

BECK

MORNING PHASE



Ever known for opaque lyrics merged with complex rhythms and genre-hopping, Beck has rightfully earned the status of being somewhat unpredictable, which was always one of his largest appeals (the venture into Scientology did nothing to detract from critics' notions of his "out-there" personality, an opinion based solely on his music; in interviews, he always comes across as a down-to-earth, relatively genial person).

That unpredictability was further underlined upon the release of *Sea Change* in 2002, his most singer-songwriter, folk-centric album, and the most thematically straightforward work of his career. Lush orchestral arrangements orbited simple fingerpicked acoustic guitar riffs, and 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 put his own emotion and catharsis above musical exploration. It was considered some circles to be Beck's magnum opus, and it further underscored his prolific ability to adeptly compose works within any given genre.

Critics and fans alike raised surprised eyebrows, as the musician who became famous for two turntables and a microphone and delivering a warped mashup of genres over the years, released an album that sounded more like something befitting 1970's radio and finally gave an autobiographical bent to his songwriting.

His newest album, *Morning Phase*, sounds uncannily like *Sea Change*, with more luxurious orchestral arrangements shimmering on the outskirts of Beck's acoustic melodies and deliberate voice (not coincidentally, it's comprised of a multitude of songs written but lost during the *Sea Change* years) exploring thematic elements tied to the hallmarks of grief.

Those themes -- the tumultuous state of heartache, and perhaps Beck's social commentary on technology's

influence on humanity's interpersonal relationships -- are accentuated to an even larger degree by the overuse of reverb. The effect smooths out Beck's rough baritone but weakens the emotional impact of his voice. And it's in every song.

Sea Change worked within the boundaries of heartache, like *Morning Phase*, but did so from different angles. The angles from which *Morning Phase* looks at — well, whatever aspect of heartbreak he's looking at, for Beck's lyrics have reverted to their opaque obscurities, yet the music maintains the same melancholic tropes — are relatively constant from song to song. Similar structure, similar pacing, similar pathos. It all tapers into a constant and somewhat staid experience.

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's merely good. It doesn't strive for anything extravagant (except for the regality of the strings) or transcendental or experimental, the way he's done with previous albums. It doesn't go for anything particularly noteworthy or new, apart from perhaps the less-than-two-minute instrumental tracks full of more strings and dreamy ambient tones that reference "waking" or "phases," representing a morning sunrise or a setting moon, leaving a beautifully bittersweet sense of wistful longing for a few minutes before the album rejoins its static emotional journey.

Sea Change had an emotional undercurrent of desolation, distress and loss that was represented in myriad structural approaches and instrumentation; *Morning Phase* tries for the same, but its record doesn't capture that tragic poignancy with the same intensity *Sea Change* did. So it just feels like a lackadaisical, though at times pretty and charming, version of what Beck already released in 2002.

MORNING PHASE

SOUNDS UNCANNILY LIKE

SEA CHANGE