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Understanding the Ghosts of 20th Century Troubadours; Romanticising Tragedy as a Means of Grieving a Time Before Our Own

The compulsion to understand what you find to be truly life-altering is not a new phenomenon. Neither is feeling the beauty of something made long ago. However, acknowledging the gulf between hearts that continue to beat, and those that don't, can often open ugly wounds which are torn apart by paradox. This ugliness comes from reductive or forged attempts to understand tragedy; a transtemporal tool that allows a certain type of understanding which forefronts such tragedy overtop of the music left behind.

This separation results in the mass-marketed perception of a masterful lattice of morbid allusion, foreshadowed sorrow, and bleak documentation, which seems to overtake further aesthetic exploration and feed into the duality of exploitative posthumous fame existing alongside beloved musical legacies. In culmination, we are left with a multitude of paradoxes; the personal identification of the ugliness that emboldens a name in contemporary discourse, the attraction to macabre allusions and premonitions, and the love (and grief) for musicians who exist in the ether.

There exists a dichotomy between tragedy and beauty. Perhaps this is where the fundamental attraction lies, in making sacred the downfalls of others. Doing so lessens the blow of actual suffering, because for observers and survivors, tragedy enthrals, entertains, and intrigues.

However, without a shared cultural attraction to tragic narratives, regardless of the ugly and ill-weighted "corporate fiction" (Buckley, 1994) which underpins them, it remains that I may never have heard the voices of my greatest teachers. The paradox here, in what affords certain 'meetings' between musicians and listeners, is the interplay between attraction and repulsion, and in my case, results in a sense of guilt and ambivalence. This yearning for the understanding of, and engaging with music by means of observing and participating in a mediated tragedy, unlocks moral tensions.

While nostalgia for the unknown and grief for what may have come before is a universal pain, perhaps I stand in a unique spot: never having observed the world in which the following tragedies occurred, I am in fact observing the observers, all the while navigating posthumous commemorations of ritual drama and sacrifice.

This is the premise under which I will explore the stories and music of three 20th century troubadours, from the perspective of a true outsider, from a life on a completely different plane.

The Commercial Attraction to the Finite: Romanticising Tragedy

Time has told me, you're a rare rare find, a troubled cure, for a troubled mind
(Drake 1969, Track 1)

Timelessness is an attribute given to those marred by shortened time, and tragedy is most pertinent and commercially viable in death, because the legacy is absolute, finite, limited. Everything becomes sacred when nothing is sacred.

However, like anyone who's fallen in love with music where time has been an unfair gatekeeper of experience, when the articulation of that music's quality or attraction is reduced down to the end of somebody's life, it seems hurtful, and all the wonderful music that is here becomes overshadowed by all things *spooky*.

We draw on connections where there may not have been any. Especially when we are separated from these people not only by experience, but by time, and access. They are no longer here. We somehow keep their story alive, not necessarily by celebrating their finite career, but by drawing upon these clutched straws adding to a story that has unfortunately concluded far too soon. Perhaps we continue to dig into the past, as to attempt to synthesise movement, nuance, and the continuation of lives and music we have lost, to survive the tragedy which they did not.

The following case studies, Jackson C. Frank, Nick Drake, and Jeff Buckley, look at the way knowledge can foster a multiplicity of understanding, while identifying the paradoxes in exploitation and encounter. As reductive or painful as romanticising tragedy may be, in many cases it is the affordance that sustains certain music. Without conspiracy, and without a commercial attraction to the finite, the following musicians whom I absolutely adore may never have crossed my path.

"The world is more willing to embrace tragedy and blood than it is to embrace joy, because that takes much more courage and strength" (Buckley 1994)

Jackson C. Frank – Welcoming Tragedy

I don't know why, but once you've seen the sky, you think you know all birds are lovely (Frank 1965, Track 11)

Like many others before me, my introduction to Jackson C. Frank was through his 1965 track, 'Blues Run The Game'. A running theme throughout my first 'meetings' with these troubadours, is that they all occurred without prior understanding of biography and context, and so in this instance my ears perked first at the glorious partnership between Frank's prose and the intricacies of his guitar accompaniment. I remember hearing his vocal melodies drift across a steel string for the first time, interweaving and dancing atop fairly simple chord progressions; a deep tenor, a bright guitar, and achingly beautiful lyrics rendered me thoroughly in awe. The uniformed, strophic song structure of 'Blues Run The Game' seems to encapsulate the beauty of simplicity and the reverence of a moment, unadorned by reckless abandon. It's focussed and clear, depicting the despair of being forever burdened with a sorrow that, like a shadow, clings on.

