

Gary Lucas



Grace at the
Captain's Table
Interview by Kevin Burke.

Almost four decades ago, a young guitarist by the name of Gary Lucas became a part of rock folklore, finding his first outlet inside the magic and wild mystery that surrounded Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet). After two albums, 'Doc at the Radar Station' (1980) and 'Ice Cream for Crow' (1982) and the Captain's withdrawal from music, Gary Lucas began carving out a career built on his own talent. His unique style of innovative guitar playing has earned him great acclaim: "... perhaps the greatest living electric guitar player" (Daniel Levitin).

In September of this year comes a long awaited compilation, 'The Essential Gary Lucas'. This 36-track album looks back over Gary's 40 year career, including his work with Beefheart and Gods and Monsters, the starting point of his collaboration with the late Jeff Buckley. Along with Jeff, Gary forged the early sound and music that would become Buckley's 1994 masterpiece, 'Grace'. We should also not discard the thirty albums which Gary Lucas has released under his own steam and the fifty plus other collaborations.

On the 29th of May, the 23rd anniversary of the passing of Jeff Buckley, I spoke to Gary. With the aim of looking back at those times in his career when he was viewed as a sideman, but has proved to be so

much more. From the get-go, the interview was a masterclass in humility, a down-to-earth discussion about the incredible musical journey of a prestigious talent.

You have your latest album, 'The Essential Gary Lucas' coming in September. Is it your way of celebrating your four decades in music?

Yeah it is, because the earliest track on there is a live track of me in New York with Beefheart doing this piece 'Flavor Bud Living', which put me on the map as a player. I think if there was one moment where I kind of emerged, and people were paying attention. The record that was out, 'Doc at the Radar Station' was my first appearance on any kind of album, and it was on the Virgin label. Yeah, you know, we toured in the UK and a bit in Europe and then in the US. So that was when we played in New York. It was a great moment because the band would leave the stage and Don (Van Vliet) would introduce me and I would come out cold, and try whip through this piece. You know usually you need to get warmed up a little bit, but often I didn't even have that luxury. So, I was just flying by the seat of my pants. Yeah, that gave me a taste of what I wanted to do, and this is what I should do, and it spurred me to keep going.

Did you feel as a guitar player, working your first gig with Captain



Beefheart helped you develop a unique style?

Yes, totally, in order to play his style of music on a guitar, I had to invent my own little technique. Because his basic idea was, as he said to me once, “a guitar is merely a stand up piano”. A lot of the music he gave me then were pieces that he banged out on the piano once, and then tape himself doing it. Then he handed the tapes to me and said, “Here! Learn this on the guitar”. I’d have to stretch my fingers to try and get the proper voicing and a lot of people who I have seen on the internet playing are really playing it incorrectly. They approximate it. In order to really do it, comes from knuckle-busting positions of the hand I didn’t even know you could do. My history as a player was like a straight flat picking style, I like rock guitar, I love folk and blues too. But I do it all with a flat pick. Then a little bit later on when I got up to University, I had some friends who were very accomplished finger-pickers. I don’t know how they learned to do it, but they had it down and they used



some metal picks. I couldn’t do that exactly, but I got my own thing going just using my flesh, my fingertips. So with my right hand I became a lot more active, and it kind of developed my finger picking technique that way.

When I got into the Beefheart situation, I was like, ‘okay’, I know how to do this, to get these sort of two-handed piano pieces he’s banging out on the six string, but I’m also going to have to stretch with the left hand, some of those notes there was like a big division in register. So what you hear on ‘Evening Bell’ [‘Ice Cream for Crow’] is my approximation at best. Then it was later coached and modified by Don, like “You got to use my exploding notes here to play correctly” and I’m like, “well, what’s that?” [Don would say] “Play every note like it had no relation to the previous note, or the subsequent notes!” He wanted a real like machine gun-like attack like you spitting out notes on the guitar.

