

# Summer Preview 2010

# Billboard

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# YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

**JACK JOHNSON WILL PLAY BY HIS OWN RULES TO PROMOTE 'TO THE SEA'—BUT DOES THAT MAKE HIM RETROGRADE OR A RENEGADE? BY ANN DONAHUE**

To understand Jack Johnson, it helps to go back to his college days at the University of California in Santa Barbara. He was a film student, albeit one who focused on surfing videos instead of black-and-white meditations on Icelandic ennui. But like all film students, he developed an attention for detail that mere mortals will consider excessive. For the audience, movies are a pastiche of noise and visuals, a carnival for the senses. For the filmmaker, an uneven part in the hair of an extra keeps him awake at night.

Consider this as explanation for Johnson's current obsession: the sound of a dying seagull.

"To the Sea," Johnson's next album, is due June 1 and contains a track titled "Pictures of People Taking Pictures." In the midst of recording the track using a mellotron—a combination keyboard/playback machine that was used in the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever"—Johnson hit a bum note.

"As I was playing I looked into the control room and

everyone was cracking up because it sounded so funny," he says. "It's just the broken B note. But we kind of got used to it and decided to keep it on there. That's always a hard decision because if you isolate it and listen to it, it sounds pretty awful, but in the mix it sounds good. It has a dying seagull sound."

All this focus, it should be emphasized, is over one note in one song. Despite his laconic, surfer-dude reputation—he is, in all honesty, the tannest person I've ever

interviewed, and I've interviewed Jessica Simpson—could it be that Johnson is, secretly, a perfectionist?

He pauses when asked about this. Johnson, 34, is sitting in the headquarters of Brushfire Records, located in a renovated Victorian-style house in the treey Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, and he looks out the window as he formulates his answer.

"Can I be a sloppy perfectionist?" he asks. "A big part of why this thing keeps

rolling along is because I'm able to improvise and roll with things. They don't always end up necessarily where I think they're going to, but I end up just rolling along with it."

Johnson has been on quite a roll: His mellow, melodic songs have resulted in 9.4 million albums sold since 2001 and 8.7 million single downloads, according to Nielsen SoundScan, on top of touring revenue of \$22.1 million for his 28-stop summer 2008 U.S. tour, according to Billboard Boxscore.

"To the Sea" is Johnson's fifth studio album, and there's much that will make longtime fans happy: His tunes are hooky without being cloying, his lyrics are clever and romantic, and the overall vibe is quite effective at lessening road rage. But perhaps most important, the Jack Johnson mystique remains blissfully uncommercialized. Forget grasping for synchs or branding deals—Johnson is content to promote the album through little more than good old-fashioned touring.

It helps that Johnson has his own label—Brushfire Records, distributed through Universal Republic—and retains the masters worldwide to his work. "He's never done anything to compromise who he is as an artist and as a person," Universal Republic president/CEO Monte Lipman says. "He's the type of person where I could say, 'Hey, we could put your music in Subway sandwich shops.' And he'll say, 'Well, if you go to Subway, you're there to buy a sandwich. You're not there to buy a Jack Johnson record.'"

## 'SEA' SELLS

"To the Sea" was recorded at the Mango Tree Studio in Oahu, Hawaii, and the Solar Powered Plastic Plant studio behind the Brushfire Records house. The album, in Johnson's estimation, is more immediately accessible than 2008's "Sleep Through the Static," and the first single, "You and Your Heart," has sold 148,000 digital downloads since it was released on iTunes as a teaser track in early April.

"Everybody's first record is a real cohesive thing because it's these songs you've had a lifetime to create," says Emmett Malloy, Johnson's manager and co-founder of Brushfire. "This one feels magically like that."

Johnson says he wrote the album in spurts, generally sitting on his couch with a guitar after his three kids went to bed. He was inspired by sources as diverse as his family, Greek mythology, Robert Bly's "Iron John" and Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World." "There's songs about losing loved ones and there's songs about starting to see the personalities of people who have passed in your own kids," he says. "It's seeing how life lives on through a family."

Johnson says he strives to be honest in his songwriting, but he worries about crossing the line into being too personal. He occasionally takes lines out of songs or rewrites

tures him surfing and floating in the ocean as waves swoop around him. "I was looking at the camera singing and I can't figure out when the wave's going to hit me from behind," he says. "That was fun to do. It was a physical challenge."