Catch a boat to England baby
Maybe to Spain
Wherever I have gone
Wherever I've been and gone
Wherever I have gone
The blues are all the same
(Frank 1965, Track 1)

Frank creates a comfortability with this inescapable truth; perhaps this repetitive structure is a tool for presenting the seemingly incessant cycle of the blues, of hitting the doldrums and staying there a while. I've met the black dog, which in a way allowed me to understand instantly at least a sliver of Frank's outlook, without falling down the rabbit hole of prior research. That said, the catalyst for my eventual contextual and biographical understanding of Frank's work was not the intrigue in the tragedy alluded to in these lyrics, but rather the quick ignition of aesthetic adoration; I loved everything about his sound, from his keening vocal timbre to the treatment of his guitar.

As a serial album listener, I wandered aimlessly into Frank's only record released during his lifetime, the 1965 eponymous debut.

I dug in.

Blues Ran The Game

Jackson C. Frank was born March 2, 1943 in Massachusetts (Abbott 2014, p.21). When he was 11, a furnace exploded at his school, burning it to the ground, killing 15 students, all between the ages of 10-12 years old (Stine 2015, p.29). Frank survived, although suffering third degree burns to 50% of his body and enormous psychological damage, both of which followed him throughout the entirety of life. While the physical injuries began to heal in hospital, Frank was gifted a guitar to aid in the recovery of his dexterity, thus beginning his affair with folk music.

When Frank was 21, he moved to England after receiving a $80,000 insurance cheque (Abbott 2014, p.46), where he befriended Paul Simon, who had agreed to produce his first and only record, *Blues Run The Game* a year later in 1965 (Hilburn 2018, p.72). However the scars, physical and psychological, remained. The link between Frank's survival of tragedy and his contribution to folk music will forever be bound; the insurance cheque essentially allowed his voice to be heard, no matter how softly.

"I remember hiding behind a screen while I was singing and playing, because I was just a little nervous and I didn't want anyone to see me." (Frank, 1995)

Frank married and had two children, the first sadly passing away from cystic fibrosis, and the other losing contact with Frank after he divorced. He spent his life in and out of psychiatric institutions, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and deep depression. After *Blues Run The Game* proved to be a commercial failure, burdened by the paralysis his declining mental health had imposed, Frank lived many years destitute and homeless. In the early 1990s, while waiting for a bus, a group of kids indiscriminately shooting pellet guns shot Frank, leaving him blind in one eye (Abbott 2014, p.194).

At age 56 in 1999, Jackson C. Frank died of pneumonia.

> *Wherever I have gone*
> *The blues come followin' down*
> (Frank 1965, Track 1)

The Transition

For better or worse, understanding Frank's biography, deeply affected my understanding of his music. *Blues Run The Game* is a candid reflection of resignation and fatalism, wrapped and sealed in a haunting, gripping beauty. It seems that unlike the macabre foresight imprinted onto the works of Nick Drake and Jeff Buckley, in the premonitions and suspicions of a proceeding tragedy, Frank survived. What I grasped upon listening the first time was a preliminary familiarity with melancholic themes and lamenting past romances; the tragedy within his music is reflective and mournful. Biographic knowledge afforded a saturation of these ideas, and transformed my understanding of his sound from a fleeting, fashionable dip into the dark and gloomy, into an unsure catharsis: unsure, in the sense that there is no relief on this record, only illustration. This seemingly literal and autonomous exploration of tragedy within Frank's work signifies the importance and self-directed role of music, as part of the grieving process (Sparling 2017, p.91). This process one may argue exists on both sides of the equation: for Frank himself, and perhaps for listeners who look to his prose for a sense of mutual understanding, connection, and relief in knowing that tragedy is shared.

However, Jackson C. Frank has pushed me to question my philosophies of musical understanding. I had always held close the idea that once music has left its performer to exist in the world, it then belongs to the ears that hear it. This translation of meaning, whether or not the specifics are shared between listener and performer, create a reciprocity and form a distinctive relationship: an intangible yet conceptual encounter.

> "*If they communicate to you any measure of something valued, or remembered, or recognised in the streets you have just walked, then they are a success within very limited qualifications; that is, you and I have met once more…" (Frank, 1965)*

There is a tangled contradiction here; the above words find themselves included in the album's liner notes, inviting listeners to take from his music whatever they like. This is the idea I had entertained for a long time. However, there is just no way that I can stand by this notion in relation to Jackson C. Frank. I have found his story to be so overbearingly prominent in his music that it's inescapable, and it's impossible for me to project my own experience into his words, now that I am aware of why those words were sung. That said, I assume that when *Blues Ran The Game* was released, it was intended to be the first of many albums, the beginning of a career not shrouded by the misery that consumed Frank in the years following.