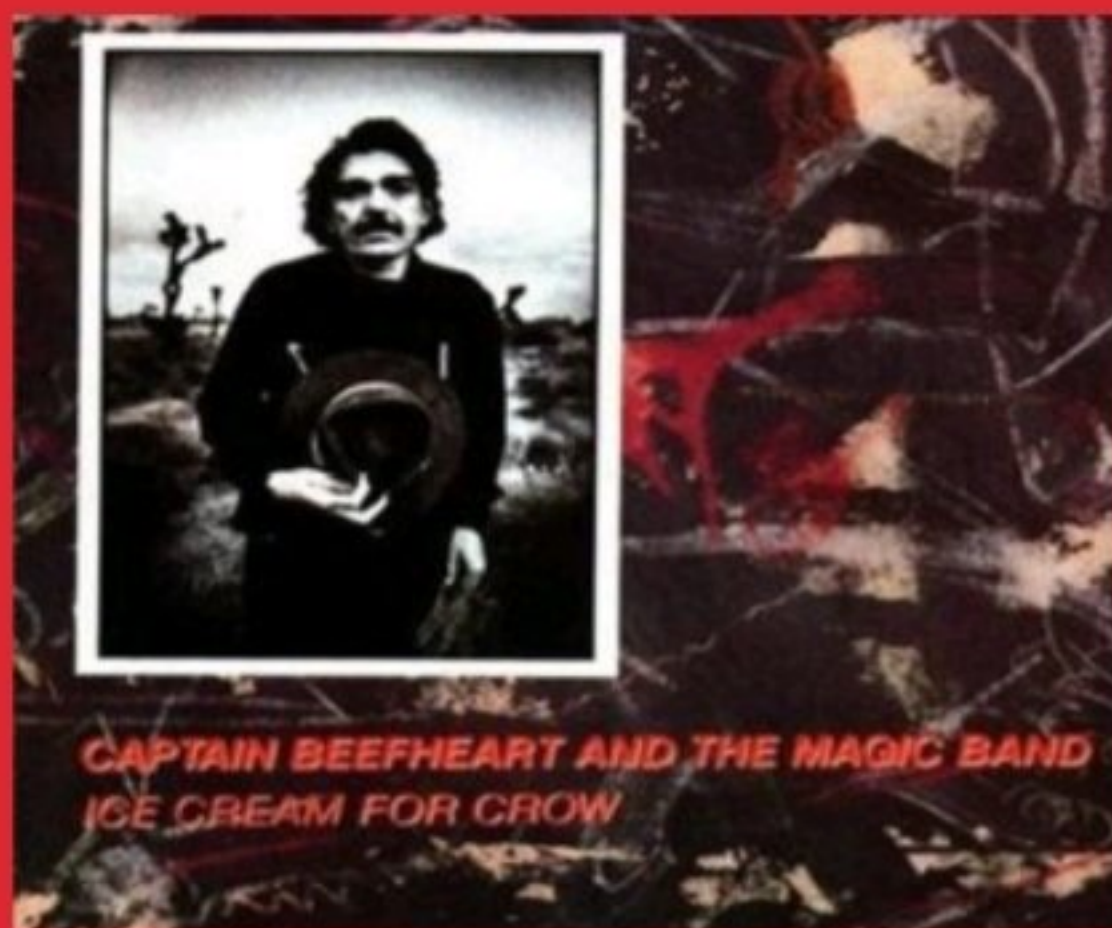
I had heard something similar and that he had done the same when



creating 'Trout Mask Replica' (1969). He taught the guys on a piano and they learned it that way, so he always kept to that format?

That's right. I think the individual band members should get a lot of credit. He [Don] could get some really great things going himself, like on a harmonica and sax. A lot of it though with this piano, he couldn't repeat it, but he could get on it and really improvise some beautiful things. but it was unrepeatable to him, they were one-offs, just captured in the moment and then he said, "Okay, learn this!". What you are learning is something that would have causes, and leaps, and maybe some mistakes. Although he would never admit to it. He was of the 'first thought - best thought' school, the Allen Ginsberg School, whatever pops into your head get it down on paper.

When you were recording 'Ice Cream for Crow', was there any hint that this was going to be the Captain's last album?



Well, I guess so, but I was in denial, he never came out and said it. Once we finished it I said "what about the tour?" and he said [impersonating Don], "I hate touring, I don't wanna go back out there!" He made money, I can tell you. He liked being on the stage, but the comings and goings, on and off, was not something he was into. It was hard to get him to budge out of the breakfast nooks in these motels. He just didn't want to climb back into the car, or two cars as it was, that's how we did it. In lieu of touring, I said, "Well, why don't we make a video?" because MTV had just started. So he said "Yeah, let's do that, okay", so we brainstormed what became the 'Ice Cream For Crow' video. He said [again in Don's voice], "We'll have spiders, rubber spiders, and they'll come down over Cliff Martinez's head."

