

*Alaska*

# BEYOND »

MAGAZINE OCTOBER 2017

## **ALOHA SPIRIT**

Alaska celebrates 10 years  
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## **ONLY IN DUBAI**

A city that thrives  
on reinventing itself

**PAGE 110**

*Hawai'i  
musician inspires  
action around  
the planet*

**PAGE 78**

# JACK

## JOHNSON

# JACK JOHNSON



*Jack Johnson performed for hometown fans at the Waikiki Shell in August.*

# SON

## HAWAII MUSICIAN PUTS HIS GENEROUS SPIRIT INTO ACTION

BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER



ZAC JONES

**IT'S** a balmy evening on O'ahu. String lights bob gently in the breeze. Diamond Head basks in the sunset, looking like it's been wrapped in emerald velvet. My friend and I are at the Waikiki Shell for a Jack Johnson concert, headed toward great seats and cold beer. But what's my friend most interested in? She's peering into a trash can. Jack Johnson has this effect on people.

We just passed a zero-waste station—part of Johnson's green-tour efforts. Cans were labeled for recycling and composting, and there was even a bin with a pig symbol, indicating that food scraps in this can would be sent off to feed animals. So that trash can

my friend is inspecting? No trash in it!

Johnson is one of O'ahu's most famous sons, a musician who is equally respected for his environmental advocacy. Since 2001, the singer-songwriter has released seven studio and two live albums, selling more than 25 million copies. If you're a fan, you've memorized many of Johnson's lyrics and possibly even his guitar tabs. If you're not as familiar with his work, you'll still recognize the hits, including *Upside Down*. His music has been called the "perfect soundtrack to a summer night." But don't mistake that for fluff; he takes on weighty subjects in his songs, too, whether it's war in Iraq or a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Johnson says he once read a review of his music that dismissed it as “basically just barbecue music.” He smiles. “That’s not a dis to me; that’s amazing. If everyone is putting on my music at the barbecue, that’s a compliment.”

Johnson grew up on O’ahu’s North Shore, in a surf-centric family and community. Up on the North Shore, plans revolve around the swell, and live music means slack-key guitar in the yard at a baby *lū’au* (a first-birthday celebration).

“No stage, no fancy lights, anyone could jump up and play,” says Johnson, who learned guitar at age 14. “There was no line between the audience and the band. That’s how I learned to play: passing around the guitar, people being patient, everyone stalling until I got my fingers on the right chord.”

By now, Johnson’s figured out all the right chords, and my friend and I thoroughly enjoy the show, which is a benefit for his Kōkua Hawai’i Foundation. Families picnic on the lawn, and Johnson has everyone—from the tiniest *keiki* (children) on up—dancing to hits such as *Good People* and *Flake*.

Between, he weaves in stories about how his songs came to be. He generously shares the spotlight with his bandmates—bassist Merlo Podlewski, drummer Adam Topol and pianist Zach Gill—as well as guest performers including the amazing Paula Fuga, who duets with Johnson on her song *Country Road*. Johnson may be center stage, but he’s wearing a simple “No Panic, Go Organic” MA’O Farms logo T-shirt. *Rolling Stone* didn’t call him the most laid-back rock star in history without reason.



Every once in a while, the music at Mango Tree Studio moves outside to capture the sounds of the island. Below is the cover of Johnson’s new release, “All the Light Above It Too.”



with light glinting off the surface. It was recorded at Johnson’s O’ahu-based Mango Tree Studio, and Johnson handled much of the instrumentation himself.

