backstage with jack johnson
Santa Barbara’s Most Famous Export Is Just Like You and Me
by Matt Kettmann
Jack Johnson is nothing special. I know it’s hard to believe, but trust me, I know him. It’s true. Despite selling a million albums, making two killer surf flicks, and playing to sold-out crowds at the top venues on three continents—all in the last three years and all before his 28th birthday—Jack’s exactly like you and me. Well, at least me. He’s a laid-back, flip-flopped, and baggy-shorted dude who’s just trying to have some fun. And unlike the rarified rock gods before him—from Elvis to Michael Jackson, men most definitely not like you and me—it’s expressly Jack’s down-to-earth nature that has catapulted the singer/songwriter to global stardom. His music is so accessible—thoughtful lyrics easy to remember, simple melodies easy to sing—that the audience is not enthralled by his music. On the way to the last show, the crowd is already chanting the words “I know Jack Johnson” has multiplied my own fame quotient even more. But as you’ll see, he’s even better, because there’s a lesson in his life for all of us.

The man

First, the obligatory history: Born in 1975 on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, Johnson learned how to surf from his dad’s friend, Jeff “Peff” Eack. Made Pipeline his backyard at age 12. Mastered the break with surfing pros Kelly Slater and Rob Machado. Played guitar with his first band, the non-renewed Hawaiian punk group Limber Chicken. Declined dad’s last-minute offer to tour the world after graduating high school. Went to UC-Santa Barbara to study math. Met Kim Baker in UCSB’s De la Guerra dining hall, immortalized in the song “Bubbles” with the Gaucho-pleasing line “I was eating lunch at the DLG when this little girl came and she sat next to me.” Played to the Isla Vista crowds with the jam band Soul. Wrote some songs but, being too shy, only sang back-up. Became a film studies major in his sophomore year. Begun laying down tunes in his own voice in the privacy of his SUV’s road living room on a four-track recording system his mom bought him. Distributed tapes to surfing friends the world over. Dug by everybody from Sydney to San Diego. Filmed two surf flicks, Thicker than Water and September Sessions. Won acclaim from critics and surfers alike. Met Garrett Dutton, the G in Philadelphia’s G-Love and Special Sauce. Recorded his “Rodeo Clowns” song with Garret. Made airwaves. Hunted down by batteries die in his new van. Jack is nothing special. But as you’ll see, he’s even better, because there’s a lesson in his life for all of us.

The lesson

After last March’s Santa Barbara International Film Festival screening of Thicker than Water, Jack played a few solo songs during the private after-party at Longboard’s. While fans hung on his every word, his mind was clearly elsewhere. He stopped after six quick songs and walked over to a group of friends. With a shy smile, Jack said, “That didn’t feel right. This isn’t the time. I just want to hang out.” After his sold-out show at the Santa Barbara Bowl last fall, Jack showed up at Restaurant Row on Cabrillo Street, set on hanging out with friends. As a handful of musicians and artists have done before, Jack challenged Roy Gandy, the restaurant’s owner/chef, to a bike race around the block. To my amazement—I was the official time-keeper that night—Jack beat Roy, the man who had invented the two-wheeled grand prix. Later, when another challenger crashed while rounding the corner in front of the Gamekeeper store, Jack led the crowd running to investigate. His friend Vaughn was only scraped. The borrowed bike was a different story. Just ask around. If you don’t know someone who knows Jack, you’d be surprised how many there are to find. His friendships are with all sorts of people, from haole surfer dudes to Latino hip-hoppers to plain old white-collar guys he knows from his UCSB days. For surfing, it’s still a big part of his life. More than one morning during his Australian tour, Jack got up before 6 a.m., caught a ride with a local kid who had lent him a wetsuit and board, and drove two hours to a secret break. Backstage just an hour before his stage appearance at Coachella, he took a break from tuning his guitar to describe, with intricate hand movements, the last couple of waves he caught in Hawaii to friend Conan Hayes, a pro surfer who was visiting in the dressing room. Jack still gets jazzed when he gets to meet the superstars that preceded him. When fellow Santa Barbara musical legend David Crosby called Jack up, he and Kim were totally excited. Kim—who still can’t believe “David Crosby and his wife came for dinner!”—was so nervous she didn’t even try to cook and just ordered take-out Thai food instead. In the same vein, when the Beastie Boys hit the stage at Coachella, I asked Jack, who was watching their performance intently, if he’d met them. With an ever-so-slight hint of yearning, Jack simply muttered, “No.” And he still takes his fame lightly. Last weekend, a 20-something ran up and blurted out somewhat confusedly, “You’re my biggest fan.” Jack, calm, friendly, and always approachable, laughed, “I just met my biggest idol!” At the same time, Jack knows he’s not in Kansas anymore. Inside the dressing trailer as the world’s beastie boys, sonic youths, and extra spicy chili peppers milled about, he said, “It was weird coming from Byron Bay (Australia) and Hawaii (where he took a breather for three days) to Coachella.”

