

# THE MAN BEHIND GRACE: THE FORGOTTEN STORY OF GARY LUCAS

BY ELLIOT PRENTICE

*In the summer of 1991, two friends sat in a room together, armed with little more than a tape-recorder, a guitar, and a shared love for Led Zeppelin. What they would end up recording together, in these sessions, would prove monumental for the foundation of one of the most celebrated albums of the century, yet only one of their names was on the cover. Within just two years, one was absorbed into the machinery of a major label, touring globally and elevated to a near-mythic status. The other remained on the outside, navigating his way through the precarity of independent music. It is the latter of these two bandmates – guitar icon Gary Lucas – that I was lucky enough to speak to about his friend, partner and singer, Jeff Buckley.*

*Gary Lucas and Jeff Buckley first met at St Ann's church, while preparing for a tribute concert to the late singer-songwriter Tim Buckley. Despite having met his father only once before his death, Jeff Buckley chose to take part in the concert in an effort to gain some sense of closure – particularly as he had not been invited to the funeral. Lucas and Buckley were paired together to perform I Never Asked to Be Your Mountain, Sefronia: The King's Chain, and Phantasmagoria in Two. Yet long before they ever stepped foot onto the stage that April evening in 1991, Lucas had already pinned Buckley as the future. Recalling Buckley's first visit to his apartment to practice for the concert he said, "He was superb... I had this moment where I heard him sing for the first time and my jaw dropped. I was like 'Jeff that's amazing!' and he was like, 'really?'... I knew on the basis of that first time together in the house that we would work really well together."*

*Their connection was electric and they soon practiced far more than just Tim Buckley's*

*songs; writing original songs like Bluebird Blues which can be found on Gary Lucas' recent album of demos Songs to No One. By the time the concert rolled around they had formed an almost, as Lucas told me, "telepathic bond". When asked about the moments with Buckley he looked back on most fondly, he recounted singing The King's Chain in particular: "it felt so good in a relaxed kind of way to be up there working with Jeff... we were both really in sync there... those were the most magical of moments." Gary Lucas would lay down complicated, intricate yet beautiful guitar tracks and Jeff Buckley would lay perfectly poetic and meaningful lyrics on top of them, without ever even needing to change a note – "I thought he was the best young collaborator I'd ever come across and probably, I would say, he remains that. I've worked with some amazing people, both younger and older musicians, but he, to me, really stands out in my mind as head and shoulders the most gifted... he was a natural foil for what I was trying to do... I just write the instrumentals and say, here, "do what you want on these?" and I just trusted him. Like, he knew what to*



*do. I didn't have to worry about that aspect of it or micromanage this thing."*

*Following the concert, Buckley returned to Los Angeles where he had been struggling to get his career off the ground. Lucas recounted to me that "he had unsuccessfully been shopping a tape of his early demos... but nobody was going for him." The problems in LA didn't just end at music, Buckley had also been struggling on the social scene – "it was really hard for him to have friends. He had a few friends who he would talk about, but kids used to put him down and say, 'the only reason there's anybody interested in you, Buckley, is because of your dad.'" It was around this time that Gary Lucas had been working on his own record with a different singer, however this ended up falling through when the label said that they were going to back out of the deal. "You can't afford to sue us," they sternly said to him and they were right.*

*Gary Lucas was thrown into a world of chaos and confusion – "I was despairing, like, how am I going to keep going? You know, if I had a crystal ball to look in the future, where will I be in 10 years? It was scary." But, as he suffered from this major defeat, he ultimately decided the only option was to keep going within the world of music. As such, Lucas picked up his phone, dialled in Jeff Buckley's number and asked him to join his band Gods and Monsters. Jeff Buckley quickly responded yes. It was equally around this time that Gary Lucas had a fruitful explosion of musical*



*genius, working on two demos named "And You Will" and "Rise Up to Be" which he would then send over to Buckley in LA. When Buckley returned to New York, he began to sing his lyrics over them*

