

MUSICIAN



Ermet Malloy

JACK JOHNSON

The master of laid-back acoustic folk-pop rides the waves of success

By Russell Hall

SOME OF JACK JOHNSON'S BEST IDEAS FOR SONGS COME when he's alone—on a surfboard. "I learned to play guitar to sit on the front porch and have sing-alongs," he says. "Ultimately songs are there to share—it's a social thing. But surfing is an escape for me, a way to have solitude and reflect on things. I do more writing in the ocean than people probably realize."

Johnson—who has spent nearly his whole life in Oahu, Hawaii—appeared destined for a pro career riding the waves until a serious surfing accident sent him in other directions. After graduating from college with a degree in cinematography, he co-produced a well-received surfing documentary that featured several of his original songs. Subsequently a four-track demo caught the attention of Ben Harper producer J.P. Plunier, who manned the boards for Johnson's 2001 debut album, *Brushfire Fairytales*.

The record established Johnson as a master of sunny, laid-back acoustic folk-pop. It also became a surprise hit, reaching platinum status and enabling the singer-guitarist to build his own studio, Mango Tree. In the past decade, Johnson has sold nearly 20 million albums. "I never imagined that initial wave would take things this far," he says. "It's been wild—nerve-wracking at times, but exciting and fun. We're still sort of riding it."

Johnson's latest project, *From Here to Now to You*, marks a return to his trademark mellow surf-folk sound. "The term 'easy listening' can have a cheesy connotation," he admits, "but we've always wanted to make our music easy on the ears. We're never going for that edgy thing where you're breaking boundaries. We've always felt part of a tradition, like folk barbecue or something." From his home in Oahu, Johnson spoke about the new album and why surfing remains a seminal component of his music.



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How did you approach the album?

The beginning of a record is always a bit blurry for me. Once the previous record is turned in, I start slowly writing songs again. Sometimes I don't write a song for a month or two. Other times I'll write three in a week. Eventually I collect them. My wife always helps. We sit around and grab them from various journals, from little recordings made on my phone, or from four tracks. Then we look at the list and decide if there's enough there for an album. Once I'm at that point, I can start to hear the album take shape.

Did one song point the way?

"I Got You," the opening track. Once I have a song that feels good every time I sing it, that's when I feel I have something to base an album around. This material felt pretty intimate, like it didn't need a lot of production. It felt like we should keep it pretty stripped down. Often the last venues I played in can shape the sonic template for the songs I'm working on. I had been doing a lot of acoustic shows in small theaters in Hawaii the year before, and I probably had those venues in mind as I started working on these songs. We've actually decided that's probably the best way to present them, in theaters.

'Surfing gives me the other side of music, the solitary side.'

Did the songs change in the studio?

Most sound similar to the demos I make, just with better execution. I'll often make a four-track version where I'll play the drums and the bassline. Once the band gets together, the bass player will sometimes play the same part I played on the demo. Other times he'll come up with his own thing—something similar, but with a better feel. And of course the drummer plays the drums better than I do.

Any fun moments?

"Shot Reverse Shot." My kids give me lots of good lyric ideas. One day my son—5 or 6 at the time—said, "Dad, can I get one of those edible watches?" "What do you mean?" "You know, the kind that just has numbers, not hands." "Oh, digital watches." "Yeah, an edible digital watch." I started writing around that phrase—stream of consciousness writing. I had also just read the book

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, on which the film *Blade Runner* was based. One of the major themes of the book is empathy, how the androids can't experience empathy. The song has references to the book and some references to film technique. It was a fun song to write.

Recall your early songwriting efforts?

In high school I was playing rhythm guitar in a punk-rock band. The bass player was writing songs, which I found intriguing. I made some minor attempts, but I wasn't sharing them with anyone. Then I went to college and the first week met this girl and fell head over heels. She had great taste in music and was well read. I would bounce songs off her. I figured if she was digging on these songs, maybe they were worth sharing. Now she's my wife. She's always been a great sounding board, a co-writer in certain ways. She gives me a lot of ideas, and a lot of my songs are about her. Meeting my wife was the beginning of songwriting for me.

How did you learn guitar?

When I was 14, I picked up an acoustic guitar and started learning chords. My dad's friend showed me how to play Cat Stevens songs, while my friend showed me how to play punk-rock songs by Minor Threat. Sometimes I would plug in and really crank up, and other days I'd sit on the front porch and strum Jimmy Buffett and Cat Stevens songs on an acoustic.

So you were a hard rock fan?

