

JACK JOHNSON'S KINDRED KEYBOARDIST

WHEN KEYBOARD PLAYER AND multi-instrumentalist Zach Gill first met singer-songwriter Jack Johnson, both were students at UC Santa Barbara. They quickly found common ground: "Jack was the only other person I knew who wrote songs," Zach remembers. "We would show each other our songs, and help each other a little bit with them. For a while we had sort of rival bands, and then we all became friends and played music together all the time."

ZACH GILL



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So it’s no surprise that a decade later, when the now-celebrated Johnson decided to add piano to his 2005 album *In Between Dreams*, Gill was the one he called.

“We’d kept in touch, and I’d played accordion with him at a few shows,” Zach says. “I just kept sitting in, and then he said, ‘Let’s add piano to some of the older songs and see how that feels.’ It was a very cautious addition at first. But it just started flowing really well, and suddenly one day I was in the band.”

The two share more than musical interests, notes Gill. “We have kind of a brother thing going. Jack and I tend to see the world in a similar light—it’s just an easy, comfortable connection. I don’t know if this has anything to do with it, but we were born on the same day. We went through college together, and there’s just lots of water there.”

Zach has been fortunate to have the same kind of rapport with his other longtime band, the jam-oriented Animal Liberation Orchestra. “ALO officially started in 1998,” he says, “but I started playing with most of those guys when I was 12! Most of us grew up in the Bay Area and went to junior high and high school together, as well as college. The music department at UCSB was really geared toward classical music, and we were all coming more from a jazz background. There was a slight irreverence to this group that we liked. It’s really a band of brothers. Because we’ve known each other so long, there’s a deep musical connection and a sense of family that I don’t see in a lot of bands.”

Speaking of family, this one borders on the incestuous: ALO’s last two albums were released on Jack Johnson’s label, Brushfire Records, and Johnson often appears onstage with the group. Brushfire is also releasing Gill’s first solo record in July 2008.

“It’s the first time I went into the studio without ALO or Jack,” says Zach. “It was a very new experience finding my voice not as a collaborator, but as the director. I quickly found out that I wanted to have other musicians play on it, but there’s definitely a lot of piano.” He laughs. “At the end, I listened to the whole thing and thought, ‘Wow, that’s a lot of piano on one album!’”

For both his own music and his work with Johnson, Gill gravitates toward upright pianos. “It’s not that I dislike grands,” he says. “I just like the funkiness of the upright. The grand has such a classical sound, but a lot of the stuff I’m doing falls more into the ragtime/boogie-woogie domain, so the upright suits me a little better.”

In fact, Zach will be playing a Yamaha U1 American Walnut upright on Jack Johnson’s summer tour. “I love the feel of Yamahas,” he says. “We rented a U1 for a studio session, and it just seemed like the perfect touring piano. I like to be able to see Jack over the piano, so I want to make sure the top is low enough. And the U1 is just perfect—it’s not too big, but it still has a really beefy sound to it.”

Another of Gill’s signature sounds is his vintage Yamaha PSS-480 PortaSound keyboard. “I collect old Yamaha keyboards from the early ’80s, and this one is all over my solo album,” he says. “I played the organ sound through a Leslie cabinet, and it sounds unreal.”

With two active bands plus a solo project, you’d think Gill’s dance card was full. But he’s also branching out into film music. “I got a song in the movie *Baby Mama*, that just came out,” he says. “And I collaborated on a song with Aimee Mann and Jerry Harrison for a documentary called *An Arctic Tale*. I’m excited to get involved in filmmaking more, on the compositional side. I don’t know where it’s all going, but I see myself spreading out more and more. It all seems to be growing. I just want it to continue!”