

JACK JOHNSON

# Surfing through the Static

BY MR. BONZAI

THE EMERALD PATH AWARD 2008



Playing around in the front yard, Jack Johnson cuts through a world of static with a worried man's vision and surfer's sense of balance.

JIM RUSSI

## What more do we need to know about our 2007 Emerald Wave Award winner, Jack Johnson?

Years ago, consumers of surf culture already knew quite a bit: youngest son of North Shore charger Jeff Johnson, Pipeline boy wonder, maker of the films *Thicker Than Water* and *September Sessions*. Jack clearly had talent, and he came from the nexus – ergo, he was a bit of a surfing star in our micro universe.

And now ... now the whole world seems to hum his melodies, lip-synch his lyrics, and somehow buy into his easy island style. He's a global mega-star. Good on him. Let's leave it at that. But take note: Jack has evolved. While fame hardly seems to have dented his nature, Jack's music has grown legs, his language has grown lungs, and his down-to-earth way of being has birthed a whole new way of being a rock star.

Music writer Mr Bonzai caught up with Jack recently at his Los Angeles studio to discuss his latest album, *Sleep Through the Static*, his environmental initiatives, and other evolutionary leaps and bounds, which add up to make Jack Johnson perhaps the world's most important surfer ... and the winner of our Green Wave Awards' biggest respect.

Born and raised on the North Shore of Oahu, Jack Hody Johnson always wanted to be a professional surfer, until he had a chance to be one. At 17, he qualified for the trials of the 1992 Pipe Masters (even his heroes Gerry Lopez and Michael Ho had to go through the trials that year) and made it to the final, where the aggressiveness of the other competitors was so intense, he failed to get the requisite three waves to advance into the main event. That (and a surfing accident a week later that knocked out his front teeth and laced him with 150 stitches) dampened his enthusiasm for the pro scene. But during the recovery he had plenty of time to spend with his guitar and consider his next move, which was to the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he studied filmmaking, played in the party band Soil, and produced the surf documentary *Thicker Than Water* with two pals, Chris and Emmett Malloy. The film not only featured his talents as a cinematographer, but also demonstrated his abilities as a singer/songwriter.

A four-song demo caught the attention of producer JP Plumier, who had worked with one of Johnson's heroes, Ben Harper. Plumier produced Johnson's 2001 debut album, *Brushfire Fairytales*, on which Harper played lap steel guitar. Johnson's second album, *On and On*,



Above: Recording in the LA house Jack and his partners converted for Brushfire's mainland operations. Like his recording studio at home in Hawaii, it's solar-powered and remodeled using as much recycled material as possible. Below: Jack outside the new studio, aka the Solar Plastic Power Plant, LA.

came out in 2003, followed by *In Between Dreams* in 2005. In 2006, he released the soundtrack to the animated film *Curious George*, which went to #1 on Billboard's Top 200 and Rock Album charts.

In 2002, Johnson and Emmett Malloy started their own label, Brushfire Records, and in early 2007, they began remodeling an old home in Los Angeles, which now houses a solar-powered recording studio and their Brushfire offices. The entire building has been made very eco-friendly, and it was here, last June, that he began tracking his new 2008 album, *Sleep Through the Static*. The album was produced by Plunier, with recording and mixing by Robert Carranza, and features Johnson's band: Merlo Podlewski on bass, Adam Topol on drums, and Zach Gill on keyboards.

**Mr. Bonzai: Tell me about this new "green" recording studio you built here in LA. This isn't your first studio is it?**

Johnson: Well, this one is a partnership with my friends Emmett Malloy and Robert Carranza. The one I have in Hawaii is my personal studio, where we recorded the last few records. That one is solar-powered, with the photovoltaic panels on our property. We also have an environmental education foundation for kids in Hawaii, and that is all run off the solar power.

We decided our record label needed an office. We were growing, with five or six artists, and we found this old building in Los Angeles with a room in the back with high ceilings – perfect for a studio. So we started daydreaming about that – a recording

studio here that could be used by the bands, a place for friends to work in, a fun clubhouse, and we wanted to make it as eco-friendly as possible. We put the solar panels on the roof. If a floor needed to be replaced, we tried to do it with as little environmental impact as possible.

