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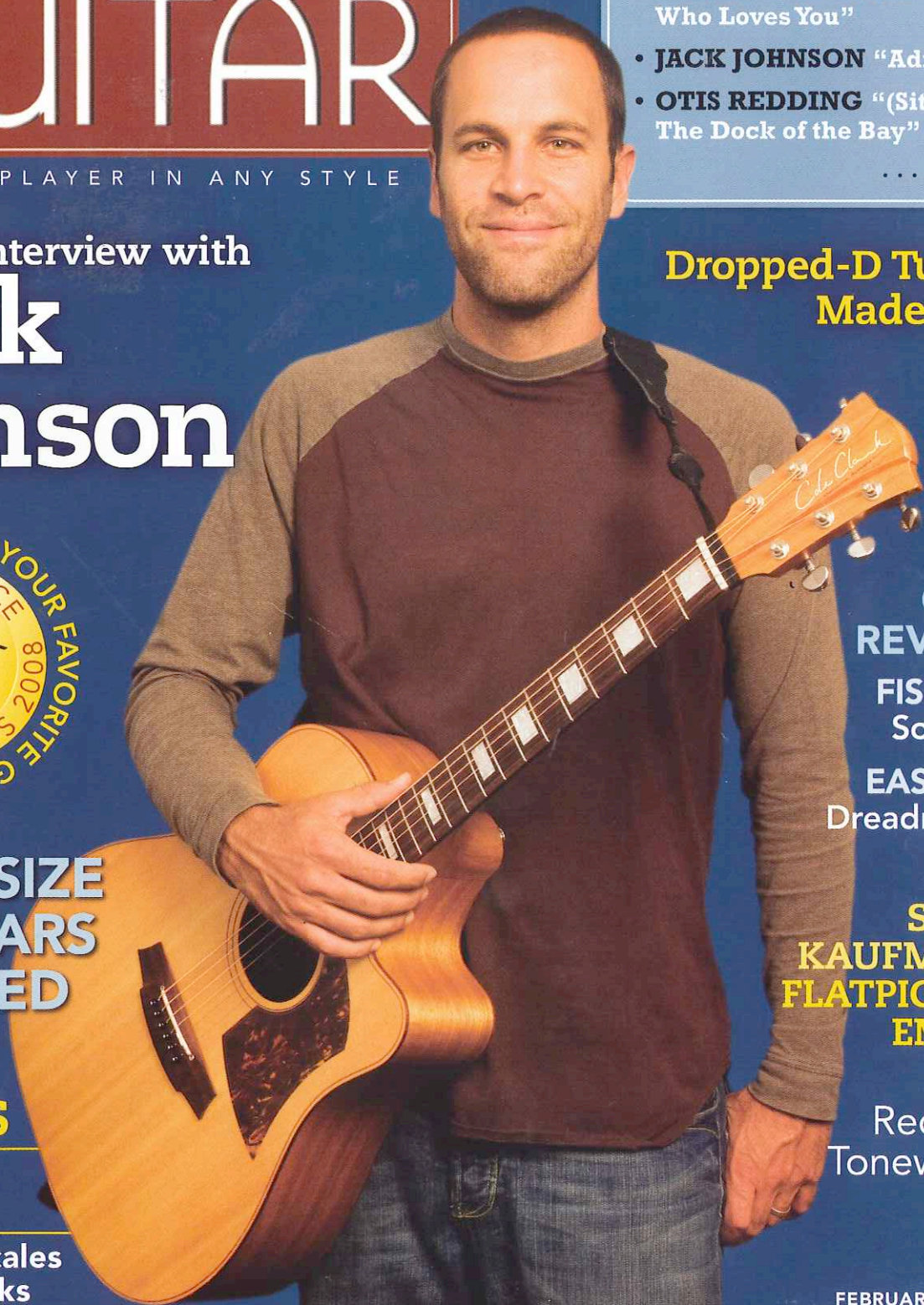
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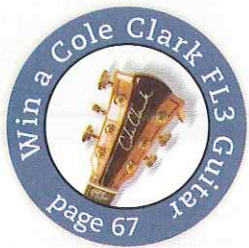
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**ON THE COVER:** Jack Johnson  
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Seagull Coastline Folk Cedar, and  
Blueridge BR-143

# ACOUSTIC GUITAR

FEBRUARY 2009

VOL. 19, NO. 8, ISSUE 194

## FEATURES

### 46 JACK JOHNSON

How the surfer/filmmaker/singer-songwriter mines his dreams for song ideas and finds the balance between Jimmy Buffett and Jimi Hendrix.

