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Tim Buckley 101: New DVD Inspires Comprehensive Look at Jeff's Dad

By **Christian Klepac**
Friday, 20 July 2007

Sooner or later, every music fan must reckon with the Buckleys.

Father Tim and son Jeff, the Bruce and Brandon Lee of the music world, were geniuses with golden vocal chords and weirdly parallel lives.

The two spent time together only briefly, when Jeff was too young to remember, but they both eschewed compromise while pursuing their challenging eclectic musical visions, and both their careers were cut tragically short by their untimely deaths, Tim at 28 and Jeff at 30.

Jeff, of course, shot to stardom with the release of his 1994 debut *Grace*, one of the best records to come out of the 90s, and one that still appears regularly near the top of music magazine "best of" lists.

Unless you've lived under a rock for twenty years, you've probably heard Jeff's cover of John Cale's version of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" enough times that, despite its transcendent ethereal beauty, you'd rather never hear it again.

Tim, on the other hand, has always been a mysterious figure to younger listeners. Many Jeff fans know him only as a handsome Summer of Love flower child who had a few minor records, then faded into obscurity.

For the curious, his nine wildly different albums offer no easy place to start, and the heretofore released anthologies are a bewildering mishmash of styles, backing bands, and contradictory creative phases. Jeff didn't help, publicly distancing himself from his father and claiming to be influenced less by Tim than by Led Zeppelin and The Smiths.

Thankfully, we now have *My Fleeting House*, a collection of all the available television appearances the senior Buckley ever made, as well as lengthy interviews with friends, band members, and biographer David Browne.

This DVD is the most accessible point of entry to the work of a nearly forgotten artist whose importance extends beyond the family dynasty to the dozens of other musicians and critics who cite him as a profound influence.

As a documentary, *My Fleeting House* is worth watching once, but the performances can be viewed individually and are worth seeing many times over. They are all the footage that remains of Tim Buckley, and they tell the sad but riveting story of the comet-like trajectory of his career.

Many Jeff fans know [Tim] only as a handsome Summer of Love flower child who had a few minor records, then faded into obscurity

The videos start with Tim's unlikely appearance on the Monkees' TV show, playing "Song to the Siren" on his twelve-string, seated on a smashed-up car.

This is the Tim who rose to fame as an Age of Aquarius troubadour with flowing locks and a sweet, vulnerable persona.

His Dylanesque period extends through the first third of the videos, including an odd TV spot with a voiceover by classical composer Leonard Bernstein, who offers guarded enthusiasm for "these young people and their music."

By the time of his BBC appearances (some of the best footage on the DVD), he had assembled a unique band of upright bass, electric guitar, and conga drums, and was reaching beyond folk for a new sound incorporating jazz and Caribbean rhythms.

His 1969 record *Happy Sad* is often considered a breakthrough moment, as folk structures drop away in favor of an eerie vibes-laced blues, and Tim stretches his voice into the jazz instrument it would soon become. Unfortunately, the video for "Who Do You Love," a transitional song from this period, is little more than still photos and random concert footage, assembled posthumously.

With "I Woke Up," performed on a short-running TV program called *The Show*, it's obvious that everything has changed. Tim's new band, complete with trumpet player Buzz Gardner (a Frank Zappa associate)



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delivers a highly improvisational rendition of an unusual song, where Tim mutates his voice into a tortured moan. This band was the backing group for the 1970 album *Starsailor*, which Tim later referred to as "my masterpiece" and which deliberately broke all the rules of structure, harmony, rhythm, and arrangement. Reportedly the band never did a take the same way twice, and Tim is said to have become furiously angry at drummer Maury Baker when he settled into a standard rock groove during a live show. "Never repeat yourself," said the bandleader.

"I Woke Up" is followed on the same program by a rendition of "Come Here Woman," an even stranger and more abrasive song that leaves jazz itself behind, degenerating (or transcending) into an atonal guitar attack layered with animalistic howls that sounds more like early Sonic Youth than anything that was being done in 1970.

Unsurprisingly, *Starsailor* was not a great commercial success. *The Show* was one of those programs that featured a hip young audience seated on the floor around the band, and one has to wonder what these kids thought of this challenging new music. Judging by record sales, most of them were not too enthusiastic, and Tim's corporate handlers begged him to release some older songs.

He complied with the *Blue Afternoon* album, and the video for "Blue Melody" shows his *Starsailor* band turning in an effervescent, jazz-infused take on one of Tim's most beautiful and traditional songs.

Tim seemed pleased enough with *Blue Afternoon*, but the songs didn't stay long in his live repertoire—he was on to wilder territory with the *Lorca* album, which just about nobody purchased.

The performance of "Venice Beach (Music Boats by the Bay)" from the L.A. public access show *Boboquivari*, shows Tim using his voice and his band to create a drifting, impressionistic portrait of a simpler time in his life. By this time he was creating suites of abstract music that couldn't really be called "songs." They were an entirely new form, born of jazz and folk, but very few people were listening.

By now the meteor of Tim Buckley's art had reached its apex and was beginning to fall back to earth. His concerts were poorly attended, he came under increasing pressure to record something commercial, and the stresses of artistic rejection and financial uncertainty drove him toward alcohol and drugs. Tim had a child and an ex-wife to support, and he was only 25 years old.

Eventually he capitulated to corporate pressure and made *Greetings from L.A.* The slick, barrelhouse rock of the new record seemed destined to put Tim back on top, but in a typical display of artistic rebellion and commercial self-sabotage, Tim's lyrics for *Greetings* were peppered with references to lesbianism, sadomasochism, and drug use.

Despite this transgressive content, the hardcore fans ... turned on him, citing *Greetings* as evidence that Tim had sold out.

His manager later said that because of the lyrics, the album "didn't have a chance in hell at radio." Despite this transgressive content, the hardcore fans Tim had garnered during *Starsailor* turned on him, citing *Greetings* (and the patchwork follow-up *Sefronia*) as evidence that Tim had sold out.

This accusation is fiercely denied by friends and fellow musicians from this period, who claim that Tim loved his new music, showed up sober and eager to work, and put all his heart into once again reinventing himself. There is strong evidence for this in the video for "Sally Go Round the Roses," which is itself worth the purchase price of the DVD. On record, this dark reworking of a fifties doo-wop number comes across like a sodden late-Doors throwaway, but seen on NBC's late night music show *Midnight Special*, the song pulses with erotic energy, and Tim swaggers, sneers, and delivers the vocal goods. One is reminded strongly of a young Lou Reed, and left to wonder where Tim's career could have gone if his managers had any idea what to do with him.

Even as sales remained stagnant, Tim pursued his muse with relentless energy, and was said to be in talks with long-time lyric collaborator Larry Beckett on a new song cycle based on Joseph Conrad's novel *An Outcast of the Islands*.

His musical searching came to an abrupt end on June 28, 1975, when he took a fatal snort of heroin at a friend's house, the day after his tour ended. He had controlled his drug use on tour, and some speculate that his reduced tolerance, plus the alcohol he drank earlier that day, allowed him to die from an otherwise normal dose.

My Fleeting House probably represents the only collection of Tim Buckley footage we will ever see; most likely there isn't any more. For fans of his work, it's an absolute must-have. For the curious, it's an excellent place to start.

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