



**F**OR A MOMENT, I THOUGHT JACK Johnson and I were going to pull it off. A co-authored song with a strum-strum, chicka-chicka beat falling into our laps like a big, fat mango. All we had to do was find a couple of hammocks and two guitars, and we might have nailed it. Still, we managed to come up with the opening lines together:

*The prettiest girl I'd ever seen* (Jack's line)  
*She took me to places I'd never been* (that line was mine)

Before we start riffing, Jack has been talking about the golden moment he first laid eyes on Kim, the woman who would one day become the mother of his three children. It was 1993, and he was in the cafeteria of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) when fate announced itself.

"Yeah, she was the prettiest girl I'd seen," he says, "not just in the cafeteria but the whole time I'd been at school. I don't know. I was just really attracted to her right off the bat, and she became my wife."

Johnson was 18 and studying film at UCSB when his rosebud walked by. Remembering the advice a friend had recently given him – "If you like a girl, don't take your eyes off her" – Johnson did exactly that.

"We just locked eyes," he recalls. "It was out of a movie. Didn't look away from each other and then that was it."

How long was the stare?

"About 15 seconds or something, you know. Long enough. She was walking across the cafeteria ... she had to look down a few times so she wouldn't trip, but she kept locking eyes and she just kept walking over and I figured she had friends near me, but she just walked over, put her tray down and sat next to me."

Did she tell you that you were the best-looking guy in the cafeteria? (This is what I've read.)

"I don't think she ever said that," Johnson says modestly, his Hawaii-tanned face creasing into a broad smile. "I might have said that. I guess I just put those words in her mouth."

And what was she to you in that moment?

"Yeah, 'prettiest girl I'd ever seen.' Might put it in writing."

It's a good line.

"Yeah, I can't say 'prettiest girl in the cafeteria,' or the 'prettiest girl at school,' right?"

Right.

**He's a wave-riding, solar-powered soft-rock phenomenon.**

**David Leser talks to Jack Johnson about how he turned his naturally laidback lifestyle into a stellar career.**



"I get back in the water and it's back to square one": Jack Johnson at home in Hawaii.





“That’s my wife: ‘prettiest girl I’d ever seen.’  
 Have you put that in a line or are we making it up now?  
 “We are. You want a writing credit?”  
 Yeah, “prettiest girl I’d ever seen, she took me to places I’d never been.”  
 “There you go.”  
 So I want co-authorship.  
 “You got it.”

You see. So easy. Not the songwriting part – although that was a doddle, too – but being with Johnson, the man whom *Rolling Stone* magazine dubbed The Dude. And not just because he looks so dudish and can surf, sing and play guitar. Or because he’s sold nearly 20 million albums worldwide over the past decade, staggeringly impressive though this figure is. No, it’s because he’s never allowed the fame to settle over his perfectly chiselled frame. (There’s another line for our song!)

Johnson lives with Kim and their three children in an unprepossessing single-storey home on the side of a hill above the beach where he surfs, kayaks, swims and goes fishing. His record label, Brushfire Records, is located in a solar-powered studio at the back of a house in Los Angeles, where he records albums, creates videos and spearheads his international environmental campaigns. He reads books by Kurt Vonnegut and the American mythologist Joseph Campbell and, whenever he can, he takes Kim and the children on the road with him.

That’s why he’s the chilled-out soft-rock phenomenon he is and why this interview with *GOOD WEEKEND* is such a living, breathing testament to it.

He arrives for our chat under the palms at the Byron at Byron resort and spa wearing paisley boardshorts, a brown T-shirt and thongs. His hair, worn longer these days, is wet and tousled and his unshaven face is worthy of a Calvin Klein commercial. He looks as if he’s just hopped out of the shower – which he has.

He’s carrying a pair of jeans that he’ll soon slip into and these will last him throughout the day and into the night, when he steps out on stage in front of 10,000 people – same jeans, same brown T-shirt, same thongs – to headline the 2010 Byron Bay Bluesfest.

“He’s so normal,” says Nadya Balzarolo, promotions general manager at Universal Music Australia. “You could meet him down at the surf shop at Byron or Bondi or Bells Beach and he would be the same person. There’s also a genuine connection with Jack through his lyrics and music. His appeal is transparent.”

**T**HE LEGEND OF JACK JOHNSON – IF WE CAN CALL IT THAT – BEGINS with his father in “The Great Taboo Land” of Hawaii, on the north shore of the island of Oahu. The Great Taboo Land was known by Hawaiian chiefs and commoners alike for its dark fables and monstrous seas and, long before it became the surfing mecca of the world – with the waves of Waimea Bay and the Pipeline beckoning surfers from all corners of the earth – Jack Johnson’s father, Jeff, went there to settle with his wife, Patti.