As a result, what his music has solidified within my 'understanding' of understanding music, is that the separation of context from sound is a violent one. Once you cross the line between an absolute experience, and one touched by outside knowledge, the understanding of music can never return to a state of blissful ignorance. You can't make a first impression twice, in the same way that I can't hear Frank's voice and not be reminded of his suffering.

This idea extends further, toward the account not only of his life outside his music, but a reflection of the single studio session which produced Frank's debut record.

"I recorded my album in under three hours in a CBS studio on New Bond Street in London." (Frank, 1995)

Being able to trace in lyrics allusion to one's life seems an interesting, albeit a rather remote attempt at 'understanding'. Tracing a physical change in voice however, renders Frank's pain tangible to listeners. It's easy for some to dissociate words from melody, listening from hearing, but even so the stark shift from a controlled and rich tenor on 'You Never Wanted Me' to a feeble and wavering croon on 'Marlene' is terrifying. Even more so upon the realisation that what manifested within just 3 hours, was a complete alteration of character, of sound, and of effect. It seems as though there are multiple voices on the album, each named Jackson C. Frank.

The world it explodes, as such a high powered load
To run, to run, to run, was all they left me
Up here there's breeze, high in the clouds we're free
To fly, to fly away, was the lesson
(Frank 1965, Track 11)

You don't need the biography to understand Frank's music, however once you have it, the understanding of his brief discography is deeply altered.

What Followed

The relationship between great art and great tragedy is not new, and it's not remarkable. In fact, it's a requisite for a lot of household names: "nothing makes a legend more indelible than to have some tragedy befall them". (Abbott 2014, p100). But while tragedy indeed befell Frank, he barely made a mark on a commercial scale during his lifetime. For what-

ever reason, as Simon and Garfunkel embedded their way into a cultural history of 1960s folk music, Jackson C. Frank faded away.

> *My friends in the bars,*
> *Hell they only see the scars*
> (Frank 1965, Track 11)

This is a story riddled with paradox. While I would argue that the separation of context and music is not only disrespectful but impossible, the story that *has* made its way to a commercial stage, romanticises Frank's tragedy. His resurgence in a cultural sphere in the 21st century is one founded on the mass attraction to someone else's sorrow. We have glimpses of this resurgence through the 1975 Bert Jansch rendition of 'Blues Run The Game' (Jansch 1975) which became a staple for the Scottish singer, as well as the 2007 release of Nick Drake's bedroom recordings where he sung the single as well as 'Milk and Honey', 'Kimbie' and 'Here Come The Blues' (Drake 2007). Perhaps the most effective reintroduction to Jackson C. Frank lies in Todd Phillips' 2019 film 'Joker' (Phillips 2019).

On one hand, if we don't challenge our understanding of a tragic opus as told by record labels or film directors, if all we do is look for allusions to fire, we miss out on absolute experience, and the recognition of beauty in Frank's playing and composition. Yet on the other hand, if the romanticising of such tragedy did not exist, I wonder if Jackson C. Frank would have resurged at all; he and I may never have 'met'.

Jackson C. Frank is touted as the world's finest legend of the 1960s, whom you've probably never heard of. How uncomfortable is the fact that his remembrance is stained with the forgetting of his music, and the accentuation of his narrative?

Nick Drake – Pink Moon as an Artefact of Illness

***Please beware of them that stare, they'll only smile to see you while your time away* (Drake, 1972, Track 6)**

I have learnt that the most wonderful way to listen to Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* is to be alone at night, with a window cracked open. It's definitely a solitary exercise. Drake's is a story painted in a suffocating loneliness, so to look up at the sky as he may have done thousands of times brings a sense of connection and comfort, of sharing something with him even if that moment is almost 50 years distant.

I came across Nick Drake in a similar way to Jackson C. Frank, his story unknown to me at my first listening. Although I had no really intimate knowledge of Drake's life before I stumbled upon *Pink Moon* and the like, I did know that he was an artist lost to the 1970s, someone who was no longer around. Unlike Frank however, Drake was a name I was familiar with, on account of other, seemingly far-removed artists citing his work as key influences in their development – people like Michael Stipe of R.E.M., Robert Smith of The Cure, and Kate Bush (Wiseman-Trowse 2013, p.13).

The 1972 album *Pink Moon* was Drake's third and final record (Petrusich 2007, p.41), and my first introduction to a world of alternate acoustic guitar tunings, maudlin prose and gentle textures I'd yet to be accustomed to. What drew me in to *Pink Moon* and the rest of Drake's discography was the simpleness of his vocal timbre; it seemed as though he didn't have to do much at all to demand my attention.

