

CURIOUS

JACK

SINGER/SONGWRITER
JACK JOHNSON ON HIS
HAWAIIAN ROOTS, HIS PASSION
FOR THE ENVIRONMENT,
AND HIS LATEST
MONKEY BUSINESS.

BY HILLARY HAUSER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUCA TROVATO

ack johnson defines surfer cool.

His music is a revelation; his lyrics often express the better side of human nature—valuing family, staying true to oneself, and appreciation for the earth. His songwriting began in the poetic scribbles he made as a child on the wall of his room, which are still there at the family's house in Hawaii, left intact by his mother, Patti. Jack's father, Jeff, is a North Shore big-wave surfing pioneer. Throughout his career, Jack's poetry has become more complex and thought-provoking, his audience larger and larger. The musician, filmmaker, and environmental advocate now plays not only sold-out concerts but also fund-raisers for the nonprofit organization Heal the Ocean. Its executive director, Hillary Hauser, a longtime Johnson family friend, recently talked with Jack at a beachfront house in Santa Barbara about his commitment to the environment and his most recent endeavor—writing the lyrics for the new film *Curious George*.

Hillary Hauser: Describe your introduction to the ocean—what do you remember? What turned you on?

Jack Johnson: As a kid I don't remember ever really having anything but a complete joy out in the ocean and going hiking and camping; we would do a lot of camping trips with my dad, out underneath the stars. He'd tell us about constellations and about sailing. We'd learn about surfing, kayaking, canoeing, snorkeling, spear-fishing, pole-fishing—pretty much anything in the water.

It was the same thinking that I feel now with my kids. Whether it's on a camping trip or in the water, as long as you can let them be out there, it's good not to limit that time. Most people say that they were never beaten over the head with all the problems of the environment when they were a kid. I read an article that said environmental education in elementary schools should be nothing more than getting them out in gardens, getting them on field trips to places that really inspire them in nature, because if you want to make true environmentalists, they need to have a profound love for nature and not worry about the problems. You can actually scare them away from the environmental world because it seems like it's all too overwhelming, and too big of a problem that they can't do anything about.

HH: Your first album was *Brushfire Fairytales*, but what was your first song that really had to do with the environment?

JJ: "F Stop Blues," on the first record, was inspired by a surfing trip to Indonesia. In college in Santa Barbara, I still got on the beach quite a bit and surfed, but I would never go to the beach for hours and hours a day anymore. I'd go for a surf, then get back to class. When I started making surf films, we went to Indonesia to make *September Sessions*, our second movie. On those boat trips you're in the water all day. I mean, you are either on the boat or on the beach or surfing—no fax machines, no cell phones, there's no TV or anything like that. You have so much time to really focus on the patterns of nature. You know, watching the swell all day, meditating—you get on such a deep groove. And you start to see the bigger patterns, the beginning of a swell, the peak of it in the middle of the day and how the tides are affecting it, and then you see a wind come in and affect the pattern on the face of the wave. You watch it all day and play guitar on the boat. Having time to sit there and really notice these kinds of cosmic things I wrote "F Stop Blues."

HH: There has been an evolution in your art about supporting the environment, both through your music and in helping Heal the Ocean—you have helped us so hugely, it is not even funny. More and more environmental consciousness has come into your work.

JJ: I used to live a pretty simple life. I used to surf and make surf films and my ecological footprint wasn't very big. And then I started touring, playing little clubs, and I started drawing bigger and bigger crowds. One day I looked at our tour and I thought to myself, when you count the opening band and our bus, the crew bus, and production, we have four semi trucks full of lighting equipment, sound equipment, instruments and things. And in some cases there are 10,000, 20,000 people driving cars to this event. The ecological footprint is much bigger.

In the songs I feel like there's a positive message, but my wife and I started brainstorming about what we could do to send out a message to other musicians or kids coming to the show that I'm making an effort to not follow the beaten path. I mean, I was basically doing what every other musician does. So we tried to make changes—running the buses on biodiesel, making our products on recycled paper as much as we could, and using organic cotton for the T-shirts.

HH: What do you think are the biggest issues facing the environment? What is the biggest threat to the ocean?

JJ: If you look at the whole earth as one organism, it seems like right now it's oil. Depending so much on one resource that is not renewable seems to be the biggest problem. That ties in with everything, with the ocean and air pollution. Renewable energy seems like the obvious answer and everybody talks about it, but the biggest issue is how to make it. The key is to not focus on the word *environment* so much or even "Save the planet." If you say "Save the planet" to some people, it really bugs them, because they think you're not talking about human problems. That's the distinction some people make; they consider nature and humans two separate things.

HH: Tell me about open space and what you're doing at Pupukea.

JJ: This is one of the first times I've gotten involved with Pupukea Paumalu, a project basically to raise money to turn an area into public land behind the North Shore. It's really an amazing spot, especially when you go out on a canoe paddle or when you're out surfing and you look back at it. You realize how much open land is there, and it really is one of the most magical places on the earth because of the waves. Anybody who has come in December and January and watched Pipeline or Sunset or Waimea knows it is a natural wonder. So we've been working to raise money to turn this whole area into a public land trust with areas for camping, a lot of hiking trails—as opposed to a mass development, which would have quite an impact ecologically. For example, widening all the roads up to the North Shore. (Johnson, continued on page 132)

(Johnson, continued from page 114)

HH: How about recycling?