By Drew Pearce

### 60 PLAYERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Acoustic Guitar readers voted for their favorite gear, retailers, educational resources, and guitarists. And the winners are . . .

By Teja Gerken

### 76 MID-SIZE GUITARS

We test six medium-size guitars to find out what you can expect from 000's, grand concert, and OM's ranging from \$250 to \$5,000.

By Teja Gerken, Scott Nygaard, and Charles Saufley

## SONGS TO PLAY

- 18 "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay" OTIS REDDING
- 20 "I'm the Man Who Loves You" WILCO
- 45 "Dropping D Blues" JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS
- 56 "Adrift" JACK JOHNSON
- 100 "Bass-Line Blues" ANDREW DUBROCK
- 104 "Moondance" VAN MORRISON

## IN EVERY ISSUE

- 10 EDITOR'S NOTE
- 12 MUSIC NOTATION KEY
- 14 CONTRIBUTORS
- 16 MAILBAG
- 102 ESSENTIAL GEAR
- 108 MARKETPLACE
- 113 AD INDEX





Put a guitar into the hands of a guy who sells millions of records and headlines the biggest festivals, and in some ways he becomes like the rest of us—inspired by the sound he's making, slightly self-deprecating about his playing, and happy to make a little music with his family and friends. That's the impression I got of Jack Johnson during the hectic scene of the Outside Lands Festival in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park this past summer. Johnson sat down for an interview with *Acoustic Guitar* contributor Drew Pearce for this

month's cover story, and he talked about the origin of some of his signature songs while sharing a few examples of his laid-back guitar style. He then took his guitar onstage for the headlining slot of the festival in front of thousands of appreciative fans—which is where the "just like the rest of us" bit breaks down!

I don't think Johnson voted in the the 2008 Players' Choice Awards, but a lot of you did. A few months ago, *Acoustic Guitar* invited you to tell us who you thought made the best guitars, accessories, amplification and recording equipment, instruction material, and guitar music. Thousands of you obliged and cast your votes. The 220 award winners that you chose in 53 categories are presented on page 60. A dog-eared copy of these pages would be a smart thing to take with you while shopping for any guitar-related goodies in the coming year.

We go in-depth on a few Players' Choice Award winners throughout the rest of this issue as well. On page 28, we take a close look at Fishman's new SoloAmp system, the latest offering from the winner of multiple Players' Choice Awards. Our mid-size guitar review (page 76) includes guitars made by five of the winners. And we explore the multifaceted guitar career of Steve Kaufman (page 90), who won two Players' Choice Awards—one in our first-ever balloting for best flatpicking guitarist, and another in the Music Camps and Workshops category.

Congratulations to all of the winners of the Players' Choice Awards, and thanks to all of you who voted.

Enjoy the issue,  
**DAN GABEL**

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# JACK

How the surfer/filmmaker/singer-songwriter mines his dreams for ideas and finds the balance between Jimmy Buffett and Jimi

for song Hendrix.

Inside a trailer behind the main stage at the Outside Lands Music and Arts Festival in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, Jack Johnson is quietly tuning up his acoustic guitar and tuning out the cacophony of crowd noise and distorted bass barely muffled by the window. A few feet away, photographers and event coordinators are scurrying to stay on schedule. Throughout the next two hours, Johnson will be whisked from interview to photo shoot to stage, where he'll stand before tens of thousands of fans who roar for an encore with such intensity it sounds like a jet has just landed by the drum kit. All the while, Johnson navigates the chaos like a Zen master.

See video of Jack Johnson at [acousticguitar.com/jackjohnson](http://acousticguitar.com/jackjohnson)

By Drew Pearce Photos by Jay Blakesberg

# JOHNSON



Over the past few years, Johnson has learned to adjust to life in the eye of a storm. Following the success of his surf films *Thicker Than Water* (2000) and *September Sessions* (2002) and his multiplatinum major-label debut, *Brushfire Fairytales* (2001), Johnson became something of a cultural icon—"The Jimmy Buffett of a new generation," as one iTunes reviewer put it.