The record is short and intense, barely a half hour long. It's remarkably mundane, unsettling, naked. Still, there is a magic about it; it sounds like the morning. A Sunday morning, where a bittersweet acknowledgment of an ending is nigh, balanced with the arrival of a new start. It's an intermediary of something; there is a sense of grief for both what has been lost, and for what is yet to come. The term 'pink moon' itself refers to the harbingers of spring, rendering this record at my first glance, as being one about loss, failure, and death, but also about hope, renewal, and repair.

> *I saw it written and I saw it say*
> *Pink moon is on its way*
> (Drake 1972, Track 1)

There is a melancholia which comes through the tone of Drake's vocals, the timbre of which is extraordinarily soft. Drake's wobbly voice mumbles atop lyrics which describe a world removed from my own, yet speaking to the universal anxieties of growth and resignation to the end. This particularly grabbed me in 'Place To Be';

> *When I was young, younger than before*
> *I never saw the truth hanging from the door*
> *And now I'm older, see it face to face*
> *And now I'm older, gotta get up, clean the place*
> (Drake 1972, Track 2)

Drake was able to explore these morbid ideas without being explicitly miserable about his experience; at least that's my take on his work. I've nev-

er tired of his songwriting, purely because it's never as dull or monotonous as one may think. 33 1/3 author Amanda Petrusich described it perfectly: "It feels a little bit like riding a bicycle, coloured streamers billowing behind you, twisting your head to admire a few flower beds before smacking fast into a concrete wall" (Petrusich 2007, p.49). This abruptness I have found, not within the temporal experience of his songs, but rather once they are over, once they have had time to sit in your head a while. Slow realisations trickle in about what kinds of things Drake may have been referring to, concealed within a stunningly beautiful soundscape, gentle and soft.

The tension here, between the suddenness and gradualness of experiencing Drake, is bridged by identifying the beauty and impact of his songwriting. Music is experiential and so relies on *being*, yet often times this being and experience lasts long after the notes have disappeared – the music on *Pink Moon* especially, is lasting.

An Attempt at a Theoretical Understanding

A sole with no footprint (Drake 1969, Track 1)

Drake's songs are painfully concise, both in prose and instrumentation. I suppose this sparsity of content is what catalyses this excruciating yearning for knowledge and understanding. However, like *Blues Run The Game*, I adore this simplicity of texture within *Pink Moon.* Aside from a single piano overdub appearing as a whisper on the title track, there is a closeness and intimacy about recording one voice and one guitar in a room. Yet unlike Frank, Drake not only explored the rhythmic capabilities his fingers could express over six strings, he ventured into realms of alternate tunings, opening the instrument up and allowing it to reintroduce itself with a sound so inherently 'Nick Drake'.

The melodies Drake wrote were unbalanced; they don't begin or end where you'd expect them to. While he played with subverting natural musical assumptions, the fading in and out of his voice isn't jarring, it seems like spoken word at times, which in real life, do allude to rhythm and pitch, just not so robotically. In doing this repeatedly, the harmonic undertones shift more conventionally, but because they aren't always matched with melodic movement, there is a heightened sense of ephemerality, of freedom.

The album's feigned simplicity is overruled by Drake's capacity to disguise genius and virtuosity as effortlessly unadorned melodies, which exist within a flowing rhythmic sphere, organic and dizzy, like water.

This said, this is my own inference; there is very little empirical evidence of Drake's musicianship. There are no interviews, no live recordings, nothing. I suppose this adds to the elusiveness of his work, the idea that while there is a yearning for understanding the theoretical, the mechanisms by which his emotion, tone, and experience marry so well with his playing, are devoid of objective truths.

The Black Eyed Dog

Drake's music is just as riddled with paradox as is his reappearance in the 21st century. In my yearning for a broader understanding of the music that seems equally as loud as it is quiet, I stumbled yet again upon a description of Drake's mastery which begins and ends with his death.

Sunday morning, November 24 in 1974, Drake played Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* on his turntable, curled into bed, emptying 30 doses of a prescribed antidepressant into his stomach as he lay down. Nick Drake passed away at around 6am that morning; he was 26 years old (Wiseman-Trowse 2013, p.13).

In his short time down here, Drake released 3 albums. *Five Leaves Left* in 1969, *Bryter Layter* in 1971, and *Pink Moon* in 1972. None of these records had any commercial success; according to the few who knew Drake, this failure was crushingly responsible for a large part of his long battle with mental illness (Petrusich 2007, p.40).

Now, nearing 50 years on, the elusive and mysterious Nick Drake has returned.

