

**An interview with singer/songwriter Jackson Gillies
on his return to the stage in his concert from the Marjorie Luke Theatre
By Rod Lathim**

Santa Barbara has watched singer/songwriter and now producer Jackson Gillies blossom into a prolific creator and performer, having graced just about every venue in the area since he was the ripe young age of 15. After a considerable hiatus marked by exporting himself to study music and songwriting in London, and then a forced return and quarantine in the hills of Santa Barbara due to COVID-19, Gillies returns to the stage. In a recent interview, Gillies referred to himself as “the new Jackson” numerous times. And that’s who we will see in an acoustic concert, supported by some of the area’s most respected musicians, recorded recently onstage at the Marjorie Luke Theatre and streaming for free at www.luketheatre.org beginning December 18.

The “new Jackson” has, by his own admission, evolved musically and emotionally. The young man who won Teen Star in 2016, was a TEDx Speaker, performed with Kenny Loggins, Michael McDonald and David Foster and other music icons, and competed on “American Idol” in 2019, has taken an inward journey and emerged a more mature, mindful, centered soul. His new songs are heartfelt, authentic, and intimate. His singing style is no longer about being the biggest voice in the room and has fewer vocal acrobatics. As with most people who have taken an inward journey, Jackson’s new sound, lyrics, and music are sensitive, contemplative, and reflective of his struggles, losses, and newfound awareness of life’s gifts.

Tell me how your streaming concert at the Marjorie Luke Theatre came about.

Rod Lathim [*the author of this piece*] contacted me and said the beautiful Luke Theatre is sitting empty right now because of COVID and he invited me to create an acoustic concert as a part of the Luke Theatre Virtual Concert Series. This will mark one of the first public appearances of something that I’m creating from the ground up in over a year after my “American Idol” appearances.

You took some time off from performing. How did you use that time?

I sort of took a step back and looked at everything that I was doing and came to the conclusion that I still had work to do. I’ll always have work to do! I needed to work on myself in a big way, so I went over to London to study at The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance. My expectation was that I would form a band and start writing amazing songs and try to get famous over there. I failed spectacularly and it was really for the best because I realized a big part of what I was lacking in my music, and the reason why I wasn’t writing songs and wasn’t happy a lot of the time, was because I didn’t really know how to be a person. I’ve struggled with huge health obstacles, and music has been what I’ve latched onto. It’s kept me afloat. It

was hard to have a personality when I was sick. Music was painting me in a light that wasn't really me.

Once my ailments got better and went away, I was a little bit hollow so I latched on to music. I would try to always constantly be trying to prove that I'm the best in the room and it came from insecurity.

You mentioned that you went through a personal evolution, and your time in London was a wake-up call. How does the music that we're going to hear in this new concert at the Luke reflect that evolution?

I was a musical theatre kind of kid. I didn't play an instrument for a long time. I started playing guitar when I got to Santa Barbara five years ago. In musical theater your goal is to be the biggest voice on stage and over-characterize. That's how I performed music for a long time. The connect in songwriting came from that personal realization that you have to be a person before you're the best musician in the world. The best way I can describe my songs now is that they are an import of life. I import experiences: love, heartbreak, and life, and I export them into songs. I think that's the truest form of expression.

Music is a form of therapy. I've saved thousands on therapists, but that's gone into guitars, microphones, and fancy toys.

Many songs in this concert deal with love and or loss of love. Do those scenarios weigh heavy in the last three to five years for you?

Yes. Being 15 and then coming to 21, heartbreak, love, and losses are inevitable. But the important distinction is that it's not who I am as a character; it's not totally defining of me. Love, romance and emotionalism affect me so much because of the philosophy I take with life and with songwriting: You can have the biggest house and the fanciest car and you could have a Grammy, but if you go home at the end of the day and there's no one to share it with, what do you really have? It becomes validated when it's shared.

Is this the "new Jackson" we're going to see in the Luke Concert?

