

Album Analysis:
Beck and Godrich
The Information

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INTRODUCTION

THE INFORMATION

The Information is Beck's tenth studio album released by Interscope Records. It ranked number twenty-four on *Rollingstone Magazine's* best albums list for 2006 (Stereogum, 2006) and number ten on *Spin Magazine's* '40 Best Albums of 2006' (Spin Staff, 2006). Received with mixed reviews by the critics and media, it is mostly likened to his earlier work in *Mellow Gold* (1994) and *Odelay* (1996). Stephen Erlewine (2006) author for *Allmusic.com* describes the album as “[hearkening] back to the collage of loose-limbed, quirky white-boy funk-rock and rap that brought Beck fame at the peak of the alt-rock revolution.” Andy Gill (2006), in critiquing the album for *The Independent* makes the observation that, “[Beck and Godrich] seem to have found a much more effective balance between those albums' bland folk-rock stylings and the bohemian oddball hip-hop/indie crossover with which [Beck is] more commonly associated.”

The two began work on *The Information* shortly after the release of *Sea Change* in 2002. For the next three and a half years they would find themselves in a relatively “painful” process, according to Beck in an interview with BBC radio. “It's as if we made the album once, and we made it again, and we made it a third time” (Redmond, 2006). The two reconvened once a year for intensive song writing sessions where they filtered and sifted through disparate ideas and eliminated material that lacked originality, freshness and vibrancy (Redmond, 2006).

Beck's initial idea was to do the album at 8-bit. However, it was Godrich's surprising confession at wanting to do a hip-hop record that surprised Beck, but nonetheless quickly became the catalyst for the 'breakbeat' inspired direction of the album. In an interview with Murphy (2006) for *Remix Magazine* Beck recalls how he had “wanted to do something that was very percussive” and was initially surprised “when Nigel said that he'd always thought about doing a hip-hop record”. Beck had always thought that Godrich “was more into the sort of singer-songwriter, Joni Mitchell/Nick Drake school, but it turns out [Godrich] loves breakbeats” - and so a working direction for the concept that was to be *The Information* was formed.

BECK HANSEN

Born Bek David Campbell on July 8, 1970, Beck's first launch into superstardom was with his 1993 single release of *Loser* by independent label Bong Load Custom Records (Kemp, 1997). His career has since been an illustrious quilted journey of genre bending music escapades with influences ranging from hip-hop, R&B, breakbeats, trash-rock, pop, soul, grunge, electronica, lounge music, folk and classical - “...pretty much any found sound or vinyl dug up from a dusty crate, blurring boundaries and encapsulating how '90s hipsters looked toward the future by foraging through the past” (Beck, 2008).

This colourful eclecticism readily found in his influences and aesthetics, can best be attributed to his heterogenic upbringing. His father, David Campbell, was a bluegrass street musician and a scientologist; his mother of part Jewish, part Norwegian and part Swedish decent, Bibbe Hansen, was a performance artist, musician, actress and muse for Andy Warhol's *Factory*; his maternal grandfather, Al Hansen, was a highly eccentric artist who was a prominent member of the *Fluxus* art movement of the 50's and 60's (Kemp, 1997); surrounded then by these individuals resulted in an upbringing teeming in artistic, musical and culture clashes, allowing an impressionable Beck to discover his love for musical foraging:

I used to have a tape recorder, with one of those cheap RadioShack plastic microphones. I used a calculator that had little melodies...when you hit the buttons. My brother was the drummer, he played pencils on a cassette-tape box, and I wrote a song called "Bells Are Ringing." We'd seen this Kraftwerk video with all these little instruments, so that's what we were aspiring to do (Scaggs, 2005).

He's released eleven studio albums beginning with *Mellow Gold* in 1993 and *Stereopathetic* in 1994. His garnered several awards along the way including back to back Grammys for *Best Alternative Music Performance* for the widely acclaimed *Odelay* (1996) and *Mutations* (1998). Besides his latest collaboration with Danger Mouse on his most recent album *Modern Guilt* in 2008 (Dombal, 2008), Beck had only ever worked with two major producers - The Dust Brothers for *Odelay* (1996) and *Guero* (2005) and Nigel Godrich for *Mutations* (1998), *Sea Change* (2002) and finally *The Information* (2007).

NIGEL GODRICH

Nigel Godrich, born February 28, 1971, is most renowned for his long term collaboration with the English progressive rock band *Radiohead*. It was during his initial involvements with the band's second studio album *The Bends* (1995), which began a long standing and extensive relationship with the quintet, comparable only to one other famed producer-artist association - that of Sir George Martin and the Beatles. Godrich's progressive production techniques on Radiohead's third studio album *Ok Computer* (1997) garnered him global critical acclaim, quickly becoming one of the most sought out producers of his day. It were for the aforementioned reasons that the nickname "Nigel the Nihilist" was given to him by the band "for his persistent attempts to steer their sound towards uncharted territory" (McKinnon, 2006). He has since been dubbed a 'superproducer' by *Wired Magazine* for "reinventing the sound" of today's contemporary musical landscape (Levine & Werde, 2003).

