

Gig review: Jack Johnson in Auckland

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Not bad for a laid-back surfer dude whose songs supposedly all sound the same. Not bad at all.

In fact, enough to send around 10,000 Aucklanders out into a warm Thursday summer night with stupid grins on their faces, nudging each other with assertions that, yes indeed, Jack Johnson is one of those guys that's good on the ipod but great live.

Those catchy little toe-tapping ditties that do have a rather familiar cadence about them may indeed be one man's vanilla, but on this night they were a decidedly eclectic audience's flavoursome treat.

A surprisingly sizeable crowd rocked and swayed and sashayed to a superb 27-song set that wheeled out most of the old favourites as well as introducing us to a few newbies off latest album *To The Sea*.

Judging by the reception the half-dozen or so new songs received, it's an album that's not going to disappoint this American's legion of fans.

Confession time: I'm one of them. In fact I've practically worn out *Brushfire Fairytales*, *On and On* and *In Between Dreams* as my albums of choice for a roadie. There's nothing like sitting behind the wheel with the Hawaii-based surfer/singer-songwriter warbling his decidedly listenable melodies and strumming his sweet guitar to while away the miles.

But I must admit even I had my doubts about the live experience. Having tasted the sweet sound of Jack Johnson only via the digital medium hitherto, I headed to the Vector Arena prepared to be unimpressed.

Instead I was blown away. Inoffensive Johnson's music may be, with its willowy melodies, slow-strumming choruses and heartfelt lyrics, but live and in the hands of a quartet of quality it was like one of those waves that the dude likes to catch.

It started slowly, built up nicely and at its zenith had a beautiful power about it that was enough to knock your socks off.

Johnson, of course, isn't everybody's cup of java. The dedicated surfer who apparently has a liking for our breaks gives you the impression he's so laid back he's practically horizontal. And his music definitely veers towards this quality.

But to my mind there's nothing wrong with a clean, crisp guitar-driven sound that's easy on the ear and light on the intensity. And Johnson is a master of the genre.

Indeed from the opening bars of *Taylor*, followed quickly by the upbeat *Sitting, Waiting, Watching*, Johnson soon had the audience eating out of his hand.

Remarkably, after a brief "Kia ora" to his familiar Kiwi audience early on, it was 10 songs in before Mr Cool - donating all his profits from this tour to charity - broke from his concentration enough to engage the audience in some patter.

"That's a good point," he said to an audience member's interjection. "I should say something. It's weird to be up here...we just love to play music," said the man whom a night earlier entertained a select audience of his wave-riding brethren out at Piha with what must have been the backyard sing-along to end all backyard sing-alongs.

But this was an audience very much in tune with the star on this night. They'd barely noticed he hadn't given them the benefit of his considerable charm, so engaging had he been via those cruisy lyrics of his.

As he switched between acoustic and electric guitar, Johnson's voice remained crystal clear and soothingly smooth. And with so many of the high points from those first three albums of his, there was no shortage of songs for this dedicated audience to wallow in.

You and Your Heart sounded like the signature song from the new album, though the title track, the intriguing Red Wine, Mistakes, Mythology and Pictures of People Taking Pictures all went down a treat.

But scattered throughout were those familiar tracks, as comfortable as the jandals Johnson was scuffing round stage in. Fortunate Fool and Flake went down like a cold beer on a stifling summer's day, a fabulous cover of Steve Miller Band's The Joker revealed the musical versatility of the band, and Inaudible Melodies, Bubble Toes, Wasting Time, Banana Pancakes, Breakdown and Good People were peeled off with precision and plenty of feeling.

A word too on the band. Zach Gill nearly stole the show with his mix of musical brilliance and slightly dorky dancing. Switching between tickling the ivories, coaxing a sweet sound out of his melodica and performing wonders with the accordion, the gangly muso drew the biggest cheer on his dancing detours.

Adam Topol was cool restraint personified on drums and bassist Merlo Podlewski surprised the heck out of everybody when he burst into a rap number that was as delightful as it was incongruous.

Johnson tried to leave us once, but was cajoled back for four more songs in an entertaining encore that included - would you believe - a reworked version of Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer and finished with a rousing Better Together.

It was a night enjoyed by all, none more so than the enthusiastic young lady perched on her fella's shoulders in the GA area who decided not once, not twice, but three times in one song to flash her ample bosom to the star of the show.

It was that kinda night. Full of surprises, but most of them very pleasant indeed.

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