Many will attribute this return to the 2000 mid-November posting of a Volkswagen ad for the new Cabrio convertible. The sixty second short was titled 'Milky Way' and features 'Pink Moon' throughout, increasing album sales by nearly 500 percent (Petrusich 2007, p.78). While the ad proved to many cult Drake fans to be a sacrifice of authenticity and a commercial staining on Drake's legacy, it also afforded new ears the delight of listening to 'Pink Moon' for the very first time. Yet again, the new-founded legacy does not simply involve the love for the song. Part of that legacy is Drake's journey, into the pits of morbid analysis and sombre narration. After all, Drake's story will forever be tied to his end.

> *"The circumstances of Nick Drake's overdose are as much a part of his legacy as his songs. His death is inextricable: no matter how hard we try to eschew the*

> *cult of Drake, to divorce his art from his disease, it is pervasive, omnipresent. It is the monster in the corner, the inevitable epilogue, the truth that can't be drowned out no matter how loud we turn up the stereo."* (Petrusich 2007, p.18)

That his music is peripheral to his tragedy is the mechanism for the rekindling of interest in Drake. His story, having now been ended for a while, can be sold. Sure, music tastes change over time but what, other than his tragedy, has changed? When he was alive, his music resonated with only a few people. Now, his music resonates with people all over the world. Why? Because Drake's story is now of posthumous sacrifice. That is "making sacred, producing the sacred" (Thomas 2014, p.313), by means of commercial exploitation. What is happening is that *our* intrigue and attraction as a society with observing downfall, tragedy, and remnants of personal catastrophe, makes for one of the most commercially viable attributes of art.

With a similar title attributed to Frank, Nick Drake is also a forgotten phenomenon. It is shamefully simple to idealise the demise of a person; there is this morbid attraction to viewing tragedy from the perspective of a survivor. That is to say, we delve into these narratives, submerge ourselves in the gloom and conspiracy of an other's experience, feel as though we understand it fully, albeit remaining completely on the outside. It is our interest and perceived understanding of a tragedy not our own, that allows us to survive it, and enjoy it.

So, in Drake, when we hear him sing about anxiety, emptiness, and death, we trust that what we are listening to is an artefact of mental illness and internal tragedy. This trust in the macabre and in our survival of it, is often what keeps drawing us back. We choose to observe a continual sacrifice of character because there is beauty in the victim, and beauty in the sacred. If water is taught by thirst (Dickinson 2003, p.87), then beauty is taught by its absence.

> *Now I'm darker than the deepest sea*
> *Just hand me down, give me a place to be*
> (Drake 1972, Track 2)

From the perspective of a fan, and thus a survivor of Drake's narrative, we believe these mumbled phrases wholeheartedly. Regardless of the fact that close friends and family documented Drake as being proud, happy and confident of *Pink Moon*, there is an unbelievable amount of literature that allow for a morbid curiosity to repaint a truth fundamentally misunderstood.

This is not to say that Drake's struggle with mental illness was never represented in his music; of course it was. Mental illness can shape how people see the world, and how people see the world with themselves in it.

> *A black eyed dog he called at my door*
> *A black eyed dog he called for more*
> *A black eyed dog knew my name*
> (Drake 1979, Track 12)

The commercial obsession with treating *Pink Moon,* in particular, as the last souvenir of a tortured mind, seems at least to me to be totally missing the point of the album, and almost insulting, ignoring the fact that Drake was non-verbal during the last months of his life (Petrusich 2007, p.47) – this is the brutal truth of depression, not lyrical allusions on an equally bleak yet beautiful record.

I would argue that art is rarely created in the deepest pits of depression.

Here's the catch; I only know this (or think I know this) because of the truths and narratives I have found myself to connect with and approve of. This isn't some ethical high road, rather a display of how fluid knowledge can be, and the fact that knowledge culminates in a variety of understandings; especially when death obstructs the ability to reconcile and objectify comprehension.

Yet this enigma will forever remain. In Drake's death, his separation from the world is strengthened, and our individual understandings of his music and life are shaped no longer by him, but by what our intrigue is *hungry* for.

We can't turn back time. So in all my quandaries regarding the ethics of an interest in Drake, there is a glaring contradiction, matching that of my connection to Jackson C. Frank. While my first experience of Drake's music was one not guided by a morbid curiosity, the fact is that without this being the crux of other people's interest (Wiseman-Trowse 2013, p.93), my path may never have crossed with *Pink Moon* at all. What we can do, is accept and celebrate that Drake's music has survived. Perhaps this resurgence softens the blow of his contextual unpopularity, using tragedy as a conduit for finally understanding and acknowledging Drake's music is a form of blessing, even if we were too late.

