

Discussing the imminent release of *Giving Up the Ghost*, his fifth album and first on 429 Records, Jackie Greene – singer and songwriter, guitarist and keyboard player, acoustic solo artist and electrifying band leader – hesitates to spell things out too much.

“Could we leave some questions unanswered?” he asks. “So people can make up their own minds about things?” Many people have already made up their minds about Jackie Greene, the Americana phenom from Sacramento who made his first album only six years ago and has steadily built up a passionate following among both rank-and-file fans and some of the biggest names in music. Tours with a who’s-who of American roots music - Buddy Guy, Elvis Costello, Susan Tedeschi, Willie Nelson, B.B. King and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott among them – and performances everywhere from the Newport Folk Festival and the Monterey Jazz Festival to Bonnaroo, have meant that Greene was recognized quickly by those who know talent, and who saw something rare and promising in him. Their early enthusiasm has only grown with each new album.

Nevertheless, Greene himself is less and less keen on defining himself in a world that wants him to be its latest “New Dylan.” Instead, 27-year-old Greene is thinking big - about death or, more accurately, transformation. He named his new, game-changing album *Giving Up the Ghost* for a reason. “The phrase refers to the destruction of certain notions and practices that I used to hold in high esteem,” he says. “I’m just sorta sick of being the kid with the harmonica rack. I don’t want to be Bob Dylan.”

Who Jackie Greene actually is becomes much clearer with *Giving Up the Ghost*. The album opens with the sweeping, richly-orchestrated “Shaken,” the album’s first single, which eschews the clean lines and familiar roots sound of his past. With a deliberative pace and washes of strings and synths, blessed with a memorable melodic hook, “Shaken” is a statement of renewed purpose – even though Greene is vague about what that purpose might be.

“It’s fairly ambiguous, on purpose,” he says of “Shaken,” which describes a figure hiding behind a curtain, waiting to go on stage. “It’s mainly about a dude who’s performed a lot, but is still very nervous about doing it. He’s not very comforted by a lot of things.” That nervous figure doesn’t sound much like the road warrior Greene, who will this year play some 150 dates. He’ll play with his own crack band as well as with Phil Lesh and Friends, who he joined in 2007, taking most of the lead vocals as well as playing keyboards and guitar – his playing of which Lesh has described as “impeccable.”

Lesh’s enthusiasm for Greene’s playing was matched by his affection for Greene’s own songs, a number of which Lesh incorporated into the band’s set, as he did with former “Friend” Ryan Adams. And when the surviving members of The Grateful Dead reunited to play for presidential candidate Barack Obama in February 2008, Greene was playing with the band.

In light of all that, it’s perhaps little surprise that Greene claims that the “shaken” character isn’t him at all. And that’s the point. “Attempting to remove the ego from the writing process was an important step,” he says. “Destroying the notion that I was some troubled artist on the path to enlightenment...and once I began to kill this part of myself, I was able to write in the voices I wanted to write in. I could let the singer exist in many realities.”

That process runs all through *Giving Up the Ghost*, from his attempts to tear down the image-making process, stating at points, “I was born an animal/Wild, wild animal” and “I don’t live in a dream/I live right here with you” to the final song, “Ghosts of Promised Lands,” in which he celebrates his – and others’ – essential anonymity. It is even more important, says Greene, in the music itself. Adept at acoustic finger-picking and ripping it up on the electric, coloring a song on the electric piano or firing up a jam with a swirl of notes from the Hammond B-3, Greene is above all a working musician, and with *Giving Up the Ghost* he gave himself permission to do things musically that he hadn’t dared before.

“I’ve always been a folkie guy,” he says. “Most of my songs have been pretty standard changes, and I’m trying to not do that anymore. I want more unique changes that might not fall into that category. I’m trying to challenge myself to make the music different.”

But despite those changes, Greene’s passionate fans need not fear: *Giving Up the Ghost* also delivers plenty of the unvarnished Americana that has made Greene such a sensation. Backed alternately by his own touring band and the same crack studio band assembled by producer Steve Berlin – Elvis Costello’s rhythm section of Pete Thomas and Davey Farragher, Los Lobos’ David Hidalgo, pedal steel giant Greg Leisz, and fiddler Larry Campbell – Greene still brings it all back home.

“Like a Ball and Chain” evokes the Stones at their rollicking best, while the bluesy stomp “Don’t Let the Devil Take Your Mind” (written with The Mother Hips Tim Bluhm, with whom Greene has recorded and performed as The Skinny Singers) sounds like it could have been written 50 years ago. “Downhearted,” a topical rumination on the state of the country, has an easy-rollin’ R&B feel, and “Another Love Gone Bad” features one of Greene’s prettiest, country-inflected melodies.

And as he prepares his band to head out for another year of serious touring, Greene is giving himself and his band the same sort of license he gave himself as a songwriter. “The recording is the recording, and the live show is the live show, and in my mind that’s different, it sounds way different, and that’s good,” he says. “Live is still the best way to experience music, because it’s pretty pure. If you want to hear something the same way over and over, you can listen to the record, but if you want to hear the song, you go hear it live. You might get a fucked-up version of the song, I might play it on the piano instead, and it might not work, but that’s just how it goes.”

Greene is just as philosophical about his commercial fate as the release of his fifth album looms and the pressure grows for him to sell the large numbers of records his enormous talent clearly warrants.

“I don’t know where everyone else gets that from,” he says. “I don’t feel that pressure. I’ve stopped feeling pressured about anything, because I realized that when everyone says, ‘This is it, it’s going to go big,’ and then it doesn’t, you let yourself down. I’ve stopped giving a shit about that. It makes me feel better about me. If this record totally flops, I’ll just make another one. I’m attached to ‘em, I created ‘em, but the commercial thing isn’t a reflection on my art or anything

else. It's its own thing." Thus freed from some of the musical, lyrical and commercial constraints he had once put on himself, Jackie Greene is pushing forward into new territory, and with *Giving Up the Ghost*, he is expanding his own, and others' notion of who he is. The new album features the sounds of a talented youngster giving himself some room to move, to explore new textures, surprising chord changes, and other characters that may or may not be him. "Ultimately," he says, "My hope is that these songs will someday ignore their creator and tell their tales all by themselves."