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"I would look out and see what [my dad] was doing on these big waves. I'd think, Holy cow, do I have to do that one day?" — JACK JOHNSON

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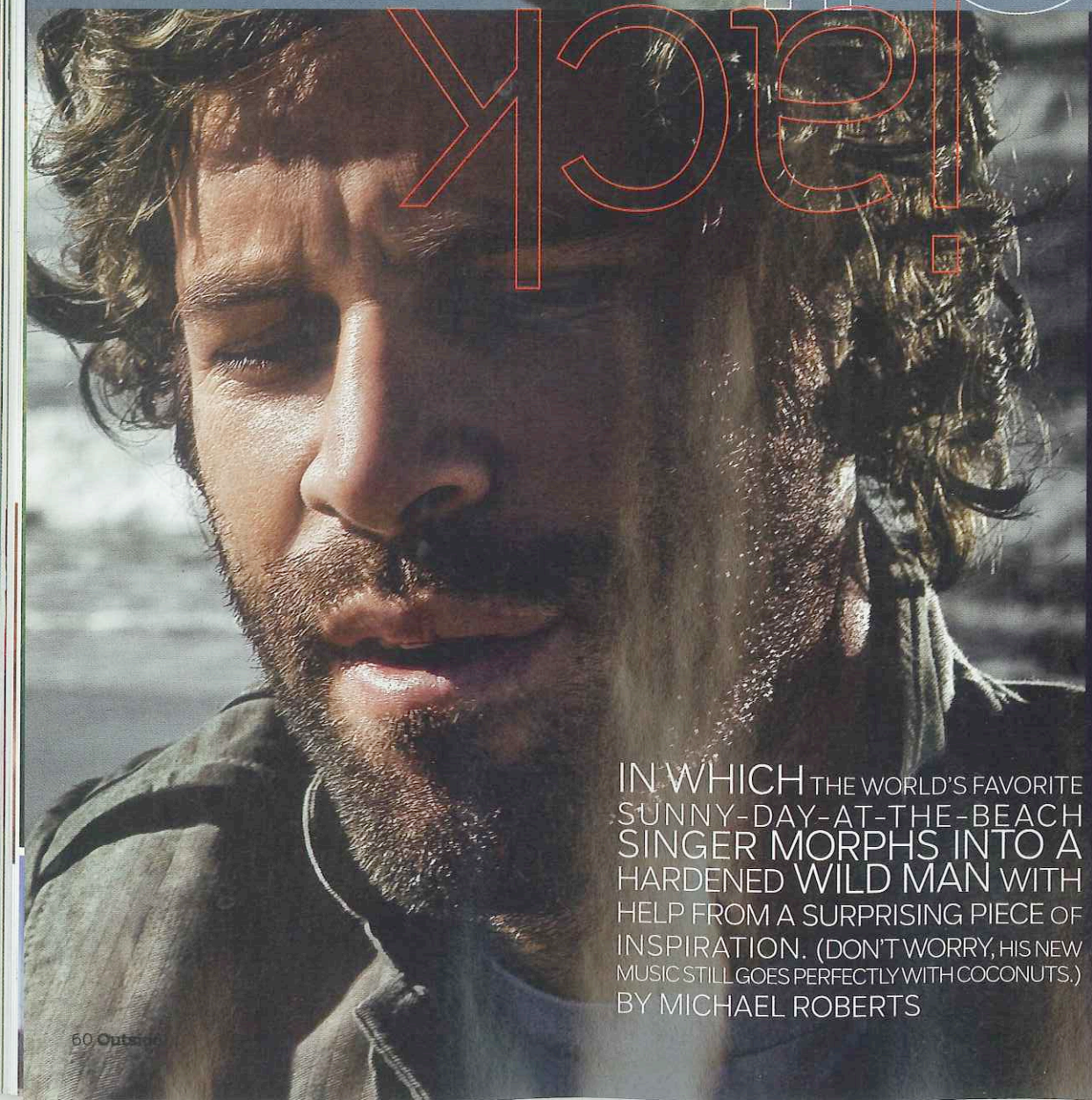
With five hydroelectric dams planned for Chile's pristine Río Baker area, **Patrick Symmes** follows 500 miles of the power lines' intended course, from threatened estancias to plunging fjords to cities buried under ash.