Jack Johnson
Rincon can't shake his memories of Oahu. And even big days at his family's Montecito flat to their house on the North Shore of Oahu. And even big days at his family all live close together on the North Shore. His grandmother, two married brothers, slew of nieces and nephews, and the rest of his family all live close together on Oahu. And even big days at Rincon can't shake his memories of the North Shore's big waves.

As he and Kim explained over brunch Sunday at the posh Esmerelda Resort in Palm Desert, they've pretty much already moved most of their stuff out of the Montecito flat to their house on the North Shore. His new backyard break will now be Rock Piles, but Pipeline at his parents' pad is only a "two-minute bike ride away," according to Jack. "We'll keep the place in Santa Barbara at least through the summer," explained Kim, hoping to make that their chill-out spot during short breaks on this summer's tour. "But we'll be back a lot, " said Jack.

Indeed, Santa Barbara will forever be a part of the Jack story. While Jack has supported causes that affect Santa Barbara's shorefront—including a large gift to the local Tent of Punk. A social commentary on our culture's dependence upon oil companies—or the pirates of the new age, as the lyrics go—"Horizon's Been Defeated" critiques "alien casinos," a phrase invented by his bike-crashing friend Vaughn to describe the luminescent oil platforms at night. Interestingly, the same structures are supposed to have inspired Jim Morrison to write the Doors' "Crystal Ships."

the music

Jack's sound is summed up in two syllables: mid-low. I've had a copy of the new album On and On for about two months now, and all I can say, other than I like it better than the first album, is that it's even more mid-low than Brushfire Fairytales. The 16 songs, all but a couple led by acoustic guitar, are about one beat slower and a minute shorter than the first album's. Compared to the slightly more electric Fairytales, On and On is closer to the kind of music Jack wants to keep doing in the future. He explained, "The second album was my own rebellious way of out-doing the first one. I just went more mellow, because that's the kind of music I like making."

In a musical world increasingly defined by over-the-top originality—whether it be the high-energy edge of the White Stripes, the punky pop of The Hives, or even the live music hip-hop of Black Eyed Peas (all bands that Jack likes)—it's a bold, even brash, superstitiously scary sophomore effort, so simple. Yet despite Jack's outward appearance of unflustered tranquility, he has a natural underlying concern about what other people think.

When the Los Angeles Times listed the top 50 must-see bands at Coachella, neither Jack nor G Love made the list. They both reacted with mild but cautiously concerned laughter. "Hey, man," Jack told Garrett backstage, "we're the underdogs."

Or even take his slightly bummed reaction to the recent negative critique in Rolling Stone of his second album. He actually appreciated one of the disparaging comments—that it would take a "leap of faith to trust that Johnson could really be this calm"—but was disappointed at the mediocre review and being compared to Donovan without the "weirdness."