But rather than coast on the momentum of fame, Johnson quickly leveraged his celebrity status to shine a spotlight on the environmental issues that are close to his heart, while continuing to create radio-friendly, acoustic-based albums that sold millions of copies (including *On and On* in 2003 and *In Between Dreams* in 2005). In 2003, he established the Kokua Festival, an annual music event in Honolulu that showcases green companies, products, and services and raises money for the Kokua Hawaii Foundation, a nonprofit organization he founded to support environmental education in his home state. In 2008 he took the spirit of the Kokua Festival on the road with him, introducing a new social-action network known as All at Once. It soon became clear that this socially conscious father of two was no old-school rock star but a new-school renaissance man.

While his fan-base grew and tours sold out, Johnson's writing and playing remained rooted in the sound that originated when he

was playing with friends on surfing trips and entertaining crowds at surfing contests. Johnson's early hits like "Flake" and "Bubble Toes" have a carefree, upbeat feel that defined his signature sound—percussive, palm-muted acoustic guitar grooves riding a wave of booming backbeats and funky bass lines. Listening to the laid-back Hawaiian sing effortlessly catchy tunes like "Upside Down" from the *Curious George* soundtrack was like taking a virtual vacation to Oahu.

But Johnson's latest release, *Sleep Through the Static*, has a more melancholy vibe that is perfectly in tune with our times. Over chiming minor chords played by a tremolo-drenched Telecaster, Johnson begins the album with "All at Once," singing, "All at once, the world can overwhelm me / There's almost nothing you could tell me that could ease my mind." There are still gentle lullabies and uptempo tunes—"Angel" and "What You Thought You Need" being two of the best—but the contemplative tone running through *Sleep Through the Static* makes it clear that the seemingly serene man under the mango tree is just as anxious about the war-torn world as everyone else.

To find out about how Johnson's songwriting and guitar-playing style have evolved over the years, I talked with him before his set at Outside Lands and asked him how he captures creative ideas and turns them into tunes.

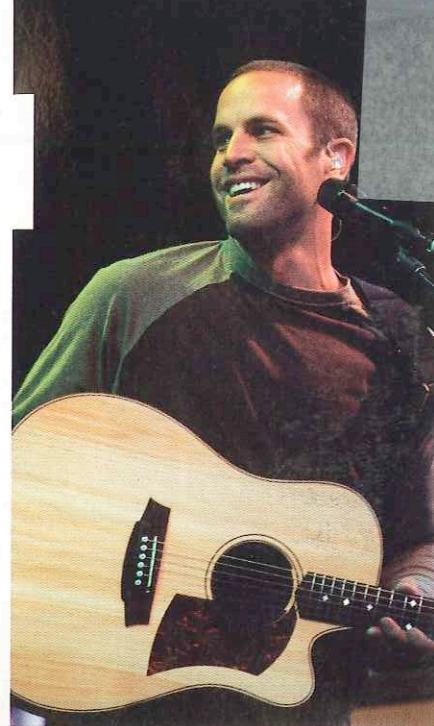
## FANNING THE FLAMES OF A BRUSHFIRE

When Jack Johnson and Brushfire Records cofounder Emmett Malloy began thinking about forming their own label, they didn't have any empire-building in mind. Like the rest of Johnson's career, it started with a few close friends and grew organically. "I don't think we had a specific agenda," Malloy says. "We did a surf movie, had some songs, and they just started getting out there." For Johnson's albums and the soundtracks to their films, Malloy and Johnson decided to create their own label name and have Universal be the distributor. "We've always been pretty good at making things, but putting them out was always left in other people's hands," Malloy says. "We did initially want to keep it at that, honestly. I was like, 'I'm directing films and managing you, and that's enough.'"

But friendships and a desire to give back led to a case of business escalation. "Jack's first break in the music world happened with G. Love," Malloy says. "When they had grown tired of being on the label they were on for all those years, we said, 'Well, we've got a label!'"

Through the course of putting out another person's record, we realized it's a lot of work—we can't just be an imprint and use the privilege we have because we sold a lot of another record. We have to go out and make this a [real] label. Then, out on the road, we realized that other musicians we loved were miserable where they were. I don't like to see things like that going down, so I just kind of go, 'Are you kidding me? Let's do a record.'"

