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MUSIC

Making It Mellow and Keeping It Green

By NATE CHINEN

OAHU, Hawaii

FOR anyone familiar with the general vibe of [Jack Johnson](#), the world's best-known surfer turned filmmaker turned singer-songwriter turned green activist, it probably wouldn't be hard to picture his home here on the North Shore. Near the porch of his modest house is a thriving patch of taro, the versatile plant found in native Hawaiian cuisine. The roof of an adjacent building is tiled with solar panels, glinting in peak sunlight. And as he kept one eye trained on the movements of his two sons, the older of whom is nearly 4, Mr. Johnson sat at a picnic table in a T-shirt and board shorts.

"I know it's mellow to the point of annoyance, to a lot of people," he said, regarding both his hang-loose image and his brand of upbeat acoustic pop. "But it is truly who I am."

On this particular afternoon Mr. Johnson, 32, was at least the mellowest person on the premises. His manager and his publicist were in town, and together with the small staff of the Kokua Hawaii Foundation — a nonprofit organization devoted to environmental education, which he founded with his wife, Kim — they were hard at work, in a low-key fashion. In just a few days Mr. Johnson would be announced as a headliner of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, taking place in California the same week in April as his fifth annual Kokua Festival at home. The Coachella promoters had also enlisted Mr. Johnson as one of two main anchors for the new All Points West festival, set for August at Liberty State Park in Jersey City. (The other anchor? [Radiohead](#).)

At a moment of increasing eco-vigilance among rock bands, Radiohead included, Mr. Johnson stands out as a longtime beacon. "He's an absolute environmental revolutionary," said Ben Harper, the guitarist and singer, who has toured and recorded with Mr. Johnson. Concert promoters involved in Mr. Johnson's coming tour will be required to buy carbon offsets, encouraged to use biodiesel equipment and guided through many other steps in a scrupulously detailed tour agreement called an EnviroRider. And the tour will support "Sleep Through the Static" (Brushfire/Universal), Mr. Johnson's fifth album, due out on Tuesday, recorded entirely with [solar energy](#) at his home studio and a new facility in Los Angeles.

It opens with two things not generally heard in his music before. One is an electric guitar, processed with reverb; it's not exactly Dylan at Newport, but it's a departure nonetheless. The other is a stark opening verse:

All at once

The world can overwhelm me

There's almost nothing that you could tell me

To ease my mind.

Singing these words in his usual soft murmur, Mr. Johnson sounds seriously bummed.

"If I had to make a graph of that song, I'd say it starts out pretty much off the charts on the bottom," he said, holding one hand flat at chest level. "And it kind of grows and grows and grows" — the hand sloped upward as he spoke — "and right towards the end, it drops back down." It was hard not to notice that this was the contour of an ocean wave. Or that "All at Once," at its peak, permits a single beam of sunlight through the clouds. "I want to take the preconceived/Out from underneath your feet," Mr. Johnson sings in that moment, delivering what feels like a message to his critics and fans alike.

Preconceptions about Mr. Johnson abound in both camps. His prime-time slot at Coachella provoked more than the usual indie-rock bickering. (He was too commercial, too bland, not edgy enough.) Within his fan base, which draws heavily from both the jam-band and action-sports scenes, there's a prevailing impression of intimacy that doesn't jibe with total album sales of more than 15 million worldwide. (Each of his previous albums has gone at least platinum, though he has never had a Top 40 single.) Then there are those who presumably own just one Jack Johnson album: "Sing-A-Longs and Lullabies for the Film 'Curious George,'" which made its chart debut at No. 1 in 2006.

"I think a lot of people start writing you off as being 'the Monkey Guy,'" he said. "I've definitely felt a bit of that. So it's nice to get to put out a record now that doesn't feel any responsibility to have to speak to kids."

His focus now has turned to the world that those kids — and, not coincidentally, his own — will eventually inherit. The title track of "Sleep Through the Static" is a protest anthem that revels in pointed wordplay:

Shock an awful thing to make somebody think

That they have to choose

Pushing for peace, supporting the troops

And either you're weak or you'll use

Brute force-feed the truth is

We say not as we do

Still, in some ways the song is vintage Jack Johnson: liltily jaunty, casually pithy and stocked with a simple refrain. ("We went beyond where we should've gone.") And the spirit of the new album is consistent with its predecessors, even the "Curious George" soundtrack. On that album the Monkey Guy gently acknowledges insecurities even as he expresses a guileless wonder. And he preaches environmental action with "The 3 R's." (Those R's provide both a checklist and a chorus: "Reduce, reuse, recycle.")

