

RAD RAY

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HOME ME BOY

Eclectic, tireless, forever modern, and, of course, easy on the eyes... Is there a musician more quintessentially L.A. than Beck? We think not. By Jessica Suarez. Photographed by Melanie Pullen



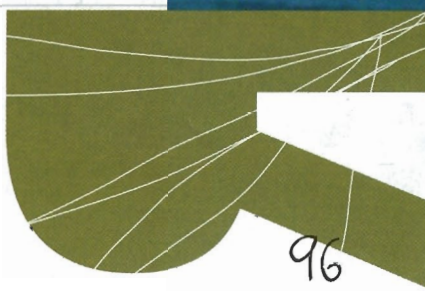


Want to know what it's like to hang out with Beck? Get thee to YouTube.

The videos for the singer's latest album leaked last month, and they aren't available on any official Beck websites, but you can watch them on youtube.com and a few blogs. Unlike his past videos, these aren't shot by Michel Gondry, or Mark Romanek, nor do they have quick cuts or any of Beck's trademark costume changes. These little movies were shot in the studio, while he was recording his new album *The Information*. Beck's mother-in-law ran the lights, while his friends shined flashlights against the walls to create patterns. His wife, Marissa Ribisi, took a quick trip to an L.A. thrift store to pick up a couple of cheap prom dresses for his friends to wear as they danced and mugged behind him. In one of the videos, his son Cosimo smiles while a man in a bear costume swings him by his arms.

"You get in these situations where a TV thing or a video thing gets congested with so much that has nothing to do with how you made the music, or how you started," he explains. These videos were different. "These were mostly recorded live. We borrowed three cameras, used a hundred-dollar video mixer we got off eBay, and got everybody in a room together. It's just people coming and going—kids, mothers, fiction writers, friends, relatives, babies. It was kind of mad." It's been 12 years since Beck debuted on MTV with "Loser," and 11 since he was labeled a one-hit wonder. Ten albums later, it seems nothing short of ridiculous to think of him as a novelty. But he does seem to miss that period where he had more time than money to make an album or a video, where, as he says "...the shot lasts way too long, the lighting's really off, but it's interesting because you're looking at a human being, and someone walks by and makes them laugh"—and this little exercise in DIY is a fond throw-back to those days. Although he's a grown-up family man now, there are some things about Beck that have stayed the same.

For one thing, he still loves piecing things together. He remembers taking home new LPs, the joy of playing them while holding the record sleeve and puzzling over the cover art. He hopes *The Information* inspires that kind of tactile appreciation. The album will come with a blank cover and six sheets of stickers, inviting the listener to place them on the cover in the arrangement of their choice. "I got to work with 15 different artists on one record, so I was spoiled," he says. "There's everything from a flying monkey to a beautifully drawn picture of a woman playing a Japanese koto naked. Complete kitsch to classic, clean images, with everything thrown together." It triggers one memory for him in particular: "Years ago I bought this old wind-up Victrola that didn't require any



electricity, and the needle on it was made from wood. You put a record on and you're listening to music coming out of a speaker non-electrically, sound waves transmitted through a piece of wood," he remembers. "There was something so otherworldly about it, it really made me experience the songs."

The songs on *The Information* don't stray too far from Beck's last album, *Guero*, though he chose Nigel Godrich, the producer behind the comparatively somber *Mutations* and *Sea Change*, to record it. He originally wanted a hip-hop album, though that vision evolved as *The Information* took shape over the last two years. "There's a certain amount of restraint on *Sea Change* and *Mutations*, and we never really got to cut loose," he explains. "So we wanted to do one where we really go into different genres, different sounds, something more aggressive than those records."

Even though they recorded 40 tracks in just two days, it took two years to turn those tracks into completed songs. It's apparent from every one of them that Beck is still as much a curator of sounds as a songwriter, and loves to see what sticks and what can be re-stuck. On "Cell Phone's Dead," you can hear hints of ABBA and Herbie Hancock underneath his stream-of-consciousness rapping. There are also samples of babies cooing, and Beck's niece, warning, "One by one I'll knock you out." Another track, "Think I'm In Love," is a love song, plain and simple: "Take a little picture in a photo booth/ Put it in a locket and think of you" he sings, before the one-line chorus, "I think I'm in love but it makes me kinda nervous to say so." It's almost *too* sweet, until he gets to the line about throwing the locket away.

Of course, one of the things that *has* changed over the last few years is Beck's longtime home of Silver Lake. "It was shocking to me the first time I saw a hipster walking down the street in Silver Lake because it was always just Latino families and these people I knew, who were sort of a post-Kerouac, post-L.A.-punk scene, bohemian kind of minority," he recalls. As he goes on about L.A.'s mutations, it's easy to get the impression that he's also talking about his music: His distinction between work, family, and friends is both porous and organic. "A lot of times on the album, it was just me for three weeks, writing and trying things out. But there were other times there was kind of a mélange of disparate people, all hanging around, converging. [We were] trying to break down the barrier between the antiseptic and the lives we're living. Trying to capture the background noise of life."

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