That collaborative, communal spirit continues to drive Brushfire. "At the beginning, we were Jack, G. Love, and Donavon Frankenreiter," Malloy says. "It was a niche thing: surfers making music, not even really surf music. As we grew out from that initial lineup, we started to take on Money Mark and Matt Costa and things that spread into different audiences. I think we've done a good job at progressing our sound, to the point where we could almost sign anything right now. All our artists have come to us very naturally. We gravitate toward the people, what they're all about, and the spirit of their music."



Some of the acoustic-based songs on the new record, like "Adrift," have an easygoing, almost country rhythm. How did that song get started?

JOHNSON "Adrift" is one of the trickier ones for me to play [for a complete transcription, go to page 56]. It's tuned to a Hawaiian slack-key tuning (D G D G B D)—an open-G tuning. But I found this barre chord I could play off of, so the whole thing is in the key of D, which meant I had to find other barre chords [in that tuning].

I showed it to my friend, Kawika Kahiapo, a great slack-key guitar player from the band Kaukahi, who taught me a lot about the slack-key tunings. He actually learned from Gabby Pahinui, one of the Hawaiian guitar legends. When I showed Kawika this new song, he said he hadn't really seen those chords before. So that was a real compliment because he said I took the slack-key tuning and made something of my own.

Another slack-key tuning Kawika showed me is the one I use on "Constellations" [from *In Between Days*] where you drop the low E string to a C [C G D G B D]. If you hold an Am7 [in first position], it becomes a C major chord. When I figured out that I could slide this Am7 [shape] up two frets and have the D—and up here [on the fifth fret] is the F—I started using the hand position like any other barre chord. On "Constellations," the intro [riff] came after [figuring out] the chords [Examples 1 and 2].

Can you tell us a bit about what inspired you to write "Constellations"?

JOHNSON I had just seen Neil Young in concert doing the Greendale show, and he played this song ["Bandit"] that was tuned down so low. I was lucky enough to get to go backstage

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after the show and asked [Young] what he was tuned down to during that song. He said it was B $\flat$ , and that he had just read an article that said the universe is resonating in B $\flat$ , so he wrote a song [in that key]. Watching him play, I drifted off and started thinking about these old camping trips my dad and I used to go on every summer when I was a teenager. We'd go to outer islands in Hawaii and camp in these valleys. The imagery of that was really going with the music Neil was playing that night. It was resonating me back to this time [on the camping trips in Hawaii]. I wrote "Constellations" within the next week or so.

*When you're working on a new song, what's your approach to creating melodies?*

**JOHNSON** Sometimes I just start humming something, find a melody I like a lot, and if it sticks around for a couple days, a few words will lock themselves into place. I might just

get the first line. Then words just keep falling into the syllables. The choruses kind of write themselves, and I have to work a little bit on the verses.

**Tuning:** C $\flat$  G $\flat$  D G B D, Ex. 1-2

**Ex. 1: "Constellations" intro**

**Ex. 2: "Constellations" riff**

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"Enemy" [from *Sleep Through the Static*] is one where I found a vocal line that follows a [guitar] line. It's in standard tuning except for the low E string, which is tuned down to C. I just started playing this [riff] one day [Example 3], then I started filling in the line: [sings] "After I spoke I had a dream that I broke / The teeth on the mouth of a snake / That I choked on the teeth / They were mine all along."

That's a song that trips my four-year-old out. He says "Now wait, you broke the teeth from the snake, but you are the snake?" He's trying to figure it out. It's been good because it makes us have conversations about what dreams are, and who you are in your dreams. I was trying to tell him that everything in your dream is actually you, which I read

**Tuning: C A D G B E**

**Ex. 3: "Enemy" intro**

recently. So the snake must have been me as well.

**Do you keep a journal by your bed to write down dreams that could turn into lyrics?**

**JOHNSON** I used to just play when the songs came and never write anything down or keep organized journals. Now, with a two-year-old and four-year-old, when I get time to go in the studio or the garage behind our house, I've got to write ideas down. But I'm not too organized with that kind of stuff. Usually, I just feel better writing when there's a guitar around and there's friends. I might get a melody I like a lot, then later that night, once the kids are asleep, I'll sit down and try to write something.

