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i Lifestyle

Guitarist Gary Lucas tells **Tanya Sweeney** about collaborating with the iconic American singer and his attempts to unearth the heir to his throne at his gigs

Gary Lucas isn't a name that trips off the tongue of your average rock music fan. He's a man that can walk down the street and remain largely unbothered, but you almost certainly know his music. Amid releasing over 50 albums and collaborating with artists like Lou Reed, Iggy Pop and Nick Cave, Lucas is also the man behind two standout tracks on one of the most universally adored albums in music history.

If you know and love Jeff Buckley's only studio album *Grace*, Lucas' signature guitar playing can be heard on *Mojo Pin* and *Grace*, the songs he co-wrote with Buckley. In the end, Lucas wrote over a dozen songs with Buckley, some of which were released in 2002 as an album, *Songs To No One*.

"All of our songs began as my guitar instrumentals — that's something people may not know," says Lucas in a Zoom call from the very New York apartment where he co-wrote those songs. "How I worked with him was I would, separate from Jeff, compose these pieces thinking of his voice, and I would send them to him on cassette via snail mail.

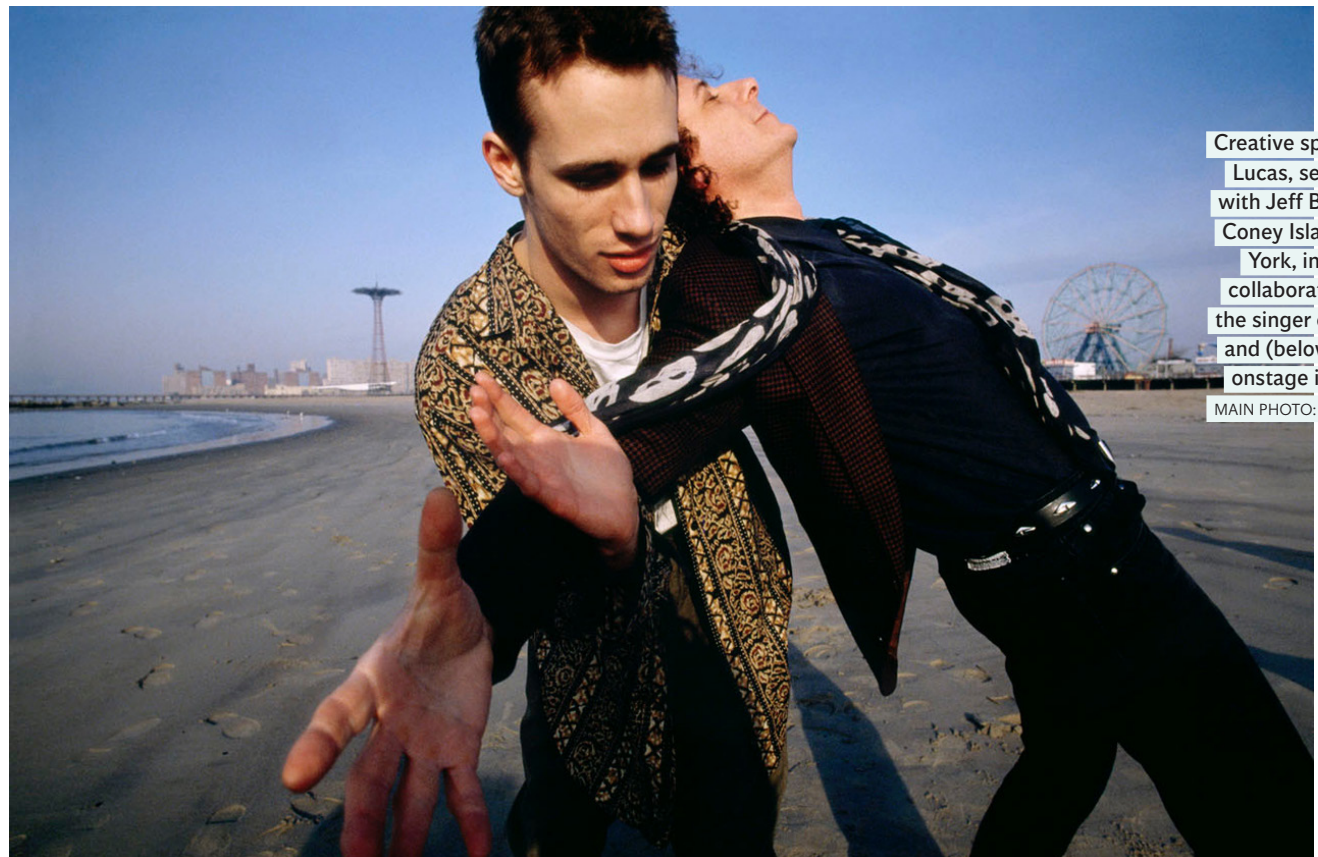
"He would get them and normally he would call and say, 'I'm gonna put some melody and lyrics on this'. That's how we divided up the labour there."

