



Jason Isbell And The 400 Unit

Self-titled (Release date: February 17, 2009)

For a comparatively brief moment in the mid-1960s, Muscle Shoals, Alabama was the unlikely epicenter of a major American songwriting renaissance. Here are some of the names: Arthur Alexander, Donnie Fritts, Eddie Hinton, Dan Penn, Spooner Oldham, O.C. Smith, Joe South, Tony Joe White. Toss Bobbie Gentry into that mix, on style if not geography, and the list is not complete, regardless.

Style matters, for in those turbulent times these writers and their collaborators fused the vocal passion of African-American soul and gospel to an Anglo-Saxon storytelling tradition which goes back at least to Beowulf: Tough, hard, passionate, unflinching songs, unrepentant in their sense of place and direct in their stubborn Southernness.

That is a powerful pile of names to spade across the work of Jason Isbell, as his second solo album, named for his band, is, well, only his second solo album. And he's almost 30. It's not simply that he lives in Florence, Alabama, just outside Muscle Shoals, nor that he recorded *Jason Isbell And The 400 Unit* at the famed FAME studio there. That guarantees nothing.

The songs will stand on their own.

The opening "Seven-Mile Island" manages simultaneously to evoke the long-ago sounds of Traffic (who have their own Muscle Shoals connection) and to serve as an oblique eulogy to the regionally famous harmonica player Topper Price, and yet it's about a failed father, a birthing mother, an island on which banished Native Americans congregated, a place where Jason and his dad used to go to collect arrowheads. All of those things said eloquently in just over four minutes, and there are layers unexamined by that long sentence.

That's the only song that sounds just like that, says those things ("Good," for example, has the rock urgency of Big Star, "No Choice In The Matter" is classic soul, complete with horns), though they all come from deep within Isbell, no matter how far he distances himself, no matter that "Soldiers Get Strange" is

mostly his imagination at work trying to make sense of how those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan feel. No matter that "Cigarettes And Wine" claims, midway through painting a very direct vignette, "I know that ain't much of a line/But it's the Gods' own truth."

That's enough. Leave the songs to be found, to talk for themselves. But let Jason explain, just a bit. "I always say that writing a song, first and foremost, to me, is a way of teaching myself how I feel about something," he says. "And that's the purpose it serves, really, more than anything else."

But the last thing Jason says about his new record is this: "I want it to be known that it's a band record. I want it to be known that it's something we all did together. Even though I wrote the songs, it was a very inclusive project."

Meet the band, then. Keyboard player Derry deBorja comes from the Baltimore area, and matriculated into the 400 Unit from a stint in Son Volt, which is where Jason met him. Guitarist Browan Lollar turned up at party, turns out to have just the right knack for Jason's songs. And bassist Jimbo Hart? "He's from Sheffield," Jason says. "I've known him since I was 16. My first image of Jimbo is him marching in a uniform playing bass with this huge kid behind him pushing his amp trying to keep up."

It was also a much more coherent recording process than the four years it took to stitch together his 2007 debut, *Sirens Of The Ditch* (New West). They spent a week cutting tracks at FAME, went on the road for a week, came back and spent another week finishing up. And it's clear from the credits that the 400 Unit made this album, together. They produced it, with Centromatic/South San Gabriel drummer Matt Pence both on the kit and behind the mixing board. Simple enough.

Here's the story of the band name, because it's a good story and deserves telling, and the telling says what needs finishing here. Jason begins, "There is a mental treatment facility here in Florence called The 400 Unit. About once a week they would drive downtown and take, I guess, the six or eight healthiest people in the facility and let 'em go downtown. Give 'em all like \$15 apiece to go get some lunch. You'd immediately recognize who it was and why they were there; they all had nametags on, saying kinda strange stuff to everybody. And trying to get a sandwich at the same time.

"When I started thinking about a band, and how we get to a new town and everybody gets \$15 and gets out of the van, goes out and tries to get a sandwich, it kinda reminded me of that."

Yeah, it's a sad record, but he's laughing. And it's a good sound, all around.

Media Contact: Traci Thomas / Thirty Tigers / traci@thirtytigers.com / 615-664-1167

Label Contact: Logan Rogers / Lightning Rod Records / logan@lightningrodrecords.com / 615-423-2038

Booking Contact: Andrew Colvin / Ground Control Touring / Andrew@groundcontourtouring.com / 718-218-8203