*There's a moon asking to stay  
Long enough for the clouds to fly me away  
Well, it's my time coming, I'm not afraid,  
afraid to die*

*"This song is called Grace now," Jeff Buckley would say to Gary Lucas, who sat there mesmerised at what would become the title track of the album which go on to be #147 on the 2020 Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. As the song subsided, Jeff Buckley began to sing the next one:*

*I'm lying in my bed  
The blanket is warm  
This body will never be safe from harm  
Still feel your hair, black ribbons of coal  
Touch my skin to keep me whole*

*Before long, the two opening tracks of the album Grace had been near completed: Grace and Mojo Pin. When asked about what he thought of the lyrics, Gary Lucas responded "I thought they were great... I think his lyrics were very poetical overall," but there was one question remaining, "the one thing that I questioned was I didn't know what a Mojo Pin was and I said, Jeff, what's a Mojo Pin? as I've related in my book, and elsewhere, he mimed kind of injecting himself and so I was like oh man, I didn't see that coming."*

*Armed with a cache of new music, Buckley and Lucas began to play some shows around New York. Within the second show they played together, Lucas shared with me that they had invited Nick Cave, a personal hero of Jeff Buckley, to attend and watch. However, as Lucas recalled, "Nobody came backstage... I think it was so late, so we just got off stage and packed up." Perhaps fuelled by his history in L.A., Jeff Buckley felt "this acute disappointment," because of it. Lucas would go on to tell me that "He [Buckley] was a bit insecure at that point, and so I tried to make him feel better I was*

like 'Hey man, you know, maybe he got a little scared... seeing you up there because he was like, man, you know, this kid can really shine as a performer.' Nonetheless, Lucas and Buckley continued playing many shows together as they built towards their big showcase show at St Ann's where, just under a year earlier, they had first met.

However, their relationship had begun to strain during these months as the two bandmates began to clash. While I will not get into the details of these clashes, they can be found within Gary Lucas' book *Touched by Grace*. Following their debut at St Ann's on Friday 13<sup>th</sup>, (An "Ominous day" Gary Lucas would later tell me), the initial hopes for a record deal had fallen through leaving the band with a sore taste in their mouth. As Lucas remained hopeful that they would be able to sign with a different record, Buckley did not remain quite as hopeful. "Jeff quit the project abruptly after that show," Gary Lucas would later recount, "I didn't see it coming, I mean, you know, I was hoping for the best though.... But there were signs of his discontent." When asked if he thought that getting the record deal then would save the band, Lucas responded "it is hard to say, but... from the way it sort of went south after that night, I wouldn't bet on it." Gary Lucas partially blames the lack of a record deal at that concert on bad acoustics within the church, recounting that he was hopeful they would still get the deal "on the basis of the tape... as suddenly the music really issued forth and it sounded so exciting," but, as he told me, "The whole thing crashed when he phoned me up."

The true reason behind the breakup on Jeff Buckley's part is not entirely known. A possible cause of the divide, which is sometimes discussed, is the idea that the record labels tried to cultivate a solo image of Buckley, rather than the band. However, Gary Lucas was quick to strike down this notion; "I think it came from Jeff," Gary Lucas would tell me, "Jeff was very competitive with his father, and... given that when his father had passed when he was 28... [he] had 10 albums or so under his belt and Jeff was not that prolific. "Lucas believed that his vision of "to get up there and to just be in each other's faces and



be rocking out, inspiring each other," would never have worked as Buckley was not interested in anything other than being, as Lucas says, "the focal point."

A week after their major debut at St Ann's, the band would play one final show together in the very place which had formed vital to so much of their respective careers – the Knitting Factory. Near the end of it, as Gary Lucas told me, "He [Buckley] said, well, 'everybody the band is breaking up.' And I was shocked. I mean, first of all, I didn't think it was appropriate for him to announce it as it was my band, and he made some dumb jokes. I thought they were just inappropriate. He put on a Ringo voice and said, 'let's kick Gary out of the band and steal him for his good ideas.'" Just like that, the formal duo of Gary Lucas and Jeff Buckley had officially ended.

