

# Review: Jack Johnson chills with fans at Greek

By Jim Harrington, Oakland Tribune (Photos: Ray Chavez)

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The knock on Jack Johnson has always been that he's boring.

Yet, that's an overly simplistic, and most likely uneducated, take on this 35-year-old singer-songwriter-guitarist, usually delivered by some hipster that hasn't made a real effort to assess his music.

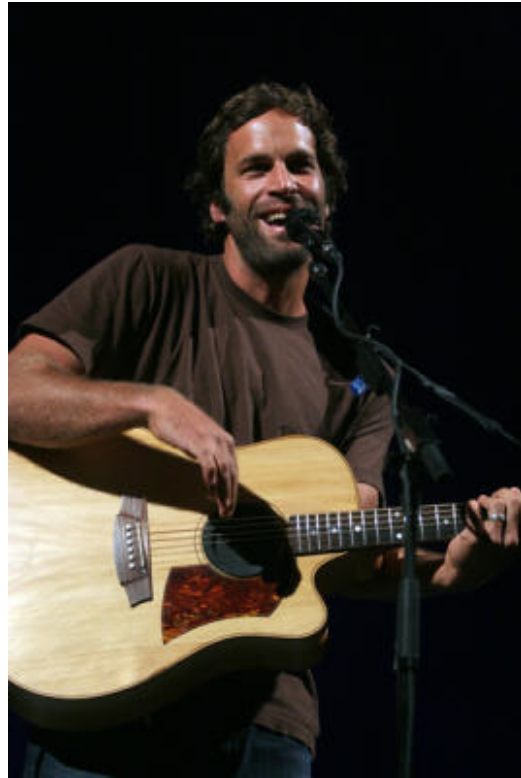
He does specialize in soothing, comforting folk-pop, the kind that can lower your blood pressure by several points and smooth the edge right off a hectic day. It's relaxing, in a similar fashion as a James Taylor song, and some dub it as sleepy.

Still, if a listener can stay awake long enough, there's plenty of nuance to be found in Johnson's deceptively simplistic tunes.

During his sold-out show on Tuesday, the first half of a two-night stand at the UC Greek Theatre in Berkeley, Johnson illustrated exactly why his records, including this year's chart-topper "To the Sea," continue to be so popular. Simply put, he's one of the finest romantic balladeers of his generation.

His love songs, which represent a goodly amount of his arsenal, are filled with snapshots of alluring, yet easily accessible imagery. He celebrates the small stuff in relationships, leaving the overwrought tales of "endless love" for the R&B crooners on the charts, and champions the kind of memories that happen -- or, at least, should happen -- everyday. A typical Johnson number isn't about uncorking the champagne and making love -- "baby, baby, baby" -- on a bed of rose petals, as much as it is about simply taking a few extra moments to appreciate the special person in your life.

Johnson, a Hawaiian native and accomplished surfer, sells those stories with an unusually appealing delivery. He'll never be the poster boy for proper diction, since he



mumbles through his lyrics (not unlike one of his heroes, Bob Dylan) and keeps his delivery on beat (quite unlike Dylan). Many of his words are buried in the band's rhythmic pattern, which further impedes your ability to follow along. Yet, somehow, the overall result tends to be that you listen more closely to what he's saying — and that the message feels like it was intended for you and you alone.

Backed by his regular three-piece band (drummer Adam Topol, bassist Merlo Podlewski and pianist Zach Gill), Johnson wasted no time in charming the Berkeley crowd as he cruised through such whimsical offerings as "If I Had Eyes" (from 2008's "Sleep Through the Static") and "Sitting, Waiting, Wishing" (from 2005's "In Between Dreams"). He certainly looked the part of the laid-back surfer dude, dressed in a simple T-shirt, jeans and flip-flop sandals, as he continued through the fan favorites "Good People" and "Breakdown." That motif was strengthened by the seaside imagery (seagulls flying, sunset over the ocean, etc.) shown on the big screen at the back of the stage. He also interacted quite casually with the crowd, drawing laughs when he singled out a fan with binoculars near the front row.



"I'm pretty sure that your only goal tonight is to trip me up," Johnson joked. "You trying to see my nose hairs?"

To understand the overall mood of the night just think of that one scene in seemingly every surfer movie when a group of guys sit around a bonfire on the beach and play songs. That's what it felt like at the Greek -- especially during "Flake," "Bubble Toes" and other selections from the 2001 debut "Brushfire Fairytales" -- only minus the bonfire, and plus 8,500 extra guests.



The fans were extremely mellow throughout the evening. Few stood, and the applause between songs probably didn't bother those living in the nearby dorms, but that doesn't mean that they weren't appreciative. You only had to look at the faces -- and see all those big goofy grins -- to know that these fans were definitely buying what Johnson was selling.