In retrospect, it's a great video, and I know it was influential. I can think of two instances. That scene at the beginning with the tumbleweed, that was his idea and that was picked up by the Coen brothers for their film 'The

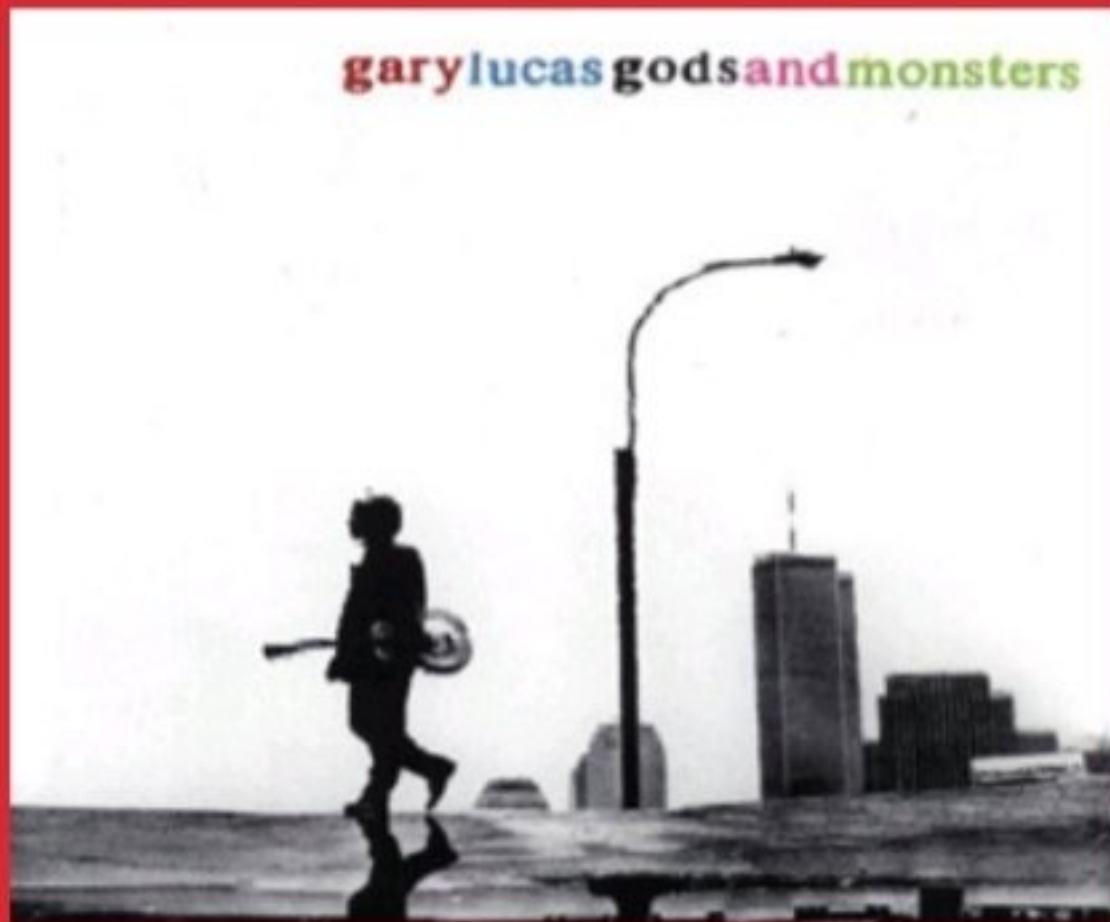


Big Lebowski' [1998]. And they used a Beefheart song on the soundtrack. The Dude is listening to 'Her Eyes Are a Blue Million Miles' ['Clear Spot', 1972] in his apartment in one scene. My friend Anton Corbin who took a lot of photos, he took the classic one in the desert that's on the cover of Ice Cream For Crow. He made a film with George Clooney called The American about an assassin in Europe. The very last scene is like a bird, some CGI effect of a spirit or something that flies up out of the dead corpse of the guy, just like the end of the Ice Cream for Crow video, where you see a little crow take off out of a tree. We were really lucky to get that shadow right as the sun was going down in the desert.

Did you manage to stay in touch with Don afterward he retired?