However, it's a very dangerous thing to romanticise mental illness, for it to be marketed as fashion which it so often is in the music world. The

flip side of the brooding depressed loner, so cool, so mysterious, is in fact a horrifically debilitating outlook, and in this circumstance claimed somebody's life. This is not to be forgotten, or overshadowed, no matter how blatantly portrayed.

*"The greatest PR stunt you can perform is dying young" (*Bret 2009, p.9)

Jeff Buckley – Sacrificing Anonymity and the Conspiracy of a Foretold Suicide

***But what am I still to you, some thief who stole from you? Or, some fool drama queen whose chances were few?* (Buckley 1998, Track 8)**

I knew one thing about Jeff Buckley before I listened to *Grace* for the first time: that he had extremely dark brown eyes.

I was 13 when I heard it. It was a boiling hot summer night and I got up from the bed, sat at my desk with my headphones on, pressed play on my laptop, and fell asleep with my head resting upon the keyboard. When I woke the next day, I'll admit, I had no clue what was going on in that record. I had heard nothing like it before, and even now, I find it so difficult to explain why. It's a rock album. It's got a couple of guitars, bass, drums, a string section pops in every now and then, and it's got a lead singer.

Thinking back, I recall really disliking the record. I couldn't understand why what it was that I was hearing was so impactful, and so physically demanding. I was exhausted trying to keep up.

Music has been in my life for as long as I can remember, but there was something so different about Jeff Buckley.

I gave *Grace* another go, trying to understand what it was that I found so confronting and important. I listened to each track on repeat, until I was at least familiar with the direction the songs were taking, slowly easing myself into this completely new and undefined world of what sound could achieve. In doing so, I fell helplessly in love with his voice; a brilliant mixture of a choirboy, a punk rocker, and a chanteuse, all present within a tone that could howl and spit, scat and run, croon and whisper. He could effortlessly transcend a falsetto which, like a plume of smoke would rise into the sky and billow out through the air (Browne 2001, p.137). I was also in awe of his dexterity on guitar, with riffs and rhythms

that seemed to defy what an instrument could possibly produce. I had been introduced to the world of Drop D tuning, a place I rarely venture out of in my own playing.

His music was as raw and wild, as it was delicate and contemplative.

> *My fading voice sings of love*
> *But she cries to the clicking of time*
> (Buckley 1994, Track 2)

Unlike Frank or Drake, of whom I had an inkling, from the vintage sound of their records, that they were musicians of old, with Buckley's sound it was impossible for me to even guess as to where or when it came from. While the record featured three covers of older compositions, the 1927 hymn 'Corpus Christi Carol', James Shelton's 1950 'Lilac Wine', and Leonard Cohen's 1984 'Hallelujah', there were also allusions in Buckley's originals to non-western instrumentation, modern (at least to me) lyrics and an astute grasp on political commentary.

> *Crown my fear your king at the point of a gun…*
> *Tell me where is the love in what your prophet has said?*
> *Man it sounds to me like a prison for the walking dead*
> (Buckley 1994, Track 9)

I didn't know anything about his biography. Not a single clue. It seemed as if his presence in my life as a lover of music, was one so encompassing that it was as if he were in the room every time I listened. So when I branched out from *Grace*, sufficiently content in my teenage understanding of his work, I was inconsolable when I discovered that my first breath was taken well after his last.

A Living Career

Jeff Buckley, born Jeffery Scott Buckley, November 17, 1966, was the son of 1960/70s cult folk artist, Tim Buckley.

Tim Buckley, after having released 9 studio albums during his life, died of a heroin overdose when he was 28. During those short 28 years, only a few weeks in total were spent with his only son (Browne 2001, p.304).

Jeff's love of music was fostered from a young age. He played in various bands and studied at the LA New Music Institute, before being asked

to perform at a tribute concert for his late father at St Ann's Church in Brooklyn, New York in 1991 (Apter 2008, p.76), which would be his long awaited introduction to the world. He was no longer Scotty Morehead (as he was known growing up, the last name taken from his step-father), he was Jeff Buckley, the son of Tim Buckley.

> *"A long time ago, when I was a little kid, my mom sat on a bed and she put this record on. It was the first song I ever heard that had my father's voice, I must have been 6. I was bored, I was bored I'm sorry, but what do you expect from a cat who is into Sesame Street at the time?"* (Buckley 1991)

What came from this concert apart from his initiation into Tim's world, and that of inextricable biographical ties, was a friendship and collaboration with guitarist Gary Lucas, who is credited for having cowritten the first two tracks on Buckley's 1994 debut LP *Grace* (Lucas 2013, p.107). The early 1990s became, for Buckley, a time of great endeavour. It saw him write some of the most beautiful songs of the decade and reinterpret/celebrate the music he so cherished in ways that excited listeners all over the world.

