



Beck

by Miranda Freeman

Back To Beck

A decade on since the release of his seminal album *Sea Change*, a record that has unintentionally come to stand as something of a DIY repair kit for brokenhearted alternative types worldwide, prolific singer-songwriter Beck Hansen revisits those cherished sounds with his 12th studio album, *Morning Phase*.

“I hope [it sounds positive], yeah, at least that’s what I strove for. Maybe I didn’t hear that as much with *Sea Change*,” a gentle-voiced Hansen ruminates from his home in L.A. “I felt like with that record I got a lot of response from it that it was kind of down, and pretty heavy. So you know, I tried to add some other dimensions to this one. *Sea Change* felt like the beginning of something,” he continues. “I sort of tested the waters a bit with *Mutations*, recording in that style, and then *Sea Change* was a bit more all-in. This one is kind of going back to that kind of sound and seeing what else is there.”

Featuring the same group of collaborators that worked on *Sea Change*—Justin Meldal-Johnson, Roger Joseph Manning Jr., Smokey Hormel and Atoms For Peace’s Joey Waronker—*Morning Phase* contains a similarly pensive energy, steeped in sun-drenched, ‘70s folk with moments of rich orchestration. Even the first few chords of album opener *Morning* seem to stretch into familiar territory, sounding not too dissimilar to *SC*’s glorious *The Golden Age*.

Yet despite the claims of foamy-mouthed music journalists, *Morning Phase* isn’t a long-awaited companion piece to *Sea Change*.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I set out for it to

be a companion piece,” Hansen offers. “The boring answer is that it’s the same people from *Sea Change*, and we recorded in a similar studio, and then there’s guy named Beck who sang on it... Not to be flippant but it’s kind of, you know, it’s kind of a sound that I spent a lot of years to find, to figure out how to do, and how to pull off, so if it sounds like [*Sea Change*] I wasn’t intending

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to rip myself off, but it’s okay if I do. It’s okay to have that kind of territory to go back to. I never once said, ‘This sounds too much like *Sea Change*, let’s stop’. I gave myself freedom to let it be whatever it wanted to be.”

Known to sit on songs for months, even years, it’s interesting to learn Hansen’s perspective on his own success. In his mind, it’s the songs that “land from nowhere” that seem to have made the biggest footprints.

“The ones that people like are the ones that sort of land from nowhere. They tumble out as one piece and yeah, and there they

are,” he admits. “Songs like *Blue Moon*, *Unforgiven* and *Wave...* those songs [off *Morning Phase*] just kind of happened very quickly. But I think overall this is the record I wanted to do.”

2002’s *Sea Change* was recorded not long after a break-up between Hansen and his then-fiancée, and this tragic life event seemed to seep into the album’s roots like a rich sap. A decade later, the subtext within Hansen’s lyricism has shifted. There’s a noticeably positive glint behind *Morning Phase*.

“I think the songs have a little bit of a forward motion to them. On *Morning Phase* I hear the sound of something coming out of a tumultuous or difficult period, and it’s that time of reckoning, and moving forward. I think anyone’s who’s gone through a difficult period—you can sit in it, the past—but there’s a certain point where you have to take what you can learn and move forward.”

That said, Hansen’s the first to admit that “wallowing in the mire” has allowed for the gestation of some of the world’s most wonderful creations.

“Believe me, I’ve written my fair share of songs while wallowing. It’s maybe even a default setting a lot of times,” he laughs. “You go to that introspective sound, that place, that mood, and musically it’s easy to go into that kind of place. But I really made an effort to make the songs [on *Morning Phase*] have some light in them. I think that’s where all the imagery of the light in the morning comes from, I wanted to suffuse at least part of the record in that, that there’s a sense of reconciling and overcoming. I think at one point I was thinking about gospel music and how that informs people like Stevie Wonder in his songwriting, that kind

of redemptive feeling. I thought, we could all use a little of that.”

Similarly to *Sea Change*, which strayed well off the beaten alt-rock path with epically lush string sections like *Paper Tiger*, Beck’s father—accomplished musician and composer David Campbell—helped out with the orchestral detours on *Morning Phase*.

“He did the orchestrating and conducted, but a lot of times I’d record on a keyboard and we’d expand on it together. I’m actually pretty specific about the strings, and I have strong opinions about using orchestra. There’s this whole history of pop music and singer-songwriter music that uses orchestra that goes into easy listening territory, and it can too often be used as a device to over-sentimentalise a piece of music,” he cautions. “I was wary of that, and was very specific of how we used to the orchestra on *Morning Phase* and the way they played. I really go for an unaffected style, as I think I like modern-classical music and Baroque music when it’s played in a very simple, plain way.”

Morning Phase only hit shelves late last month, but Hansen is already working on his 13th studio album. As he tells *Rip It Up*, it will be “very different” all over again.

“I’m recording another album that I’ve been working on for about a year with some different producers and different collaborators. That record I’m really looking forward to; it’ll be very different from *Morning Phase*,” he says.

WHO: Beck
WHAT: *Morning Phase*
(Capitol Records/EMI)