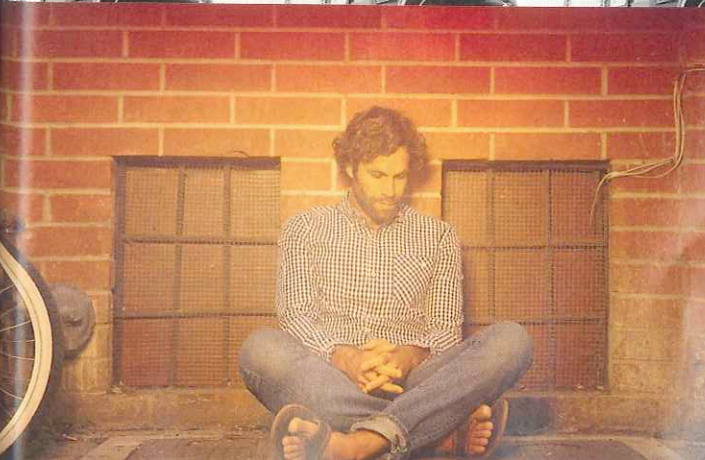
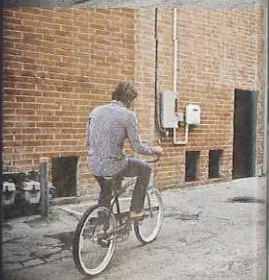
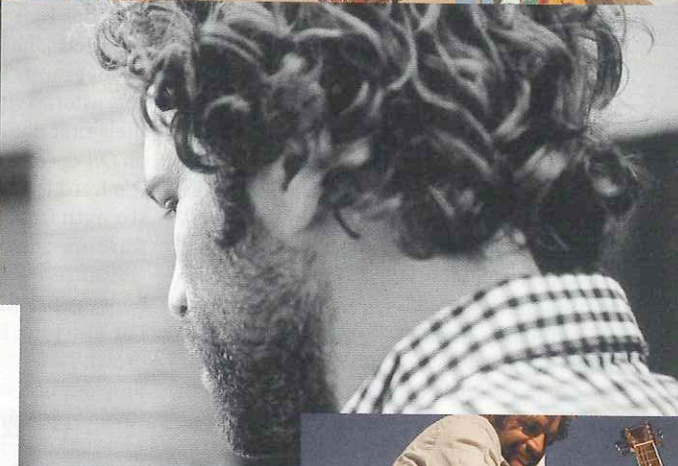
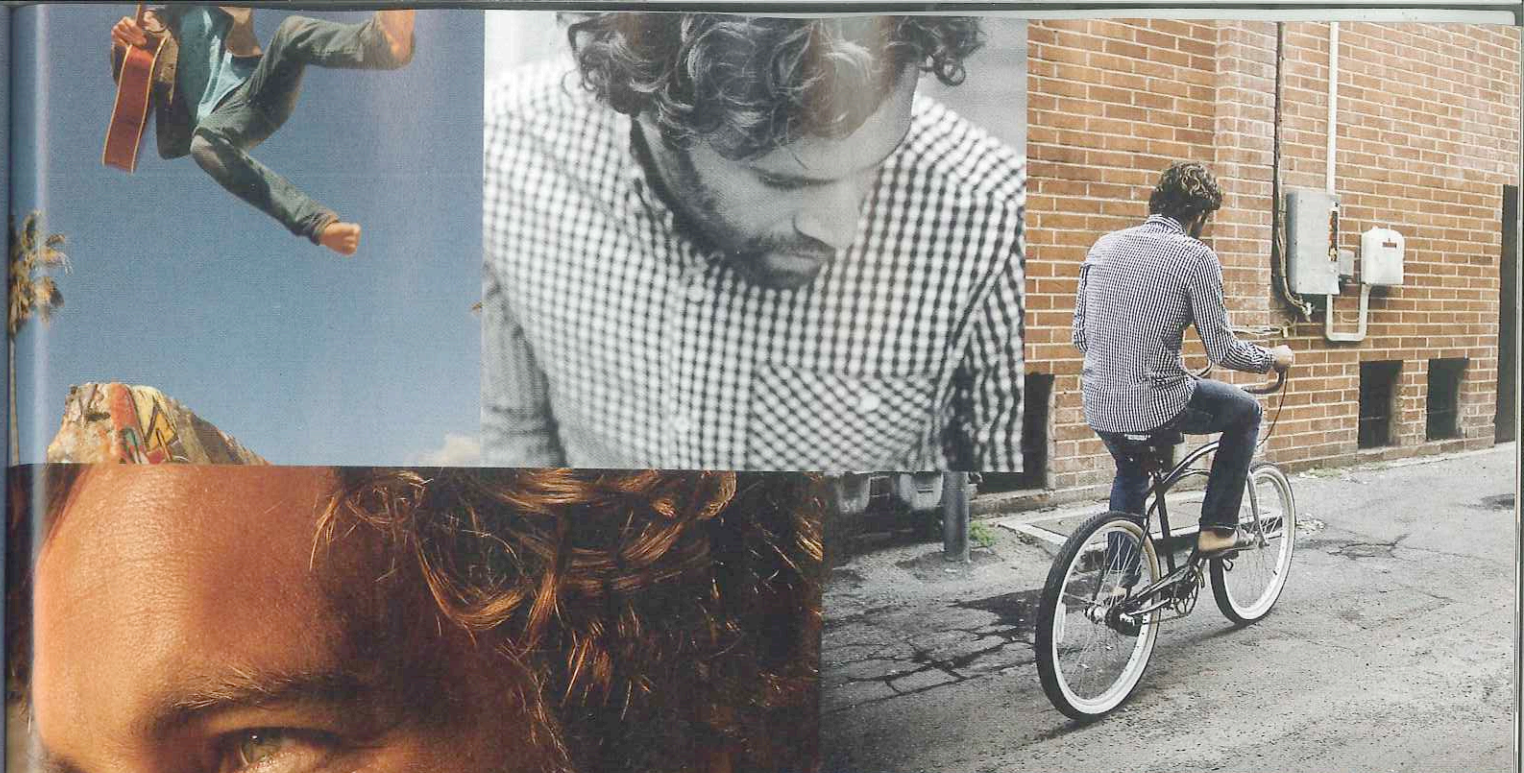
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SHERYL NIELDS