Yes. Those big notes in those big moments and vocal acrobatics will always have a place in my performances. I always felt like my secret weapon was the big note or the big run. But in doing my soul-searching, as cliché as that sounds, I've found that my new secret weapon is my brain and my heart. I've seen the reactions from my friends and family when I've played my original songs. I can see on their faces they're feeling the same way I felt when I was writing the song. That's better than any standing ovation or crowd response I could ever dream of having. When people can just sit down, close their eyes, and listen to one of my songs and it connects with their life experiences, that's the goal.

Is there a favorite lyric from one of your songs that you perform in this concert that illustrates that experience of your process of using your brain and your heart?

Yes. The song is titled “Sunset” and is a good example of my newfound songwriting era. It came to me in a very quiet, soulful way. The idea popped into my head one night when I was home over Christmas break from London and it wrote itself in 20 minutes. I’d never had a song come that quickly or an image that came that strongly. I couldn’t have written it if I weren’t as quiet as I was at the moment. It came from another source. It’s a subject matter that I’ve never really thought about or talked about — a generalization of death and letting go of life. I wrote it while watching a sunset.

*Yeah the clothes we wear will rip and tear,
our hearts will cease to beat.
And the love we found will turn to dust and float into the sea.*

Those words just sort of spilled out of me. I think it’s due to my not being so loud and braggadocious and sort of settling into my quiet self.

You’ve mentioned your musical influences and I’ve always enjoyed reflecting on how your choices of influencers are from an era older than you.

My musical influences are another big part of my evolution. They include John Mayer, Joni Mitchell, The Avett Brothers, Frank Ocean, Bruno Major and Lizzy McAlpine. I’ve spent the past five years really trying to expand my palate and assimilate all types of music

Your new songs demonstrate a beautiful marriage of lyrics and melodies. Tell me about the process of marrying a lyric with the music and what it feels like when you know you’ve got it right.

I imagine having a song where the lyrics hit beautifully and the melody and chord changes blend perfectly is possibly something like doing heroin, although I never have. The best part is there’s no hangover in the morning. You can go through about 80,000 different versions of songs that never see the light of day to get to *the one* where it all comes together.

Are there any particular new songs in this concert that have potent impact for you or that you would say rise to your top of your list?

Yes. “I Could Have Loved You” will be released either by the time people read this or very soon afterward. That was the song of breakup that I wrote fairly quickly. The way it’s being produced is very different than anything else I’ve ever done.

How is it different?

The song isn't groundbreakingly new in terms of the lyrics or the subject matter for me personally, or in the grand scheme of the pop context, but the fact that I wrote it entirely myself is unique. I co-wrote and co-produced the last two songs I released. The way I'm producing it is hugely a representation of me at this moment. I'm recording most of the tracks at home in my apartment. I'm co-producing the song with the very talented Philip Etherington who produced Lizzy McAlpine's work. This time around I know every inch of every molecule of how I want that song to sound and feel.

You're mixing all the sound on the concert at the Luke. Talk to me about your decision to do the mix.

Thanks to John Mooy, my guitar tech extraordinaire, a few years ago I started getting interested in mixing. When I was in a health ditch and very sad and cooped up in my apartment due to HS [hidradenitis suppurativa], John brought me a mixing board and said, "You're gonna sit down and record one song every day this summer. You're not going to sit in here and sulk." Ever since then I've become completely obsessed with learning how to mix and master audio. It's an incredible thing to have the ability to mix the live audio of my Luke Concert. This is sort of the crux of everything I've obsessed over for the past year and a really great representation of my schooling in London.

My hope with this concert is that it'll be a time capsule. It'll just be something that you can go to and you can revisit the exact time when you first listened to it. "Oh, I remember that was right around Christmas time and it was COVID ... it was so crazy." It'll be a little lunch box of songs that you can come back to and revisit whenever you feel like it.

You're producing not only your own work but are producing other artists' work now. Tell me about that.