Mr. Johnson grew up in a setting that upheld greenness as a tactile ideal. His father, the renowned surfer Jeff Johnson, had moved to Hawaii from California in the mid-1960s. So Mr. Johnson was born directly into the intense surf culture of the North Shore.

His earliest musical memories are more visual than aural: he recalled perusing his older brothers' records and fixating on decidedly unmellow Queen, Black Sabbath and Kiss cover illustrations. [Jimi Hendrix](#) made a strong impact on him just as he took up the guitar at around the age of 14; Mr. Johnson zeroed in on less flashy details like "the real lovely little licks that he would do between chords, and the songwriting itself."

He began to write his own material, though surfing remained his chief pursuit. He competed professionally in high school until a near-fatal reef collision. (His allusions to this are so breezily vague — "I hit my head real hard when I was 17" — that it's hard to picture him laid up with a cracked skull and more than 100 stitches on his face. Of course he still surfs often.)

Mr. Johnson went to the University of California, Santa Barbara, majoring in film. Then, with a couple of friends (one of whom is now his manager), he directed his first surf documentary, "Thicker Than Water" (2000), which set a new standard for the genre.

"Everything had been kind of '90s punk, with really fast cuts," he said. "What we wanted to do was make a movie that captured the feeling when you get out of the water and you're just kicking back with your friends on the front porch, with the salt still on your skin."

The soundtrack, with music by Mr. Johnson, matched that feeling. He did the same for his next surf film, "September Sessions." Through mixtapes and word of mouth, his songs made the rounds among serious surfers and skateboarders, always an influential crowd.

"I knew it was something extremely special and vital," said Mr. Harper, an avid skateboarder recalling his first exposure to the music. His manager, J. P. Plunier, agreed, and produced Mr. Johnson's first album, "Brushfire Fairytales," initially released on a tiny label in 2000 and later distributed through Universal.

In the studio and on tour opening for Mr. Harper, Mr. Johnson enlisted the bassist Merlo Podlewski and the drummer Adam Topol: the same lineup he has now, along with Zach Gill on keyboards. Soon after he started playing his own shows, he got involved with grass-roots conservationist groups like the Surfrider Foundation.

"Jack Johnson is like John Prine and [Bob Marley](#) in the sense that he's a great storyteller," said Jim Moriarty, Surfrider's executive director. "And the stories have an environmental call to action."

Having seen the results of his activism on a local scale, Mr. Johnson was ready when a larger effort essentially proposed itself. In 2002 he received an invitation to perform at the Bridge School Benefit, an annual concert organized by [Neil Young](#) with his wife, Pegi. "My wife and I were there together," Mr. Johnson said, "and watching them in action, both of us saw right there the blueprint for Kokua."

The Kokua Festival, a fund-raising Earth Day concert with Mr. Johnson as both headliner and host, has provided a testing ground for some practices listed on the EnviroRider, like vendor composting and refillable water stations. It also mirrors his stature as a bridge between cultures. [Willie Nelson](#) has played the festival; so has Willie Kahaiali'i, the Hawaiian guitarist-singer who records as Willie K.

"When we choose the artists," Kim Johnson said, "we always try to choose at least two artists from Hawaii and two mainland artists." Mr. Johnson interjected, "And I'm in between, because I'm from here and my

band is from California.”

The Kokua Hawaii Foundation (kokuahawaiifoundation.org), with Mrs. Johnson as its executive director, runs school recycling drives and helps sponsor field trips to nature centers, among other things. Sitting in their living room with Kaliko Amona, the foundation’s program director, the Johnsons spoke enthusiastically about a recently implemented initiative, ‘AINA in Schools. The acronym, Hawaiian for land, stands for Actively Integrating Nutrition and Agriculture.

The following morning more than a dozen volunteers gathered at Sunset Beach Elementary, one of five pilot schools partaking in this farm-to-school program. They were there to set up planter boxes and soil beds for a garden that students are tending this year. The Johnsons pitched in, getting their hands dirty; Mr. Johnson occasionally held up a wriggling earthworm for his sons to inspect. Here there was no static, only sun and soil. As for the ocean, it was just down the road, and the day was young.

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