

Jeff Buckley Blessed Idiot



Despite rave reviews, Jeff Buckley's debut album *Grace* went pretty much unnoticed when it was released here last year — a pity because it is among the decade's finest: eclectic, hypnotic and boasting a glorious version of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah'. This was a major talent in full flight, and although he did sound eerily like his father, the late Tim Buckley (who died of a drug overdose in the mid-70s), Jeff was clearly his own man. Over a year on and it still sounds like a classic, and reactions to Buckley's live shows of late have been akin to those of Hendrix's legendary London shows — 'At times it was as though rock music was merging with the ecclesiastical... it was as though an angel was singing for us,' raved *The Age* in Australia recently. The live video for

'Eternal Life', currently being played on Max, also suggests Buckley can kick arse with the best of them, and represents how far Buckley has come from his days and nights of solo shows in New York cafes. *Grace* is as much Led Zeppelin as Leonard Cohen, and Buckley's heroes Charlie Parker, Patti Smith, Nina Simone, Van Morrison, even Bad Brains, are all there in Buckley's music — "In order to really pay tribute to things you must really love yourself," is the way he likes to put it. It was late on a Tuesday night, New York time, when I rang, and the first thing we talked about was the weather, which had admittedly been rather extreme...

"The blizzard totally obliterated any city life, and grown people were out there throwing snowballs at each other... you know that

old thing where, like, you catch a friend from behind with a snowball, and you don't mean to hurt them but you do, and they cry and go: 'That really hurt!' But, like, watching 42-year-old yuppies do it, it was really cool."

You grew up in southern California, but then moved to New York. What do you like about the city?

"The whole fuckin' city's alive. It's just so evidently alive, compared to LA, which was very submerged and isolated. It's a secret sort of bloodstream that's flowing through that city. There's people trying to make it, and become famous, and get one over on each other, you know, it's pretty sickening. The whole Hollywood thing — it's an industry town like a steel mill town, or a coalmining town, but the industry there is fame, it's not art. The people there are all various hues of treachery... I mean who wants to be famous anyway?"

So, you moved to New York and started doing solo shows...

"Yeah, I was playing in New York for two and a half years. I did — at least at Sin-E [a small Irish cafe on the Lower East Side] — a gig a night if not two a week, including some other cafe. I went totally self sacrificial and starting gigging things left and right, 'cause I needed to make some money and I needed to learn this thing I was trying to learn. At Sin-E I used to play, like, two hours straight — a big workload. Sometimes I'd luck into something where I'd get like 200 dollars in one sweep opening up for someone at a bigger club, but mostly I'd play for tips. Making a two-hour show go like that though was real fun... it still is fun. I did something for New Year's.

"You see, I wanted to become a good storyteller, and I had no other way or tutelage to get me to that end, so I decided that I had to make it up myself, because there was no-one around to teach me. I guess I was yearning to meet Ray Charles some night. That teacher thing came from my whole be-bop obsession, you know, like that old story about Miles Davis goes to New York and he meets Charlie Parker, and then he comes into the ranks and then becomes a genius — which is good, I think. It's more original that way."

There was quite a big bidding war in 1992 from labels wanting to sign you. There must've been a lot of money floated before you - were you ever tempted by that?

"No, 'cause I had a really good lawyer,

and we concentrated on the structure of the deal rather than the money. [Buckley finally signed to Sony offshoot Columbia.] Money as an entity in the music biz world doesn't belong to you. It's like numbers on a piece of paper somewhere. You can come up with, like, four genius albums and still not make a cent, but the structure of the deal, that's the whole thing that keeps you alive — meaning, like, publishing or how the deadlines are for you... it must be really collaborative and you must define the word perpetuity — very important, you gotta do that."

Had you grown up with a distrust of the business?

"Oh, yeah, 'cause my stepfather's wife's ex-husband [laughs] managed a group, and there were other people of my mom's age who from time to time would lead me aside after they saw me with a guitar in my hand, and they'd give me the talk, you know: 'This business is a jungle... they'll steal you blind and rip you off and rape you, blah, blah, blah,' and they'd be in their frustrated state, thinking they could've had it all. But what I saw was they had a child and a really nice home to live in, and I didn't get it until I grew up a little bit and went to LA."

***Grace* is the title of your album. What does it mean to you?**

"*Grace* there meaning a prayer like a death prayer — not being afraid of it, sitting totally immersed in trouble and in all those crappy slings and arrows that come to you in regular life, and then someone begins to love you for real, and instead of wishing for death, even thinking about it, it's not a factor at all. Death meaning relief."

Even when you played solo you used an electric guitar rather than an acoustic...

"Well, it's a lot less limited as far as sound goes. You're dealing with electric current and that can pull a whole variety of sounds out of, like, the reverb unit on the PA. I'd just plug straight into the PA, put a mass of reverb on, and the louder I played the more it would appear, and it would disappear the quieter I played, and you could, like, bend notes and leave them bent while you sing."

Have you written much material since *Grace*?

"Not a lot of stuff I can keep, but I got a lot of things cooking up."

You lost your diary in Sydney...

"No, no I recovered it. That's the diary I constantly lose and constantly recover. I've done that a little under 30 times."

You must be blessed.

"No, the world's a pretty honest place... oh, yeah, I'm blessed you know, the idiot's always blessed. You always have idiot luck when you're an idiot like me!"

Buckley plays Auckland's St James theatre on February 9, accompanied by his band, who one critic described rather nicely as "a portable epiphany unit".

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