We're using bamboo for the floors, which is a replaceable resource, and we used the old wood to put in floors and ceilings in the house. We have toilets with the low-flush option, and the insulation in the walls is all recycled blue jeans.



**I just thought of myself as a filmmaker who could goof off with music a little bit**

**I understand that you're actually generating more power than you need for the house?**

Yes, and the extra power goes back into the electrical grid of the city. In Hawaii, your electric meter goes backwards. I think here in California, when you go back to zero, the electric company may pay you for the electricity. When you have the chance to do it this way, why not do it?

**And it sets an example. You're a well-known person, so people pay attention to the way you are doing things. How would you describe your relationship with your engineer and co-producer, Robert Carranza?**

Good friends. It really comes out of that. It started out for me with Emmett – we were making surf movies, and we were best of friends. Then I got asked to come to somebody's office for a meeting about my music. They were interested in this little demo that we had made. Then we started getting all these phone calls. You know how the music industry is – once somebody hears about this new person who has a demo that somebody else is interested in, they don't want to be a "Johnny come lately." So they all start calling.

I didn't have a manager so when I went to these meetings Emmett started acting like my manager. Then he read some books about how to be a music-industry manager. We became partners in this whole operation. Anytime we had to find somebody for this or that position, it would usually come up through a friend of a friend. We were really lucky, because everybody that is around us now are friends.

Last night, after we finished the record, the head of the label, Emmett, and the band, and JP Plunier, who produced my first record, we all sat around talking about the project and drinking some wine. Same thing when we're on tour. Everybody on our tours are all friends.

Getting back to Robert, we were introduced by Mario Caldato, Jr. who produced the second and third records. Robert engineered and mixed, and we just really loved having him around. He just gets sounds so quick. That's important for us, because a lot of times, we're in the studio getting sketches of things, but while we're practicing he's already got things all set up. We have a simple sound, so he doesn't over-think it. He gets really good sound, really quick, so we can keep on moving. If things

start taking too long, people start losing energy and want to go for a skate. He knows how to get a good sound quickly.

**You're bucking the digital trend. You're tracking to a Studer 24-track analog machine, even though I understand you had some difficulty finding tape. Is this your choice or Robert's?**

That was a group decision. We'd made a few records together, and we thought we'd make this one feel a little different. The ones in Hawaii were recorded in my garage, and we recorded to Pro Tools. It worked out, but we're doing a lot of this record here in LA and we were able to get a good tape machine.

I was used to doing 4-track stuff before these records with the whole band. I used to always record that way and I liked not looking at the music on a computer screen – just hearing it. If it had a good feel, you moved on, living with your little mistakes. Those little mistakes become part of the character of the song.

It's so easy with Pro Tools to clean yourself up and make it into something that you're not, actually. With the tape, you have to listen to it instead of

being able to look and see if something doesn't line up. I'm not a real audiophile. I leave that stuff to Robert. The guys in the band can hear the difference between tape and digital. I have always been more into the songwriting and putting the song together. Subconsciously, I probably hear the difference, but I don't pay that much attention to it.

But it feels really warm, and we aren't using a click [a click track, an electronic metronome]. We just go sit in the room all together and track the songs. Sometimes I'm playing acoustic guitar and singing, for laying it down, and I'll have to go back and replace the vocal. But for most of the songs, the guitar, the bass, the drums, and the piano are all from the same take.

**Do you remember the day or the moment when you decided to be a musician?**

Not really. I decided to start playing around with music when I was 14. A friend of my dad was playing guitar at a barbecue and everybody was singing along to these Van Morrison and Cat Stevens songs he was playing. And the next barbecue just didn't seem to be as quite as much

fun, because he wasn't there. So I decided I should learn how to play the guitar well enough that everyone could sing along. It also just intrigued me to be able to sit there and play these songs and have the ability to do it by myself, just with a guitar. I started learning the chords. But as far as becoming a musician and making that what I was going to do in life ...?