This past summer I was lucky enough to produce, mix, and master an EP for Hana Aluna, a Santa Barbara singer/songwriter, and in doing that I realized that it's a whole other avenue for me. It's incredibly difficult to make a living on just being a singer/songwriter. I've found that I'm good at hearing another person's music and knowing exactly what it needs and most importantly not color it with my own sound or my own taste. That's the mark of a really good producer, when you can only hear the artist and not hear the producer's influence on a recording. The EP for Hana is called "Rambler" and features five new songs of hers. We're currently in pre-production for a second EP with Hana and I'm finishing up a single for Ben Catch. I'm ready to expand my producing services to artists in the area. Bring me your stuff!

This isn't your first appearance on the Luke stage. What is the significance of coming back to the Luke for you now in your evolutionary journey?

The Luke stage gives me a really interesting opportunity to monitor my progress through the years, because people have seen a lot of different incarnations of "Jackson" on that stage. Audiences have seen me in the context of playing with other people, sometimes solo, and at

times with the whole of the musical Santa Barbara community in the case of “Teens Sing for Santa Barbara.” But this time it’s very transparent. It’s very much just myself on a stage with a guitar, with a great scenic and lighting look I got to create with the folks at the Luke. This time it feels like the truest me on that stage. I’m always going to evolve and change but this time I think you’ll really see who Jackson is right now.

I can’t express how grateful I am to the Luke for giving me this opportunity. The fact that I got to do this at all is incredible. Some people don’t get to do anything like this ever in their lives. It’s an incredibly special thing to be able to curate and tweak every single aspect of a show down to the lighting, the set, what guitar I’m playing, and who I’m playing the music with — total creative freedom! It’s also a type of therapy, a way of processing everything that’s happened during this pandemic.

Tell me about the musicians who are playing with you.

Trevor Hurvitz, who plays guitar and piano with me, is possibly the most talented musician I’ve ever met and I don’t say that lightly because I’ve been fortunate enough to meet some incredible people. But the things that guy is doing at his age are unfathomable. Like all the musicians with whom I chose to work, he is incredibly genuine, sweet, and supportive.

Randy Tico, my bass player and longtime mentor, is a seasoned Santa Barbara veteran who’s been part of the heartbeat of Santa Barbara for years. Pianist Brian Mann was selected not only because of his musical prowess but because he’s incredibly genuine and loves making music. These are my friends — you gotta make music with your friends. It was also really special to have cellist Laura Mihalka play on my song “July 17” and John Prine’s “Hello In There.” She did a beautiful job.

What was your biggest take-away from your “American Idol” experience?

I realized that I didn’t see myself as ready to be in the public eye. I did “American Idol” because I wanted to get famous and be out there promoting myself as a finished product, and I’m not a finished product. I didn’t really have anything new to bring to the table, and that’s when this whole journey started in learning how to write my songs and learning to really be an artist. I want to be someone people will be listening to when they’re 70 and I’m 82.

Did it teach you anything about values and the disposable nature of artists in the television and commercial setting?

I realized that value is sort of an illusion. Shows like “American Idol” and our mainstream media want us to think that what they’re pushing is the best and that’s all there is. I had that mindset that everyone has to like me or I’m going to be a failure, and that came with catastrophic stress.

I realized there are so many lanes that you can go into, especially with this digital age. I discover new artists every single day on Instagram who have hundreds of thousands of followers who I've never heard of before and are doing sold-out tours. That's my goal. I don't want to be world famous. I don't want to be Shawn Mendes. My goal is to make a comfortable living making music whether that be producing for other people or doing my own songs.

What do you hope people will take away from this concert coming up from the Luke?

I hope this concert enables people to sit down, listen and enjoy the music, and then in a year listen again and think about who they were with during the pandemic — who they were falling in and out of love with, and reflect on all that good or bad. If it's bad, you get to look back and hopefully see how much better things are now.

"Jackson Gillies in Concert" will stream indefinitely, 24/7 at www.luketheatre.org beginning December 18, 2020, as the fourth concert in the Luke Theatre Virtual Concert Series. Currently streaming for free are: ***Mendeleyev In Concert***, ***Resonance*** and ***Pianos at The Luke***. For more info on Jackson visit Jacksongilliesmusic.com.