However, in line with the motif of a fateful tragedy, Jeff Buckley was taken from the earth's grasp when he was 30 years old. In 1997 on his way to a studio in Memphis to rerecord what would have been his second album, Buckley made a pit stop, played Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" on a boom box, waded out into Wolf River fully clothed, and was pulled below by the undertow of a passing boat (Browne 2001, p.12).

Even with currents so strong, he floated upstream, and was found at the river's edge of Beale Street, 6 days later.

The Image and The Conspiracy

I couldn't awake from the nightmare, that sucked me in and pulled me under (Buckley 1994, Track 5)

Since that day, many have come forward to testify both for and against this tragedy as being a suicide. Even more people however, have taken to dissecting Buckley's work, pulling out lyrics or interview quotes, anything alluding to water, as some kind of evidence of a foretold death. The attraction of a morbid conspiracy rears its head, ultimately solidifying Buckley's appearance within popular culture as a figure damaged and

manic; a legacy created out of archetypically dark, misunderstood music, and of the tragedy of being taken away far too soon.

Yet unlike Frank and Drake, this misunderstanding existed even in Buckley's life.

> *"Critics try to pin so many different inaccuracies on me and my music, they look at the complicated things and try to simplify them. They think they can nail your whole life down just by knowing the bare bones of your history in partaking in 10 minutes of conversation."* (Buckley 1994)

Buckley's media presence was largely based upon the assumed paternal association and a craving for a biological explanation of Buckley's voice, regardless of the timbral disparities between them. Alongside the allure of immortalising a young artist, is the collation of gossip that links two of the most brilliant voices of the 20th century together. There's an excitement in tracing virtuosity within a lineage, within a father/son relationship. Interview after interview, every journalist has touched on this.

"I have a great admiration for Tim. But that's a respect as a fellow artist, because he really wasn't my father." (Buckley 1994)

This seemed only to increase after Buckley's passing; now these allusions can be made without reply, as both voices are gone.

So how does all this external knowledge impact my understanding of an album and an artist I so adore? How is it that, in a commercial sense, Buckley has weathered the same kinds of storms as Frank and Drake? Why is it that my comprehension of these extremely different people and extremely different music, shifts and whirls with a tighter grasp on context?

Understanding Anemoia

Screaming down from heaven (Buckley 1994, Track 1)

When you google Buckley's name, read any book, or watch any documentary, what introduces his story without fail is a description of his death. Every time I read it, it's like a punch to the gut. In a similar way to my understanding of Drake and to an extent mental illness, what I find truly upsetting is starting their story with their end.

Buckley's death didn't create his music. Buckley's death wasn't the entirety of his story, and by saturating his legacy with a ghostly voice

forever bound to tragedy, I think we miss the point of the art he created, completely. This discounts his music and impression on people and replaces virtuosity with enigma; perhaps if we spent as much time exploring his work without being guided by his mortality, we'd find a world that coaxes the record to be played loud and to be enjoyed. From the electric guitars dripping in flanger, dancing upon a 6/8 groove in 'Grace', the superb orchestral arrangement behind 'Last Goodbye', to the intense balladry of 'What Will You Say', and the stunning recklessness in live versions of 'Hallelujah', there is a soundscape so brilliantly explored. I think we owe it to people like Buckley to refocus the cultural discourse surrounding their work, and to celebrate the wonderful music they so generously allowed to pour forth.

"Music is endless… I guess it's just called freedom" (Buckley 1994)

This freedom is something I can see within Jeff Buckley's discography, especially when you can listen to his music ignoring projected afterthoughts that seem to alter and sway the tone of his work. This freedom I think is easily lost when one is constantly looking for clues.

That said, I'm aware that this curiosity is warranted; his time on earth was far too short so I can fathom the lengths at which people go to try and make sense of that. I certainly did.

Philosopher René Girard speaks of a mimetic desire: a desire which is shared (Girard 1977, p.146), and the desire which reinforces the selling of tragedy, and thus the continuation of a story. In my instance, I *have* shared in the desire to fall into the narratives which parade certain music for its tragedy: to saturate my understanding of this music under the guise of sacredness. This is because underneath the morbid attraction, must be adoration. The desire therefore, is rooted in an attempt at soothing the loss of those cruelly taken away.