There was one time when I was traveling to Australia and I had to put my job down on my entrance paper; it asked for my occupation, and I wrote down "musician". That was the first time. I used to always write "filmmaker", because I was making surf films before that. I thought the music would be a fun little deviation. I made one record and opened for Ben Harper, but it wasn't until I had a few tours under my belt that I actually started thinking that this was growing into my main thing. Before that, I just thought of myself as a filmmaker who could goof off with music a little bit.

**Do you remember the name of the first song that you wrote?**

Hmm, what was that called? I can't remember it. I do remember the song, but I can't remember what the word was that I ended up using as the name. Actually, the first song I wrote was co-written with two of my best friends. We must have been 8 or 9 years old. It's funny, because the recording lasted for so long – the only reason I remember all the words is because we had this recording of us singing it. We took it seriously and sat down and wrote the words out together, like we were writing a song. The song was:

*I went down to the store,  
I said hello to the door,  
I went inside  
and I asked the guy  
what can I buy?*

*So I got some food  
and I went on home,  
I feasted out and  
I had some fun.  
And that's what happened that day.  
So, yay, hey-hey.*

It had kind of a Ramones ending, that "hey-hey". My friends were Peter and Doug Cole. Their mom was a piano player, and she was like a second mom to me: Sally Cole. She encouraged us to play the piano. We'd get the pots and pans out and sing, just like any other kids. But that was the first song I remember writing, being pretty proud of it ... we thought we were pretty cool.

**Can you remember the first time you got paid for playing music?**

It would have been at The Mint here in LA. It came



Skating through the static, and smiling all the way. Downtime at home.



Merlo and his magic hat.



Zach Gill, the world at his fingertips.



Adam Topol – beats working!

## Surfing has helped me in learning how to improvise ... within the music, and the flow of music.

in two phases: I had this band in college, just playing keg parties and bars downtown. We were underage at the time, but we could play some of the bars. We were 18, 19, 20 years old. We got paid a few times. Then I started making films, and I came back and started doing my own music, which grew into what I am doing now.

Before that, my college band actually opened for Sublime once, and for the Dave Matthews Band, when he did his first tour on the West Coast. It was at the Ventura Theater and held about a thousand people, but there were only a couple hundred in the audience. Our band was called Soil. Zach, who plays piano in my band, was in a band called Django, like Django Reinhardt. We were both born on the same day, and we both started college at UC Santa Barbara together. We were sort of rival bands and played parties. We ended up becoming good friends and playing music together.

### Why do we human beings make music?

Well, that's a good question. Kurt Vonnegut made me feel happy in the last book he wrote, *A Man Without a Country*. He said, in this world, if you start thinking about things too much or looking at

the way things are going, it can really get you down, you feel overwhelmed. But at least we have music. It kinda makes everything worth it. That's the way I feel, too.

I don't necessarily know why we do it, but it is nice that we do it, and it sure is nice to share an idea with somebody, play a song – for a couple people sitting around in a room, or for thousands of people at a concert. You get on the same wavelength, where you all agree. If it's a song with lyrics, you get to a point where you're singing words and everybody is singing along. It feels like you agree with someone, or you have a common ground, or feel you are all one thing. Music can unite people and can have a theme that holds people together. With an instrumental it's the same thing on a different level. Those tones and that progression can unite people as well.

### When you're composing, do you come up with the music first and put the words in later?

Most of the time, sitting around, it definitely comes from a melodic place more than a lyrical place, for me. I usually start humming or making sounds. It could be like a second instrument, like a second guitar line if I'm playing a strum. [Jack sings nonsense sounds.] Just making noise, and then I'll find the melody, and then the melody sets a mood for me, and there might be a certain word that just fits in the melody. And the song starts growing from that word – and that word might bring up an idea or connotation that pulls me in a direction. And a lot of times, it'll just be what I've been thinking about, or from conversations with Zach. We're best of friends and talk about songs all the time. We both have our families really close, and we just talk about life itself and growing up, and songs come out of that. We end up giving each other a lot of lines. Something he says might turn into a song for me, and vice versa. He might play me a song that came from one of our conversations. He takes the points that we have both made and puts that into the song.

