

“Mouthwash, Jukebox, gasoline”:
Experimentation or Gibberish
You Decide



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 You decide

**"Something's wrong 'cause my mind is fading
 And everywhere I look there's a dead end waiting
 Temperature's dropping at the rotten oasis
 Stealing kisses from the leprous faces" (Hanson)**

What does this verse mean to you? What does it mean period and where did it come from? The verse is lyrics from a song entitled "Devil's Haircut" by Beck. Beck is a musician. He's not Jeff Beck the guitarist, a different Beck...Beck Hanson. Beck gained a lot of popularity in the early nineties with his hit single "Loser." Even then his music and lyrics were "different". Over ten years have passed and he still writes music the same way. But what way is it and why? Well to understand Beck's lyrics you have to know Beck Hanson.

Beck Hansen was born in Los Angeles in 1970 (Kemp 61). His father, David Campbell was a bluegrass musician and his mother, Bibbe Hanson briefly hung out with Andy Warhol's Factory crowd in the 1960s (Kemp 61). "Beck's late grandfather, Al Hansen was a member of the Fluxus avant-garde art movement of the '50s and '60s" (Kemp 62). Beck's father played violin and was a musician for hire (Kemp 64). He liked what his father played but it wasn't until later that Beck picked up an instrument (Kemp 64). Beck's grandfather had more of an influence on him as a child.

In particular Beck tells a story of his grandfather that made an impact in his childhood. Beck says, "He was a strange phenomenon, you know, who'd come from out of nowhere. I remember he came to stay with us when I was about 5, and he brought with him bags full of junk and magazines, cigarette butts, all sorts of refuse materials that he would use for his art pieces. I had some old toys that had broken and didn't work stored in the back room somewhere. He found an old rocking horse, the kind you buy at Kmart, made out of plastic with springs on it. And he offered me five bucks for it-which, for me, was an unheard-of quantity of money. I immediately said yeah, he could

have it. But I couldn't understand what he would do with it, what use he could have for it. So I came back from school one day and saw this *thing* sitting at the side of the house, vaguely familiar but somehow completely unrecognizable. He had taken the thing and glued cigarette butts all over it, severed the head off and spray painted the whole thing silver. It was a metallic headless monstrosity. At the time, it was more of a curiosity to me. But in retrospect, I think things of that nature gave me the idea, maybe subconsciously, that there were possibilities within the limitations of everyday life, with the things we look at that are disposable. We can appoint ourselves to be - alchemists, turning shit into gold. So I always carried that with me "(qtd. in Kemp 64).

In 9th grade Beck dropped out of high school. He says, "I'm sure there's something good about high school, but not any of the ones I went to"(qtd. in Dunn 52). He then started a series of remedial jobs. One was as a stock boy and he was fired because they didn't like the way he dressed(Dunn 52). "Beck got himself a guitar at 16 and started playing on the street(Dunn 52)." "I just carried my guitar everywhere, he recalls.(qtd. in Dunn 52)." Beck realized that he would probably spend the rest of his life working in dead end jobs for little money(Jovahovic 23). At the time Greyhound buses were offering a special for \$30 to go anywhere in the country(Jovahovic 23). "So in mid-1988, he booked his ticket with a girlfriend and set off with his guitar, a little cash and nothing much else(Jovahovic 24)."

In New York, Beck became involved with what became known as the "Anti-Folk Scene"(Jovahovic 27). This scene was like the title suggests(Jovahovic 28). "A punkish rowdy selection of folk songs delivered by performers that stomped and screamed around the stage(Jovahovic 28)." "Beck wanted to continue the tradition of the original folk music but put his slant on it(Jovahovic 30)." The subjects of the songs could be anything. One in particular was about a packet of potato chips(Jovahovic 32). Beck says, "The artists were writing about really mundane things and trying to get to the essence of them(qtd. in Jovahovic 32)." "Beck also realized that there were no restrictions when it comes to subject matter and songs. It was this discovery that set him on his current course(Jovahovic 33)." Unfortunately the anti-folk scene wasn't well documented and there are no live tapes in general

circulation(Jovahovic 33). While in New York Beck would sleep on friends couches and had little or no money(Jovahovic 36). The anti-folk scene didn't last long and it started to break up and artists began to go there separate ways(Jovahovic 37). In the early 90s Beck decided to head back to L.A.(Jovahovic 36).

Back in L.A. Beck went back into his old routine of working dead end jobs(Jovahovic 38.) He kept writing music and would perform unannounced by jumping on stage and performing while a band set up their equipment(Jovahovic 38). Eventually Beck ran into producer Carl Stephenson(Jovahovic 46). Stephenson wasn't impressed with Beck's work but then, Beck played a slide guitar riff that he liked(Jovahovic 47). He put a drum beat under it and a bass track and attempted to rap(Jovahovic 47). He felt his rapping was poor and sang a chorus of "I'm a loser baby so why don't you kill me"(Jovahovic 47). Beck says, "I went home, and we didn't see the guy for a year, and I totally forgot about it"(qtd. in Jovahovic 47). Time passed and copies of the song were distributed to the radios and a hit was born(Jovahovic 48). The song "Loser" became an anthem for slackers everywhere and it would be a long time before Beck would be more than just a spokesperson for slackers(Jovahovic 49).

