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New Tim Buckley Retrospective DVD Offers Few Revelations

BY SEAN P. MANNING
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Full-blown artistic reinvention is often a concept associated with performers who have reached a certain plateau of critical acclaim and commercial success. If, for instance, David Bowie wants to change from Ziggy Stardust to the soul-singing Thin White Duke, he can. If Prince wants to change his name to a symbol and back he will, and people will eat it up.

But to know and love the music of songwriter Tim Buckley is to see the less glamorous (but equally brilliant) side of reinvention. Starting off as a songwriter in the post-Revolver school of psychedelic pop, Buckley eventually made forays into Appalachian folk (Goodbye and Hello), jazz (Starsailor), and blue-eyed soul (Sefronia). This translated to an unusually prolific career while cementing Buckley's reputation as a cult act, with even devotees showing preference to specific eras of his work. Starsailor in particular remains a controversial release, splitting fans over whether the Miles Davis-inspired jazz fusion is poetic brilliance or just a chaotic caterwaul.

It's easy to see why, despite critical acclaim, Buckley never became the almost-household name that his son, the late songwriter Jeff Buckley, was: Availability of his releases has fluctuated throughout the years (Starsailor, after being virtually unavailable on CD for many years, was just added to the iTunes store in 2006), and there has yet to be a definitive best-of collection that would introduce him to new fans. This is perhaps why the shortcomings of "My Fleeting House," the first ever collection of Tim Buckley videos made available on DVD, feel a little more gaping than they would for an artist who was better established in the public eye.

The disc presents 13 television performances along with interviews from Buckley's songwriting partner Larry Beckett, guitarist Lee Underwood and David Browne (author of "Dream Brother: The Lives of Jeff and Tim Buckley") in order to beef the content up to feature length. The performances themselves are unimpeachable, save for the pervasive use of multiple fade-outs and other gimmicky camera tricks. It's Buckley doing what he did best, and there's something marvelous about seeing it unfold with his Spartan two-man backing band behind him.

Where the collection falters, then, is with just about everything else. Rather than following a linear structure, the documentary interviews are structured around talking about the performances themselves, which creates a misleading summation of Buckley's career while offering few revelations. Underwood talks about how Buckley used strange guitar chords to compensate for a finger injury that kept him from playing standard barre shapes. Then he rants about how people are too exclusive with the music they listen to. And then how progressive Buckley was for sharing the stage with a black conga player. This is supported with footage of Buckley and said conga player smiling at each other. All of these claims may be true, but in the context of the film it feels reductive and more than a little besides the point. Elsewhere, a saggy-looking Beckett reminisces about the '60s and bitterly refers to Buckley's songwriting years without him as an "experiment." Personal insight is one thing—and in a smaller dose it could have been a boon here, but no one here seems to have any critical distance from Buckley, which only adds more smoke and mirrors to his mystique.

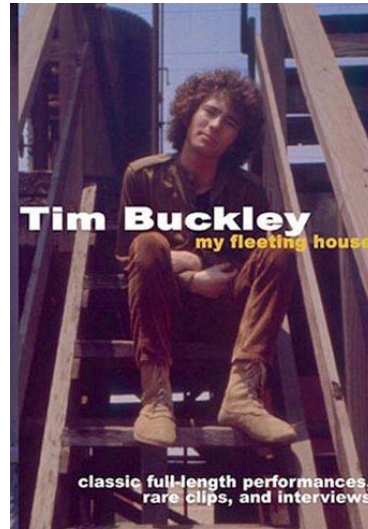
So then what's wrong here? Was Ray Manzarek or Robert Plant tied up the weekend these interviews were filmed? If Buckley really is such an important songwriter—and he is—this is hardly a worthy collection for him. Much of the commentary of "My Fleeting House" feels petty, and newcomers would be better suited to simply pick up one of his albums and uncover their mysteries for themselves.

Say goodbye and hello to Sean at arts@dailycal.org.



COURTESY/TIMBUCKLEY.NET

A SONG TO THE SIREN. Singer and songwriter Tim Buckley has come to be known as an innovator of '60s and '70s folk.



Tim Buckley MY FLEETING HOUSE [Mvd Visual]

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