

Review – Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

A sense of atmosphere builds before Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit take the stage at the Usher Hall.

Save The World begins with a flourish of colourful electric arpeggios. When his playing leaves the beat it hits you straight in the heart. King of Oklahoma is reminiscent of Springsteen's songwriting on Downbound Train with its tale of love gone sour and this once 'King' in the last-chance saloon.

Tonight the track ends with a Neil Young and Crazy Horse sonic blast, every note is a joy to take in. Isbell and "rock n' roll" guitarist Sadler Vaden have a compelling onstage chemistry and the interplay between them is a sight to behold. Few American Heartland songwriters can capture the lives of the lost souls who float around rootless and penniless but still hold on in hope for a better day like this guy. There's real tension and drama in the writing that is utterly compelling.

Strawberry Woman has the pastoral charm of a Ronnie Lane track with some beguiling accordion sealing the deal as Isbell jumps on the riser and sings of drinking Irish whiskey on the Irish sea. As you look around the audience during Last Of My Kind, they hang on to every word.

Alabama Pines takes everything to another level, sitting in my row are friends of Isbell from his community in Alabama whose hearts are beating out of their chests with pride, they are all on their feet. It's an affecting moment and I feel transported by the song and those around me. The pent-up

energy of Death Wish builds with the pulsating power of two drummers, Will Johnson and Chad Gamble. The former takes on various instruments during the evening but it's quite a spectacle when they are both behind the kit. Isbell's brooding telecaster rakes out every note as his uneasy story unfolds.

There's a nod to Drive-By Truckers, the much-loved Southern Rock band that Isbell was a part of between 2001-07, with a version of Decoration Day. The folky If We Were Vampires is another fan favourite, Isbell's talent is to write an everyman ballad like this or Cast Iron Skillet where his fans bring their life and experience to the song. He leaves us with the feel-good and Stonesy This Ain't It.

Some legends have appeared at the Usher Hall of late including Bob Dylan, Isbell has every right to stand among the likes of the former, this is one of the most varied setlists I've seen by any writer in the last year. He means every word he sings and every note played. The 400 Unit is also a phenomenal band of musicians in their own right. The man in patent leather red shoes certainly had us dancing the blues. Songwriters and performers of this quality are as important as eating, breathing and sleeping in times such as this.

The last of his kind indeed.

Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, Usher Hall

All photos Richard Purden