There is a paradox here. An inconsistency in what I'm bereft of. One could argue that there is no real loss due to my temporal and physical disjuncture between shared worlds, or lack thereof. However there was a time when my knowledge of the tragedy of a world without Buckley didn't exist, and a time where it did. Thus, what has remained consistent, is this sense of feigned nostalgia, and of grief. This is called 'anemoia', the longing for something you have never experienced, the missing of something never known (De Brigard 2017, p.160). It's an obscure sorrow. I have found a home in Buckley's music, but the grief comes in the form

of trying to understand him as a person, and not a marketed, tragic character. It's the music that interests me; I will forever yearn to understand where it came from. It is no different with Buckley himself: although my attempts in understanding will always remain attempts.

There is also something to say for the relationships we have with the artists we discover in our teenage-hood (Levitin 2006, p.232). There is an excruciating level of protectiveness, at least in my experience, for the voices that soundtracked one's most tumultuous years, the years of change, and development, of the events and people you encountered that has shaped the way you walked into adulthood.

This hold is what makes the following version of understanding Buckley's music, incredibly uncomfortable:

"Drowning might have been quite a good career move" (Lucy, 2006)

It's not the obviousness of Australian comedian Judith Lucy's ill-reception of Buckley that is uncomfortable; one can dislike music without offence. What makes comments like these horrifically awkward, is although there is a blatant disregard for a person's life, (strengthening the notion of understanding musicians as characters rather than people), there is also an understanding of why she said what she said. It's a paradox engrained in the anger and hurt generated by comments like this, that is meshed with a logical and objective understanding of its meaning. In the same way that Drake and Frank have been lionised through their tragedy, Buckley's story has also compounded commercially and exploitatively, because it has ended.

There is a lot of sadness that surrounds the appreciation of Jeff Buckley's music, but I think the greatest thing we can offer as lovers of it, is to allow ourselves to listen with a sense of wonder and joy, that it made it to us, one way or another.

Paradox of understanding

Remember me, but forget my fate (Buckley 1995)

The past in many ways is a foreign country. No amount of new media affordance, bootlegs, photographs, interviews or data can truly transport one to authentic, actual experience of a time long ago. The closest we get, I suppose, is music, because it's a temporal art form, an experiential

exercise of the mind and soul. We get into danger when we attempt to reckon with temporal boundaries, to sustain something lost to the century before. Yet, as lovers of past voices, we do reckon with these temporal boundaries out of a sense of grief and longing to truly understand.

In romanticising tragedy, we uncover attempts to understand such music. However, exploring this concept is a tricky one. It begs the question as to whether or not I understand any of this music at all. I've been guilty of the overanalysing, being ridiculously protective of an image created so authentically in my mind, and above all I have been absent from the world these particular musicians wrote about.

Knowledge does not cut a clearly defined path to understanding. I have traced this in multiple comprehensions of Frank, Drake, and Buckley, even going so far as to track this multiplicity in my own experience. Things alter your understanding: it's a fluid and present activity. The paradox however lies in my discomfort with exploiting tragedy as a means for resurfacing the names of those lost far too young, and understanding their work as something coloured from beyond their time. There is an associated guilt that is learned in identifying the tensions between attraction and repulsion, and the mechanisms for which we understand tragedy. That said, understanding is a personal endeavour.

"What do I want people to get from the music? Whatever they want. Whatever you like." (Buckley 1994)

My ambivalence with the treatment of these voices still remains, in the sacrificial light with which they are painted in posthumous commemorations of ritual drama and tragedy. Nevertheless, these words give us the permission to experience and understand this music in whatever way resonates within us. I choose to understand the music of these particular 20th century troubadours as playing a vital role in my life; in this music I have found great teachers, and great comfort. The discomfort in the romanticising of their tragedy is relieved, if not expunged, by their vibrancy and loudness in *my* everyday.

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Understanding the Ghosts of 20th Century Troubadours; Romanticising Tragedy as a Means of Grieving a Time Before Our Own

There is a temporal grief in understanding music from a time beyond our own. It's an obscure sorrow which is often garnered through glorifying and romanticising the demise of certain voices, creating a posthumous narrative which feeds into a societal attraction to the finite, to catastrophe, and to tragedy. This paper will explore triadic contexts of three musicians lost to the 20th century (Jackson. C. Frank, Nick Drake, Jeff Buckley), pertaining to the environments in which their music was created, the tragedies which remain, and the unravelling of 21st century consumption. This thereby identifies a moral paradox: whilst we, the lovers and listeners, survive tragedies belonging to others, we risk understanding music as peripheral to tragedy in doing so. Yet *without* romanticising tragedy, many voices may have completely faded away alongside the physical bodies and souls which harboured them. So as observers of sacrifice, where do we stand?

KEYWORDS: Romanticising tragedy, attraction, knowledge, understanding, allusion.