**The song "Flake," from *Brushfire Fairytales*, is in a key (D minor/F major) that would probably lead others to use a capo. Is there a reason you tend to prefer barre chords?**

**JOHNSON** I didn't start using capos much until this newest record. I find that one of the main ways that I play—that percussive thing, muting all the strings to get that snare sound—comes from not having a band for a while, sitting around playing by myself, trying to do the guitar and the drums. "Flake" was like that [Example 4]. Once I had a band, I slowly moved away from always feeling like I had to cover it all. Sometimes the snare drum and that [percussive] noise from my guitar compete if we're not locked in together. So I've been using a capo more now. It's kind of

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nice to discover things a little later because it opens new doors.

**On the electric side, new songs like "Hope" use guitars just to accent the backbeats and create a sparse reggae rhythm. Were you trying to create some space for the new member of your band, keyboardist Zach Gill?**

**JOHNSON** Yeah, it was fun. This was the first time that Zach and I got to be in the studio together from the beginning. On the *Curious George* soundtrack and *In Between Dreams*, he came in once we finished recording, and we found a few spots where we felt like it added to the songs. It's easy to fill things up too much. But this time around, he was in the studio with us, jamming around when we were

getting ready [to record.] So if you were to take the keys away on this new record, there'd probably be too much space on certain songs. So it worked out.

"Hope" is actually one that Zach [Rogue] from the band Rogue Wave had written for a potential movie. He had the melody, but he never finished the words. We played it one day and I liked it a lot, so I started writing words for it. I've worked with the band on songs, but that's the first time where we've worked on a song that someone else already had and took it somewhere else.

**When you're working out chord progressions, do you think in terms of theory?**

**JOHNSON** No, I'm pretty bad with knowing

all the scales. I saw a Joseph Campbell documentary once, and he was saying there was a meeting of all these different religions at a conference. One guy said, "I don't really understand the theology behind it." And Joseph said, "We don't really have one. I think we just dance." I always liked that. It made me feel better. Right before I did my first record, I met with this producer who was probably a little too glossy for what we were doing. During the meeting he said, "Why would you put a [dominant]-seventh chord there instead of a major?" I didn't even know I was playing a [dominant] seventh, you know? I play them just about everywhere because my pinky doesn't usually go down when I do barre chords. So it's not always correct, but it's OK.

**Ex. 4: "Flake" progression with snare sound**

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The guitar work on "F-Stop Blues" from the soundtrack to September Sessions is different from the version on Brushfire Fairytales. It reminded me a lot of Jimi Hendrix's rhythm playing. Can you tell us a little about his influence on your guitar style?

**JOHNSON** He's definitely one of the biggest influences on me. It's funny because it's probably not in the normal way that Hendrix

influences people, because I just never took it to that step where I could play lead and take guitar solos. For some reason, I didn't think I could do it. I wasn't taking lessons—I was always getting tablature books and things like that. But I love what he did between each chord, all those pretty little hammer-ons. All the Hendrix things like "F-Stop Blues" [Example 5], that's just my version of that style. Sometimes your limitations are your strengths, too, you know? Me trying to sound like Hendrix—it comes somewhat close, but it has these little things that just become your own style.

Can you tell us a bit about the origin of your All at Once campaign?

**JOHNSON** We wanted to do a tour that felt how the Kokua Festival in Hawaii feels. All the money from that goes to the Kokua Hawaii Foundation, a nonprofit group we started to benefit the public schools in Hawaii. This time, we reached out to different nonprofit groups in every community where we played. When you bring that many people together, it's nice to be able to do something besides just play music. You have all these hungry hearts that are in their early 20s finding their way in the world. Then you say, "Here's these great groups in your town, here are these great people who come to the show." They meet each other. Then we leave town and they're doing great things together. **AG**

