

Jack Johnson: solar-powered pop star

The Hawaiian singer Jack Johnson talks about surfing, saving the earth and his new album, *To the Sea*

By Craig McLean, June 9, 2010



Jack Johnson near his home in Hawaii Photo: Emmett Malloy

At Jack Johnson's Kokua Festival in Hawaii, the environmental message hits you before you make it through the gates. ride a bike – help power a school says the sign on the bicycle valet-parking enclosure outside the Waikiki Shell, an outdoor auditorium on the outskirts of Honolulu.

A van emblazoned with the logo of styrophobic.com flags up the biodegradable credentials of the food utensils at the annual festival, which was established in 2004 by Johnson and his wife, Kim. And every fan of Johnson is encouraged to buy carbon-offsetting credits with their ticket.

The festival, which features Johnson and his band as the headline act, attracts 20,000 concert-goers over two nights. All proceeds go to Johnson's Kokua Hawaii Foundation, a non-profit organisation that supports environmental education in schools and communities in the islands.

'Eighty-five per cent of the islands' food is imported – that's crazy,' Johnson says. 'That's one of those statistics that made us start up Aina In Schools – aina means land in Hawaiian, and it's an acronym for Actively Integrating Nutrition and Agriculture. Teaching pupils about growing their own food and supporting farmers is the kind of local activism that is important.'

For Johnson, 35, who was raised with his two older brothers in a backwoods Hawaiian idyll of boat trips, long hikes, camping expeditions and self-sufficiency (spearing fish, making boat masts from the native hao tree), 'it's about trying to give children the same experiences I had. Try to give them a respect for nature.'

Equally, as a keen surfer – he began his professional life making surf films – Johnson is aware of the dangers of pollution. The east of Hawaii's main island, Oahu, 'is a filter for the Pacific Ocean, and there's just plastic over the whole beach. It's close to my heart because I surf over there a lot.'

A poster pinned to the fence of the auditorium sets out the core 'greening' principles. Kokua (it means 'help') bans plastic water bottles, uses sustainable biodiesel, is aiming for zero waste, and will raise money for a range of island-wide non-profit organisations, many of which are represented in the festival village situated behind the auditorium's banks of seating. The Kokua foundation's stall is situated alongside representatives from the Hawaii Farmers' Union, the Surfrider Foundation and the Liquid Aloha Brewery ('coming soon: sun-powered beer').

Johnson's new, sixth album, *To the Sea*, was recorded in his home studio on Oahu's North Shore using electricity provided by solar panels on his roof. It is so efficient that it puts energy back into the power grid for the use of his neighbours. All profits from his upcoming world tour will be donated to charities, many of them projects local to each venue and town. For Johnson, the money he earns from his CD sales are more than enough.

'The important thing is to make sure Kokua doesn't just feel like another hemp fest, another hippie fest,' Johnson says when we meet in the back garden of his studio on the Monday after the festival. He admits that 'we do get a lot of snarky comments' from observers who see his green efforts as too good to be true. But whether in his gentle, largely acoustic, campfire-friendly songs, or in his commitments to an isolated, Hawaii-paced lifestyle, Johnson is sincere in everything he does.

His concerts fill arenas all over the world, but he is ever more intent on living a life resolutely untouched by the millions he has made since releasing his debut album in 2001. Johnson's eco-principles may be a deeper shade of green than any other big-selling artist in the world – including Radiohead – but he even couches his ambitions in modest terms: 'I'm not trying to say we're saving the world. We're just trying to put a little energy into it.'

Musically, Jack Johnson was raised on his parents' love of soul (Otis Redding, Ray

Charles, Aretha Franklin) and of traditional Hawaiian artists (Kawika Kahiapo and Gabby Pahinui, the latter 'the Mississippi John Hurt of Hawaii'); his older brothers' hard rock and alternative albums (Black Sabbath, Violent Femmes, the Doors); and on the islands' only real contemporary music scene – a local variation of reggae called Jawaiian, part-Hawaiian, part-Jamaican.

Geographically – and spiritually – he was raised on the North Shore of Oahu, or what Hawaiian's call 'the country', the verdant hinterland beyond Honolulu. This side of Oahu is renowned for its surfing, and as a child Johnson spent every spare minute out on the board. But when he was 17 he suffered a serious injury. Escaping from the cylinder of a wave after attempting a tricky 'backside barrel', he dived through the back of the wall of water and smashed face-first into a coral head.

'I was under water for about one wave,' he recalls as we sit in fierce sunshine under a monkey pod tree, birds cawing nearby, tiny black lizards scuttling over the rocks. 'I was conscious the whole time, but barely. I kept thinking, "I've got to swim right now but I'm just going to rest for a second." It was like pushing snooze on an alarm clock. Then I took a breath under water and it hit me: "I'm drowning right now. I've got to swim." I got to the surface, threw up a bunch of water, there was blood all over the water. I was really lucky I didn't die.'

Johnson had fractured his skull, broken his nose, lost his front teeth and lacerated his face. His injuries required 150 stitches (but, remarkably, caused no lasting damage). He was forced to convalesce for three months during winter, the prime surfing season. So he busied himself on the guitar that he had previously played only occasionally in a school punk covers band.