It was the early 1950s and Jeff Johnson was like one of those early pioneers of the Wild West, part visionary, part maverick adventurer, whose crazy-brave scheme was to get as far as possible from everything he knew. He chose the high seas instead of the untamed lands of Oklahoma to test his inner wild man.

Jeff salvaged a boat, charted a course for the Hawaiian islands and one month and 3800 kilometres later, with his supplies all but gone, he landed in Maui’s sublimely beautiful Hana Bay. He liked what he saw and called Patti and their first son, Trent, to join him. Later, they moved to the island of Oahu, known as “The Gathering Place”.

Today, of all the thousands of legends and fables that make up the Hawaiian creation myths, this personal story is the one Jack Johnson relates to most – the modern-day hero’s journey of a father who set out alone in a boat, and then invited his wife to join him in paradise. That’s partly why he’s so enamoured at present with Robert Bly’s 1992 best-selling book, *Iron John: A Book about Men*, which is nothing less than a meditation on men’s rites of passage.

“My dad’s journey is like the biggest myth of my life,” he says now. “He sailed to Hawaii when he was 20 years old, and that was definitely something that had mythical proportions growing up – being around the ocean a lot. And then getting to an age where, being a teenage kid and thinking, ‘Wow, it was only three years from now that my dad actually got on a boat and sailed to Hawaii by himself.’ There’s a lot to stand up to.”

Chances are Jack Johnson’s three young children (aged six months to six years) will one day be saying the same thing when they realise what a heroic figure their father is. The myth-making began in 1992 when, at the age of 17, he became the youngest person to make the finals at surfing’s Pipeline Masters, home to arguably the most lethal wave in the world.

A week later, he was at the Pipeline again but this time he wiped out on the coral reef, smashing his head and shredding his face.



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“Prettiest girl I’d ever seen”: (top) Jack Johnson with wife Kim at the Grammy Awards, February 2006; (above) with Ben Harper in a US radio studio, August 2003.

“I think [at the time] I tried to play it down for some reason,” he says in a Hawaiian drawl that sounds not unlike a mouth full of molasses. “It wasn’t a shame thing. There’s nothing shameful about almost dying, but I guess it was scary to be only 17 and come that close to death. Maybe I subconsciously convinced myself that I didn’t come that close to dying, but when I look back now I was really close.

“Kelly Slater [nine-time world champion] was out with me actually, and we would always play this game when we were kids where we’d challenge each other into bigger and scarier waves by saying, ‘You won’t go, you won’t go.’ And he said that: ‘You won’t go.’ And I went.

“I took off on this wave and it was an extreme low tide that day ... and I was riding through the tube like I’d done a million times before, and sometimes when you know you’re not going to make it out, you just dive through the back of the wave, and as I dove off ... the compression was pushing the air down and it opened up a little air space right below me, and as I jumped down and hit the water, I just hit dry reef and went straight down on my face.

“Basically, I was knocked out. I was still aware that I hit my face really hard but I wasn’t that worried. I was thinking, ‘Okay, I hit my face and I’m a little tired now ... I should swim,’ but I didn’t have the energy, and I thought, ‘I’ll just rest for a second, then I’ll swim.’

“It was kind of that feeling where you’re so tired you keep pushing the snooze button on the clock and you might push it three times and eventually you look at the clock and you realise that you’re already late for where you’re supposed to go.

“I kind of gave up and took a breath in and started choking and swallowing water. And knowing what I know now, I was kind of really lucky I made it because I took a bunch of water in. That was what jolted me. ‘Holy shit, I’m drowning right now.’ It was a horrible feeling for somebody so confident in the water because it just meant that I wasn’t even trying to swim.”

Once Johnson rose to the surface, he started throwing up water and feeling for his face. His fingers slid into a deep pocket in his forehead. His nose was broken and his lip was dangling south of where nature had designed it. The sun had just set and Slater was still out surfing. He had no idea what had happened to his friend, but years later would still feel guilty about taunting Johnson into taking that wave.

Johnson climbed onto his board and let the whitewash carry him to the beach. Minutes later, he was running up to the front porch where his parents were sitting with a neighbour, a paramedic. “I was trying to cover [my face] because I knew [Mum] would be freaked out. And I started saying, ‘Mum, it’s not as bad as it looks,’ but the paramedic didn’t want me to see myself in the mirror. I kept telling him, ‘I feel really calm, I feel fine, it’s not going to freak me out,’ but when I looked at myself in the mirror, I almost passed out. It was like, if you drew an X [on my forehead] and pushed all those four quarters back, it was just a big round circle that didn’t look like you’d be able to bring it together again.”