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IN WHICH THE WORLD'S FAVORITE
SUNNY-DAY-AT-THE-BEACH
SINGER MORPHS INTO A
HARDENED WILD MAN WITH
HELP FROM A SURPRISING PIECE OF
INSPIRATION. (DON'T WORRY, HIS NEW
MUSIC STILL GOES PERFECTLY WITH COCONUTS.)
BY MICHAEL ROBERTS



This is

no way to start a discussion about manhood.

We—Jack Johnson and me—are in a PT Cruiser. A sparkling, aquamarine, convertible PT Cruiser. We are driving through Burbank, California, on a cloudless 70-degree day in early March, and everyone on the road is wearing oversize shades. Still, even with the top up I can feel them staring as we wind westward toward the Ventura Freeway en route to the Los Angeles offices of Brushfire Records, Johnson's label. At a red light, two younger guys in a pickup give our ride the once-over, then grimace. If only they knew we were about to dive deep into a discussion of masculine energy.

It's Robert Bly's fault. I had been told before coming to Southern California that Johnson's new album, *To the Sea*, was heavily influenced by the poet and author, specifically Bly's 1990 bestseller, *Iron John: A Book About Men*. The book uses the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "Iron John" to explain the unfortunate state of the American man, who Bly says is indecisive, overly gentle, and sad. The "Iron John" tale, to massively simplify, is about a boy prince who frees a Wild Man (a.k.a. Iron John) caged in the royal castle and flees with him into the forest to be guided through a series of trials. As Bly sees it, modern men desperately need this kind of mentoring.

Johnson's keyboardist and longtime friend Zach Gill sent him the book last year, not long before Johnson's father died of cancer and his wife gave birth to their third child. "It was definitely good timing," he says.

No matter that Bly's heyday was 20 years ago. Back in the nineties, *Iron John's* mash-up of mythology, literature, and pop psychology helped inspire a lot of guys to reclaim their masculinity (say his fans) or simply gather in New Agey self-help groups to whine about their daddies (say critics). For several days before meeting Johnson, I dug into the book and wondered: Jack Johnson + Wild Man Power = what? He is, we have been told over the years, a very, very mellow dude. A 35-year-old Hawaiian surfer-cum-multiplatinum rock star most comfortable when he's barefoot on the beach, which is where you should be when you play his kick-back acoustic tunes. A writer of many, many love songs who takes his wife and kids on tour. A summer breeze incarnate. A soft man.

So far today, he has adhered to this image. This morning, when I walked into his band's rented rehearsal space in Burbank, the guys were drinking ... tea. Now he's driving my rented Cruiser so I can take notes—so considerate. As we zip along the freeway, he



JOHNSON IN LOS ANGELES
MARCH 2010

confides that when he first started playing live shows, he would get so freaked out he'd almost faint. He's become more comfortable after having fans tell him "they danced their first dance to 'Better Together' or put on *On & On* while giving birth to their kid." It's hard to imagine Roger Daltrey taking strength from providing the soundtrack for someone's first dance.