I did for a year or so, and then I quit because ... it's a long story. You see, he didn't want to do anything and Virgin was still interested. So I took my guitar out to visit him and he was just incredibly difficult to be around. Plus, I

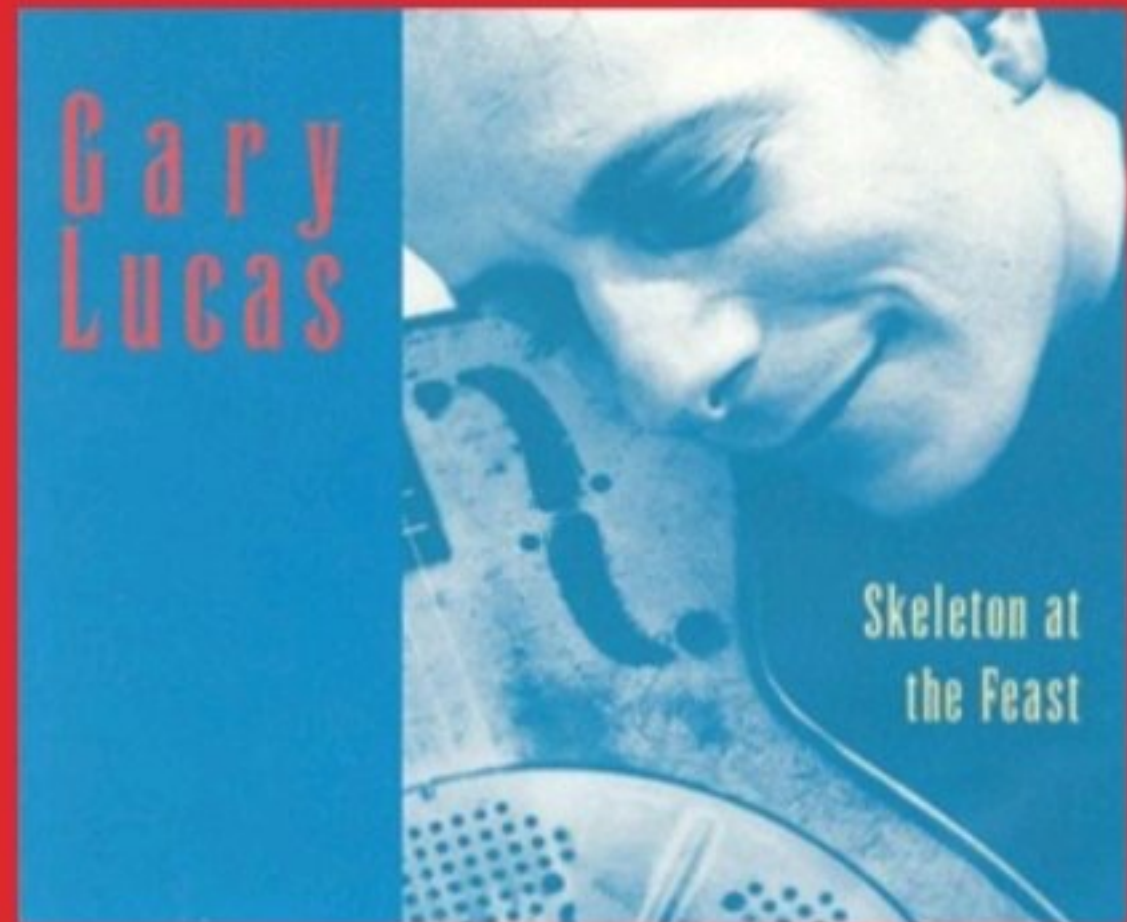
had drummed up business with a very prominent gallery in New York City, who could do an exhibition of his paintings. It was a break for us. So I spent a week visiting him and his wife and cataloging all the paintings and drawings going back to the sixties that they had stashed up in their attic. He was irascible to be around, I don't really want to dwell on this. I just thought it isn't healthy anymore to stay. Then I got back to New York and I just wrote him a letter. He freaked and called me one last time and said, "What are you doing abandoning me?" I was like "Don, we can do an album, and I'll play on it 'cos Virgin wanna do it". And then I said "I got you this Gallery in New York, you can go have a show. I just don't want to be involved in the day-to-day." I never felt comfortable with it [being Don's manager], I'm not a businessman despite what people think. I had to do some of it because I put myself in a position of representing people like Don for a minute, but only because he asked me to do it. It wasn't like a commercial proposition. But I think that was it, I never spoke to him



again. I think I waved to him once from a distance through another person and he waved back. In my heart I treasure what I'd done and I just want to remember the good stuff. I wanted to do my own music and one thing about working with Don he was incredibly possessive and jealous. And if you had ideas to do any music on your own, he was very upset by it. He went out of his way to keep Eric Drew Feldman off the album, because Eric was playing with the Snakefingers at that point. People were trying to make a living and you can't make a living waiting round for Don. So anyway, had I not really made a clean break then I couldn't have become Gary Lucas in the way I did.

