

Gregory Alan Isakov

South African-born, Philly-raised musician whose music is all tones of sepia and creeping warmth



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— Amy Ray, *Indigo Girls*

“Hints of everyone from Steve Earle to Gillian Welch also creep into Isakov's twangy, shaded folk...”

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“Writing and performing is a mystery to me,” explains singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist **Gregory Alan Isakov**. “I try to get myself out of the way as much as I can.” *This Empty Northern Hemisphere* is **Isakov's** latest collection of songs in which he conjures the miracles and heartaches of day to day living then transforms them into melodies, with a serious commitment to songcraft and musicianship. “The record for me is about traveling a lot, leaving things behind and feeling like the whole world's been pulled out from beneath you,” he says.

Isakov composed the songs for *This Empty Northern Hemisphere* following his relocation from the Colorado wilds to the town of Boulder. The period also marked the beginning of a new creative cycle for the 28-year-old singer songwriter, who combines his personal past with poetry to create a musically visceral present. “I've always liked song-based old-time music along with '70s-string-section-jazz-type things. I think it all creeps into my songs. But then I was **Pearl Jam's** biggest fan too,” he laughs.

Born in South Africa, **Isakov's** family immigrated to the US in opposition to the apartheid. “My parents took a lot of risks in leaving. The experience instilled in me the feeling that life is quality not quantity based.” **Isakov** was seven when they settled in the Philadelphia area, a time he describes as understandably challenging for the family, though he personally felt at home in his new multi-cultural environment. Since that time he's been a traveler. “I've lived in so many different places; I don't feel indigenous to anywhere.”

Raised on his parents' music collection that consisted of two records, *Simon and Garfunkel's Greatest Hits* and *We Are The World*, **Isakov** says, “I listened to those records a thousand times each.” He played jazz saxophone at school but eventually gravitated to his older brother's electric guitar. “I think it stuck because I never took lessons—and there was no teacher in my head when I played.”

As a teen he attended folk festivals and was impressed by songsmiths **Greg Brown** and **Dar Williams**, but it was **Bruce Springsteen's** *The Ghost of Tom Joad* that proverbially changed his life. “That was a big one for me. There was a mood to the record I was completely blown away by. Listening to these writers closely, one day I had the realization that these people had no idea what a big part of my life they were and how they'd created the soundtrack to it.” It wasn't long after his epiphany that **Isakov** began to create his own music.

Moving to Colorado in 1999 to study horticulture, he simultaneously embarked on a career as an acoustic singer-songwriter. He debuted with the gentle *Rust Colored Stones* in 2003 and followed with the haunting *Songs for October* (2005) and the Celtic-influenced *That Sea, The Gambler* (2007). It was while touring that he caught the attention of Americana singer-songwriter **Brandi Carlile** who liked what she heard and passed on **Isakov's** music to **Amy Ray** of the *Indigo Girls*. “He's a really great writer and really raw. His voice is just putting it out there. There's no affectation or pretension. It's like punk folk,” says **Ray**.

In 2008, the Denver publication *Westword* named him their Best Acoustic Folk Artist. The previous year he was given the paper's Best of Denver Singer-Songwriter award; they called him “a rootsier **Glen Phillips** channeling **Kelly Joe Phelps**.” **Isakov** feels an artistic kinship with folks like **Phelps** (he admires his ability to merge heaviness with humor) as well as **Carlile**, who offered to sing and record parts of *This Empty Northern Hemisphere* at her studio. The pair also cut **Leonard Cohen's** “One of Us Cannot Be Wrong,” as a duet. “I think it's one of the most beautiful songs in the world,” says **Isakov**. “It was a struggle for me to see how I could make it better—so I tried to make it as different as I could.”

Isakov co-produced the album at various locations with **Jamie Mefford** who also engineered and is credited with God Noises. He's accompanied throughout by his band, the **Freight**: **Jen Gilleran** (drums), **Jeb Bows** (violin) and **Phil Parker** (cello). **Isakov** plays guitars, banjo, piano and harmonica, among other instruments.

The record opens with “Dandelion Wine.” “I don't think I've ever spent longer on a song, even though it's only a few lines,” explains **Isakov** of the song's distilled verses. He wrote the beautifully minimalist arrangement, “Words,” with his younger brother. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* inspired the winsome “Idaho;” “Evelynne” and “If I Go I'm Goin'” are story songs, in time-honored singer-songwriter tradition.



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