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# Beck's Holy Moun- tain

OR, BALLADS FROM THE BOTTOM OF A VOLCANO

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Cotton long-sleeve button-down shirt and silk sash by  
ANN DEMEULEMEESTER. Acetate Grandmaster-Two  
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For the old-timers had it easy. Simple times came with simple problems, and the songwriters of bygone days—country singers, blues people, folk troubadours—they had first dibs on putting to music the human woes that plague us: heartache, blight, loss, greed, hunger, disease. For more than half of the twentieth century, the basic ballad, spread across a few elemental idioms, was enough. But stakes have been steadily rising since, and the muck of life has grown ever more complex. We live in a post-modern era, so it follows that we’d need a postmodern protagonist to play the foil.

He’s sitting in the studio, a massive mixing board at his back, on the eve of a two-week European tour. It seems hackneyed to mention that Beck Hansen, now 38, still looks boyish, or that he seems a mite bit shy and unsure of the world, like he should be lying in a field somewhere, trying to squeeze meaning from passing clouds. He’s stubbly and slouching. He’s wearing a fitted, flannel shirt that his hair is long enough to touch. He keeps a small guitar between his hands and strums it unconsciously.

#### **“I THINK, IN A WAY, I’M JUST TRYING TO FIND**

**SOMETHING WORTH REPEATING,”** Beck says, his voice almost a whisper. “My grandfather [Al Hansen] was an artist and, at some point, he settled on this image of the Venus of Willendorf, the oldest figure in art, and for the rest of his career, that’s all he did. He made them out of scraps of paper, cigarette butts, matchsticks...paintings. If I could find that thing I wanted to do for the rest of my life, that box to put myself in, I’d stay there.”

Before 2005’s *Guero*, it was tough to draw direct comparisons between any two Beck records. His album-to-album malleability is famous, but this explanation for it—that he just hasn’t figured it out yet—is new. It’s always been easiest to paint Beck as a cosmic audio trickster, or a kid in a candy store, and, to a degree, he is still both: He acknowledges his fractured fan base with a self-satisfied grin (“Shows are strange. The *Midnite Vultures* contingent will come to life, while the rest of the audience is just stone.”) and he kind of bounces in his chair, when he reveals that “Chemtrails,” the first single from the new album, *Modern Guilt*, is guitarless, despite its significant psych-rock heft (“I swear, that’s something I’ve been trying to do for years.”).

But the more he speaks, the further our old images of Beck recede. He is clearly tired of the industry-inflated record-release cycle (“It’s so anticlimactic.”), he censures himself for having used humor as a lyrical crutch over the years (“There’s no meaning there.”), and he seems incongruously anti-technology for a man whose last two albums were new-media smorgasbords (“We should just be making vinyl and throwing a CD in there.”).

Beck is changing.

“I’ve always looked up to certain songwriters,” he says. He chooses his words slowly, like a cartoon tortoise. “Like Joni Mitchell or Leonard Cohen. How they’ll get into the kinds of things that you think about all the time, but don’t know how to articulate. Things that are so personal. But universal. I’m trying to simplify...get rid of things I don’t need.”

If he were in the black hat and cloak that he wore earlier for the camera, Beck would look like a character from an Alejandro Jodorowsky film: some kind of cowboy in a half-meditative state.

For an album touted as the psych-rock debut of Beck, *Modern Guilt* shows surprising restraint. The record is all raw tones and locked grooves, breathy “ahhs” and an occasional Technicolor flourish. There’s no extravagant instrumentation or arsenal of vintage toys—it’s just voice, bass, drum, and guitar. And, of course, the various glitchy bits, broken beats, and looped percussive punches thrown by the album’s producer, Danger Mouse. But even these are spare, and rather than presenting an unwieldy collision of eras, *Modern Guilt* is warm, catchy, and extremely tight. Most songs crest before the three-minute mark, or crash into it with so little as a fade-out.