As Buckley was hailed as a mighty singer-songwriter during his lifetime, Lucas felt himself become further removed from the origin story of those two songs.

"Columbia Records sort of disappeared me out of the [story] — they issued a press release that mentioned almost everyone down to the janitor in the studio," Lucas says. The slight still stings. "I just take the time to try and remind people I was there, in a nice way. I'm just happy to be out there to remind people of Jeff's brilliance."

The two met back in the early 90s at a tribute night at St Ann's Church in Brooklyn for Jeff's father Tim Buckley. Jeff was a relative unknown, still trying to shake off the shadow of the folk singer father whom he'd barely known. At that point, Yale-educated Lucas was an established guitarist and member

'I hand him a mike and he opens his mouth to sing. It's just unearthly.... I was blown away'



Creative spark: Gary Lucas, seen here with Jeff Buckley in Coney Island, New York, in 1992, collaborated with the singer on *Grace*, and (below) Lucas onstage in Rome
MAIN PHOTO: CHRIS BUCK

'I hope that I find the next Jeff Buckley out there'

of Captain Beefheart — something that endeared him to the young singer.

"This kid just walks up to me and he's pumping his eyes — he's really, like, electric. He's making faces and dancing around me," says Lucas. "I'm like, 'this must be Jeff', because I knew he was coming and he just looked like a much younger Tim. We had this great moment and he was just super enthusiastic."

A day later, Buckley went to Lucas's apartment to work on a cover of *The King's Chain*, one of Tim's last recordings before his own death in 1975, aged 28.

"I hand him a mike and he opens his mouth to sing," says Lucas. "It's just unearthly. He's wailing and he's really possessed and he's hitting all these really high notes. I was just blown away. He looked over at me sheepishly and he said, 'was it any good?'. I just said, 'man,

you're a f***ing star'. Believe it or not, he sort of needed reinforcement in those days."

At the time, Buckley was a guitar tech with the touring band for The Commitments, alongside Kenneth McCluskey, the Dubliner who played Derek 'Meatman' Scully in the hit film. It was during the New York date of this tour that Lucas and Buckley worked on a song called *Rise Up To Be*, which would eventually become *Grace*. After parting ways with The Commitments band, Buckley joined Lucas's band Gods & Monsters for a short spell before deciding he wanted to go solo.

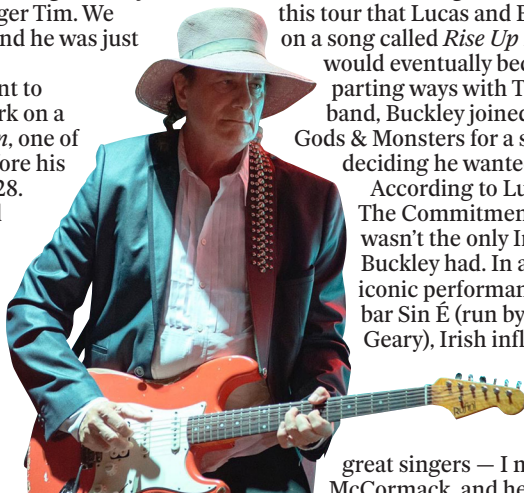
According to Lucas, his time in The Commitments touring band wasn't the only Irish connection Buckley had. In addition to his iconic performance at New York bar Sin É (run by Dubliner Karl Geary), Irish influences writ large across his music. "He reflected so much of the Irish tradition of great singers — I mean, you got John McCormack, and he loved people like

The Pogues." Katell Keineg, the Breton-Welsh singer who made Ireland her base for many years, also sang at Buckley's funeral in 1997.

Jeff was just 30 and was working on the follow-up to his massively successful debut album, with varying degrees of success, when he went swimming fully dressed in Memphis's Wolf River Harbour and drowned. His death caused shockwaves across the world, with fans anguished at the thought that the singer was cut down at the prime of his life, with so much more to offer creatively. For Lucas, a friend and collaborator, the news was especially hard.

"I got a call from my friend, who said, 'I've got some really tragic news. Jeff's missing'. I just shrieked," Lucas says. "I was in denial, thinking he'd maybe played a prank. You know, he was capable of that, he was kind of a joker. And then the body turned up. I cried every day for about a month. I never got a chance to say the things I would have said, had we had another encounter."

Two months before his death, Buckley played a secret gig at the Knitting Factory in New



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