

Breezy Jack Johnson makes Tahoe connection



Jack Johnson will return July 29 to the stage at Harveys for his second consecutive sold-out show. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – Donning a Keep Tahoe Blue T-shirt, singer-guitarist Jack Johnson made his priorities clear early on to the environmentalists and fans on hand for the Harveys Summer Outdoor Concert Series Friday night.

Booths to support his philanthropic, eco-friendly messages, soft rock smooth enough to provide the urge to swing in a hammock to gentle breezes, and a painter's palette sky marked the evening.

“They told me you’d be kind, and a beautiful sunset was happening,” Johnson told the crowd after the opening number from his four-member band. He was referring to ALO – Animal Liberation Orchestra – that first took to stage July 28.

Johnson isn’t your average rock singer-songwriter. For starters, even before he started playing, the Johnson Ohana Foundation he created with wife Kim donated \$4 million to 400 nonprofit agencies around the planet. Among them are the League to Save Lake Tahoe, Sugar Pine Foundation, Sierra Watershed Education Partnerships, Clean Tahoe and Tahoe Rim Trail Association.

Johnson puts his money behind his claims of caring about the environment. In 2008, he adopted the concept of “greening” meaning reduce and reuse – applying the concept to the 2010 tour.

The musician, who was also a professional surfer in Hawaii, has developed quite a following. A mass of people showed up Friday night – general admission style – standing and dancing most of the time in the Harveys back parking lot.

The cool vibe was accentuated by the show the night sky was giving, as well as the melodies and effects on stage.

During his landmark love-lorn tune “Sitting, Waiting, Wishing” off the “In Between Dreams” album of 2005, smoke billowed from the machine on stage. It was as if Johnson sent his audience to the Na Pali Coast of Kauai, where the fog rolls into the valleys in a dream state.



Thousands of fans sway to the music of Jack Johnson on July 28 at Harveys. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“This is the kind of music that transports you,” South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman Wendy David summed up, while embracing the free-flowing style of the artist with her husband, Kerry, from the bleachers.

When he broke into his hit single “Upside Down,” the crowd roared as he sang “I don’t want this feeling to go away.”

He urged the concert-goers to raise their kids in the air to get the full effect of the vibe, which was essentially created for them since the song comes off the album “Sing-A-Longs and Lullabies for the Film Curious George.” The kid-friendly band at one point even brought a stunned boy in the front on stage to use his light sabers to spur audience participation.

Coco McCue of Gardnerville thought of her grandson, who couldn’t make it that night.

“He loves Jack Johnson,” she said, citing the youngster’s love of Curious George. McCue, who owns a few of Johnson’s albums, sat in the bleachers enjoying the high view over the sea of people crushed in to make their connection with Johnson.

Johnson also helped with that connection by enlisting a

drummer straight out of Tahoe, introducing Adam Topol. Topol called out to North Tahoe High School graduates and asked who's been to Tahoe City hangouts like Rosie's. The audience responded with vigor.

Johnson and Topol apparently joked with each other about Tahoe's high elevation.

"Man, do you feel this altitude?" Johnson recounted asking Topol.

In turn, Topol supposedly told Johnson it was "nothing" and that's because he "grew up here."

The drummer consequently showed off his specific jazzy, Afro-Cuban percussion fundamentals throughout the night. His journey demonstrated it was a far cry from when he started out touring school talent shows, while later discovering at USC that people actually pay to hear bands. He recalled playing cover songs at a party with a homegrown band, in which "someone gave me \$50, and I got this girl's phone number," the band's website read.

The perform-for pleasure, laid-back-surfer lifestyle and mentality of Hawaii and Santa Barbara permeated the whole evening with Johnson's band as well as California-based ALO. The ensemble joined Johnson on stage for a set, highlighted by the sensuous "Girl I Wanna Lay You Down" and "Big Sur" that the front man said "because this song is about that." He described the beach scene around a campfire where a pick-up band would improvise music.

Johnson's small band had highlights of its own – in particular his keyboardist Zach Gill, who occasionally brought out his buka for accompaniment. The Japanese wind instrument provided a bellowing style to tunes.

And in pure Hawaiian style, Johnson added to the latest craze among wannabe musicians by pulling out his ukulele for the

sweet, sentimental "Breakdown."

Within a long encore, Johnson even launched into a special song about gambling with Willie Nelson, declaring the legendary country singer "got stoned and took my cash."

Diverse and eclectic, Johnson and his band not only delighted the concert-goers with other fan favorites like the cute "Banana Pancakes," in addition to "Better Together" and "Good People." The latter two have a social conscience message about the quest for a tender goodwill and respectable humanity.

He received a rousing applause near the end of the night with "Home," citing it's "wherever we are," a song he wrote for his three children on the North Shore of Oahu.

"You guys made us feel at home," he told the crowd.

Harveys shares the love a little longer this summer with more shows to come, including: the second Johnson show tonight; Slightly Stoopid on Aug. 4; The Who on Aug. 16; and performances by Eric Church on Sept. 2-3.