I even liked thrash metal—early Metallica records. I got a chance to meet Kirk Hammett. He's a musician who has a surfing hobby, whereas I'm a surfer with a music hobby. He was actually a fan of my surf movies. It blew my mind that he knew about these things I had done, because I had spent my teen years studying tablature books, learning how to do hammer-ons and Kirk Hammett guitar solos. I went toward the acoustic stuff as I started songwriting. But as a teenager I practiced scales and sat around trying to get a good lead tone.

And Hendrix had a profound impact.

Especially Hendrix. People who cite him as an influence tend to be ripping soloists, but what I loved were all the little hammer-ons and slides he does to connect his chords. They're beautiful embellishments that give his music a liquid quality. He blends the chords together in ways where you can't detect the end of one chord and the beginning of another.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Most of the steel-string acoustic guitars Johnson plays on the new album were made by Cole Clark in Australia. "Whenever they had something new they would bring it to me and then come to the shows to see how it sounded live," says Johnson. "I would try out a new guitar that night and then keep it for the rest of the tour."

Johnson also played a classical guitar made by Pepe Romero Jr., son of the legendary Spanish flamenco guitarist. "Pepe's a surfer—he lives in San Diego—and we met through mutual friends," says Johnson. "The new record has more classical guitar than I've ever played—it's probably on half the album. I also played a couple of vintage Gibson acoustics, a J-45 and a Dove. Both have a great sound."

Only one song—"Radiate"—features electric guitar, and Johnson played a hollow-body Cole Clark. Johnson uses Fender Twins for amplification, with minimal effects. "I keep it pretty simple," he says. Sometimes I'll kick



on a flange—a Dunlop Uni-Vibe, to get sort of a Hendrix-y sound. And sometimes I'll use a green [Ibanez TS9] Tube Screamer to get a bit of overdrive. I'll use an octave pedal for a solo—something to give it a little beef. Mostly I run everything through the Fender Twin and try to get the slightest bit of overdrive, so that when I dig in—maybe on some reggae or skank—it doesn't bite the ears too much with that natural distortion that tubes give you."

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Onstage in Roskilde, Denmark, 2010

Rebel Media/Vernage

'There's no one from a record label reminding me that these songs will eventually be for sale'

How important is surfing?

Surfing gives me the other side of music, the solitary side. I often write when I'm surfing—not with pen and paper, but it gives me a chance to think and process things that are happening in my life. I have three kids, and that's a nonstop responsibility. If I have an hour available to surf, that's time for reflection. Often I'll come in from the ocean with a new idea for a song.

Ever feel the pull of New York or L.A.?

No, but I've felt the push. *[laughs]* I always felt like an outsider in those places—not in any extreme way. As the success of *Brushfire Fairytales* grew, I had the means to turn a garage in Hawaii into

a recording studio. That's been really nice. There's no one from a record label reminding me that these songs will eventually be for sale. We get to focus on making something we love.

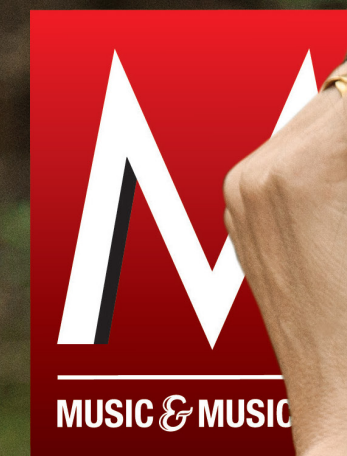
What will you be doing in five years?

I don't know. In the past I've said I didn't think I would still be doing this by this point. I always thought touring might get in the way of raising a family, but we've found our own way to make the tours into a family road trip. We get to travel the world and teach the kids geography by actually going to these places. By the end of every touring cycle I think I'm done. And then after a year off, I get an itchy feeling to do it all again.

MEANT TO B-FLAT

Much of *From Here to Now to You* was recorded with Jack Johnson's acoustic guitar tuned to open B-flat. The prevalence of the alternate tuning can be ascribed to a bit of serendipity. "It happened by accident," Johnson explains. "My kid knocked over my guitar and broke off one of the tuning pegs, which caused the string to de-tune. I didn't fix the peg—instead I just tuned the whole guitar around that string. When I put the tuner up to it, I discovered it was B-flat. It's funny, because a few years ago I got to go backstage after a Neil Young show and hang out with him and talk about music. Neil played this song that was tuned very low, and afterward he said he had just read an article that said the universe is resonating in B-flat. So breaking that tuning peg turned out to be a happy accident. For some of the songs I used a capo and went up to B or C, but I leave that guitar in B-flat."

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