Godrich's ability to push the boundaries of a production process coupled with Beck's unique ability to meld a myriad of sonic influences make for a remarkable musical collaboration that has spanned, as mentioned above, across the release of three studio albums. Their first partnership delivered Beck's sixth studio album *Mutations*, "a record of psychedelic folk, rock and blues, with hints of country and Brazilian music" (Kopcow, 1998), released by Geffen records in 1998. They collaborated once again for Beck's eighth studio album, *Sea Change* in 2002, a record that was tracked in two weeks after the artist's much publicised break-up with long time girlfriend Leigh Limon (Bryant, 2002). These emotionally charged two week period yielded a collection of "gentle and mournful" (Montgomery, 2006) songs that showcased a raw and sentimental side, Beck had never previously shown. *The Information*, released in 2006, was their third collaboration where they "decided to throw out whatever system or conventions [they] had in working with each other" and "to really experiment and see what happens" (Murphy, 2006). In commenting what it was about Godrich that made him an ideal partner, Beck replies,

All of my records tend to have crazy sounds going on to some degree...and I think Nigel and I definitely share that. He brings a little bit of alchemy into it that's sometimes mysterious and sometimes very simple, but whatever it is, it's always just right for what needs to happen (Murphy, 2006).

PRODUCTION DETAILS

PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

Initial tracking dates for the duo's "homemade breakbeat library" were done during an intensive seven days at the legendary Ocean Way Recording studios in Hollywood. During these sessions Beck aimed to achieve a freestyle vibe and grittiness that emulated the sound of old 45 vinyls (Murphy, 2006). This very concept is introduced to the listener on the very first track of the album titled *Elevator Music*¹. Here, Beck and Godrich provide a sonic buffet of percussive hits that seem to have been sampled from a variety of records. In commenting on how they achieved such results Beck states "I don't know if I'm allowed to give away [Godrich's] secrets, but what he uses to get his sound is not all that different from what other people are using - it's just the way he's using it, or what he's using it on." (Murphy, 2006).

In fact, Godrich's unique and creative production traits are immediately on show on the very same opening track with flanging and phasing effects applied on a few percussive samples throughout the track. He has also made use of a reverb effect unit "salvaged from a '50s Chevy", applying it on Beck's evocative melodic accompaniment in the chorus section of the song (Murphy, 2006).² For the title track of the album *The Information*, Godrich utilises digital distortion, droning strings, ring-modulated synths and Moog sounding bass synths to accompany a collection of freeform sound bites³ recorded using an open mic technique. "We just had all the microphones open and got a bunch of people in there making sounds. We'd go down to the pawnshop and grab a flute, and someone else would grab a cello, and somebody else would be screaming... whatever we needed" (Murphy, 2006).

This open mic technique is further exploited by Godrich in his integration of atmospheric sounds, captured right in Beck's backyard. Godrich in recalling the sessions says, "we built a little studio in his garden - half the time we were in the pool, the other half we were talking about what we're doing and trying new things..." (Serpick, 2006). These samples consisting of "snippets of conversations,⁴ dogs panting, children squealing",⁵ etc., was recorded using Neumann microphones that included a "vintage U47, circa 1948". An amused Beck recalls the process - "We just put the microphones outside...and had the front door open and the dog running around and friends coming by. I mean, there are tracks where you can hear sprinklers and air-conditioning units" (Murphy, 2006). These organic noise sounds not only provide the atmospheric backdrop for most of the tracks, such as the intro to *Strange Apparition*⁶ and the outro for *Nausea*,⁷ it also serve to unify and focus the overall sonic aesthetics of the record.

1 Track 01 - Elevator Music

2 Track 01 - Elevator Music at 01:01

3 Track 13 - The Information

4 Track 08 - Dark Star at 03:00

5 Track 03 - Cellphone's Dead at 00:59

6 Track 04 - Strange Apparition at 00:00

7 Track 06 - Nausea at 02:20

Another technique which would provide cohesion for the album came from Beck and Godrich's collaboration with DJ Z-Trip. After recording the initial breakbeat tracks in the studio, Beck and Godrich sifted through and selected appropriate material to be pressed on 100 vinyl copies. DJ Z-trip was then given free-reign to scratch them back into the mix. As Beck recalls, "we put them through cheap samplers and ran them backwards and put dirty effects on them and tried to not be precious about it - really the idea was just to be...reckless with them" (Murphy, 2006). This technique is clearly demonstrated on the track *1000BPM*⁸ where scratch type and vocal stutter effects are dispersed throughout the track. In an interview for *Rollingstone Magazine*, Godrich sums up what part of the experience was about:

The record was all about getting a bunch of people in the studio, giving them some direction, cooking it and seeing what came out [such as] a guest spot from DJ Z-Trip and a spoken-word session with Dave Eggers and Spike Jonze⁹ (Serpick, 2006).

This free-styling concept becomes an integral theme that permeate the entire length of the creative process, not only limited to the production stages but it would also motivate Beck's design for the album cover and his concept for the music videos that were to follow suit.

