

BECK

MORNING PHASE

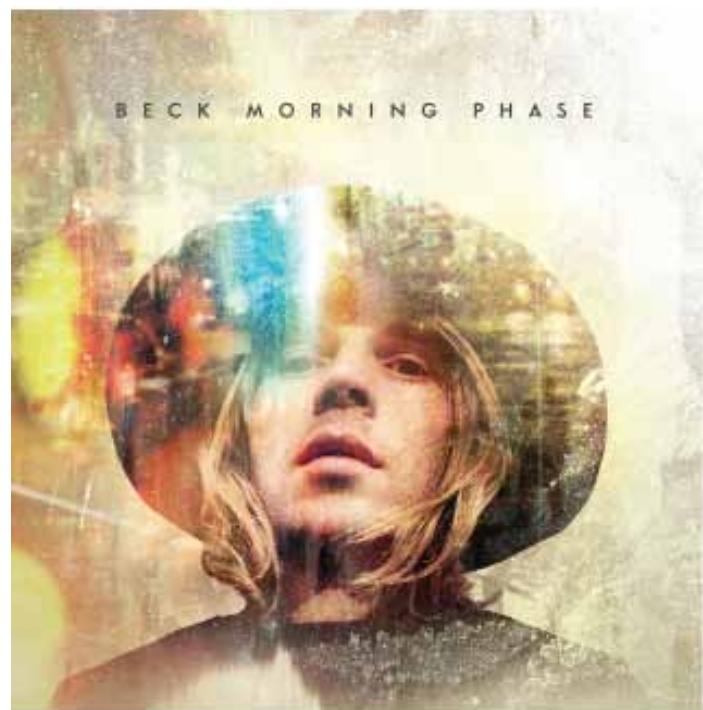
Beck has long been unpredictable. Lyrical vagueries, genre-hopping, indecipherable videos: it's all part of his charm. You don't know what he'll do next. Neither does he. He's talked of fickle inspiration, how uncertain he is of how the muse will move him.

In 2002 the muse moved him to write *Sea Change*, the most straightforward singer-songwriter work of his career. Orchestral arrangements orbited fingerpicked acoustic guitars. His vocal delivery—rough and undemanding—represented the depths to which he had sunk after the dissolution of a five-year relationship. Lyrics, once so indecipherable, became plainspoken, the metaphors clear, the declarations lucid. It was an affecting album, seemingly his first record that placed emotional catharsis above musical exploration.

Some circles considered it Beck's magnus opus. Critics and fans alike raised surprised eyebrows. This was the musician famous for two turntables and a microphone: a warped mashup of folk, hip-hop, and rock that had arrived when grunge was choking the airwaves. And now he'd released an autobiographical album befitting of the 1970's.

His newest record, *Morning Phase*, sounds uncannily like *Sea Change*. Not coincidentally, it's comprised of songs written during the *Sea Change* years. Same instrumentation, same structures, same themes of loss and isolation and depression.

Or the themes may be explorations of technology's influence on interpersonal relationships. It isn't clear. His lyrics have become mercurial again. And his voice loses its impact behind rampant reverb, smoothing out his baritone but blunting the emotional impact. *Sea Change* worked within the boundaries of heartache, but in vastly different ways from song to song.



The angles at which *Morning Phase* looks at heartache remain blurry. They're pretty, in a forlorn and melancholic way, but the meanings aren't clear, and each song sounds like a remix of another.

By no means does this make *Morning Phase* a bad album, or even a mediocre one. It's good—but that's about the best you can say for it. It doesn't strive to be extravagant (except for the regality of the strings) or transcendental or experimental.

Pitchfork.com sums it up as "easy to listen to." That isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it doesn't leave a lot of room for revisitability, not with the undefined pathos and overly similar sounds. *Morning Phase* feels like a lackadaisical, though at times beautiful and charming, version of what Beck already released in 2002.

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