While they still did a few shows together, with Buckley appearing as a special guest, they slowly grew even further apart. However, on Tuesday, August 17, Gary Lucas received a phone call from Jeff Buckley. "Remember those great songs we used to perform together, 'Grace' and 'Mojo Pin'? Well, I want to record them on the album... and I want you to play on them." Gary Lucas, still recovering from the breakup was left with the decision on whether to hand him over the songs and play them together for his album *Grace*. When asked whether he ever thought about saying no to this offer he responded, "I mean, it's crossed my mind if I was really still very angry about the betrayal you know... I could have just said 'oh f\*\*k you!' or something but no... one part of me was just surprised. I thought, 'he's being friendly' and,

*'you know, I give people a chance... when he did call, it was like a nice surprise, but I hadn't forgotten.'*

*And so, it came to be that Gary Lucas would join Jeff Buckley within the recording studio, playing on the songs that they had written together, for his album. The two tracks recorded together – Grace and Mojo Pin – form the opening two songs of the entire album with Gary Lucas' guitar playing actually forming the very first sound you hear on said album. When asked about his views on the rest of the album, he responded "Honestly, it took me a long time to appreciate the rest of the Grace album," Gary Lucas would go on to tell me, "You know my initial reaction to hearing it, now... you could say this is my ego, but it didn't really click with me. I was a bit disappointed after hearing it, I think he should have gone in a more experimental direction, like Grace and Mojo Pin." Lucas was quick to clarify that "there's still plenty of experimentation on there, it's not like I would dismiss that record at all. And, over the years, I grew to really love it... but I was the father of the first two songs... they don't sound like the other songs on that record by a long shot." While the album Grace is, by all accounts, a masterpiece it is fair to say that it is far less experimental than a lot of Jeff Buckley's earlier work, and live pieces. Gary Lucas, when prompted on which of their own songs in particular he liked, shone light on "Bluebird Blues," with it being one of the first songs they wrote together –*



*"We just jammed on it, so it was like a 10-minute song, but it was liberating to apply improvisational techniques and Jeff was really adept at it. He could like go wherever I would switch up on guitar and following everything I did and... unify it and make it sound really coherent." Equally, when asked about if there was a particular live version of Buckley's work that was more in fitting with Lucas' vision, "As far as Jeff's own stuff, well, there was one I heard him do. I think it was the live version of Mojo Pin – it could have been the live at the wetlands that's floating around. He has a whole long section where he's improvising and talking... I would like when he would stretch out the songs and made them more improvisational"*

*Interestingly, some of the songs which would later make its way onto the album were actually derived from the songs in which Jeff Buckley had unsuccessfully taped in L.A., "I think one of the songs on the tape became Last Goodbye," Lucas would tell me, with another song, mentioned in Gary Lucas' book, being Eternal Life. Although, looking back on listening to the tapes Lucas had this to say – "I think I f\*\*ed up. I didn't really hear any songs on there that stuck in my mind as powerfully as Grace or Mojo Pin... so, I didn't mean to dismiss it, but I just said 'Jeff, we ought to continue on the path we're on you know?...' maybe the thing would have lasted longer had I encouraged, had I tried to work up one of those songs and been more receptive."*