### Where does surfing fit into your development and where you are now?

Surfing was everything to me. It became part of my personality and who I am. I identify more than anything with just being a surfer. The way that music makes it all worth it ... surfing to me is the meaning of life, in a certain way. When I wake up in the morning, it's the first thing I think of. "What's going on with the waves? What's the tide doing? Is the wind direction okay?" It's like somebody showing you how to do magic, or fly ... to have the ability to go out there and glide around on these waves, it sorta becomes everything in your world. I hope to share that with my kids; we go in the water all the time, and I hope they find that same love for surfing that I have.

Surfing has helped me in learning how to improvise ... within the music, and the flow of music. Going out on tour for the first time and learning how to adjust, sometimes you think things are going to be a certain way, and something happens that is completely different. It's like riding a wave. You never really know what the wave is going to be like. Sometimes it will break in that spot, or this spot, and you always have to be changing your line and going in a different direction, compensating when the wave comes at you. You gotta change and make split-second decisions. That's helped me a lot. Not getting too set in a way and thinking how it's going to be. I've always entered every new year with the idea of, "Who knows?" Once I grow into what I am, I'm ready for it to start fading away. Surfing has helped me to be ready to roll with whatever happens.

### If you could ask anyone to join you in the studio, who would you like to hang out with?

Right now, it would be Greg Brown, the singer/songwriter. I actually called him up the other day when I was listening to some of his music. It just moves me so much. Again, that Kurt Vonnegut

book had a real effect on me. He said things that resonated with me. He talks about there being different types of artists. There are ones that respond to life itself and are actually riffing off of life experiences. And there are other ones that respond to the context of the art that they are in. They are looking back on the history of their own art and responding to that and doing things in the context of what other artists in that genre have already done. Vonnegut points out that one is not better or worse, but that he felt lucky to be one who responded to life itself. In my own work, a lot of the time, I will be more inspired to write a song about life experiences.

Greg Brown is one of those people where his songs become life experiences to me. They are so pure and so moving, that I actually want to sit down and write a song after listening to his music. It really affects me. He gets right to the core of things. I was listening to his record, and I thought, I'm just going to call this guy and talk to him. It was pretty neat just to talk to him because he has meant so much to me. Listening to his music, one time I felt so good about life that I sat down and wrote the song, "Better Together."

### If you ran into a teenager who wanted to become a musician, what advice would you offer?

As long as you're enjoying the exact moment you're in at that time, everything will be just fine. Don't have too many expectations. Filling up a club, is that going to be your biggest goal? If that's as far as you get and you enjoy that, okay.

People ask me for advice, and sometimes they're already dreaming too big. I used to play at Restaurant Roy in Santa Barbara, and it held maybe 70 people in the little side room. And in LA, I played at The Mint maybe 15 times before it grew beyond that. Backstage, I ran into this girl who was playing there, and she said, "Aren't you just sick of this club? I can't stand playing here. I can't wait to play at the El Rey." It's a bigger place, and I tried not to be rude or disagree. I just shrugged my shoulders. I was thinking to myself, "I can't believe it" ... the room was full that night, with all these different songwriters getting up to play. I was so excited and so grateful. To me, as long as that room was full and those people wanted to hear my songs, I was so flattered and so excited. I never



Fireside strumming gone wild. Now, all the world's a stage for Jack.

LUCY GARDNER



Shots like this remind you that Jack is a surfer first and a music celebrity second. A perfect top note, out front, North Shore.

really dreamed that it would get much bigger than that. Every time it would get bigger, I would just try to adjust to that level.

I didn't used to sing in my college band. I wrote a lot of the songs and played rhythm guitar. After college, I started writing my own tunes – just acoustic guitar and my voice – and I was really nervous about it. I went to some open-mic nights and played where nobody would know who I was. My wife would sit in the back and watch me. If 10

people responded at an open-mic night, I had something good right there.

That's the hard thing, when people come up to you and ask, "How do you do it? What shall I do next?" I don't know, just focus on the song. Try to write songs that are really meaningful to you, and when you share them with people, make sure you try to get yourself back in that space of when you wrote the song.

I used to close my eyes a lot and put myself back

in the place where I wrote the song, so when I played it, I remembered what I was saying – I wasn't just going through the muscle memory of the words.