“One of my favorite moments in music is the mid-’60s,” says Beck. “There was this feeling with psychedelic rock that it could go anywhere, but it hadn’t yet led to musical excess—to prog or heavy metal. The first day Danger Mouse came over, he opened up his computer with all his beats on it, and the desktop was the cover of *Revolver*, which was perfect. That’s the point where the doors first open.”

The reversed guitar clip and rolling rhythm section of album-opener “Orphans” could play as a tribute to “Tomorrow Never Knows,” if it weren’t for the piano pings, handclaps, and subtle breaks pinning down the track. “Modern Guilt” channels a Spoon-like pop classicism as the shrugged-off comeliness of Beck’s voice brings to mind a bluesier Skip Spence. “Gamma Ray,” the second single, combines slack vocals and steadfast rhythm to reinvent the Zombies for a world that’s already heard “Hey Ya!” There’s an immediacy to *Modern Guilt*’s ten tracks, mostly driven by coarse, crackling bass notes, but seemingly helped along by the storied one-hundred-twenty sleepless days that birthed the record. The same news leak, in early May, that foretold the album’s arrival, also announced that it would hit shelves within six weeks.

“It was the most concentrated work I’ve ever done,” says Beck. The album came out only about three weeks later than reportedly planned. “We got into it and everything else went out. There’s something healthy about that—just making something and releasing it the way it was in the jazz era, where they’d just cut a record every two months, or so. I think that’s what musicians are made for.”

The pace isn’t the only thing separating *Modern Guilt* from its predecessor, *The Information* (2006), which took three-plus drudging years to finish. While that album’s lyrics are a mixed bag of stream-of-consciousness, post-millennial raps and scattered love paeans, *Modern Guilt* is focused and even graceful by way of its content. Beck claims he slashed his first lyrical impulses, writing and rewriting to get at whatever heaviness was hidden beneath the surface. Little of this album lends itself to easy comparison with previous Beck records (an ironic return to form), but the words recall the wistfulness and disaffection of his last critical best.

“There was a kind of writing that I started to experiment with on *Sea Change*,” says Beck. “Sort of tossed off and crafted at the same time, coming from a place that’s personal—from some of those hard-learned truths of living. That was the first time I felt I could get into that sort of thing, without feeling heavy-handed. Of course, it’s easier to bring that into a folk vein than into a song like “Youthless.””

Wool tweed double-breasted herringbone jacket by  
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*Cotton jacket with epaulets, cotton button-down shirt, and cotton pants by ANN DEMEULEMEESTER. Leather boots by CABANE DE ZUCCA. Lambskin hat by NUMBER (N)INE.*



“Youthless” might be the closest thing to a dance track that *Modern Guilt* has. It’s a sticky song with a skittering beat, tambourine, rollicking guitar, and spacey quirks that opens with the lyric: “*There’s a bottomless pit that we’ve been climbing from / just to get on level ground.*” But, unlike the detritus of *Sea Change*, lines like this weren’t extracted from the corpse of a failed long-term relationship. The song gets stickier as the chorus digs deeper into a different mire: “*We’re youthless and pretending / with our bare hands holding nothing.*”

It’s not difficult to interpret Beck’s path in the public eye as one of continual identity crisis. In early interviews, he spoke of the influence of his paternal grandfather, a Presbyterian minister. Later, he’d allude to the Jewish values he’d learned from his mother (Andy Warhol-acolyte Bibbe Hansen). In 2002, after reuniting on an album with his previously estranged Scientologist father, David Campbell (who arranged and conducted *Sea Change*’s strings), rumors about Beck’s own involvement with Dianetics intensified. These were confirmed, in 2005, nearly one year after he’d quietly married actress Marissa Ribisi, herself a second-generation Scientologist.