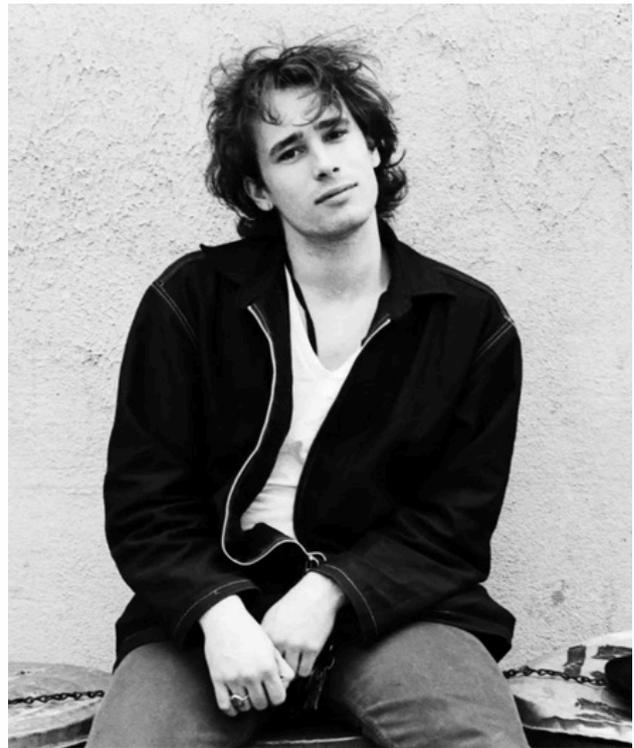
*Sadly, following the recording, their relationship had not been cultivated back into what it once was, returning back to their long period of silence. They would meet one last time on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1997, for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the Knitting Factory, as Jeff Buckley was set to perform. Midway through the setlist, Jeff Buckley would invite Gary Lucas to the stage, entirely unprompted and unplanned, to play Grace together one last time. Gary Lucas, speaking about this moment, said "It was like an amazing reunion and, for me, a reconciliation because over the years since we had worked together... I didn't chase after him to go see him play solo. I guess you could say I was licking my wounds a little bit from, you know,*

*the thing blowing up. I thought that was a lovely generous gesture to invite me on stage and I was really shocked in a way as I didn't see it coming." Even after all these years a part, they remained as in sync as the first day they had met "to play up there was heavenly for me, it was like 'man, we're really in sync, we still got this telepathic bond between us.'"*

*Jeff Buckley's career was in as good a place as ever, with him being well under the way with his album *My Sweetheart the Drunk* which would later be published posthumously. While Buckley, as Lucas outlines in his book, had been in a bad place with the pressures of the label, there was hope for the future. Lou Reed had been in attendance at that night in the Knitting Factory, later expressing interest in collaborating with him, alongside the imminent release of his second studio album and much more. But, most importantly, there was hope for the future of Lucas and Buckley together. Following the night at the Knitting Factory, as Lucas would tell me, "I came away from that with a very strong feeling, which I related to my wife Caroline, that whether or not we worked immediately together again... that we would be working together again in the future. That's how it felt to me. That's what I believed."*



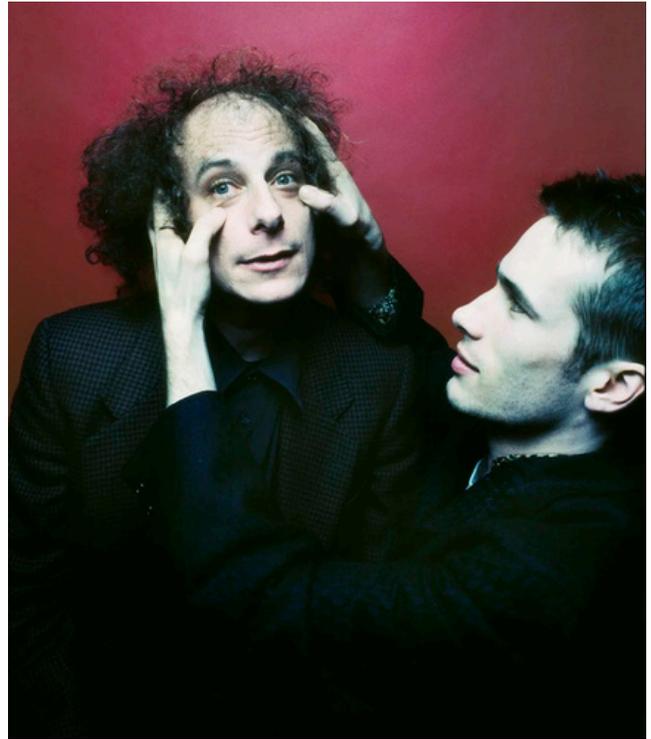
*This dream was, in some way, realised when Jeff Buckley reached out to Gary Lucas asking for guitar tapes to help his work on *My Sweetheart the Drunk* – "I sent him the first instrumental, with the title *Dream of the Wild Horses*... but he responded so positively. He said, "do you have any more?" so that was encouraging. But the fact is, I heard his voice on them. They were really suited, I believed, for him to execute vocals and put lyrics to*



