



MUSIC

A Conversation with Jack Johnson

The laid-back folk-rocker talks about his new album, his punk-rock past, and his craziest fan interaction

By Nicole Greenstein | Oct. 04, 2013 | [Add a Comment](#)

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It's been three years since his last studio album and **Jack Johnson** is back, ready to reclaim his title as the master of mellow, surf folk-rock. With his latest effort, the Hawaiian singer-songwriter traded in the darker, electronic sound from his past two albums for the breezy, beachside charm of his older releases.

Unplugged and unaffected, *From Here To Now To You* was written entirely on the acoustic guitar, right on Johnson's front porch on Oahu's north shore. The 12 tracks were then recorded at Johnson's own Mango Tree Studio, where the band took nightly sunset breaks to catch some waves in the backyard.

TIME caught up with Johnson backstage before his sold-out show at Tower Theater, the historic music venue just west of [Philadelphia](#). The artist opens up about the new album, his punk rock past, and the time he was tackled by his childhood surfing idol.

TIME: First of all, congratulations on "From Here To Now To You" reaching the Number 1 spot on the *Billboard* 200.

JACK JOHNSON: Yeah, that was really exciting. It's crazy, it's something we never really expect. We're always kind of blown away. It was funny because I think Drake's record was supposed to come out the same week as ours. And then the last minute he switched a week, so we got lucky.

What were some of your influences as you were writing and recording the album?

I'd say Greg Brown, as far as musicians, is always a big influence for me. Let's see, what was I reading? I read [Philip K. Dick's] *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* while I was writing a little bit. So I feel like that kind of slipped into the song "Shot Reverse Shot." There are some lines that come from that book, in my mind, that are about empathy and how the Androids can't experience empathy and that's how you can tell them apart.

A lot of people have said that this new album is your most personal yet. Was it hard for you to



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balance your privacy and what stories you would share?

I think there’s a truth between an experience with a father and a daughter, or a truth between an experience with a husband and a wife, in my situation. But I don’t feel like it’s sort of a reality TV show where I’m exposing something that I would later wish I didn’t share. I haven’t found that to be the case yet. Maybe down the line my kids will get mad at me for putting things in songs.

I think your kids might think it’s pretty cool they have their own songs.

We’ll see. Teenagers don’t usually think their parents are pretty cool. I’ll give them a lot of fuel for the fire. *[Laughs]*

You’ve got a great studio space back in **Hawaii** with an ocean view. Do you find that the swimming and surfing breaks help fuel your creativity?



Emmett Malloy

Yeah, quite a bit. It’s something where the band is pretty used to if the waves are really great. We talk in the morning usually, we don’t have a real set schedule. So in the morning when everyone’s waking up, we give each other a call. And some days we’ll say, hey let’s try to meet around ten or something. But then everybody seems to be getting the call that the waves are getting good, and we’re not going to record today. For me, one of the worst things in the world is being in the studio and then getting a phone call from my brothers saying how good the waves are, because they love to rub it in. So yeah, we do take a lot of surfing breaks.

That doesn’t sound like a bad place to work.

No, they’ve got a pretty lenient boss.

One of your songs off the new album, *Tape Deck*, is about your first rock band back in the day. It’s pretty hard to imagine you as a punk rocker.

Well, we weren’t that punk rock. You were saying you’re from D.C.?

Yeah.

That’s funny, because Minor Threat, Fugazi and Ian MacKaye were probably my biggest inspirations at that point. And I played the 9:30 Club once, and I remember hearing stories about Minor Threat playing there and that was exciting for me. As silly as it sounds, I’m still pretty influenced by his writing I think. I mean lyrics, like “you are not what you own,” and things like that really stuck with me. I was listening to those during a time in my life where I was just shaping the person I was. And so, I do credit Minor Threat’s lyrics for shaping my personality in some ways. As much as my music doesn’t have that edge or immediacy about it, I think lyrically I’m still inspired. My two older kids are both learning the guitar now, and I love playing them “Stepping Stone” which Minor Threat covers. That’s the song they play they most.

But even back then, we didn’t look very punk rock. We were still wearing slippers and board shorts. It was too hot to really dress punk rock. You know, it was probably the most un-punk scene in America at the time. It was punk slightly influenced by reggae, or something like that.

Your shows are probably some of the most environmentally friendly in the music industry. Even all your tour merch is eco-friendly. Do you think the “green touring” movement will catch on?

Yeah, I think about five years ago we had this thing we started called the “Green Rider.” You always hear stories people about asking for one color M&M, or a different kind of champagne. People ask for crazy things. So we decided to just use that and ask for things we thought would be worth doing. Like if we’re going to play your venue, you have to change the light bulbs to energy-efficient. And it sounds really high maintenance, but at the same time we thought nobody’s going to take the energy to change them back afterwards, right? So it’s been great. Most of the venues have all been really accommodating, and they even told us that after we left they kept everything the same.

As someone who’s been in the music industry for over 12 years, what are your thoughts on some of the challenges that face the industry right now?

Yeah, everything’s changing so quickly with all the streaming. I’m pretty bad with keeping up with technology as far as that part of it. But rewinding back to when — this is going to make me sound like a grandpa — but when

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burnable CDs were first coming out, and people could download stuff off the Internet. When I was first touring, that was what everybody in the industry was talking about. I didn't really feel part of the industry at that point. I felt like just a guy who got to put out a little album with this little independent label, and I felt like an outsider at that point still. And people started saying, oh it's a real problem and everybody's downloading stuff for free now.

When I went on the road, the first tour I did was a tour with Ben Harper opening for him. I was on such a small label that we didn't have very good distribution. And it was really nice when people would come up to me with blank CDs, and they would say, "Hey, can you sign this? You know I feel bad I burnt it but we can't buy it anywhere." And so I was actually really happy that the technology existed at that point, because I wouldn't have people at my shows otherwise. Because after I was done touring with Ben, we were doing our own little club shows, and the clubs were filling up but we still didn't have any CDs in stores. And so in a way, it was making it so I could even tour at that point. So I've always just tried to keep an open mind to new technologies that come out. A lot of times thing rebound back. Learn to dig change, and it will dig you in return.



K Johnson

Do you have any plans for your music after the tour?

No, not at all. Usually the guitar gets put away for a little when I go home. Not like literally put away, but yeah I'll probably get home and hang with friends and surf.

Last question — what's the craziest thing a fan has ever done to you?

Well one time, there was this guy. His name is Rabbit Bartholomew, and he's a legend in the surfing world. He's really well known, he's like one of the heroes of our sport. He tackled me one time. At the end of the show I was at this little bar in [Australia](#), and he's an Australian former world champion surfer. I was saying goodnight and everyone was partying pretty hard, it wasn't just him. But he ended up tackling me on the stage and pinning me down. He was telling me all this stuff, and I was trying to get out from underneath him. It was really awkward because the whole crowd was watching Rabbit Bartholomew, you know one of my childhood heroes, pinning me down on top of the stage, wrestling me.

A girl tackled me once, too. We were playing a real mellow song, and I was just closing my eyes and I didn't see it coming. And she got me pretty good.

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