



REUTERS PHOTO BY MARIO ANZUONI

# Beck

## *A letter to my younger self*

Pop star Beck contributes to a celebrity series of letters to younger versions of themselves for street papers worldwide. Beck talks about the "insanity" of public life, the hard times of his teenage years — and a life-changing trip to London.

**W**hen I was 16 my family was going through hard times. There was a pile of us living in a little apartment in L.A. I found myself retreating from education. I think I fell between the cracks of the system. I was the only white boy in my class and I was harassed a lot. And when I wasn't being harassed, I was ignored. I was too young to go to a city college but my high school was struggling, there were a lot of problems with

gang violence. So I spent a lot of time on my own. And I started thinking about making a living.

**At home I had no personal space, and you need that as a teenager.** I sought refuge in the library I used to go to the big old city library in L.A. a lot but when I was 16 it burned down. I still remember watching it on the news. I had a tear in my eye. I sought refuge in the library, the one place I could spend as much time as I wanted and it didn't cost me any money. Usually I was the only kid there, and that's where I got most of my education. There was a big music section, so I found out about old folk music and country blues, and those old Library of Congress records — I

remember listening to them. Around the same time I started playing guitar, trying to learn these songs. It felt like discovering lost knowledge and forgotten history. At the time popular culture was all about glossy global pop and upward mobility. I was taken with the opposite.

I was writing a lot of very simple, personal songs. But at that time that kind of music was met with a lot of antipathy in L.A. The reaction was completely negative. You have to remember, this was the time of the punk movement in L.A. It was all about being transgressive. The gigs were, like, fire-eating guys in leather bondage or suits of armour playing speed metal on burning oil cans. So my little personal guitar songs, they didn't go down so well.

**I was pretty independent when I was 16.** I guess my mom was pretty laid back. That's just the way it was. I saw an ad in a newspaper for a plane ticket to London that someone couldn't use and I knew a kid from school whose father lived in Hampstead Heath. So I took the plane with this guy's phone number in my pocket and I just showed up at his house with a few dollars. I had no suitcase, nothing, I didn't even bring a coat. I spent weeks just walking round London freezing. I ended up getting stuck over there until a friend of a friend lent me money to get back to L.A. But that trip made a huge impression on me.

**I was a highly curious kid, constantly searching for information.** There was no Internet, of course, so you really had to work at finding things out. There were some people who could help — the old man at the guitar shop would answer questions sometimes. So I felt like I was always looking for clues, keeping my eyes and ears open. I would scour newspapers for free shows 'cos I had no money. A lot of the big bands of the 1940s gave free concerts on Saturday afternoons. The musicians were in their '70s and '80s but they were still playing great. I went to a lot of those. And I went to repertory theatres to see old movies, they were very cheap — \$2 to get in. I saw a lot of old spaghetti westerns, and some weird, non-linear, surreal movies. I took it all in, always thinking — what does this all mean?

**I don't think anything that happened to me when I was a teenager would have prepared me for the life I've had.** Especially being in the public eye, I had no clue how to deal with that. It was really trial by fire. There were periods when it just felt

like insanity, traveling every day, city to city. There was no time to breathe. And after a while I took five years out of it. I didn't go on tour or put out records, I just spent time in my community and raised my kids. That was really important to me.

**If I could talk to the young Beck now I'd say, always go with your instincts.** You can get lost listening to the loudly expressed opinions of other people. And I'd tell him to lighten up. I got a lot of grief for any success I had so I was always trying to compensate for that, trying to make records that wouldn't be too successful. It was a very convoluted way of being. Now I do what I want and I don't care if it's too weird or too mainstream. I just care that it works.

**There was a real schism in the press in the late 1980s, early '90s between how young people were represented and how they really were.** Older people, civil rights advocates and members of the previous generation's counterculture talking about disengaged slackers (Beck's 1994 hit Loser was held up as a 'slacker anthem'.) The way we were presented

was way out of touch, like a bad movie from the 1960s when an establishment that just didn't get it negatively characterized young people. Now the same thing was happening to us. The late '80s were a tough time to be young, we were really challenged. The most iconic child of that time was Linda Blair in "The Exorcist." We didn't live in a time when young people were celebrated. Almost everyone I knew worked menial labor on minimum wage — we all had jobs, we took whatever we could get. We didn't have any money. The whole slacker thing was just incredibly condescending and wrong. It was a way to marginalize an entire generation.

**I tried to be very conscious of the time passing when my kids were very young.** I knew it would go by fast so I paid attention. But if I could go back and relive any time, I'd choose that. No matter how hard you try, it just goes so quickly. I remind myself to stop and look around as much as I can. It's hard to remember sometimes but I try to find something memorable in the moment, something that won't ever be the same again, so it gets locked in my mind. I tell myself, this person is only going to be 7 years old once. And then you turn around and they're 12.

*As told to Jane Graham. Reprinted from the U.K.-based street paper Big Issue.*



Street Roots is proud to be a member of the global street paper movement and honored to serve the readers of Portland and Multnomah County.