

Colors: Beck's foray into mainstream pop

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In today's musical climate—characterized by an endless glut of pop albums that sound like they were crafted in corporate boardrooms and focus group sessions—any pop album delivering a few inspired and original tracks is a cause for minor celebration. This past year, the musician Beck (Beck David Campbell) provided just that with his album *Colors*. The 11 albums Beck released prior to *Colors* (2017) blended a dizzying array of genres, resulting in a series of psychedelic funk, soul, folk, hip-hop and and rock infused-anthems that have consistently topped the charts. *Colors* continues this body of work, with an upbeat blend of contemporary club sounds and ethereal backup vocals (“Wow”), rock rhythms and piano reminiscent of Ben Folds Five and the Beatles (“Dear Life”) and harder-edged, electronic-infused rock (“Colors”).

Admittedly, some tracks on the new album, such as “Seventh Heaven” and “Up all Night,” are bland and uninspired pop offerings that have the same ubiquitous mass-produced sounds that have crowded FM radio stations for the better part of the past two decades. There are echoes of Beck's funk sensibility, but they are diluted by highly predictable melodies and song structure. The track “Dreams” initially sounds like a promising up-tempo soul track, only to be deflated by the most inane “hook” imaginable, with Beck singing, “Dreams ... she's making me high, she's making me high.”

His previous body of work has often showed some unevenness, but one always sensed that despite the successes or failures of Beck's songwriting and artistic choices, ubiquitousness was never the issue. Even when Beck failed, he did so with a distinct sound. *Colors* is somewhat unsettling because it breaks with this trend. The question worth asking is whether this reflects a new stage in his career or a temporary foray deep into mainstream territory.

Assessing the ~~un~~*Colors*—~~quality~~ of genre explorations offset by contemporary pop conformity—also requires a look back at the trajectory of Beck's career, including his artistic roots, and how two-and-a-half decades of massive success have cemented his status as both a mainstream and counterculture icon.

Born in Los Angeles in 1970, Beck had parents who were deeply involved in the arts and music scene. His father David Campbell is a prodigious arranger, composer and conductor, who has worked on over 450 gold and platinum albums, playing in studio sessions with artists such as Marvin Gaye and Bill Withers, later arranging songs for Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Radiohead, and many others, including his son's. Beck's mother Bibbe Hansen is the daughter of Fluxus artist Al Hansen and is herself a performance artist, musician and actress who was part of the Andy Warhol factory in her early days. Needless to say, art in all its forms was an intimate part of the environment Beck grew up in.

Beck moved to New York in 1989 at age 19 and became involved in the “Anti-Folk” scene, which embodied a reaction to some of the strained pretensions of 1960s' folk music and popular music in general. He first emerged as a dominant presence on FM radio four years later with the 1993 hit “Loser,” debuting an explosive fusion of modern sounds that had huge appeal for the 90s generation. The lyrics were chaotic, self-deprecating, slick, ironic, and poetic: “*You can't write if you can't relate. Trade the cash for the beef, for the body, for the hate. And my time is a piece of wax falling on a termite that's choking on the splinters.*”

His follow-up album *Odelay*, released in 1996, further integrated elements of hip-hop, country, pop, rock and folk into a highly original sound, and produced three tracks that became instant classics on modern rock and college radio stations: “Devil's

Haircut,” “Where it’s At” and “The New Pollution.”

Among a long list of later albums, *Sea Change* (2002) and *Morning Phase* (2014) were notable for their expansive psychedelic-folk sound. There was an earnestness and depth of feeling on these two albums, released 12 years apart from each other yet sounding like two sides of the same record. The mellow acoustic guitar, piano and soaring string arrangements on *Sea Change* and *Morning Phase* are complemented by gritty vocals deal with loss, isolation, acceptance and redemption. On “End of the Day,” Beck laments; “*I’ve seen the end of the day come too soon. Like the prison dogs they set out after you. You owe nothing to the past but wasted time. To serve a sentence that was only in your mind.*”

In a recent interview with British musical journal *New Musical Express* about *Colors*, Beck mused, “When you make music for a lot of years ... there’s sort of an expectation that you’re going to go away. In popular music it’s built in for people to come and go. There are points where you wonder if you’re overstaying your welcome. It’s not even insecurity; it’s trying to be real with yourself. Maybe it’s a common thing for musicians—at some point you wonder, do you get out of the way? When’s the point when someone taps you on the shoulder and goes, ‘It’s time to go home’?”

Hopefully, Beck will extend his welcome on the contemporary music scene by drawing on his creativity to offer listeners the original sounds that have sustained his work over the past two-and-a-half decades.



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