

The Experimental Artist: Richard Buckner, September 20 at Huckleberry's

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Meadow, the 2006 album bearing Richard Buckner's name, is not the record that the singer/songwriter would have made. But that was the point.

After his hands-on production approach to *Impasse* (2002) and *Dents & Shells* (2004), Buckner enlisted producer J.D. Foster to make the creative decisions for him.

As Buckner explained in a phone interview last week in advance of his September 20 [Daytrotter.com](#)

show at Huckleberry's: "As an experiment to myself, I just thought, 'I need to see how much power I can put in someone's lap and just let it go. Even if I think it's wrong, just let it go. Every idea. Just give them what I have and see what they can do with it.' ... Give it away instead of driving myself crazy with production-y things."

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Buckner said he trusted Foster, who'd worked on several of his previous albums including his major-label debut, 1997's *Devotion + Doubt*. But that's altogether different from fully ceding control. Of the record's "Kingdom," Buckner said, "I probably would have done some weird, half-ass flamenco, nylon version. But we got in there and he [Foster] had an idea for this weird, delay, reggae-ish thingamajig. I'm so glad that it's so much different than I would have done it."

And Buckner said it wasn't difficult to hold his tongue when he disagreed with Foster: "I was good about it. I needed to let go."

Buckner's *Meadow* experiment is typical for the enigmatic artist, who has regularly challenged himself creatively with odd exercises. Constraints -- be they setting or structure or something else -- ensure that he's not repeating himself, and help him explore new paths. "I like to screw myself up as much as possible," he said in one interview.

"I've been giving myself little ... puzzles as handicaps to write again, which is really fun," he explained, talking about his upcoming record.

I asked him for an example. "You've got some OCD coming," he replied. "Hold on." When he returned to the phone, he offered a few irregular patterns -- rhyming, melodic, and rhythmic sequences -- that he wrote to: A-A-B-C-B-A-C-A-A-B-C-B-B-A-C ... ,
A-B-C-D-A-C-B-D-A-B-C-C-A-B

For the listener, he said, "it separates the words in a way that they're familiar but not in the exact place they should be."

As a writer, he said, these exercises "make you think of things a different way."

Buckner's visit to the Quad Cities comes at a good time to look back at the career of the songwriter. Merge Records earlier this year re-released three out-of-print albums: *Bloomed*, *The Hill*

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, and

Impasse

. Together, they sketch out Buckner's impressive breadth and depth.

Bloomed, from 1994, is comfortably country, the songs carried by expressive musical economy, a grounded, plainspoken poetry, and Buckner's resonant voice. The ironic suicide ballad "22" is loaded with foreshadowing ("The kitchen drawers were open / Hot water in the bath") and haunting, coarse singing: "There was red smoke in the water."

As *Rolling Stone* wrote of a different album: "Buckner's fragmented yet incisive wordplay and emotive phrasing and vocalizing -- which ranges from a tortured whisper to a twangy howl -- project heartbreak and dashed hopes without histrionics."

For 2000's *The Hill*, Buckner adapted selections from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*

sometimes using the poet's words, sometimes crafting instrumentals inspired by his characters. Originally released as a single-song album, for the re-release it's divided into 18 tracks, ranging from a cappella to backwoods groove to noise-rock atmospherics.

Buckner scrapped his sessions with Foster for 2002's *Impasse* and re-recorded the songs at home, with abundant, droning synthesizers adding an alien texture to the roots core.

Although Buckner has been publicly quiet since the release of *Meadow*, he hasn't been idle. He composed the score for an independent film (

Dream Boy

), made a track for a PBS documentary, and is prepping his next album, which he expects to release in late 2010.

But his musical career was waylaid by a few jobs that he took to get health insurance. He had no projects on the horizon, and "I couldn't tour because I didn't have a new record 'cause the last record I'd done was a film score that didn't come out," he said. So he worked as a road-flagger in the Catskills, a forklift-driver in a warehouse, and at a school for autistic kids -- what he called "just jumping from hamster wheel to hamster wheel."

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Then he got an offer to do a show and found out he could get health insurance through the Freelancers Union, and he was able to re-dedicate himself to music.

He expects to begin recording when he returns from the road, and he'll be tracking the album at home. That's a function of money, but it also appeals to his adventurous nature, wanting to find out the sounds he can get in his current home in upstate New York. "There's no budget here," he said. "And I'm also kind of curious about what kind of stuff I can do here at the house."

Richard Buckner will perform on Sunday, September 20, at Huckleberry's (223 18th Street in Rock Island). The show starts at 7 p.m., and the bill also includes Sean Bones. Tickets are \$8.