**We have audio history recorded for over a hundred years. If you could go back farther and hear something from the past, what would you like to hear?**

I grew up in Hawaii, and I'd like to hear the Polynesian music before it was affected by the tourism and the influence of western culture. It wasn't written or recorded anywhere before the western ships showed up. It's oral history, and you can maintain a certain amount like that. But it would be really interesting to hear the music before that time, back in the time of the chants, and none of that Western influence.

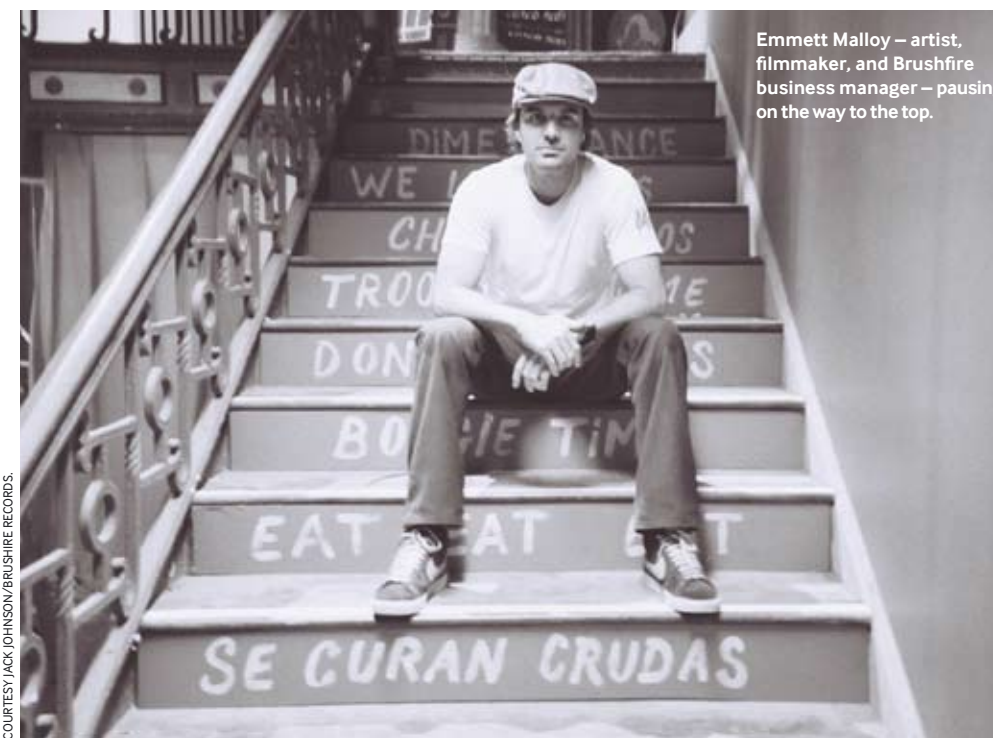
But I love the music that came out of the combination of the two cultures united, and the ukulele introduced to Hawaii – beautiful music from a collaboration of two cultures. I do get to hear traditional Hawaiian chants, and I bet it's pretty darn close to what it was in the past.

*David Goggin (aka Mr. Bonzai) is a photographer and writer who grew up in Newport Beach, California and has been interviewing musicians for almost 30 years. His book, Faces of Music (Artistpro, 1995), will give you a clue as to how far and wide this guy has ranged.*

SEAN DAVEY

**Right: Producer J. P. Plunier, Jack Johnson, and engineer/mixer Robert Carranza pause and pose mid-recording.**

**Below: Jack's local shoreline has benefited from his celebrity. The school behind those houses receives money from his Kokua Foundation, and the land on the hillside above was saved from development thanks to a campaign (spearheaded by 2005 Green Wave Award winner Blake McElheny) in which JJ was an important figure.**



Emmett Malloy – artist, filmmaker, and Brushfire business manager – pausing on the way to the top.

COURTESY JACK JOHNSON/BRUSHFIRE RECORDS.

