

## SPOTLIGHT



# THE JOHN BUTLER TRIO

An Australian favorite shrugs off labels and limits

Grant Gerathy, John Butler, Byron Luiters

Kane Hibbard

FOR MORE THAN 15 YEARS, Australian roots-rockers the John Butler Trio have consistently reinvented their blend of acoustic folk and alternative rock. Defying definition has allowed the band to sidestep preconceived notions and stay sonically adventurous. "You don't want to be limited to a certain type of music," says frontman and guitarist John Butler. "You want to do what's tasteful. You want to have great spirit and integrity—but not get too clever."

For the band's sixth studio album, *Flesh and Blood*, Butler credits his bandmates, bassist Byron Luiters and drummer Grant Gerathy, for turning a basic framework into transcendent art. "It's like throwing paint at the canvas, with all these grooves and ideas," he says. "There were so many colors you could choose from." Embracing the band's musical eccentricity, Butler believes genre distinctions are meaningless. "If we wanted

to rock out, we did," he says. "If we wanted tender, fingerpicking folk songs, we'd play those. Sometimes we wanted it to sound like Led Zeppelin on acid."

Butler's humble beginnings as a busker on the streets of Western Australia has helped him balance career ambitions with an appreciation for the simpler things in life. "In the past I'd always been looking over the shoulder of tomorrow," he says. "I was very motivated and goal-oriented. But I've learned to relax. What's most important to me are my wife and two kids."

Family has long served as a source of inspiration for Butler, who was born in Southern California but moved to Australia at an early age. When he was 16, his grandmother gave him his grandfather's Dobro guitar, which became like a trusted confidant. "It was something you could tell your secrets to," he says. "This hobby

was actually like keeping a diary." Now an ambassador of Australia's Maton Guitars, Butler relishes his status as a versatile multi-instrumentalist. His favorite: a custom-designed Maton ECJ85 Jumbo acoustic guitar. "It's been a workhorse for me," he says.

After years of touring, Butler, 39, has learned to deliver what an audience wants. "I could play a lot of rarities, but I usually stick to seven or eight songs from the new album," he says. "When you go to hear Stevie Wonder, you want to hear 'Superstition,' or if it's Rage Against the Machine, you want to hear 'Bullet in the Head.'"

By taking a broader view of his fan base, Butler has endured as the music industry cycled through changes in fashion and style. "We've been lucky to have some longevity," he says. "We've had some people hop on board, but we're still there in the underground."

—Blake Boldt

