

Walkin'the Rock Talk



BY JENAI M. ENGELHARD

When Jonathan Auerbach takes the stage, no one doubts that he will put on a good show. The audience senses it before he utters word, before he strums a chord.

Auerbach had just returned from a five-week tour in Portugal where audiences would not let him off the stage. Averaging several encores a night at top venues and clubs, he was on a performance high. Shortly after, on a drizzly, lilting Saturday afternoon in Cambridge, Mass., he premiered songs from his upcoming album for a smaller, less rowdy audience, at a benefit concert for the music therapy program at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Playing solo on his acoustic, he delivered the same level of explosive energy that left them in Portugal raving for more.

It is enlivening to see an artist with the type of fervor that Auerbach puts into every pulse of every song. Imbuing his entire physicality and being into his music, he gives you nothing less than old fashioned, timeless rock n' roll...

"We're going to Nashville!"

It was October of 2002, in the living room of Jonathan Auerbach's chalet/sanctuary nestled in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, a sort of antithesis to the hectic life of a touring singer-songwriter. He had just finished performing his song "Bard Among the

Bums” for a one-man audience, the catalyst that would trigger a change in the course of his life and career. That man was Shawn Jones, a friend and fellow guitar slinger. Auerbach had approached Jones, asking his friend to give him his honest, uncensored opinion as to whether he had a chance in the music business. Jones’ response: a whole-hearted, unabashed “YES!”

Three days later, they were in Nashville...

Like it or not, in business, and especially in the music world, looks and initial impressions count. For starters, if it always comes back to the wardrobe, then Auerbach knows how to dress. The first thing a reporter noticed when meeting him was he wore a very cool shirt (the sort of shirt that says, ‘It may be a weekday morning, but I am still a rock star’). Once, when he entered a restaurant in New Orleans sporting his summer attire (a pair of beige cotton slacks, his shoes a stone colored, hipped up version of white bucks), the maitre’d could not help but exclaim, “Ankle décolletage!”

In fashion, you must know the rules of the game in order to take risks. In rock and roll, you must understand the laws of music in order to break the rules. And as a man who has soloed through life, Auerbach knows how to strategically break the rules. He is a “self-made man.” While he exudes the sort of charisma that commands attention, it’s not just charisma that got Auerbach where he is today, a musician and performer who is respected internationally in the music business. “It came hard earned,” he says, quoting a lyric from one of his original songs, “Fall Reaching.”

At the height of a lengthy career as a sought-after award-winning travel writer, editor and publisher, Auerbach made the decision to dive head first into a music career. During the final years of his writing career, he felt the restlessness that often preludes an epiphany. He had always played music, and he knew he was good. When he began writing his own original material, he knew it could be really good. So when he finally “auditioned” his material that fateful day in New Hampshire, he was just waiting for the green light.

Yet the gravity of this choice was monumental. To walk away from the stability of a successful career, to face the economic consequences of such a huge life change was daunting, even for a chronic risk-taker. Auerbach did it; and he did it professionally, without burning any bridges. “The (career) transition and the winding-down was both ethical and methodical,” he says. “I always delivered when I made a commitment and always took seriously being a consummate professional on all levels.” Auerbach the journalist eventually became “Mr. No,” refusing to accept a constant flow of projects and assignments. His theory is, say no to a million things, but when you say yes, you had better deliver with a nuclear explosion.

Auerbach’s decision to enter the music business triggered protests, some well meant, from many in his close network of friends and professionals. “When I decided to chuck it for Rock & Roll, I was prepared for the Huns to invade,” he laughs. Yet he converted former doubters into ardent fans, among them seasoned music professionals such as Rick Morrison, the former National Modern Rock Director and Vice President of Promotion V2 Records. Upon hearing Auerbach’s first album, he commented, “Jonathan’s ‘Launch’

takes me to a place far, far away. Jonathan's music is nothing short of entrancing. One can't help but lose themselves in his prolific world."

Joseph Rosendo, the producer and publisher of Travelscope Radio and Publication, said the album was the freshest marriage of music and lyrics that he had heard in years: "In an era of repetitive, thoughtless ramblings, his words tell a story and (dare I mention it) offer up something of value to ponder and relish."

There is no doubt that Auerbach's history as a writer with an intense case of wanderlust influences the nuances and rhythms of his music. Oedipus, the former program director for the legendary, groundbreaking FM station WBCN Boston, called him a "true American iconoclast," who "evokes the sound of a wandering troubadour singing his way across the country."

"I write what I want. I like what I like," Auerbach says. If he doesn't like it, he won't play it, and he has canned a lot of material. As Faulkner said, you have to be willing to kill off your darlings. "I believe in strong narrative, and like an old-fashioned story-teller, I hope to be read (or heard). My music is old-fashioned scary rock of the best kind, where playing and writing and musicianship and emotionality really meant something." His second 2007 Nashville-recorded album, *Siren Call*, is testament to that, further garnering worldwide radio play and press acclaim, and catapulting him into successful tours and major league sponsorships and artist rosters like Larrivée Guitars.

In a business that is often in seismic flux, where music is too often computerized and homogenous, where Scarlett Johansson gets played in Starbucks, where the line between reality television and music is uncomfortably blurred, where supposed live performances are often fraught with lip syncing and auto-tuning, Auerbach's sound is one hundred percent his own, and cannot be mistaken for anyone else's. His voice is deep and raspy, yet surprisingly fresh. His music is a return to timeless rock, without any of the synthesized and fabricated sounds you often hear on records and during live performances today.