The water skills and athleticism born of a childhood in the ocean – the 'rite of passage' experiences that Johnson views as fundamental to personal development – had saved him. He first hit the waves on his own aged five, although before that he would venture out into the Pacific perched on the nose of his father's board.

Jeff Johnson was a building contractor by trade but a surfer by passion. Some of Jack Johnson's environmental values – he part-balances his worries about flying round the world by running his tour buses on sustainable biodiesel and requesting that concert venues adopt recycling measures – derive from his parents' love of their environment. 'My parents were involved in stopping some of the developments up here – a Japanese company wanted to build a multiple golf course and hotels on these bluffs,' Johnson says, gesturing to the tree-covered hills that rise up above the wild, one-acre garden behind the two properties that house his studio and the Kokua Hawaii Foundation.

The home where he lives with Kim and their three children is a little along the road; before he cycles off on a battered bike to collect his six-year-old son from school, Johnson asks me not to divulge his children's names, nor any details about the location. His folk-flavoured music may be undemanding, but his fans are passionate – Johnson and his family have had visits from strangers before.

His father died last year after a long illness. A grieving Johnson did, at first, think it would be a long time before he could return to making music. 'But for some reason, after my dad passed I found myself writing a lot. And all of a sudden I had a whole album's worth of songs.' In tribute – and in keeping with the video for the first single from the new album, *You and Your Heart*, which features Johnson singing the entire song while surfing – the cover of *To the Sea* features a sculpture his father made when he was 20: a wave fashioned from driftwood. 'And after that whole previous year, once it was over,' Johnson says quietly, 'the idea of getting out in the world, travelling, going on tour, was appealing.'

His mother and his 15-year-old niece are joining him on this summer's European tour, as nannies to his children. 'It's a little different probably from a lot of musicians' situations, where touring takes you away from the family. It's like a family road trip for us most of the time.'

Johnson met his future wife at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Both were studying maths, although he admits that he stuck with the subject only to stay in the same class as her. He was passing his exams, 'but Kim realised before I did that I was somewhat miserable'.

She took him to Reel Loud, a student film festival on campus. Here Johnson saw a 'Spinal Tap-like pretend documentary called *Sasquatch Now* about some guys trying to capture Big Foot in northern Washington'. Johnson, who wrote lyrics for and sang in a college band, liked drawing and already made DIY animations in his spare time, was impressed: 'I've spent a semester doing math tests, they've been making this...' The next day, with Kim's encouragement, Johnson switched to the university's film degree course. Once he graduated he thought he could be a cameraman, or a filmmaker, figuring that 'I'd be learning a trade but it was creative at the same time'.

After college, he agreed to film some friends on a surf trip to Indonesia. Johnson was a good surfer, but his friends – Kelly Slater, Rob Machado, Shane Dorian, Ross Williams – were becoming 'the best surfers in the world'. His first documentary, *2000's Thicker Than Water*, co-directed with an old school friend, was a hit within the surf community. He was writing music on the side, but 'felt funny' about putting his own songs on the soundtrack.

However, during the editing of a follow-up, *The September Sessions*, there was a sudden musical gap when the rights to use a Jeff Buckley song became prohibitively expensive. 'So at the last minute we threw in *F-Stop Blues*, which I'd written on one of the surf trips. I felt OK – I was a little bit embarrassed. But it was definitely a huge thing, it made the surf culture start asking if I was going to put out an album.'

Around the same time a four-song tape, which was already the subject of much buzz in surf circles in California, began to be noticed by the Los Angeles music industry. A top-dollar bidding war ensued to sign Johnson, with major record labels 'throwing some big

numbers. It got kind of ridiculous.' Equally ridiculous were the 'concerns' of some labels. Johnson says that they told him, 'We're just afraid from looking at your lifestyle that you won't actually go out and promote the albums.' They feared Johnson would be too busy surfing or making films 'to go out on the road and tour for 200 days a year'.

But an early adviser, JP Plunier, the manager of the American singer-songwriter Ben Harper (and himself a surfer), suggested Johnson stick to his guns. 'He said, "You should keep doing what you're doing. That's the attractive thing about your whole thing – you're a writer who goes out and experiences life and travels, and the songs come from a real place."'

Johnson held out. Not for more money. All he wanted was control. Eventually, in 2001, he signed with Universal, on the understanding that he could establish his own record label. He called it Brushfire, after his debut album, Brushfire Fairytales. Brushfire has its offices and studio in Los Angeles – other artists signed to the label use the facilities. But true to form, Johnson keeps his distance. 'We created this little bubble for ourselves,' he reflects. It was all he ever wanted, or needed.

A decade and 14 million album sales later, Jack Johnson is still guided by those early principles. He moved back from California to Hawaii with his new wife to start a family – and to give something back to the islands and culture that had shaped him. And even as he found ever-larger, ever-wider success over the past 10 years, the songs remain – in their own eco-artistic way – as small, local and sustainable as they ever did.

'Even when I just play songs on an acoustic guitar I guess they still have a singalong aspect,' Johnson says. 'If it's going to work round a campfire with 10 people singing, then usually it's going to work with 20,000 singing along.'

'To the Sea' (Island Records) is out now. Jack Johnson's British tour starts on June 26

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