And yet, something about Jack Johnson feels surprisingly—how to put it?—*potent*. For starters, he looks different. Wearing brown pants, with thick, bronzed arms popping out of a snug green T-shirt, he's surfer fit, as opposed to the doughy Johnson I first met in the middle of his 2005 summer tour. Tougher, too, and definitely more hirsute, with a beard and a thicket of sunbaked hair instead of the buzz cut he'd been giving himself for the past 20 years. Listening to the new album, it's clear that *Iron John* knocked a few things loose in Johnson's head. A number of songs on *To the Sea* take symbols directly from the fable, especially the title track, which has him singing from the Wild Man's point of view ("Unlock the pain, and I'll be here waiting" ... "All your walls mean nothing to me. I know you'll come back, to set us free"). So, as we roll toward L.A., I ask Johnson: What's up with you and Iron John?

"I'm in the place where I've had a few kids and lost my own dad last summer," he answers. "It's this transitional period, where

part of me is reaching in one direction and trying to hold on to the people I'm losing, and part of me is reaching the other way to hold on to these new kids coming into the world."

He squints at the traffic ahead. "I'm definitely starting to feel more like a father."

AN HOUR LATER, we're on a couch at Brushfire HQ, which occupies an old house in West Hollywood that still feels very much like a home, with a well-used kitchen, a few offices in repurposed bedrooms, and vintage moldings. In the back is the Solar Powered Plastic Plant, a small studio where Johnson recorded parts of 2008's *Sleep Through the Static* and *To the Sea*, as well as many of the emerging artists on his label. We've been talking *Iron John* nonstop, sidetracking into Santa Claus (a misunderstood Wild Man, according to some scholars), *Brave New World* (John, the "Savage," is a Wild Man, natch), and Joseph Campbell (from whom Johnson learned that most myths repurpose the same universal symbols and themes).

Johnson tells me about a day when he was a boy playing in the front yard of his family's home on the North Shore of Oahu. He and a friend were teasing the Johnsons' dog with a chocolate-chip cookie when he "saw this motion." A massive wave swept over the bushes into the yard. He turned to run and saw his mother, who was doing laundry outside, where they kept the washing machine.

"I remember seeing her face turn to see the wave," he says. "It seemed in slow motion, all of us running, and then the water went underneath the house and around the sides." They made it into the backyard in time to watch a canoe come careening around the house and crash into a support beam.

"We stood there as the wave dissipated into the yard," he says. "For a long time I remember going to bed and thinking, I wonder if a wave will come and take our house away?"

He pauses, then adds, "That didn't have much to do with anything, but I figured I should share, because it sticks with me."

But there is a connection. In the "Iron John" myth, the Wild Man brings the prince through the forest to the edge of his magical spring. He tells the prince not to touch the water—he's not ready yet—but the boy can't resist. Though the prince fails the test, the water changes him and starts his initiation into manhood.

Growing up on the North Shore, Johnson also learned his earliest lessons from the water. His father, Jeff, was a hard-charging waterman, surfing big waves and always going off on diving, sailing, and fishing adventures. Raised in Manhattan Beach, California, Jeff started surfing at an early age and moved out of his family's home at 18 to live with an older Hawaiian surfer who had come

A NUMBER OF NEW SONGS TAKE SYMBOLS DIRECTLY FROM THE "IRON JOHN" FABLE, ESPECIALLY THE TITLE TRACK, WHICH HAS HIM SINGING FROM THE WILD MAN'S POINT OF VIEW.

over to California to hang out with Greg Noll and other big-wave pioneers. Jeff later went to UC Berkeley and married his childhood sweetheart, Patti, and they had a son (Jack's oldest brother, Trent). In his early twenties, Jeff fixed up an old boat and sailed it solo across the Pacific to Maui, and his young family flew over to meet him. The Johnsons settled on Oahu's North Shore, where Jeff worked as a contractor. Jack was son number three, born ten years after Trent and seven after Pete.

The album cover of *To the Sea* is a photo of Jeff building a 20-foot-tall wooden wave on the mudflats in Berkeley, where artists used to repurpose driftwood for all sorts of creations. He finished the wave just before he set sail for Hawaii. "It was his journey across the ocean—his hero's journey—that I started seeing in mythological proportions," says Johnson. "My whole life I've thought about it: As a young man, he hopped on a boat and sailed across the ocean. That's a pretty strong image to have of your father."