What you did afterwards, with *Gods and Monsters*, then with Nick Cave, Lou Reed and John Cale. Having worked with all of these names, is there anyone left you would still like to collaborate with?

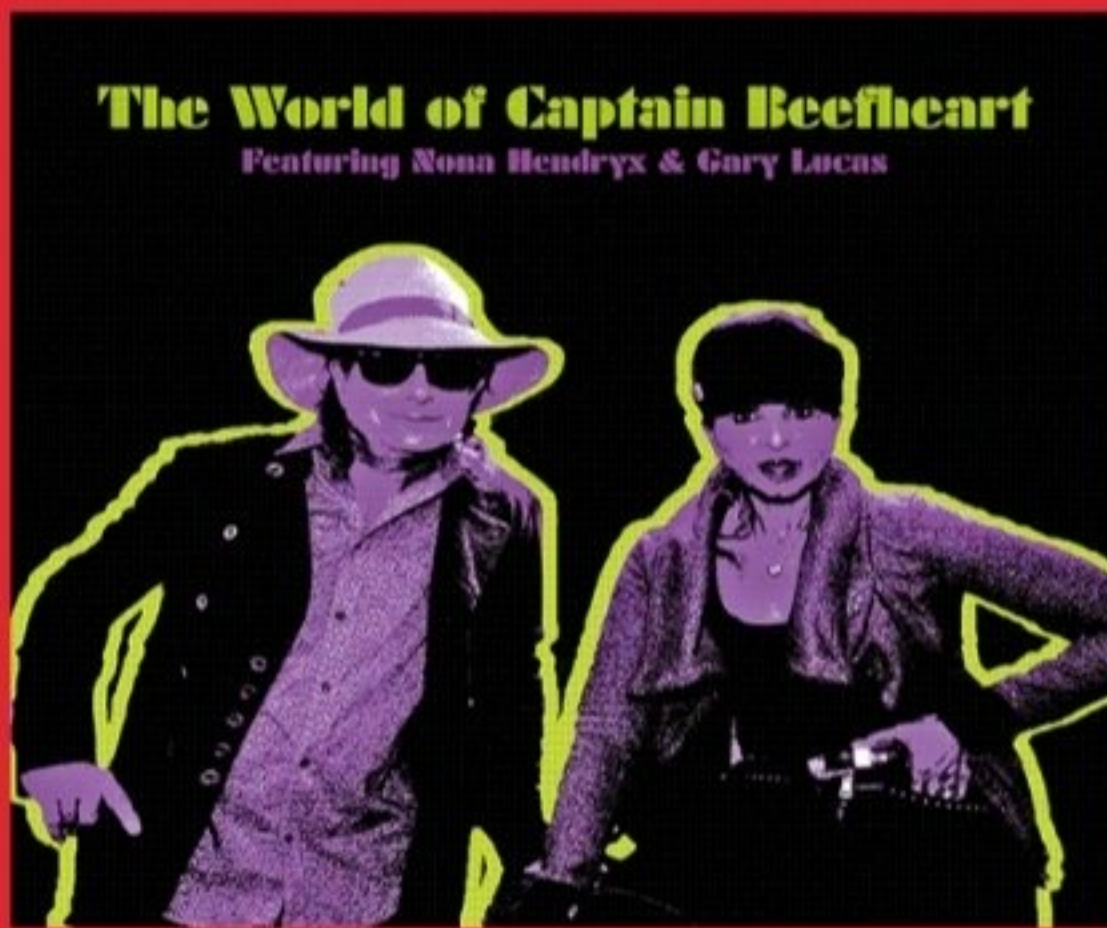
I worked with some of the greats, and they were great. I had the opportunities to work with them and I feel very



blessed that they saw something in me to make them want to work with me. I don't think it's going to happen, but I'd love to work with Van Morrison, and I'd love to work with [Bob] Dylan, I think their situation is such that it's unlikely unless some mutual friend lobbies for it to happen [laughs]. I love to work with younger artists, they have a lot less baggage. Especially now, I can't force anything to happen, I'm doing what I can do. I'm recording on my iPhone here in my apartment, and I'm writing new music all the time and posting online. I'm just trying to keep my name out there.

