



Aloha From Hawaii: Jack Johnson Talks About His New Album

[Chuck Crisafulli](#)

10.19.2009

Over the last decade, Jack Johnson has done an extremely fine job of balancing a couple of passions in his life: riding waves and making music. The Hawaiian native grew up as a devoted surfer, receiving early instruction on the art of catching waves from his father Jeff, a pioneering big-wave surfer and local legend. When Jack was still a teenager, injuries cut short what looked like a promising pro surfing, but just a few years later, with the success of his 2001 debut album, *Brushfire Fairytales*, his music career was launched in a big way. This year, Johnson effectively pulled together his love of water and music with *To the Sea*, his fifth studio album and a showcase for some of his most thoughtful and heartfelt songwriting to date.



Those who have come to appreciate the acoustic guitar-driven, Caribbean-tinged sound of Johnson's previous work won't be disappointed with *To the Sea*. The musical vibe is still warm and sunny and the melodies on tunes such as "You and Your Heart" and "From the Clouds" flow with pop-crafted ease.

But there are also some deeper emotions at work. Johnson's father died two years ago, and, as a father himself now, Johnson found himself using the challenges and rewards of parenting as the subtext to much of his songwriting. In some ways, he considers the album as a whole to be a tribute to his father.

"The title of the album felt very natural title to use this time around," Johnson explains. "The obvious appeal is that it's a phrase that sounds nice when you say it, but I was also thinking of a body of water representing the subconscious. The sea is a place my father led me to, and it's a place I've taken my own children. You get to the shoreline and you make the decision whether to dive under the surface or not. That works on a lot of levels. On the most personal level, when my father died, we took his ashes to the sea. The last song on the record is called "Only the Ocean" and that's really a song for my father. Every time I go to the ocean now I feel like I'm visiting him."

While Johnson's songs on *To the Sea* cover any number of universal themes--love, loss, the perils of red wine overindulgence--and can connect with listeners in a variety of ways, he says that he favors a strongly personal approach to songwriting. "I like the idea that a song is sometimes a way to finish a conversation. I think Kurt Vonnegut said that he always wrote for his sister--if she would like it he'd keep it in, if not he'd take it out. I like to write for one listener. For me it's not always the same person, but the kind of songs I write work better if I'm not really thinking about the people who will eventually hear them. Instead I'm thinking of one person who I had a conversation with. And I always say that if it's a love song, it's for my wife, if it's a break up song it's about my friends' experiences."

Johnson's just completed a U.S. tour in support of *To the Sea* and is preparing to head out for dates in New Zealand and Australia. At all his shows, Johnson has been making an attempt to further the idea of 'green' touring: using bio-diesel tour buses, cutting down significantly on the trash generated by band and crew, and even setting up free water stations for concertgoers with reusable bottles. He's donating 100% of his own tour proceeds to nonprofit environmental groups (and is in fact touring in support of an album that was recorded in a solar-powered studio).

Johnson's still an avid surfer, and prefers his touring to get him to some kind of surfable coastline at least every four or five days. Getting in the water isn't simply recreational--Johnson says that's often where some of his best songwriting inspirations occur. "I think I always have to get back to a place where I'm not that aware that something I'm creating is going to be played live in some big venue. You want to feel like it's just you and the music. Quite often things do come to me when I'm out in the water. The trouble is that I can't remember too much without having a guitar on the surfboard with me. Many times my surf session has been cut short because I feel I've got to rush to shore and find a piano or a guitar before I forget something."

Asked to compare the pleasures of catching a perfect wave and performing a great set, Johnson says they are equally intense but very different in nature. "Being in the wave and being on stage are probably very similar in terms of the adrenaline rush, but for me they really feel like the opposite ends of the spectrum. The ocean is really a place I go to for solitude. It's almost like a church in my life. Music is really a social experience. I was actually a little worried when the music career started to take off that it might spoil the love of it I had, but I realize that the songs I write are really meant to be shared, whether that's with five people or with all the people that have been nice enough to buy my albums. I've gotten so many letters from people telling

me how the music has helped them through difficult times, or been a wedding song, or been part of a mixtape for the birth of a baby. That means a lot to me, and I'm flattered the music could be there for them."