Jack Johnson is now leaning across the table towards me, pointing out his fake teeth, the metal rod in his mouth, the scar running under his nose and into his lip and the old X mark on his forehead, which I tell him bears an uncanny resemblance to a crucifix.

“Yeah, I used to always trip out on that when I was a kid,” he says, his hazel eyes gleaming.



Johnson was rushed to emergency and, on the way, his über-cool “Iron John” father told him, “Chicks dig scars.”

**J**ACK HODY JOHNSON WAS BORN ON MAY 18, 1975, THE YOUNGEST OF three brothers. He was “baptised” in the ocean when he was barely a week old, and to this day the ocean fulfils the role of “family church”, the place where he takes himself for sustenance and balance.

After his accident, two things happened. In the first instance, he realised he no longer wanted to compete in the water, that the very idea was counter-intuitive to the ocean itself.

“As soon as you think there’s actually competition,” he says, “[that] is when the wave will kick your ass. And that’s what happened to me. It was a little reminder of how insignificantly small we are compared to the ocean.

“Looking back, it almost seemed a little silly to be competing with each other in the surf when, in reality, it was more of a spiritual place for me. The contest didn’t seem to make much sense after that.”

(Johnson admitted to *Rolling Stone* two years ago that he used to be so competitive as a boy that on a dare, he once ate a friend’s elbow scab and then, on another occasion, a sun-baked goldfish stuck to the hood of a car. He lost the second dare because he failed to keep scales and gills down.)

The second realisation was that, as good a surfer as he was, he wasn’t in the same league as his friend Kelly Slater, nor would he ever be. He decided to go to college and study film.

“Psychologically, it was a big turning point,” he says. “I think it gets a little exaggerated ... a lot of people picture that I had this wipeout and then overnight it was just guitar and there was no surfing any more.

“What really happened was I had to spend about three months out of the water and I did start playing my guitar every day and I jumped to that next level of proficiency. I was still only 17, so I was starting to learn guitar a little better and I started trying to write my own songs in that time.”

Johnson’s early musical influences included Jimi Hendrix, Black Sabbath, American punk band Fugazi, Radiohead, Violent Femmes, G. Love & Special Sauce, Van Morrison, Neil Young and Bob Dylan, and from this eclectic mix his own cruisy, postprandial sound began to emerge – songs of the sea and paeans to that girl in the university cafeteria whom he married on the beach in 2000. (Johnson was barefoot, of course.)

He didn’t ever intend to be a musician. “I was never really somebody who



“**Looking back, it seemed almost silly to be competing with each other in the surf when, in reality, it was more of a spiritual place for me.**”

**King tide:** Johnson surfing the famous Eisback in Munich, Germany, in 2008; his early wipeout in Hawaii was “a reminder of how insignificantly small we are”.

ever learnt my scales,” he says. “I don’t have guitar heroes. I love hearing the riffs of Jimmy Page or the newer stuff like Jack White ... but it was nothing I ever, like, kind of tried to base my ideal on, of being a guitar guy ... I just liked to learn a few chords and write words with them and stuff.”

In 2000, Johnson slipped into Indonesia to film – and star in – his second surfing documentary, *The September Sessions*. On his return, he pulled out the guitar and began plucking the chords to a new song called *F-Stop Blues*. It was a strum-strum, chicka-chicka ditty about hermit crabs, cowrie shells and incoming tides.

As his wife was to later tell *Rolling Stone*: “We were just sitting there with our mouths open, ’cause it was such an amazing song. That’s when we were like, ‘Whoa, you really gotta make an album!’”

*Brushfire Fairytales*, Johnson’s debut album, was released on February 1, 2001, and immediately found a receptive audience. Here was a bunch of summertime songs about the sea and about people who need to slow down and about girls with eyes as “big as their bubbly toes” and catchy choruses that went, “La ta ta ta ta la ta ta ta ta ta ta ...” Audiences swooned.

Two years later, his second album, *On and On*, was released, and three years after that, the third, *In Between Dreams*, which debuted in the American charts at No.2. By 2008, his fourth album (recorded with 100 per cent solar power), *Sleep Through the Static*, was out – debuting at No.1 – and Jack Johnson was the accidental superstar, possibly the most relaxed, unbuttoned dude in rock history.

In January 2009, he rode the wave of his own success to play at one of the 10 inaugural balls in

Washington, DC, for the new Hawaiian-born, body-surfing American president, Barack Obama. “It was his hometown ball,” Johnson recalls now, “and he [President Obama] said from across the room [in pidgin], ‘Where’s the local boy?’ And he came up to me and gave me a big hug. You might think you’d get the presidential stiff arm for the handshake, but he had the upturned hand that signified we’re going in for the Hawaiian shake with the thumbs up. And he went like that, and then pulled me into the big hug. That way it didn’t leave any guessing, you know. He was just real warm.”