“I always call it four-tracking,” he explains, referring to a four-track tape recorder he had when he was a kid. He normally writes the songs and then does sketches as demos, playing the bass and drums to assemble a rough draft before working with his band. This time, however, he brought in a producer friend; he wanted the quality of the recording on the sketches to be high

## THAT INTANGIBLE SOUND

In September, Johnson released his latest album, “All the Light Above It Too.” It has Johnson leading listeners through a range of moods, from a buoyant *Big Sur*, to a country-tinged *One Moon*, a sly *Gather*, and a jab at greed in *My Mind Is for Sale*. Johnson is a lifelong surfer who can keep up with Kelly Slater, and all that time out in the ocean seeps into his music. This album has a liquid, bobbing quality, calling to mind an afternoon on the water



Born and raised on O’ahu’s North Shore, Johnson is an avid surfer.

enough that he could possibly use them for an album.

“I’ve always had this feeling, and I’ve seen this in music documentaries with other people, too: A lot of times you are trying to figure out the song, and there’s this one take where you finally know it well enough that you get it, and then you play it through another time and it just loses a certain spirit. With this album, I wanted to capture that spirit of newness to a song, when there is still potential in it. It’s still a little raw; there’s room to grow with it.”

Songwriting often comes easily for him—the classic *Banana Pancakes*, for example, was a quick little ditty for his wife—but penning a new song can also take him weeks or months. “The ones I write in five minutes are sometimes the ones that resonate most with people,” he says. “The ones I think are really something, well, they will wind up as the deeper cuts.”

Yet, in every town he visits, he’ll come across someone who pulls him aside and tells him how a particular song rescued them, pulled them out of a riptide of emotion during a rough time. “That is so flattering to me,” he says. He understands. Music has been there for him in hard times, too. “Some songs



*Kim Johnson shares in directing the couple’s Kōkua Hawai‘i Foundation, including its support of ‘ĀINA, a school garden program, and Plastic Free Hawai‘i, which hosts regular beach cleanups.*



resonate broadly with a lot of people and some resonate deeply with only a few people—and both are worth putting out,” he says.

Recording in Mango Tree Studio, a converted two-car garage, helps imbue his music with a sense of time and space. “The last record, there was a cricket living in the attic, and we couldn’t get rid of it,” he says. “I know where to listen for it on the album—

*Among Johnson’s favorite concert venues is The Gorge in Washington state.*



it's that intangible quality captured. My dad used to come in to the studio and be like, "You can't hear anything in here. I'd rather hear the songs from the porch, with the ocean in the background." Johnson sees his point. Every now and then, the microphones get carted outside to try a few recordings outdoors, capturing that rustling of the leaves and the sighs of the island.

## FAMILY AND BEYOND

When Johnson sat down with us before the concert, he'd just returned to O'ahu after spending the summer touring, and as always, a loyal, longtime crew had accompanied him. "My sound guy, most shows he's like, 'That was amazing,' but he has the total right to come up and say, 'Man, you guys sucked it tonight,'" Johnson says. "And I'll laugh because, he knows. He's been my sound guy since 2001. He's been to every show."

Johnson especially enjoys touring the West Coast's chain of venues that include Red Rocks in Colorado, The Gorge in Washington state, the Santa Barbara Bowl in California, and The Greek Theatre in Los Angeles. "The venues themselves are magical and have a lot of history," he says. He particularly likes concerts close to the coast, in case a good swell comes a-callin'.

He says he wouldn't tour if he didn't love it, but admits sometimes it's hard. "You can start to question, 'What am I doing here?' if you overthink it. All those eyes, looking toward you.

"That's the challenge. I don't feel that I was born to be an entertainer," he says. "It's something that I found my way into doing. I love recording and writing, and I do love performing, but I didn't dream of being an entertainer as a kid. I'm not up there jumping around and doing the splits. I tend to close my eyes and stand in one spot."

Well, not exactly one spot. He's a terrific live act who commands an audience without ever doing a split. He sells out the Hollywood Bowl, after all, and that's a 17,000-seat venue.