In other words, in Johnson's version of

"Iron John," his own father was his Wild Man mentor. "My dad led me to the water and said, 'Here you go. Be careful,'" Johnson says. "You have to sit there and decide when you're ready."

"I would look out and see what he was doing on these big waves," he says. "As a kid I'd think, Holy cow, do I have to do that one day? And, slowly, I would go out when it was knee-high. Then you start surfing waist-high. Next thing you know, you're surfing waves as tall as you. One day you break a leash a quarter-mile offshore in 20-foot surf and you're not scared at all. You realize you've gone through that rite of passage. You've become powerful in an intensely powerful situation."

WE'RE DRINKING BEER now at a sidewalk table, at a café a few blocks from Brushfire. On the walk here, Johnson sang a discarded verse from the song "To the Sea," causing several women walking the other direction to smile, then give sideways glances that said, *Hey, is that ...?* The words told more of the "Iron John" tale but didn't apply to his own life. Johnson doesn't pretend to understand the entire fable or even a fraction of what Bly extrapolated from it. This is part of the reason he made the song the seventh track on the album instead of the first, as he'd initially

planned. "It's the first time I've gone and retold a story that already existed," he says. "I don't know if it will work."

Critics will probably think it doesn't. But then, they're never kind to Johnson, routinely ripping him for weak lyrics and uninspired music. A *Rolling Stone* review of *Sleep Through the Static* said Johnson's attempt at more ambitious writing "just falls flat" and that the music "would benefit from being a little braver." A *New York Times* report on a 2005 show in Central Park reported that "half the show exuded a sleepy charm; the other half was much the same, only without the charm." (Says Johnson, "That was a bad show.")

Regardless, *To the Sea* will surely sell, sell. Johnson has an unbroken track record of hits, moving more than 18 million albums since his 2001 debut, *Brushfire Fairytales*. His last three albums spent time atop the iTunes bestseller chart. And while there are some new sounds on *To the Sea*—Zach Gill's various keyboard instruments get a lot of use on a couple of tunes—it's still that familiar

Jack Johnson groove. The only real risk he's taking is breaking a nine-year-old oath not to write any songs having anything to do with the ocean. "When I did my first album and everyone was like, 'It's the surfer guy!' it made me go, OK, I'm never writing about the beach, I'm never writing about the ocean, not gonna write about waves or anything like that. And then this album has the ocean, the sea, tides, waves."

He laughs. "I think I just felt like, 'I've been holding all these words back—here's everything oceanic!'"

It's a choice that makes him more ripe than ever for parody. Already, *Saturday Night Live* has done two versions of "The Mellow Show with Jack Johnson," with Andy Samberg playing Johnson as a smiling, guitar-strumming stoner on a beach with a pet gecko who "can both roll and smoke doobies" and a footwear brand called J.J. Casuals—shoes that look like bare feet.

When I bring up the *SNL* skits, Johnson smiles and says he's actually talked to Samberg about doing a digital short in which they'd pull off a "laid-back style" bank robbery. (They were never able to work out the production logistics.) As Johnson sees it, having an established projection of himself out there helps him protect his privacy. "I feel really lucky I don't live in L.A.," he says. From Hawaii, he can hide out and "watch that caricature build." And sometimes, he admits, it can be easy to just step into that role when you're in front of cameras or on a stage.

The thing is, Johnson no longer fits the part. One phase of manhood that "Iron John" doesn't address is what happens after your Wild Man goes away. When Jeff Johnson died last August, hundreds of North Shore surfers paid tribute to him with a traditional paddle-out. In online forums, old friends wrote moving stories about adventuring with the "ultimate waterman." His bandmates, Gill says, didn't expect they'd be recording new music so soon after Jeff died, but in November Johnson called them over to his Mango Tree Studio in Hawaii. "I think working on the album helped him process," says Gill.

"There are those marks in people's lives: losing your virginity, getting married, having children," Gill adds. "The final thing is when your parents are gone. It's like, 'All right, now it's you. What are you gonna show us? What are you gonna do?'"

Jack Johnson has his answer. He's going to grow his hair out. He's going to sing songs about the ocean. He's going to lead his children to the water's edge.

He's going to be a Wild Man. ○

SENIOR EXECUTIVE EDITOR MICHAEL ROBERTS WANTS TO GROW A WILD-MAN BEARD, BUT HIS WIFE SAYS NO.