## THE SOLAR POWERED PLASTIC PLANT

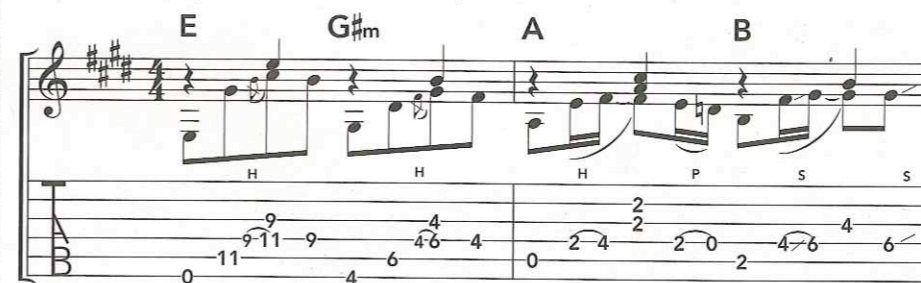
*Sleep Through the Static* was recorded using 100 percent solar energy at the Mango Tree, Jack Johnson's studio on the North Shore of Oahu, and at the Solar Powered Plastic Plant, a new studio in Los Angeles built by Brushfire Records to serve as the label headquarters and to create a space where Brushfire artists can record with the least possible impact on the environment. Solar panels provide power for the offices and studio; the wall insulation is made of recycled blue-jean scraps; and the Duro-Last green roof features recycled shingles.

While looking for a spot to do Johnson's new record, Emmett Malloy, Johnson's manager as well as the cofounder of Brushfire Records, found a house in the middle of Los Angeles where he grew up. "We knew we'd use the Hawaii space for the songwriting and vocals, but we had to do the band part somewhere else," Malloy says. "I found this old house with a photography studio in the back. We did everything we could to be as low impact as we could while renovating. A friend found tons of scrap lumber everywhere. He spent days sanding it all and did some great woodwork on the inside to help give it a vibe. Then we put up the solar panels and got all the gear and really went for it. We were still putting drywall up when Jack showed up to record."

Since the recording of *Sleep Through the Static*, the Solar Powered Plastic Plant has been put to use for projects by other Brushfire artists as well. "Zach Gill did his first solo record [*Zach Gill's Stuff*], Neil Halstead did a majority of his record [*Oh! Mighty Engine*] there. Mason Jennings did about four tracks there [for his new record, *In The Ever*]," Malloy says. "I do all of my film stuff out of there as well."

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### Ex. 5: "F-Stop Blues" Hendrix-inspired riff



## WHAT HE PLAYS

**ACOUSTIC GUITAR:** Cole Clark FL2 guitars with a Cole Clark-designed dual-input acoustic pickup (DIAP) and a Radial passive DI. "On my first tour in Australia, Ben Harper introduced me to the luthiers [who eventually formed] Cole Clark Guitars," Jack Johnson says. "The guitars are made out of sustainably grown wood (bunya top, Queensland maple neck, back and sides) down in Australia. Bunya is a beautiful wood. Most of all, the pickup system is really great for playing live. You get that real nice exact sound from the bridge pickup, but the [Face Brace Sensor] inside gives you a little more off-the-string sound."

**ELECTRIC GUITAR:** 1974 Fender Telecaster.

**ELECTRIC AMPS:** 1965 Fender Twin Reverb and 1965 Fender Deluxe Reverb.

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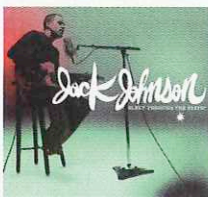
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# Adrift

Words and music by Jack Johnson



Jack Johnson discovered open-G tuning (D G D G B D) through friends in the slack-key world and used it to write "Adrift." On the version on *Sleep Through the Static*, Johnson tunes down a whole step (C F C F A C) to what could be called "open-F tuning." Those three C notes (and especially that booming low C at the bottom) are great for playing in the key of C, and that's where he parks this tune.

Johnson's brother Trent joins Jack on the track, lazily playing the alternating-bass strum pattern in standard tuning as shown on the first staff (guitar 1). Throughout

the rest of the song, Trent's part is shown in chord frames and uses the same basic strum pattern.

Jack (guitar 2) plays the recognizable descending fingerpicked riff at the beginning by barring across the first five strings at the second fret with his index finger. In the verse, he repeats the descending figure over the C chord and moves around the fretboard for some colorful sliding sixths over the F chord. The Am7 chord he plays in measure 17 requires a barre with the pinky across the top three strings at the seventh fret. If you find this difficult, try reinforcing the barre with your ring finger. The song cycles through three verses and ends with an instrumental verse before fading out.