Other tracks include "Turn Your Love," featuring an assist from Hawaiian singer Paula Fuga, and "Red Wine, Mistakes, Mythology," which Johnson says is most directly based on "Brave New World." "There's a line in the book where [Huxley] says how much better things are and how much happier they are because of the soma—there's no need for headaches or mythology," he says.

It was Johnson's wife, Kim, who looked at this collection of songs and suggested two things: He had enough for an album, and he should tour. "My wife's pretty good at pointing that out sometimes," he says with a laugh.

**'IF IT FEELS LIKE IT'S SELLING SOMETHING, I ALWAYS FEEL LIKE I DON'T WANT MY MUSIC TO BE INVOLVED.'**

—JACK JOHNSON

them to cloak their meaning. (He assiduously avoids mentioning his children by name, in song or in interviews.) On "To the Sea," the song "My Little Girl" is an ode to his infant daughter.

"At listening parties it seems like all the dads that have daughters come up to me when they hear that song and they say, 'Aw, man, I was really feeling that,'" Johnson says. "I realized that although it feels personal to me when I'm writing it and you can tell I'm singing from a place where I'm really feeling those emotions, they're not thinking about my little girl, they're thinking about their own. And so it becomes very impersonal in that way."

Johnson directed the video for "You and Your Heart," which debuted April 20 on VH1.com and fea-

## TOURING AND TOURISM

Johnson is looking ahead at a long summer on the road, with 34 North American dates and a sprinkling of European shows amid festival stops at Eden Sessions in Cornwall, England; Glastonbury; and Denmark's Roskilde.

For years, touring was a burden for Johnson—between the promotional duties in each town and performing each night, he would have a hard time managing his anxiety. This time around, he's found a pace that agrees with him—he's doing press before he hits the road and bringing his family along so he can spend mornings with them sightseeing. "It's pretty logical. You're out on the road, you should visit the radio station, and somebody from that town's newspaper wants to





talk to you," he says. "But that was the stuff that would make me nervous the whole tour."

That isn't to say that Johnson won't step up to the plate when it becomes necessary to promote his work. Kathy Nelson was head of music at Universal Pictures when Johnson recorded the soundtrack to the 2006 animated film "Curious George." The album went on to sell 1.4 million copies, and its single "Upside Down" has sold 1.3 million downloads, making it his best-selling digital song, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

"He's majorly a perfectionist. I tried to never subject him to the craziness and just let him do his thing," Nelson says. "But he did all that and more. He went [into scoring sessions] with Hans Zimmer and Heitor Pereira, he came to the premiere and brought his whole family from Hawaii, he met [Imagine Entertainment heads] Ron Howard and Brian Grazer. He was a delight."

Another indication of how much Johnson is willing to give: When he's done touring, Johnson will donate all the profits from his trek to his foundation, the Johnson Ohana Charitable Foundation. ("Ohana" means "fam-

ily.") "It's a perpetual thing where we use the interest each year to fund groups," Johnson says. "It's real rewarding because you start to see where it was all going—here are the instruments from this school that are being bought, here you see the photographs of the garden that was funded through it."

Brushfire Records GM Josh Nicotra says that the promotion of the tour via radio will also have an environmental theme. "Instead of 'Call in to win when you hear the song,' we'll do 'Call in to win when you hear a green tip from one of the DJs,'" he says.

In an age when most artists rely on touring to earn income, Johnson's willingness to give away all his proceeds seems a touch mad. Then again, most artists don't sell albums the way Johnson does. "We wouldn't do it if we needed the money to make a living—don't worry about us," he says with a laugh. "We're not promising it's going to be like this forever, but every time a tour comes around we can decide ahead of time whether it's worth doing again."

**TV OR NOT TV**

What makes Johnson's decision to donate his touring pro-

ceeds to charity all the more remarkable is his reluctance to take advantage of another revenue stream: using his songs in commercials or on TV shows. "If it feels like it's selling something, I always feel like I don't want my music to be involved," Johnson says. "[For TV] I always try and think, 'Is it something I would watch myself?' Then that would be cool. I used to have a fear about my music being in places where somebody didn't turn it on. For a long time we were worried about it being on TV because I didn't want it all of a sudden to be in people's living rooms if they didn't want it to be there."