Johnson brings his three children and wife on tour with him, turning it into a family road trip. He and his wife, Kim, have been together since their freshman year of college; she's the subject of many love songs, as well as his co-manager and lead of their environmental and philanthropic efforts. The couple founded the Kōkua Hawai'i Foundation to support environmental education in Hawai'i's schools and communities, as well as the Johnson 'Ohana Foundation, which supports environmental, art and music education worldwide. Album- and tour-profit donations,



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along with the Johnsons' personal charitable activities, have resulted in more than \$30 million in contributions to charity since 2001.

This year, the Johnsons executive-produced a 30-minute documentary called *The Smog of the Sea*, about plastic pollution in the ocean, and Jack scored the film.

"I wanted to be part of the making of a documentary that didn't shy away from the truths of what's happening in the ocean, but also gave you some hope and [would be appropriate to] screen at a high school," he explains. "Jacques Cousteau said, 'People will protect the things they love.' Make kids fall in love with the ocean to protect it; make kids fall in love with nature if they are going to be protecting nature."



RYAN T. FOLEY

## CARING FOR THE PLANET

Jack and Kim Johnson are involved with a wide array of environmental initiatives. Here are a few of the highlights.

He and his crew launched *All At Once* in 2008, magnifying his star power and fan base into an online community of 6 million people working for positive change. *All At Once* teams up with 400 nonprofits, and has helped raise

\$3.7 million in donations and matching funds.

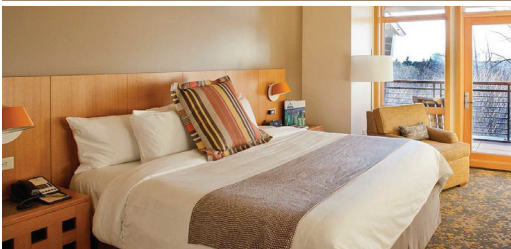
At his concerts, fans can connect with nonprofit partners at a Village Green festival area, with food, tents and displays. It helps the nonprofits spread their messages—and provides them with fresh volunteers for events such as garden workdays and beach cleanups.

At home in the Islands, the Kōkua Hawai'i Foundation—which the Johnsons founded in 2003—aims to help students become stewards of the environment. It is a robust nonprofit with many facets, such as 'ĀINA In Schools, which encourages garden-based learning, healthy food on campus, agricultural literacy, waste reduction, nutrition education and family outreach.

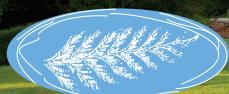
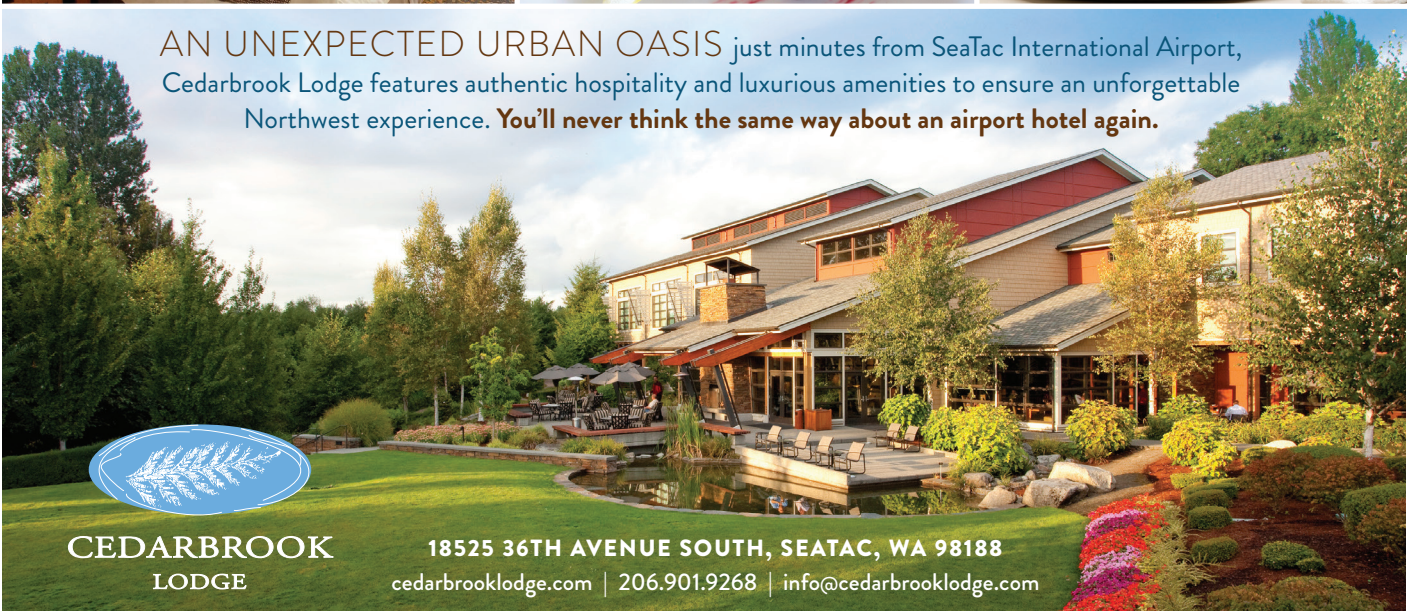
3R's School Recycling supports 64 schools in their on-campus recycling and composting efforts.