JJ: Recycling is an important issue. In Hawaii we go around to the schools and sing to the kids. We have a song, "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." It's based off an old *Schoolhouse Rock* song, "Three is the Magic Number," and I give an example of how you can reduce, reuse, and recycle.

HH: What are the lyrics?

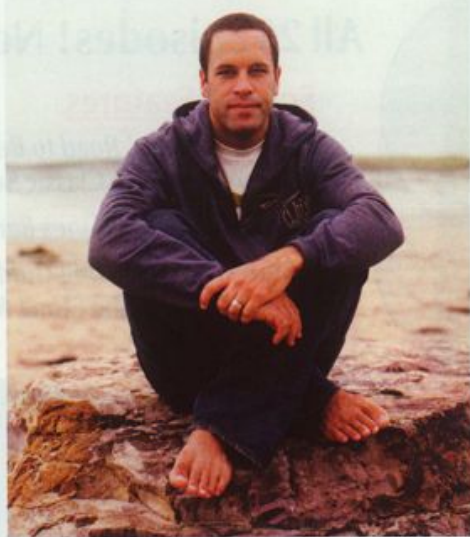
JJ: If you're going to the market
to buy some juice,
Bring your own bags and you learn to
reduce your waste.
We've got to reduce our waste.
And if your brother or your sister's got
some cool clothes,
You could try them on before you buy
some more of those—reuse.
We've got to learn to reuse.
And if the first two R's don't work out,
And if you've got to make some trash,
don't throw it out—recycle.
We've got to learn to recycle.

It makes it fun, that's the whole deal. And I think it shows the kids that can do something to help in their own community, that they can actually make a difference. Instead of talking about the really big issues, you know, global warming and things, this is something you can introduce that seems pretty fun. You don't talk about pollution, you say this helps keep the sky nice and blue, and this helps keep the trees alive. The recyclables go in bins in the school parking lots, and the money raised comes back into their school. They're helping their school get computers and things, so it really empowers the kids.

HH: You're helping nonprofit groups like *Heal the Ocean*, and through *1% For the Planet*. Which issues do you think are the most important in terms of the ocean?

JJ: I think the enemy becomes the ally. People talk about the good old days, thinking that it was better in the past. And then you have futurism, which is thinking that things will get better and talking about how much better things would be if this or that. Neither of those, archaism or futurism, is living in the moment. A lot of people talk about how it would have been nice to have been around before the Industrial Revolution when the whole planet was clean. But the paradox is that the technology causing all this trouble is probably the only chance now to make things better.

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HH: Yes, for example, *Heal the Ocean* is working to develop modern technology to turn sewage into irrigation water. Tell me, do you consider yourself an environmentalist?

JJ: I put on concerts to raise money to donate to *Heal the Ocean*, and everybody is thanking me all the time, and I'm not trying to be modest when I have to say don't thank me, thank *Heal the Ocean*. I'm playing music and drawing attention to the people that are actually doing the work. Even with my own *Kokua Hawaii* Foundation, my wife is the one who does all the hard work. I get to go play music for the kids, and I get to put on a festival that raises the money, but she and her friends are the ones meeting and working. I'm surfing or writing music. Somebody has got to write the music that inspires the kids. That's been a good partnership for my wife and I. She gets so many things done and she motivates me, and I'm able to do the shows to raise the money to keep it all rolling.

HH: *Curious George* is your latest film project—tell me about the experience.

JJ: It was fun to write the lyrics, because I identify with the monkey. He is like a little nature's child. He runs around the jungle and he comes to the big city and he's so curi-

ous about it all. I grew up in Hawaii, and it wasn't like we were wearing loincloths and living in shacks or anything, but Santa Barbara felt like a big city to me when I got [to UCSB], coming from Haleiwa. Anytime I go to L.A. or New York, it's so wondrous to see all the craziness.

I identified with his excitement and being overwhelmed. The lyrics for one of the main songs are:

*I want to be where talk of the town
is about last night when the sun went
down,
And the trees all dance and the warm
wind blows in the same old sound,
And the water below gives a gift to the
sky and the clouds give back every time
they cry,
And the grass grows green
down beneath my toes
And if the sun comes out
I'll paint a picture all about the colors
I've been dreaming of,
The hours don't seem enough
to put it all together.
Well maybe it's as strange as it seems.
This kind of thing, I was trying to figure
out everything.*

You can't always figure things out, but sometimes it's nice when things are unexplainable. Whether it's scientific or religious or anything, sometimes there doesn't need to be an answer. That's what's beautiful about things, it's the unknown, letting it be the unknown. George never stops being curious about things, and there is never really a complete answer. That's one of the main themes in the song: Never stop letting yourself be curious.

There's another song in the film that says:
*Who's to say what's impossible?
They forgot that this world keeps spinning,
And with each new day I can feel
a change in everything,
And as the surface breaks, reflections fade,
But in some ways they remain the same,
And as my mind begins to spread its
wings, there's no stopping curiosity.
I want to turn the whole thing
upside down.
We'll find the things they say
can't be found.
We'll sing and dance to
Mother Nature's song.
I'll share this love I find with everyone.*

That's about the wonder of life and it's a pretty simple theme song, I guess. **D**