But I think trying to place Jack's sound into popular-music categories will never work, since critical eyes tend to overlook what makes it so special. I contemplated his quick rise to fame while listening to both of his albums back-to-back on my five-hour, traffic-clogged drive through the Los Angeles basin on the way to Coachella. The tunes reminded me of the camaraderie that's felt during his live shows, when everyone's singing and swaying in unison, so I concluded that it's Jack's simplicity that makes his music so popular. Look at such top-selling bands as the White Stripes or Queens of the Stone Age, or even the Beastie Boys for that matter. What's disappeared from the popular music world is something pure and simple, a sound that might be easy and familiar but is sincere and authentic as well. Just as it's easy to miss Jack in a crowd of Pacific Ocean white boys because he looks like everyone around him, it's also true that Jack's influences—reggae and rock, hip-hop and punk—are a genuine hybrid of what an entire generation has grown up listening to. Sure, it's slow and mellow, but it's all there: the cadence of hip-hop, the roots of reggae, the jams of rock, the everyday lyrical content and punk.

A colleague of mine often refers to Jack's sound as "campfire music." Either description hits it dead-on. You can't deny it. Jack's songs are the tunes you want to sing with your closest friends while drinking beers and sitting around a glowing pit or hot grill. Thankfully,
On and On continues this tradition, as I quickly found myself singing along with songs I’d heard only the first time an hour before.

Confession: I was a late arrival on the Jack train. Since I tend to shy away from the next best thing—an attitude I’ve learned is often, as in this case, shortsighted—I avoided even listening to his music until I prepared for our first interview a couple of years back. When I heard the chorus of the first song on Brushfire Fairytales—“Slow down everyone / you’re moving too fast”—I was hooked. That album and the upcoming On and On are jam-packed with poignant social commentary. In the same song-writing tradition of Bob Dylan and the Clash’s Joe Strummer, Jack has something important to say and he’s successfully using catchy music as his medium.

And therein lies the true reason I believe so many people of all ages—certainly most of his college-aged and post-college-aged fans—love Jack’s music: He has something to tell them.

Television is not a good thing; we watch too much of it, and we place too much emphasis on what the little box tells us, as he explains in “It’s All Understood” and “Falling.” We are too concerned with others, too focused on keeping up with material trends, and don’t spend enough time understanding ourselves, the recurring theme in the old and new songs “Posters,” “Gone,” “Wasting Time,” and “Symbol in My Driveway.” As a culture, we pass blame for atrocities down the line, from a schooled triggerman, to the parents, to the media, to the songwriters and filmmakers, as he sings in “Cookie Jar,” summing up, “It was you, it was me, it was every man / We’ve all got blood on our hands.”

There’s wisdom in his musings, which equates to value for a generation strangled by popular media and starving for someone in the spotlight to say what we’ve all been thinking. Even his love songs to Kim stay pure and, on the new album, the lyrics of those songs reveal the deeper relationship issues that occur in every partnership. In all his music, Jack says it poetically and presents it in an easily digestible format. And for that, no matter what your musical taste, he should be commended. He’s just being himself—flip-flops, T-shirts, shorts, and all—and saying what he thinks, and, it appears, some of that sincerity is being transferred to the masses.

“I think what attracts the people who come out to the shows is that they feel they could have written these songs,” Jack said Monday, reflecting on the past weekend’s concert: “When people are singing along, it feels really good to know you’re around a group of people who have similar beliefs and feel the same way about the world’s state of affairs.”

In our numerous conversations, both official with tape recorders and informal in bars and restaurants, Jack has told me that he rarely reads what’s written about him, no matter whether it’s in Time, GQ, Rolling Stone, or The Independent. There’s no point, he’s explained, since if it’s complimentary, he may “get a big head,” and if it’s critical, well, no one wants to read bad things about themselves. So I doubt he’s reading this. But if you are, Jack, I want to give a heartfelt thank you. Thanks for the music, of course, the veritable soundtrack of my post-UCSB years, but also for being a positive role model for a growing generation that desperately needs one.

But most of all, thank you, Jack, for showing the rest of us that sometimes just being ourselves is cool enough.

Jack Johnson celebrates the release of his new album On and On this Tuesday, May 6, with a show at the Arlington Theatre. Doors open at 7 p.m., show starts at 8 p.m. Tickets available today at all Ticketmaster locations, including the Arlington, Robinsons May, The Wherehouse, and Tower Records.