Plastic Free Hawai'i trains businesses and schools on the environmental and health benefits of going plastic free, and conducts beach cleanups and other local events. —K.D.W.

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TANNER WATT

**Reusable stainless steel cups and water bottles sold at Jack Johnson concerts have replaced plastic cups.**

In producing the film, Johnson spent a week in the Sargasso Sea [a midocean habitat off the North American Atlantic coast] with a marine scientist and a small group of citizen-scientists, and says he learned about a fog of microplastics—trillions of shards of which permeate oceans. “[That experience] made me even more passionate about what we’ve been doing at our shows, with trying to eliminate single-use plastic. That trip just ignited that passion even more.”

Johnson’s tours have been plastic-free backstage since 2005 and, since 2007, have offered fans free water through refill stations, encouraging them to bring their own reusable containers.

“At some music festivals, there’s a sea of plastic cups on the ground afterward,” he notes.

In 2014, he spearheaded a test of reusable stainless steel pint cups at the Santa Barbara Bowl. As the crowd left, there was not a single cup on the ground. “To see a venue with no plastic, it sounds kind of nerdy,” Johnson says, “but to me, it’s so exciting. If that becomes the norm, we could make a cultural shift.”

Since he launched the Reusable Pint Program, several other venues, including many of those owned by



Live Nation, have followed suit. Fans receive a discount on refills for the life of the cup, encouraging them to bring it back to the next show.

For Johnson, his goals reach beyond cups. “After a certain point, I didn’t want to just think about the negative,” he says. “It was more about how can we expand on the positive.” The result is the All At Once social-action network, which reaches out to connect his legions of fans with local nonprofits at each tour stop. The nonprofits focus on sustainable food, environmental projects and plastic-free initiatives. “When we come back and work with these groups afterward, they are saying, ‘After your show, our membership exploded, we have all these people come to our river cleanups.’ That makes me feel really good,” Johnson says.

“It’s not just about sharing the music, and the love and the sing-along aspect of it. It’s making sense. The show is doing something good in the long run.”

These can be challenging times for environmental activism, and Johnson acknowledges that. “*Smog of the Sea* is a perfect example,” he says. “It can be depressing to learn about all this stuff. Yes, it’s depressing, if you are just going to give up. You wake up some days and feel totally overwhelmed, but you can’t participate with anger. It doesn’t work as well.”

When Johnson was on the boat, learning about the rate of fragmentation of plastic, he says he actually felt joy. Joy?

“Because I knew I was working on a better version than what we have now.” ✕

*Kathryn Drury Wagner is an editor and writer based in Los Angeles.*



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