

# The American Daily

Analysis with Political and Social Commentary

## Tim Buckley Is Still Ahead Of His Time

By [Aaron Goldstein](#) (05/20/07)

On a Saturday afternoon several years ago I was listening to the local oldies station in Boston and decided to call in a request. Usually I am greeted by a blaring busy signal when I call but this time I got through.

The conversation went something like this:

ME: I'd like to make a request.

OLDIES DJ: What would you like to hear?

ME: Something from Tim Buckley.

OLDIES DJ: Who?

ME: Tim Buckley. He once appeared on The Monkees TV show.

OLDIES DJ: Never heard of him.

I suppose I should not have been surprised. Although Buckley released nine albums between 1966 and 1974 they met with little chart success. Nor were there any singles to speak of. But in another respect I was surprised. The DJ I was speaking with must have been in his 50's, possibly in his 60's. Buckley was signed at Elektra Records. The same label that signed The Doors. He did occasionally appear on television and toured fairly regularly across the United States and Europe. I took it for granted that a DJ of the 1960's and 1970's would know all the musicians from the 1960's and 1970's.

But perhaps this was by design. Much of Buckley's material, let alone his multi-octave voice, would not have fit a radio format, even supposedly "progressive" FM stations of the early 1970's. The radio was no place for songs like "Love From Room 109 of the Islander on Pacific Coast Highway", "Blue Melody", "Anonymous Proposition" or especially the title track of Buckley's 1970 album Starsailor – an album simultaneously considered his finest work yet horribly misunderstood. The best way to describe Starsailor to those who have never listened to it is to imagine the Edvard Munch painting, The Scream, set to music.

Buckley died in 1975 of an accidental overdose of heroin. He was only 28 years old. It is debatable as to whether Buckley's music was just forgotten or if it had ever been properly remembered in the first place. Whatever the case, it thankfully has not disappeared altogether. Buckley's music has come to be appreciated over time albeit very incrementally. In 1978, his song "Once I Was" was featured in the climatic scene of the Hal Ashby film Coming Home where Bruce Dern commits suicide. In 1984, Buckley gained a new audience in the U.K. when the British super group This Mortal Coil recorded Buckley's "Song to the Siren" – the same song he had once sung on The Monkees TV show. In the 1990s, several previously unreleased live recordings were discovered. The most notable was Dream Letter: Live in London 1968, a two disc CD, which preserved a rare recording of Buckley's first concert performance in England at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. In 1994, Buckley's son, Jeff, would release his debut album Grace. Jeff inherited Tim's multi octave voice but had more commercial appeal. Of course, music critics could not help but compare Jeff Buckley with his father and would question him about it. However, Jeff grew up estranged from Tim who left his wife Mary Guibert before Jeff was born in November 1966. In fact, Jeff only spent eight days with his father around Easter in April 1975. Two months later, Tim Buckley would be dead. Jeff Buckley spent much of life distancing himself from a father that had little to do with his upbringing.

But when Jeff Buckley accidentally drowned in the Wolf River in Memphis almost ten years ago (May 29, 1997 to be exact) at the age of 30 the comparisons between father and son would intensify further. This was especially true with the publication of David Browne's book, Dream Brother: The Lives of Jeff & Tim Buckley in 2001. Although Browne's book is primarily about Jeff it would have been impossible to write a book about Jeff without also writing about Tim. A year later, Lee Underwood, who served for many years as Tim

Buckley's guitarist, would write his own book about Tim titled *Blue Melody: Tim Buckley Remembered*.

All of these works provided more information about Buckley than what was known about him when he was alive. However, Tim Buckley's estate has been silent on his legacy. That is until now. Earlier this month, a new DVD titled *Tim Buckley: My Fleeting House* was released with the blessing of his estate. The DVD consists of interviews with David Browne, Lee Underwood as well as Larry Beckett, Buckley's longtime lyricist. Beckett might have very well provided the best explanation as to why that DJ I called had never heard of Tim Buckley. Beckett said, "If the pieces that we wrote got on the radio then fine but if they didn't that was equally fine." He went on to say their objective was to create "works worthy of listening to." My *Fleeting House* also consists of full length live performances including his appearance on *The Monkees* forty years ago as well as appearances on various American, British and Dutch television shows. Buckley also turns up in a scene of a 1971 film *Christian Licorice Store* featuring Beau Bridges, Maud Adams and a pre-Colonel Henry Blake McLean Stevenson. In *Christian Licorice Store*, Buckley's performs "Pleasant Street" (the movie's title is derived from the song) while Adams is taking pictures of him. Many of these live performances have been available on the Internet for years but are presented in their full glory on the DVD.

*My Fleeting House* gives the viewer an opportunity to go inside all of Tim Buckley's musical rooms. But for my money the most interesting room was *The Show*. In February 1970, Buckley made an appearance on a program called *The Show*, which was broadcast on WITV, a PBS affiliate in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The *My Fleeting House* DVD features Buckley performing two songs on *The Show* from *Starsailor* – "I Woke Up" and "Come Here Woman". Both of these songs sound radically different from the album which was already very much in left field to start. If Buckley's music during his *Starsailor* experimental phase did fit it into any genre it might have been with a Miles Davis crowd. Yet both sadly and strangely Buckley was never accepted into the jazz world. Then again, Buckley might not have sought such acceptance. The DVD also features Buckley interacting with the studio audience as well with Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch-22*, who also was a guest on the same show.

Like nearly all DVDs, *My Fleeting House* features extras which include Larry Beckett reading his essay about "Song to the Siren" and about how Tim Buckley turned down an opportunity to write a song for *Midnight Cowboy*. Beckett and Underwood also, independently of one another, review Buckley's studio albums. While Underwood offers unqualified praise for everything in the Buckley discography up to and including Buckley's later efforts *Sefronia* and *Look At The Fool*, Beckett becomes more critical of Buckley's post-*Starsailor* works when Buckley attempted (and failed) to become a more commercially viable act. Beckett describes Buckley's 1972 album *Greetings From L.A.* as a "strange revulsion from folk rock."

Tim Buckley (as well as Jeff Buckley) inspired much of the poetry inside my 2003 chapbook *Oysters and the Newborn Child: Melancholy and Dead Musicians*. Indeed, the title is inspired by "Song to the Siren". When Buckley performed "Song to the Siren" on *The Monkees* it included the lyric, "I am as puzzled as the oyster." This lyric was supposedly mocked by singer Judy Henske, who was at that time married to Jerry Yester, who co-produced two of Buckley's albums (*Goodbye and Hello*, *Happy/Sad*). Buckley was said to be so distraught at Henske's criticisms that he refused to play the song in public or record it. Buckley would eventually record "Song to the Siren" on *Starsailor* but with a far different arrangement and an amended lyric that sung "I am as puzzled as the newborn child."

Speaking for myself, *My Fleeting House* serves as a reminder of why I devoted so much time and energy to writing poetry about Tim Buckley. I cannot say with any measure of confidence if *My Fleeting House* would inspire its viewers to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard but it will serve as an introduction to one of the most complicated, enigmatic and unique musicians of the second half of the 20th Century. *My Fleeting House* further demonstrates why more than thirty years after his death Tim Buckley remains ahead of his time.