One thing you love is touring. Do you miss it now in the midst of this pandemic?

Yeah, I mean that's where it all happens. You come alive. But things aren't as they were, there are too many distractions with the internet and social media, a lot of different entertainment options than going to see an artist. But, I think that it's still the best place to make new fans, and to get some



feedback so you're not feeling like you're doing it all in a vacuum. I mean, I love to meet people. Now it's come to an adventure every time I go on the road. There's a romance about it.

Do you come up with many ideas on stage?

Sure, I try to change everything up. I never play the same piece the same way twice, and I try to improvise within the piece.

Is that sort of improvisation similar to your approach with Captain Beefheart?

I have a musician friend, who's a very good composer and he saw it and he said, "I could never do this" and it's because his whole thing was improvisation around, like a jazz musician. You got to have your head and then you wing it, then you come back to the head. that you have [explaining improv]. There are various ways of doing it but improvisation, with Beefheart, what sounds



improvised, or the only real improvisation going on, with that record is Don, singing and playing on his horn. Once in a while we snuck in stuff when he wasn't looking. I mean sometimes he'd be vague with his instructions, he'd just walk off saying "You know what to do". If he heard it and he didn't like it you would know - "What you fucking around with my music for?"

I didn't realize this until earlier on today that it's actually 23 years since Jeff Buckley's passing I am sorry, it must have been so hard for you. There was a creative click between the two of you.

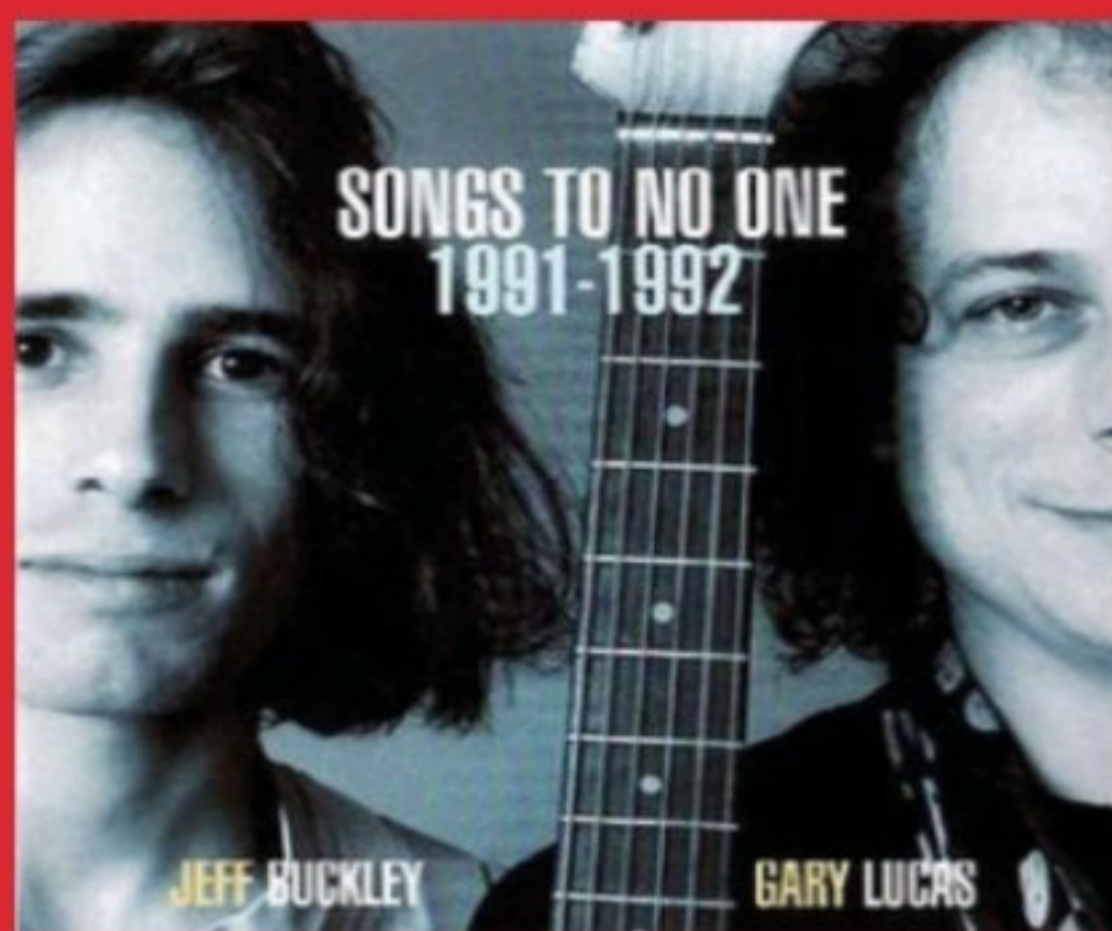
It was really tragic. I was really broken up to hear that. Well, I didn't even believe it for a few days. I was in denial, like, "Oh, you know Jeff, he's just taking a break, he's just disappeared for a few days, he'll be back" So, then when it was confirmed, I just broke down, you know, for about a month [an obvious pain in Gary's voice]. But you know, I always refer to