In an era where branding is the new buzzword, Johnson's attitude seems strikingly old-fashioned. But Brushfire Records is expanding its roster, he says, with the goal of giving other artists the same kind of control over their work. Johnson admits that Brushfire's roster is heavy on his friends: Zach Gill plays keyboards for Johnson and is signed to the label as a soloist and with his group, ALO; Brushfire artists G. Love and Matt Costa are longtime collaborators with Johnson and also contributed to the "Curious George" soundtrack. Singer/songwriter Zee Avi,



Contact high: ZIGGY MARLEY and JACK JOHNSON after performing together at the 2010 Kokua Festival in Honolulu.

from Borneo, is the first artist released on Brushfire whom Johnson didn't previously know. Her 2009 self-titled debut was a joint release with Montone Records.

"I'll help by taking bands out on tour and letting them have the opening spot and doing collaborations," says Johnson, who recently produced the ALO album "Man

of the World." "The whole reason why it started was to allow bands to have artistic and creative control over their stuff. We don't push anybody in any direction unless they want the help."

Therein lies the dichotomy of Jack Johnson: He wants to call the shots in his career and believes strongly in creative control—overt type A symp-

toms—but at his base, he's driven by the illogical impulses of creativity. The biggest challenge for him, then, is one that faces every artist: getting the sound he hears inside his head down on the album.

"You should hear how I sound up here," Johnson says, tapping his head. "It's amazing." ●●●

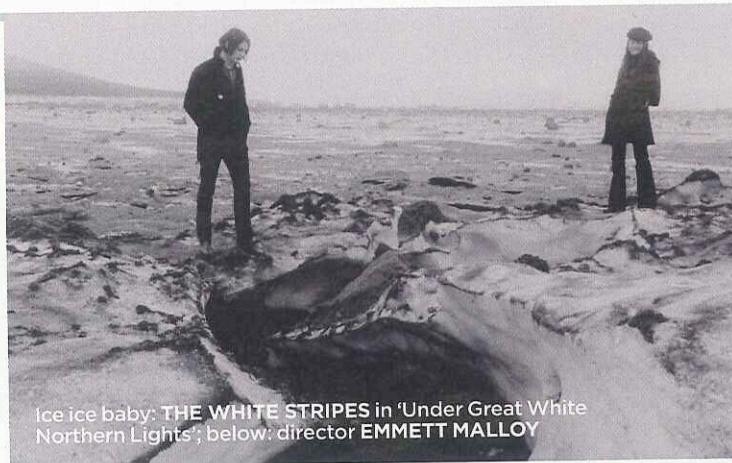
**BUT WHAT I REALLY WANT TO DO IS DIRECT . . .**

Besides serving as co-founder of Brushfire Records and Jack Johnson's manager, Emmett Malloy has a thriving career as a documentarian.

His most recent film, "The White Stripes: Under Great White Northern Lights," follows the band on its 2007 tour through every province and territory in Canada after the release of "Icky Thump."

The film traveled the global festival circuit to rapturous reviews; it made its U.S. debut during the film segment of South by Southwest in March. "Reviews always scare the shit out of me since there's usually one bad for every good," Malloy says. "But everybody has said such nice things that I'm just going to sit and bask in it."

"Great White" is now



Ice ice baby: THE WHITE STRIPES in "Under Great White Northern Lights"; below: director EMMETT MALLOY



available on DVD through Woodshed Films, Brushfire Records' sister movie production company. The movie has sold 17,000 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan, and was No. 1 for three weeks on Billboard's Top Music Video Sales chart. "Great White" is also available in a number of album iterations; fans can order a limited-edition boxed set from

Warner Bros. Records that includes the movie, a double-CD of 16 live tracks, a 7-inch on colored vinyl and a silkscreened print for \$229. The "Great White" album combinations have sold 50,000 copies, and the title peaked at No. 11 on the Billboard 200.

Malloy previously directed "Jack Johnson en Concert," which followed the singer on his last European tour, and alongside his brother Brendan co-directed "Oasis: Dig Out Your Soul in the Streets" and the

videos for Metallica's "St. Anger" and "The Unnamed Feeling."

Malloy's next film role is as music director/co-producer of "180 South: Conquerors of the Useless" about adventurer Yvon Chouinard's trip from Ventura, Calif., to Patagonia. It debuted at the Santa Barbara (Calif.) Film Festival in February, played at the Newport Beach (Va.) Film Festival in late April and is currently on a tour of colleges and one-off screenings across North America.

—AD