



Jason Isbell Group Effort

Former Drive By Trucker Jason Isbell's second solo effort is really as much group effort as it is solo project. *Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit* has him playing with musicians from the same area where he grew up around Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

"Even though I wrote all the songs, this was very much a group project," Isbell noted. "The band came before all the songs except one, so I was writing with these folks in mind." "These folks" include Derry deBorja on keyboards, Jimbo Hart on bass, and Browan Lollar on guitar. Matt Pence played drums and co-produced, but doesn't tour as the band's drummer. "I've known all these guys for years," Isbell noted. "I met Derry and Matt while I was touring with the Drive By Truckers and they were with other bands we were on the road with. Jimbo and Browan, well, I'm not sure how I met them, but it was probably at a party somewhere when we were all much younger!"

The record is a showcase for Isbell's triple-threat talent. While his tenure in the DBT showed flashes of great songwriting, playing, and singing, the magnitude of the writers, singers, and players in that band assured that his

role would be one among many. The latest record, while it may be a group effort, thrusts Isbell onto the stage as one of the great rock writer/singers and players of his generation. It's a diverse set of songs with smart lyrics and great arrangements.

"I really wanted to make a more modern record than some of the stuff I've done in the past. Something that wasn't clearly an alternative country or Americana album. I wanted it to sound a little bit more like a rock-and-roll album. I tried to write songs that would work with the style of the players in the band. I'm very happy with the way it turned out. It actually was a really easy album to make and a lot of fun."

Isbell's interest in music started at an early age. He says by the age of 5 or 6 he was learning to play music because his grandparents did. His parents weren't musicians, but their record collection helped supply a push for the younger

Isbell. "They had a lot of old country music, like Merle Haggard, George Jones, Hank Sr., and a lot of '70s arena rock like Queen, Free, and Skynyrd. I also paid a lot of attention to the radio in the '80s. I liked a lot of pop music, like Crowded House, 'til Tuesday, and a lot of the Top 40 that was going on." A listen to *400 Unit* shows the effect of those various styles of music.

Asked about specific writing influences, Isbell cites Randy Newman, Neil Young, and "Bob Dylan is an obvious one. Also, now, Springsteen. Plus I've always loved Merle Haggard."

And guitarists? "I guess a guy I really admire as a player... I play lots of slide guitar, so Lowell George is a favorite. I was a big fan of the stuff he did on every level. I think he was one of the most talented people I've ever heard. I also have to say Danny Gatton and Duane Allman, as far as guitar players go."

Isbell's musical education got a bit

of a jump start from school. "I was mostly self-taught as a guitar player, but when I got older I started playing horns and started reading music, so I was able to get a little education out of that. But, I was mostly self-taught. I spent eight hours some days during a 10-to-12-year period teaching myself to play. I played in bands in high school, then went to college in the Memphis area. I concentrated on classes, and writing songs. I didn't play out a lot in those years, but pretty much went right out on the road when I got back from school."

Those familiar with his DBT days might be surprised to learn Isbell's guitar of choice these days is a reissue Gibson ES-335. "I've still got a '59 reissue Les Paul Standard that I used on the record—that's what most people will probably remember me playing with the Drive By Truckers. I also have an old Strat I've reworked. I put some Lindy Fralin pickups in it. But for the most part, I've been using

the 335." Many of Isbell's songs are based on acoustic guitar tracks, and for that he relies on one built by Scott Baxendale, from the Colfax Guitar Shop, in Denver. "He worked for Mossman and with George Gruhn for a time. And he used to restore vintage Martins. So his designs in bracing are similar to pre-war Martins."

Isbell has recently become a

fan of Sommatone amplifiers, built by Jimmy Somma, in New Jersey. "They make great class A/hand-wired amps. I use a 40-watt that's switchable down to 20 watts. It's really an incredible amp. I've owned Fender Deluxes, Marshall JCM800s, and lots of other amps, but this is the best one I've ever owned. I really love it."

Despite suffering from a tired voice during his interview with VG from "playing a lot lately" and lamenting the fact that his former band "toured all over the place, traveling way too much, in hindsight," Isbell and the 400 Unit have a full schedule of dates lined up and he continues to prepare for the next record, even though he tends to procrastinate a bit. "I work better with a deadline, that's for sure. I'm constantly working on things, but I get more done when I've got a record to make in two or three weeks." — **John Heidt VG**