INFLUENTIAL ATTRIBUTES

Beck had always toyed around with the notion of the traditional album - taking its "linear structure" and experimenting with its boundaries and pre-existing formats (Murphy, 2006). This trait goes hand-in-hand with his song writing sensibilities and the idiosyncratic way he arranges for the musical and sonic material on his records. For Beck's previous album *Guero* (2005), the standard CD launch was complimented with a separate deluxe CD/DVD release "featuring 'textural movies' and 'vision-scapes' by the London-based imagineers D-Fuse" (Murphy, 2006). Remixes of the tracks were also leaked online, culminating into a full length remix album version for all the tracks. This album was aptly named *GueroLito*, released a couple of months soon after *Guero* (Dombal, 2005). The album featured reinterpretations from artists such as Diplo, Board of Canada, Air, El-P, Subtle and Th' Corn Gangg (Lundy, 2005).

Similarly for *The Information*, a DVD companion was included along with the stock CD release, containing, yet again, a visual accompaniment for each of the fifteen tracks on the album. These were a series of "low-budget" and "blatantly improvised" videos (Walters, 2006) shot in a makeshift green screen studio with cheap cameras and a cheap video mixer, bought for \$100 from eBay (Steuer, 2006). Beck and Godrich invited friends and family to be part of the footage, which included "Beck's wife, Marissa Ribisi; freak-folk icon Devendra Banhart; and various bandmates and friends..." (Walters, 2006). Also included were Beck's mother-in-law who designed the lights and his son, nieces and nephews who were "running around acting crazy" (Steuer, 2006). This, to Beck, perfectly suited the underlying theme and mood of the album - loose, impromptu and "not really delineating between the fact that we're making a record and what daily life was" (Serpick, 2006)

8 Track 11 - 1000BPM

9 Track 15 - The Horrible Fanfare, Landslide, Exoskeleton at 07:35

These videos had two main purposes. First was its use as a vehicle for a one-of-a-kind YouTube release (Pattison, 2006) where every one of the fifteen music videos were uploaded as a “visual version of the record...on the Internet”, adding to the album’s aural experience (Steuer, 2006). They were also included as bonus files to any listener that purchased the songs on iTunes, or other similar digital distribution services, automatically being downloaded with the audio file (Serpick, 2006).

In conceptualising for the album artwork, Beck maintained a free-style thematic idea and designed an interactive, do-it-yourself CD cover. The cover is left blank and allows the listener for customisation, using a range of stickers that came with the packaging. This made for each album having a unique and exclusive cover, tailored to suit the individual and directly mirroring the way Beck makes music by “picking and choosing from a range of sonic images and combining them to see how agreeable a design he can make with them” (Gill, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The Information is certainly another record which typifies Beck's innovative tendencies. Once again he has repurposed familiar musical styles into something unique and revolutionary. What sets this album apart from the rest of popular music is its "open embrace of electronics, sound synthesis, sound manipulation and generally left-field and experimental modes of signal processing" (Murphy, 2006); merging analogue based production sounds and digital pre-production methods. Beck's unique methodologies and his highly creative approach to presenting the 'bigger picture' of the record to its listeners is another major reason why this album holds much influence for the rest of the music industry. In an interview for Wired Magazine, Beck elaborates this very notion of pushing the envelope when it comes to album releases:

There are so many dimensions to what a record can be these days. Artists can and should approach making an album as an opportunity to do a series of releases – one that's visual, one that has alternate versions, and one that's something the listener can participate in or arrange and change. It's time for the album to embrace the technology (Steuer, 2006).

Several artists have since taken on this challenge and have effectively used technology to creatively expand the definition of a traditional album and in turn have reconfigured how their listeners interact with their work. Radiohead's initial launch of their 2007 album *In Rainbows*, saw an unprecedented approach by releasing the whole record online without going through proper record label distribution channels (Pareles, 2007). They repeated this process for their 2011 release of *The King of Limbs*, with several formats available for purchase including a DVD format with videos of live renditions and the inclusion of a 32 page hardback book containing photos from the recording session (Radiohead, n.d.).

Danger Mouse's 2011 collaboration with Italian composer Daniele Luppi produced the album *Rome*. It features the track *Black* which is accompanied with an interactive 3D video, titled *3 Dreams of Black*, directed by Chris Milk. "In the video, you can create your own characters, and if enough people like those characters, they could later be added to every other user's experience of the video" (Breihan, 2011).

Blink182's seventh studio album *Neighborhood*, released in 2011 (Holt, 2011), makes use of an interactive album cover in conjunction with *ThingLink*, "a free tagging tool available to any artists that give photos new life with music or sounds from Soundcloud, video, social, contests, etc" (Hypebot, n.d.). This was utilised as a marketing tool on various websites to interconnect the album's numerous multimedia material online.

These are just a few examples of artists embracing technological advances made available by digital media. They, along with Beck, continue to seize the opportunity to shake the status quo of a generic record and continually present the music industry with ideas and possibilities for innovative and creative ventures.

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