## Guitar 1, Standard Tuning

Guitar 2, Open-G Tuning, down one whole step: C F C F A C

### Intro

Swing (♩ = ♩<sup>3</sup>)  
♩ = 82

**Guitar 1**  
C

**Guitar 2**

(continue simile)

### Verse

**Guitar 1** C F

**Guitar 2**

1. Your voice is a-drift I can't ex-pect it to sing to me As if I was the on-ly one  
2-3. See additional lyrics.

\* Instrumental fourth verse.

C F

I'll fol-low you a leaf that's fol-low-ing the sun

When will my weight be too much for you When will these i-

deas real-ly be my own 'Cause this mo-ment keeps on mov-ing

We were nev-er meant to hold on

D.S. al Fine (after third verse)

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1. <sup>C</sup>Your voice is adrift I can't expect it to sing to me <sup>F</sup>

As if I was the only one <sup>C</sup>

I'll follow you, a leaf that's following the sun <sup>F</sup> <sup>C</sup>

When will my weight be too much for you <sup>G</sup>

When will these ideas really be my own? <sup>Am</sup> <sup>G</sup> <sup>F</sup>

'Cause this moment keeps on moving <sup>C</sup>

We were never meant to hold on <sup>G</sup> <sup>C</sup>

2. <sup>C</sup>If this was a scene worth waking up for

When I woke up, you planted me in my own body <sup>F</sup> <sup>C</sup>

Don't know why, but somehow it just feels so wrong <sup>F</sup> <sup>C</sup>

When you're sad I will be lonely <sup>G</sup>

But when you rise again I'll have become the sun <sup>Am</sup> <sup>G</sup> <sup>F</sup>

I will shine down upon you <sup>C</sup>

As if you were the only one <sup>G</sup> <sup>C</sup>

3. <sup>C</sup>Your voice is your own, I can't protect it

You'll have to sing a verse no one has ever known <sup>F</sup> <sup>C</sup>

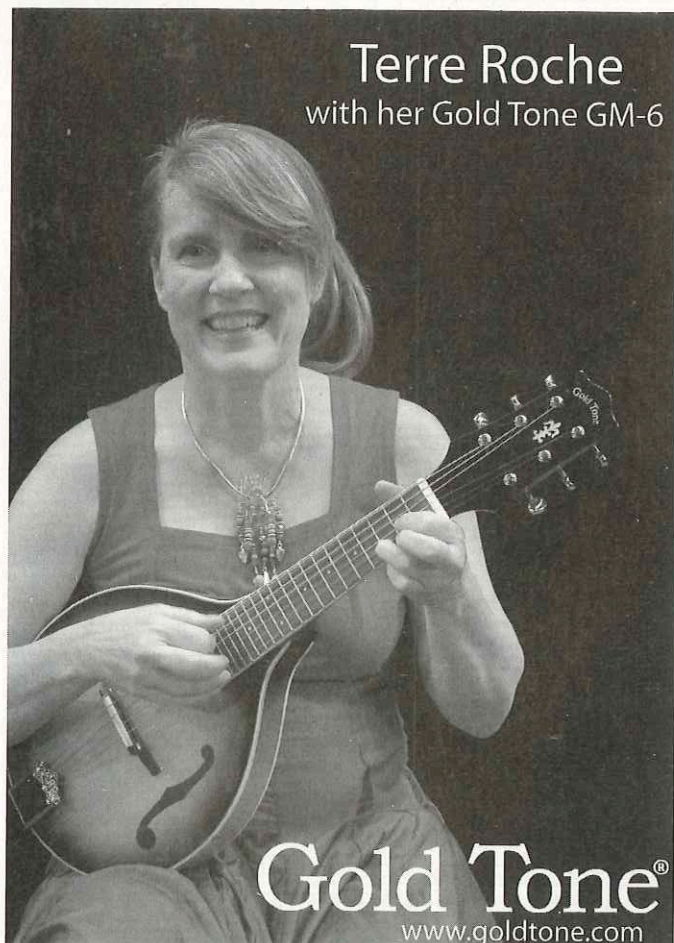
Don't be afraid, 'cause no one ever sings alone <sup>F</sup> <sup>C</sup>

Your weight will never be too much for me <sup>G</sup>

Your ideas have always been your own <sup>Am</sup> <sup>G</sup> <sup>F</sup>

And this moment keeps on moving <sup>C</sup>

We were never meant to hold on <sup>G</sup> <sup>C</sup>



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