## Emmett Malloy: The Music, the Movies, the Surf

BY MR. BONZAI

As Jack Johnson's manager and partner in Brushfire Records, surfer Emmett Malloy is at the top of his game these days. The instigator of 'The Moonshine Conspiracy' (which birthed Brushfire and Woodshed Films) is justifiably stoked. Jack's new album (recorded in the Solar Plastic Power Plant of the Brushfire Records headquarters in LA) opened at #1 on the charts and stayed there for weeks. In recent years Malloy has directed striking films for the Foo Fighters, the White Stripes, and for Brushfire (an intimate look at life in the studio with Johnson and his band). Emmett's a busy man, with many more projects, artists, tours, and films on his horizon. Following are excerpts of my recent interview at the Brushfire house.

**On meeting Jack & starting out:** Jack was going to UCSB. My cousins Chris, Keith, and Dan Malloy are my dad's younger brother's boys; they are one of the great surf families in the last couple of decades. My first job out of college was working in an editing facility, and I started out delivering tapes, and eventually became an editor, and then made trailers for film previews. It was a great way to learn a trade. I didn't know anything about the entertainment industry, but it came to me pretty quick. Cousin Chris was a prolific pro surfer and was in the magazines and films I was watching. Our friend Taylor Steele was making good surf

films; he just went to Hawaii with a video camera and was documenting that new school of surfers: Kelly Slater, my cousins, Shane Dorian. So Chris and I started talking, and I told him that I had access to everything, and he suggested I meet Taylor, and we decided to make a film about my cousins, which I would edit and produce at my facility.

We needed somebody to film, and we thought of our friend Jack, from the North Shore, who was going to school at Santa Barbara and studying film. We met up, and that's where the relationship began. From that point on, we all became best of friends and really started to work together. Jack and I continued on with Chris, and made Thicker Than Water, and that's when Jack's music started coming out of him.

**On becoming a businessman:** I'm as much of an artist as anybody, but I have to laugh sometimes because I've become a businessman in a lot of ways. In the last year I've done all the White Stripes videos, I've got three surf films in the making, and I continue to hone my career as a film director and producer, because that's what I've always wanted to do. But I'm Jack's manager, and from the early days when we set out to do this and made that first film together, it's been 'artist and artist'. Then I suggested we put all his songs on one tape. I funded things because I was making a modest salary as an editor, and he was just out of college and didn't have a penny. I remember going to the ATM one time, and he showed me his account slip – it couldn't get any lower.

**On their path to success:** People started to get interested because his music was very

**It grew so fast, and all along I committed myself to Jack as a manager, along with his wife, Kim. It became important to me.**

immediate. In the beginning, it was like a joke. I would go to meetings with Jack; he trusted me to do these things. I was directing some videos, and I thought I knew what to do in these types of environments. I had some connections. I grew up in LA, I wasn't some pie-eyed kid from a lost planet. I knew what felt good, what didn't. I knew how to operate in these situations, so I said, "Hey, I'll do it. Let's go." It was comical. We would laugh at the scenarios as it got bigger and bigger, and opportunities came up with Ben Harper, and then doing a record with producer JP Plunier came along. It grew so fast, and all along I committed myself to Jack as a manager, along with his wife, Kim. It became important to me.

**On their partnership:** Jack and I have a great relationship, and he does trust me creatively. He's a guy who doesn't like to do too many things, so he trusts me to do videos, to work with him on films. He trusts my creative instincts. Ultimately, I want him to be free to write music the way he does. I don't want him to get bogged down with the business.

**On Brushfire:** With the label, it is an incredible privilege to have what we have. I don't want to put out a record that isn't great. It's something that I really cherish. Ultimately, this world that we built with Jack and our surf films, and Woodshed Films, and Brushfire Records, has an important identity and we try hard to bring in new additions that make sense. This thing that started out with family and friends, and now it's 15 million records later, with Jack, and a million-plus with our other artists, but it's still got that family vibe.

**On surfing:** I got into surfing when I was in college and now surfing has really taken over my life. It's my little sanctuary, and surfing gives me a state of mind – it's a very free-flowing and creative sport. All day I am being chased on the phone or computer or on a shoot with tons of people shouting, "Emmett! Emmett! Emmett!" Surfing has given me something that fuels my mind. 🏄‍♂️