

On the Road with John Butler

By Chris Opfer

Dreadlocked, tattooed and apt to spout off on the beauty of mother earth and the evil of big business, it's easy to write off John Butler as nothing more than a filthy, dirty hippie. Yet, unlike many modern day hippies whose fondness for facial hair, hacky sack and the dye are their only connection to their Woodstock-era forefathers, Butler's bohemian aura is more a way of life than simple fashion.

Butler is a man well aware of his principles and is determined to stick to them. Where others only pay lip service to environmental and human rights issues, he takes action. His band is currently crossing America in an eco-friendly bus. On his website, in his CDs and at his shows, fans are bombarded with information on the ills of nuclear waste and the benefits of recycling, among other topics. And if ever there's a shortage of organic band merchandise for sale, it's a moment few and far between.

Where others readily lend their tunes (and souls) as jingles pitching everything from financial services to Bloomin' Onions (let's go Outback tonight!), Butler is intent on maintaining his artistic integrity, even if that means losing a few bucks here and there.

The John Butler Trio's second album, *Grand National*, was released in March 2007 and a world

tour ensued. I caught up with the Butler before his band's show at the 9:30 Club.

Chris Opfer: You're knee deep into the American leg of the tour now. How is it going?

John Butler: It's been really, really good. We've been coming [to the U.S.] for about six years or so, but we're really starting to climb. We finally have an audience here like we do elsewhere.

CO: You guys are pretty big in Australia and other parts of the world. What's it like coming over here and playing in places where you're less known?

JB: Gaps between those things are getting smaller and smaller every time. But I like the idea of going out to new places and trying to win people over. I also like the idea of playing to family, or people who have become my family and know the music and are there to have a real experience together. So, I like them both and they kind of end up morphing into each other anyway.

CO: *Grand National* was released by a major label [Atlantic] in the U.S., but you seem conscious about maintaining your independence.

JB: Yeah, it's always a compromise, you know. I mean, they [Atlantic] own the masters and that's not something I'm totally happy about, but I





in awhile.

CO: With songs like “Better Than” and “Good Excuse,” you seem to be talking to someone in particular. When you’re writing, do you have a specific person in mind?

JB: Yeah sure, that guy there, right there (points at mirror). Some times I look at myself and I say “what the hell is your problem.” It’s one of those things where, as I’m speaking to myself, I know I’m actually speaking to a lot of people. “Good Excuse” was a good way to talk to myself, but I put it into this other perspective of this other person, this overly-privileged white boy who dresses like a gang member and is complaining about how tough his life is. It’s like “you don’t even know what tough is.”

CO: On the new album, you go right at the Bush Administration, particularly on Iraq and Hurricane Katrina. Do you think your background (born in California and raised in Australia) gives you a unique perspective on these issues?

JB: I take a lot of the things I see happening in the world from a human perspective. That is, not from any one nationality or political point of view, or even from any socio-economic point of view. I really don’t divide the art into what’s political, what’s commentary, what’s social, what’s love...they’re all different aspects of being a human being. So when I look at the war in Iraq or stolen presidencies or Hurricane Katrina or other things, it’s hard not to talk about it.

People almost seem scared that they’re not qualified to talk about things because they’re not American. Well, I feel qualified to talk about it because I’m a human being. Those people on the other side of the planet are my brothers and I want safety, peace, justice and equality for them as much as I want it for my own kids. We’re all human beings and we all want basically the same things. These are human rights. It doesn’t really represent a political point of view.

CO: You guys were actually touring the U.S. when Hurricane Katrina hit.

JB: It makes you ask a lot of questions that have racial overtones like, “I wonder if this happened anywhere else, would there have been a quicker response?” It’s a strange thing were we

sit racially in this country. I say “we” because I feel, well, it is “we.”

There are some really great things about this country. The freedom that you can do anything and be anything that you want to be. You come here and people are behind you with the “you can do it” kind of vibe. That’s what I love about the country.

CO: Some of these songs are really heavy. Obviously, you’re frustrated about what you see. It seems like you decide in the end, though, to focus on love and peace. Did you do that consciously? Did you not want to come off as too angry?

JB: I’m just sick of being angry. I’m sick of looking at Bush and feeling nothing but hate and anger. I have to take a bit of my own medicine and realize that I love the people that frustrate me the most if I want to make this world work. If I want to be part of the solution, I have to not be part of the anger and the hatred and the arrogance. It’s a real conscious decision to say, well, “I see the devil and the devil is running,” but now is time to stand up and take our future back, rather than going, “hey, look what they’re doing! Aren’t they lame?” It just gets old, the anger. Hating George Bush doesn’t work for me. It’s hard to love people like that, but I think it’s even harder to live with the hate. Even if it’s justified.

CO: You guys jam pretty hard on the beginning of the album and then, all of a sudden, it’s just you alone on the guitar in “Losing You.” How did it turn out that way?

JB: Well, I come from a singer-songwriter background. I write all of the songs, usually by myself and that’s where the songs are born. “Losing You” was born on a 1930s National white camping with my daughter. We went up to the hills and I started writing a song. It just kind of came out.

CO: I’m hoping to hear “Ocean” tonight. What’s the story behind that song?

JB: The song came about around ten years ago. I had just left university and was busking at the time. So, I discovered this tuning that I thought had way too many C’s and G’s in it. I said, “nah, can’t do that.” But, then I turned up my guitar one day and this song just kind of came out of it and I started busking it all the time. It just kinda stayed with me. It would go away for a year



or two and then work its way back. It’s a song that keeps me connected to where I come from which is playing music on the streets.

CO: How has busking influenced your career?

JB: It’s a real simple, old fashioned way of doing it. We say we want people to hear this music, so let’s take it to em. The money we make, we’ll put that into trying to take it to more people. I sold my tapes for 10 dollars on the street and that money went to buying new strings, getting an amp and making more tapes. It’s always been a long history of reinvestment to further the life of the music. That’s what we’re gonna keep doing and nothing really changes. We have two buses out front and an office full of people working for us, but we really just use it to take the music to more people. I’m directly fed by my audience and I don’t take that for granted at all.