Soul Man*, became a key source for him) as if by osmosis. Among the lesser-known players under whose influence he fell was Kelvin Holly (Little Richard, the Amazing Rhythm Aces), the first guitarist he heard on a Magnatone amp. He continues studying and absorbing a wide range of sounds.

"I'm still learning, still exploring new areas like jazz," he said. "I'm trying to get to the point where I've got a style that's recognizably mine. Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Albert King, Freddie King – you can tell it's them right away. That's what I'm after."

But, he added, "If there's one thing I know, it's that I'm a good slide guitar player who does a lot of interesting things on it."

To say the least.

