

# Let the truth wagon roll

Jay Johnson is a man of conviction  
By Tom Geddie

**“W**HEN THE DEPTH OF YOUR addiction leaves you shackled in a cage and the strength of your conviction is the last thing that you crave,” Jay Johnson sings on his most recent recording, “then it’s time to pay the toll, let the truthwagon roll.”

The song is “The Truthwagon,” which Johnson recorded in 2006 as a single at Eric Herbst’s Panhandle House studio in Denton. Before that, his most recent full CD was *Royal Blue Moon* in 2004.

That’s a shame. His songs are so good that new ones should be available every year of two. His delivery of the songs is so right that he ought to be on stage frequently. Johnson’s music fits loosely into that too-broad-to-define-anymore-because-it’s-been-so-co-opted “Americana” genre; he’s taken to calling his songs simply “southern.” I lean toward calling it a bluesy sort of folksy Southern pop-rock.

For eight or so years until recently, Johnson barely played four or five or so shows a year.

But he’s back now, hosting a Thursday night show from 7-10 PM at Love & War in Texas in Grapevine since November, sharing the stage with guests including Tommy Alverson, blacktopGYPSY, Randy Brown, Troy Cartwright, Byron Dowd, Matt Hillyer, Jeff Hopson, Ben Knight, Mark David Manders, Lisa Morales, Max Stalling, and musical partner Mark Lafon. Once or twice a month, he and Lafon have the stage to themselves.

It’s a show he didn’t seek, but that he enjoys.

“Tye Phelps and Courtney Keith Portwood contacted me to see if I wanted to do something at Grapevine,” he said. “There was a hole in their schedule so we talked about what kind of show and we fell into the idea of guest songwriters and me. I open the show, then the guest does a full set, then we get on stage together and do a song swap.”

The song swap, which often includes influential cover songs by Johnson and the guests, is often the most fun for him.

“It’s interesting to hear these other writers display their influ-

ences and songs they like,” he said. “Matt did a Buddy Holly song that kind of caught me off guard. Everybody else, I kind of knew where they were” coming from.

Johnson’s beginning to perform more often again; his schedule include the Wildflower Festival, Tommy Alverson’s Family Gathering, Terry Razor’s “Raz on the Braz,” the Far Out Art Fest in Ben Wheeler, and a house concert. He’s ready to do more shows in clubs and other venues after taking off for quite a while to help put two daughters through college.

“I got a good job opportunity that required a lot of focus on my part, a big-time commitment,” he said. “I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss that opportunity. So I took the time off and got my kids through college. I didn’t quit playing, I just quit playing a lot.”

“I’m a musician,” he said, “and I’m supposed to be making music. Whatever cards I’m dealt, they have music notes on them, and I’m supposed to play them.”

One of his intriguing concepts that slips into is songwriting is the 100-year rule for poets: Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, William Wordsworth, William Blake, Ranier Maria Rilke, and others.

“My criteria for reading material, especially poetry, is the 100-year rule. Anything that has existed for 100 years has been passed down from one generation to the next,” Johnson said. “That qualifies it as being good enough to pass down. If you are going to give something to your child, it would be the good stuff, not the crappy stuff. So something that has lasted and I can find it after a hundred years, that means it had enough value to be handed from one generation to the next. I do read current novels and stuff.”

Johnson is also working on a



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new set of songs with Lafon, although he won’t put a timetable on the project. The two are also just beginning to put a full band together.

As good a lyricist as Johnson is, it’s not a song without the music.

“One of the reasons I want Mark in on the start of this is that I want to have some really strong music behind this idea,” he said. “I would say all of poetry is a circle, and all of music is a circle, and at the intersection of those two circles is pop music. The best songs are both. That’s just on the mechanics of it. Then you gotta put some soul into it. Without the soul, it doesn’t really mean anything.”

(When Johnson says “pop music,” he’s differentiating between popular music and classical music.)

Johnson first got into music

when his father put him into piano lessons for the manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination.

“I liked it, so I started playing like in second grade, doing recitals. Then church choir and junior high,” he said. “My brother started taking guitar lessons so I picked up the guitar when guitar was becoming really cool. I got through high school and had my first band gig when I was 18, at a bar. I did some other stuff including ‘Cotton Patch Gospel.’ Music’s just always been there.”

Born in 1964, in Tyler, by the fifth grade had lived in San Diego, California; somewhere in Montana; somewhere in Arizona; Tyler again; Noonday, Texas; Nacogdoches, Texas; and San Augustine, Texas. For sixth grade, he was back on the farm in Noonday: two parents, four boys, onions, potatoes, corn,

beans. “Plant and harvest,” he said.

“There was no rock music allowed in my house. Late at night I would listen to Dallas rock stations: KZEW, Z-97, Q102. Tyler radio sucked. I’d go to sleep with that little mono earplug hidden in my ear. I learned those songs. I couldn’t buy an electric guitar so I used what I had. Mostly a gut string classical that I got for \$100. I bought a 12-string for \$80 and took the little strings off because I couldn’t tune it.

“Daddy took the guitar away one time. I was playing ‘The Joker.’ That whole ‘peaches and trees’ thing didn’t sit too well with the principal of a private Christian high school.”

Eventually, he said, he decided that he wanted to tell his grandchildren— whenever he would have grandchildren—that

he was a songwriter.

“So I started writing songs. Mostly bad. Nobody listened. Made a recording. Gave it away. Friends bought it. Kept writing. Still bad. Decided to make another recording.”

That second CD was *Images*, which Johnson released in 1999. Most of the songs made the MP3 top 40 Texas folk/rock list. He Johnson won the 2001 B.W. Stevenson songwriter competition at Poor David’s Pub and was named male vocalist of the year at the 2002 Rockzillaworld awards show.

“When I get to the end,” he said, “it will not be asked if I sold a million records or played a concert for 10,000 or changed the direction of the world. It will only be asked if I did what I was supposed to do.”

Which is to let the truthwagon roll. ■

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—JAY JOHNSON