Often a record sounds great, but the performance is dead upon arrival. Not so with Auerbach. He is determined that each and every song he writes will sound as forceful and true during a performance – with or without his band -- as it sounds on the record. Auerbach's onstage persona and attitude is far from that of the put-on prima donna performer. He simply goes for the jugular, aiming to electrify. When he says he is going to do something, he does it. "I will not be eclipsed," he says. "I believe I can hold the room, whether it is ten people or ten thousand."

In November of 2004, just as Auerbach's rock career was in full stride, a very close loved one was diagnosed with cancer. For the next year, he stopped his music career and became a full-time caregiver. "I stopped everything," he said. "It was not the most important thing. It was the only important thing." It was at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute that his loved one was treated successfully. He knew he wanted to give back, and that he wanted to merge his music with helping cancer patients. "It was a gift," he says of this experience. "It made me a better man."

That summer, Auerbach sat down with trustees and executives at Dana-Farber and the Jimmy Fund (which support cancer research and care at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute), and joined the Leadership Counsel. In June, he played his first benefit concert for music therapy, and because the next two concerts over that year were blockbusters, Dana-Farber made Auerbach's subsequent benefit concerts officially sponsored DFCI events. Over the past five years, he has raised close to \$70,000 through public speaking, house concerts and annual benefit concerts. In addition, a percentage of all of his music revenues (from CD sales, performance fees, and online sales) has gone to Music therapy services at the Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies at Dana-Farber, where cancer experts take novel approaches to cancer treatment. These strategies include massage therapy, acupuncture, music therapy, and nutritional guidance.

In 2008, Auerbach created and taught a series of master class workshops for patients at the Jimmy Fund Clinic called "Rock in Time- Rock Music Performance Jams." These classes, assisted by Brian Jantz (the board certified music therapist at the Zakim Center), focus on performance. He says, "For these young people it is a chance to explore their inner rock star and to have fun, leaving behind the world of cancer, if only for a short time." He was especially inspired by a young man named Paul Coskie, whose teenage years were taken from him after a traumatic brain injury from a car accident followed by a leukemia diagnosis four years later. Auerbach refers to him as a "lion of a young man with tremendous courage and optimism," who fought his way back to life to the astonishment of the doctors.

When he first started the music master classes workshops, Paul's ability to play music was complicated by cerebellar ataxia, (a condition where nerve cells in the cerebellum are lost or damaged, resulting in the patient having less control of certain muscles). For Paul, this loss of control affected his left hand, so Auerbach taught a technique where Paul's left hand, which experiences tremors, anchors to the guitar and acts as a sort of stabilizer and percussive instrument, thereby turning it into an effective playing hand. Auerbach reminded Paul that Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead was missing a finger, encouraging him to turn his obstacle into an asset. This skill was a remarkable breakthrough for Paul, who says that the classes relax him, help him to feel normal and build his confidence as a musician and performer: a testament to music's ability to heal.

Despite the enthusiasm of many for the music therapy program, it was under funded last March due to the reality of the global economic crisis. Funds raised since have reignited the program, and Auerbach resumed directing his master workshops on the 23rd of October. The next day, he was the noted guest at a benefit concert titled "Music Moves, Music Frees, Music Heals", which raised \$1,925 for the music therapy program at Dana-Farber. "The power of music to heal and transform lives is the oldest of truths and the original universal health plan," Auerbach addressed his audience. "Powerful medicine, though much like love, is always part mystery. And there you have it. Who would disagree that perhaps the only thing more terrible than a world without music would be one without love?" And he grinned; "Unless of course you're a music hater, like Sigmund Freud was. Maybe Freud wouldn't have succumbed to Beatle Mania. But I cling to the belief he would have downloaded my music from iTunes."

Inasmuch as Auerbach is a powerhouse onstage, he is a force to be reckoned with in real life. He is an ain't-taking-shit-from-no-one kind of person, to the extreme. "I don't require that you like me, but I require that you respect me," he says. "I believe the world is an often predatory place, that many people are bullies by nature." If anything confirmed this belief, it was the music industry, a cutthroat business fraught with pettiness, jealousy and narcissism. He had to get past a lot of backstabbing and gossip mongering, especially in the beginning. "Don't expect anything from anyone. Don't expect favors," says Auerbach, who was determined to earn his credibility in the rock business before others came on board.

Nothing captures this spirit of self-reliance better than his lyrics on Fall Reaching from Siren Call: "Never played it safe in a tight pinch; chased my fate, made my plan; took some hits never pays to flinch; Followed my lead being my own man; Lessons are learned, no point in preaching; Bridges get burned; if you fall, fall reaching."

And as a man who lives his lyrics, Auerbach's results speak for themselves. He has a growing fan base in the United States and in Europe. He has had two successful tours in Spain, Italy, Austria and most recently, Portugal. He is a Do It Yourself Artist who owns his own publishing company, administered by ASCAP, the music performing rights organization. Many of his songs, including Distant Drumming, Lily of the Valium, Fall Reaching, Memory Lane and Keepin' It Real, continue to be played on FM and internet, college, commercial, and non-comm FM and internet radio in New England, nationally, and worldwide.

We live in the culture of the amateur, the pseudo-professional" Auerbach says. "As an artist, you have to be your own filter and dramatically differentiate yourself in order to be heard." HEARD, that is, and ready to hear – it's the title of Auerbach's record #3, which, naturally, he nailed in Nashville, release date mid-March 2010.