Jeff, and play some of that music that we shared. The fans keep the torch burning. Too many young people don't even know who he is, and that's like unbelievable to me.

I think your book 'Touched By Grace - My Time with Jeff Buckley' (Jawbone Press) has become the go-to book about Jeff Buckley and the creation of 'Grace'. Can you tell me a little about it?

I got the opportunity to write it, and I put down everything I could remember. Once I finished it I said "Damn, I should have mentioned that". But I think it's a definitive statement of what it was like from my point of view to be involved with Jeff Buckley. I tried to keep it honest and real throughout, and despite it not being like a typical rock biography, because I didn't want to do that. I wanted the book that reflected the warts and all. I didn't spare myself. I was just keeping it real. Yeah, and then people who read it, you know, the response has been, "Yeah, that's probably right", that's probably



accurate. I think that has been because it has that ring-of-truth to it, at least from my point of view. I got one shot to get this right. I'm glad you like it.

Your album 'Songs to No One 1991 - 1992' came out in 2002 and that kind of reaffirmed the connection between yourself and Jeff, and what a lot of people didn't know also. Did you feel similarly to the book that it was something that needed doing?

The problem was Sony, and their PR and marketing, maybe Jeff to a degree, just didn't really want to share much. So, they quickly disappeared me from the narrative, the story of Jeff Buckley, as far as what they told the fans and the press. I mean, it happened [that way], I'm certainly not the first person it happened to. Therefore a book was a good chance to just set the record straight once and for all from my point of view. And if you want to know about it, there it is, you know, boom! It's there waiting to be discovered.

There are rarities on the second disc

of ‘The Essential Gary Lucas album’. Is there anything from the ‘Grace’ era?

Yeah, you know, I have the ‘Grace’ demo that came out on ‘Songs to No One’. I have a track with a symphony orchestra in Amsterdam done with a Dutch singer. So that’s two of the Jeff related tracks. Unfortunately, I have more, but his estate was not willing to allow me to put them on there, so what can I say? Thing about it, it’s unfortunate but I would not be controlled by an estate. As far as getting my music out there, and getting my story out there and not getting steamrolled over and they keep trying to do it. I wrote a few letters to Sony when they put out this ‘You and I’ [Posthumous Jeff Buckley] record [2016], they marketed it as saying it’s the first-ever recording of ‘Grace’. Well, I’m like “I beg your pardon, I have this record called ‘Songs to No One’ and there you’ll hear the demo”. So like ‘what the fuck?’, surely the product manager knew it, everybody knew it. So a guy wrote back from Legacy, “Well, it was certainly not intentional”. But the damage is done. I spent a good two days trying to find reviews of it in every English language citation reviewing that album, and if there was a place to write notes, to correct them in a respectful way. It was just another indignity I had to suffer along the way, as to not get steamrolled over because I refuse to die that way. I mean, there’s a good chance I might

yet. I’m like well when I die they are going to say ex-Captain Beefheart and maybe a little footnote saying ex-Jeff Buckley [laughs]. It’s funny ‘cos I’ve done so much other work.

I interject: That’s undeniable, 30 solo albums, at least 50 collaborations ...

Yeah, and they are still trying to write me up as just a sideman.

Upon that, we slowly wound down our conversation, exchanging pleasantries and goodwill for the future. I came away with the sense that Gary Lucas is an incredibly honest person, and not just a talented musician, but also with the idea that his impact on music will make sure his legacy remains more than a footnote.

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