*them. It would have been pretty, you know, a successful collaboration again, on the order of *Grace and Mojo Pin* and the other songs I co-wrote with him." Sadly, Jeff Buckley would pass away in an accidental drowning on the 29 May 1997, before the tapes could ever be realised into full song. When asked if Gary Lucas had heard any of his guitar in the Buckley archives and posthumous releases he responded "no, I don't know if he just put them aside or did any work them." answering the question of if there was anything Gary Lucas would want to tell the world, he responded "I really miss Jeff. I do. I think about him every day and I just think it was tragic, so early, too early to pass. Way too early to pass. I just felt bereft because of all the great songs we could have written together that were still in the planning stage."*

*There are few times in history in which an artist has had such a boom in popularity almost 30 years since its release yet, in recent years, Jeff Buckley's music has skyrocketed in the charts. Perhaps attributable to what some would call the 'TikTok Generation', in April 2025, the song *Lover You Should've Come Over* appeared on *Billboard's Hot Rock & Alternative Songs* chart for the first time, debuting at number 22.*

*The full album, Grace, has re-entered the Billboard 200 and continued to climb, reaching No.82 in December 2025. When asked about his views on this, Gary Lucas responded "Well, I think it's good. It's a good thing, overall, because I think the vibe that most people get is something unique. His aura is so strong that in a period like this in the world, where there just seems to be so much darkness and things out of whack... I think he provides a unifying principle in a way. It's like a beacon of light, in his intimacy with the audience and the warmth of his voice... I've had female fans who said to me, oh I spoke with Jeff last night and I'm like 'what?' and, you know, they have conversations, I guess, in the dream world... that's a phenomenon that just speaks to the... I guess the depth of feeling that is communicated by Jeff."*



*Yet, as this meteoric rise continues, the name Gary Lucas is far too often left out of the limelight. There is no example of this as prominent as in the documentary *It's Never Over* in which Gary Lucas was not only not asked to feature within it but was largely omitted from the story altogether. While it is safe to say that the story of Jeff Buckley and Gary Lucas was not a simple one, it is one that was vital to the formation of the music that we know and love today. There has not been a single more transformative moment in musical history than Jeff Buckley standing upon the stage at St Ann's for the first time, a moment in which was shared with Gary Lucas. And while it would be possible that Buckley would have made it big without the band *Gods and Monsters*,*

*his time within the band proved vital in establishing himself within the New York scene, allowing for his future shows at places like *Sin-é* and to ultimately sign his record deal with Columbia. This is all not even to mention the fact that Lucas wrote, and recorded, on the opening two tracks of the greatest album in history. As Gary Lucas said, "Yeah, that was a moment in time where we really came together and created something pretty monumental in those songs." But, for now, Gary Lucas continues to tour as best he can, playing music in the memory of the friend he lost – before they could ever truly reconcile and rediscover the inseparable musical bond that tied them together once more.*



*For more information on the story of Gary Lucas, you can read his book; "Touched by Grace: My Time with Jeff Buckley." Equally, to hear the music mentioned within this article you can listen to Buckley's album *Grace* as well as *Songs to No One 1991-1992* which includes many of the demos from Gary Lucas and Jeff Buckley's time together. Lucas has also had a highly successful solo career, with over 50 albums to date in multiple genres as well as having toured over 40 countries.. His music is exceptional and I would truly recommend giving it a listen.*