You gotta love that Hawaiian character – all that surfing and sitting around campfires strumming guitars, and crooning about banana pancakes and how we all “love to lay here lazy”.

It helps explain why Johnson is such a demigod in chilled-out, surf-obsessed Byron Bay. Whenever he plays the local Bluesfest – which appears to be nearly every year – the crowd seems to lose its collective head. Girls’ hearts palpitate. Guys – when they’re not staring forlornly into the middle distance, wishing they were the Hawaiian hunk on stage – start dancing. Then the whole place erupts into a chorus of song. The old, the young, the middle-aged. Word for word. Just like in church.

*Mmmmm it’s always better when we’re together, yeah we’ll look at the stars when we’re together.*

“There’s a beauty and simplicity in his music,” says Peter Noble, director of Bluesfest. “I love my life. I love the world and I want the world to be a better place. Isn’t that a nice way to be?”

It sure is. Not exactly thrilling, but nice.

Johnson thinks his appeal comes from the down-by-the-beach feel of his music. “I come through, say, Germany and I’m wearing slippers on stage and stuff, and it’s almost like getting a glimpse of something they don’t have. Whereas at other places like Byron Bay, a lot of people will say, ‘I saw that guy on the beach today,’ like any other guy. It feels like it comes right out of the community in a way. The music you’d hear at the markets would probably be real similar to the tones we’re getting up on the stage.”

SHORTLY AFTER THE SUCCESS OF *BRUSHFIRE FAIRYTALES*, JOHNSON RAN into his friend musician Jackson Browne, who asked him how long it had taken him to record his album. “Six days,” Johnson replied.

“Oh, man,” Browne reportedly responded, “I’ve been in the studio for about a year working on this one.”

“He was cracking up that we did it in a week,” Johnson says, almost cracking up himself.

And who wouldn’t fall about when they’d been able to parlay the same sound into 18 million albums sold over 10 years?

“Is that what we’re up to?” Johnson muses.

Apparently so.

“That’s just an abstract number to me now. Eighteen million is the same as one million, really. You know what I mean [laughs]. Once we got to a million, it just all kind of seemed the same.”

I know what he means.

So, I ask the dude, what constitutes a meaningful life to you?

“Feeling like you’re part of a community,” he says. “Good conversation. Feeling like what you do is important. Don’t get me wrong; it’s important to write songs that become soundtracks for people’s lives and I feel sometimes that’s good, but I didn’t feel like that was enough, and what’s really made the whole thing make sense to me is the idea of using the touring as a fund-raising tool for non-profit groups.”

In 2003, Jack and Kim established the Kokua Hawaii Foundation to support environmental education in schools and communities in Hawaii. Their efforts were to extend well beyond their island home. According to Johnson’s website ([jackjohnsonmusic.com/allatonce/nonprofits](http://jackjohnsonmusic.com/allatonce/nonprofits)), all the profits from his current world tour will be donated – as in previous years – to environmental, art and music-education programs.

In 2008, he donated nearly \$US1 million to 184 environmental non-profit groups around the

world. The money went to schemes as diverse as buying back gardens in the Bronx, implementing tree planting projects in Utah, encouraging environmental awareness in Perth, WA, and fostering healthier eating habits in Victoria.

He aims to make all his concerts 100 per cent carbon neutral, with recycling of waste at all venues and powering buses, trucks and generators with bio diesel.

Johnson’s commitment to helping heal the planet is enviable. So, too, is his relationship to the sea. “It’s where I stay connected with family,” he says finally. “It’s where I stay connected with friends. It brings us all closer.

“But it’s also a place where I’ll go to just find my own personal space. Sometimes, when it’s stormy out and there’s no one in the ocean and it hardly looks rideable, I’ll paddle out and just find a little place to be alone. It’s hard even to explain. My wife used to say if I did two weeks away from the ocean, I’d start getting kinda like when a woman gets PMS.

“I’d start to feel almost not like myself if I was away for too long. More and more, I’d just realise this really is a part of me and part of who I am. I don’t know what it does, but it’s kind of like a reset button every time I get back in the water and it’s back to square one.”

Speaking of which, I think Johnson and I are still in with a chance with those “prettiest girl I’d ever seen” lyrics. I’ve been working on them ever since we met, and I think if we throw in a mango tree and a frangipani breeze, add a few Hawaiian licks to the strum-strum, chicka-chicka beat, we might have ourselves a hit. **GW**

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Jack Johnson’s new album, *To the Sea*, is out next Friday.