

BECK

Midnite Vultures (Geffen Records)

Beck's new album is at once unexpected and in character for rock's most eccentric superstar.

In "Midnite Vultures," Beck abruptly abandons his psychedelic experiment, which produced last year's "Mutations," in favor of straight-ahead 1980s funk.

It is as if Beck had suddenly quit channeling Syd Barrett and was possessed by the spirit of the artist formerly known as Prince.

Some listeners may be jarred by hearing Prince's breathy whispers and feral howls coming out of Beck's mouth. Perhaps it will be even more jarring to hear Beck singing largely about sex, veering from the blunt sexuality of Prince and Rick James to the steamy euphemisms of Barry White and Marvin Gaye.

Yet, as different as it all sounds on the surface, the album is exactly what we've come to expect from Beck.

"Midnite Vultures" continues the artist's habit of experimenting with musical styles. As he already has done with rap, pop, psychedelia and even bossa nova, Beck absorbs the funk sound, digests it and manages to spit out an entirely original work. Beck doesn't merely copy a style, he deconstructs it, studies its elements, adopts the best of what he finds and rebuilds it in his own brilliant and off-center way.

And like Beck's previous albums, "Midnite Vultures" is flat-out fun. It is loaded with zippy hooks — the best is the maddeningly catchy "Nicotine & Gravy" — and kooky lyrics. Beck's voice is stronger than at almost any other point in his career, displaying a depth and range that would have surprised listeners of his 1994 debut "Mellow Gold."

His unerring sense of rhythm and his uncanny ear for sonic detail — musical trivia buffs should check out his creative sampling from the seminal German band Kraftwerk — remain intact.

Beck fans may be surprised by his new sound, but there is no way they will be disappointed.

— Sean Scully

FIREHOUSE

Category 5 (Mystic Music)

Longing for the days of Warrant, Winger and Ratt? Eagerly awaiting the next Poison tour? Or saving the old rock T-shirts for the inevitable resurgence of White Lion?

Then the new Firehouse album is for you.

The East Coast quartet is the master of the absurd art of 1980s hair metal — the silly ballads, the soaring guitar chords, the dark sunglasses and leather pants, even the semiliterate frat-boy liner notes.

After five albums, Firehouse — a 1991 American Music Awards winner — has mastered the formula.

— S.S.

"Now Hear This"
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