And that pattern isn’t new. Before Beck was a high-school dropout, he was one of the lone *gueros* in his Los Angeles neighborhood. After, he busked around Europe and New York, then returned to Los Angeles to eventually release three albums on three labels in the year of his big break (1994: *Stereopathic Soulmanure*, Flipside; *Mellow Gold*, Geffen; *One Foot In The Grave*, K Records). Since then, he hasn’t been able to maintain a musical style for more than an hour (unless you add *The Information*’s outro to its running time), and even his presence in interviews is nigh impossible to nail down. To wit, is Beck blank-faced and slow-talking because:

- a) he doesn’t have much to say,
- b) he’s guarding his words, or
- c) he’s just *that* thoughtful?

He has evidently settled into faith and family (Beck and Ribisi have two children: Cosimo, 4, and Tuesday, 1), but a person can only go so far down the road of spiritual odyssey before arriving at his own door. If Beck is, indeed, changing further, it’s toward something more perfect and more basic. His struggle now appears to be with his ability to explain the human condition—that thing that exists between the intimacy of home life and the anonymity of religion.

“There’s so much subtext to things today,” he says. **“THERE’S**

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**PSYCHICALLY.** People have this subtle nagging in the back of their minds. It could be dissatisfaction with government or consumer culture. Or, just

the way that one contributes to the ills of society—not of their own volition, but because that’s the way the system is constructed. It’s a difficult thing to explain. It’s not something that you can completely codify, and you’d ruin it with bombast.”

Hence, his obsession with singers who cut to the heart (he also mentions Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams), and the overwhelming urge to simplify his own art: paring down lyrics, recording and releasing *Modern Guilt* so quickly, with such little fanfare, and even his choice to work with a form of music that has room for re-evolution: proto psych-rock (a form that existed, not coincidentally, just before Western culture went into overdrive). Beck is steeling himself for something.

“There are some people,” he continues, “who just embrace the drive-thru, the multiplex, the text message, and the stucco house, and they don’t mind living in sweat pants. It’s this sort of lessening, and there’s something in me that really fights that. I’m trying to write from the perspective of somebody who is just remotely cognizant of it, but completely entrenched, who feels that pervading tinge of unease.”

Call it “modern guilt,” a uniquely postmodern affliction whose character and origin is always obscured, but whose hallmark is the mildest and most persistent gut-sized ball of generalized confusion and fear. It’s the feeling that might come from too much advertising and too many options, from having all aspects of expression turned into commodity, from satellite waves and cell-phone static, from waging vague wars in foreign lands, or from a severe, Twin Towers-sized interruption of the off-kilter comfort that all of this engenders.

How does one define an absence that feels present?

And that, specifically, is the struggle of the songwriter today: beating this Nothing into submission, giving it a name, and singing that name aloud, in order to relieve the rest of us. Simply put, Beck’s quest is discovering the new ballad.

On *Modern Guilt*’s last song, a slow-burning epic called “Volcano,” Beck comes as close as anyone has. He tells of a Japanese girl who jumped into a volcano, and asks, “*Was she trying to make it back? / Back into the womb of the world?*”—as if things had become so muddled on the surface that only total rebirth could deliver respite. But moments later, Beck offers a less unsettling take. After an album’s worth of lyrics about wandering lost, the record’s final words ring of revelation: “*I don’t know where I’ve been / But I know where I’m going / To that volcano / I don’t want to fall in though / Just want to warm my bones / On that fire a while.*”

“There have been times,” says Beck, “when I wanted to just get away from all of it, like these guys who end up out on the land somewhere, out on the prairie in a shack. Part of me, too, always wished I could wholly embrace society, but I don’t know. Maybe Brian Wilson articulated it better: I just wasn’t made for these times.”

Which is a sure sign that he’s at least eligible to be a part of that hallowed guard. Parting ways, I want to imagine him walking into the sunset. Instead, Beck shakes my hand loosely, bobbing his head with a half-smile, like he’s trying to remember something he’s forgotten. Maybe this is what the modern hero looks like.☒

Cotton long-sleeve button-down shirt, cotton scarf, and lambskin hat by NUMBER (N)INE. Cotton vest by ANN DEMEULEMEESTER.

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