Time passed and in 1996 Beck released his next album, Odelay(Jovahovic 85). This is the album that has the song I wanted to analyze. The song is entitled "Devil's Haircut" and the lyrics are as follows:

**Something's wrong 'cause my mind is fading
And everywhere I look there's a dead end waiting
Temperature's dropping at the rotten oasis
Stealing kisses from the leperous faces**

**Heads are hanging from the garbageman trees
Mouthwash, jukebox, gasoline
Pistols are pointing at a poor man's pockets
Smiling eyes whipping out of their sockets(Hanson)**

This first stanza included two sets of verses. The first set of verses sounds like the narrator is depressed. His mind is fading and he can't seem to find a way out. The rotten oasis could be his heart and its getting colder. The only comfort he can find is from kissing lepers. When

I first heard this song and until I saw the text I thought the leprous faces sounded like "laugh-for-us faces". I felt this added meaning to the verse. Instead of stealing kisses from the numbed and possibly rotted flesh of lepers the kisses were being stolen by someone who is trying to amuse the narrator. The laugh-for-us faces are trying to change the dead ends to a way out. But now seeing the text the leprous faces appear to represent other people whose temperatures are also dropping.

The second set of verses gives the impression that this depression is spreading. Not only do the lepers have temperatures dropping but heads are hanging. Heads hang when people are feeling down. The garbageman trees are almost like everybody's garbage is hanging for everyone to see. Mouthwash, jukebox, gasoline are all forms of things that waste like garbage. Cars burn gasoline, people rinse and spit out mouthwash, and jukeboxes use music. What I mean is the music isn't constantly played, it plays for the duration of the song and then it's gone. A poor person can't really be robbed; a poor man's pockets are usually empty. Smiling eyes are almost looking in anticipation of what will happen next. Basically some things can't be used over and over. When they are gone they are gone and that is it. So if the poor man's money is gone he doesn't have any so what then? The smiling eyes are waiting to see.

Love machines on the sympathy crutches
Discount orgies on the dropout buses
Hitching a ride with the bleeding noses
Come into town with the briefcase blues (Hanson)

This third verse seems to be the narrator still in a search to end his depression and find some kind of love. Instead of lepers he has moved on to machines but they are on their last legs. So he decides to search for love elsewhere. This is another part of the song that confused me until I saw the text. I thought the lyric was "discount mortgage on the dropout buses." I felt the narrator would take a cheap trip out. But after seeing the text it appears to be just another form a rotten solution. Hitching a ride with the bleeding noses seemed like taking a plane somewhere and getting home after living out of a suitcase for a while. But this may not be the case. The narrator does take a

cheap trip out but not on the bus but with the bleeding noses. Bleeding noses could be people that just got into a fist fight and are leaving with a bloody nose. These are the people the narrator has just hitched a ride with. Now he has the blues because in this new town he is going to have to live out of his briefcase for a while.

**Something's wrong 'cause my mind is fading
Ghetto blastin', disintegrating
Rock and roll, know what I'm saying?
And everywhere I look there's a devil in waiting**(Hanson)

To conclude the song the narrator is still depressed. He can't find a solution and his situation is getting worse. Not only is his mind fading but it is disintegrating. Now instead of dead ends waiting the devil is waiting. The final meaning of the song is in the chorus.

Chorus: Got a devil's haircut in my mind(Hanson)

The chorus is sung in between the verses and to conclude the song. So the narrator has a devil's haircut in his mind and he's seeing devils everywhere. If he gets a haircut like one he might fit in. It is as if the narrator has given in. The temperature in his rotten oasis has dropped too low and now he's cold. Of course the devil is hot and fiery, but evil. Some mean people are said to be cold. So if the narrator gets the haircut he is going to become heartless, cold, and mean like everyone he's seeing.

Beck has many different interpretations for this song(Jovahovic 195). He says, "It's a bogus poetic allusion to the evils of vanity. Or it could be just something that sounds good to sing to. Or it might be that I was putting my own lyrics to a Can song where I can't work out the real lyrics. And there's also a tradition of blues people talking about haircuts - gimme that wig back that I boughtcha(qtd. in Jovahovic 195)" He also wanted to write a song based on the Stagger Lee myth(Kemp 94).

The Stagger Lee myth is about a cold blooded killer(Hauser). "Stagger Lee gets into a dispute with a man named Bill DeLyon after losing his Stetson hat to Billy while gambling(Hauser)." "He pulls out a gun and Billy pleads for his life for the sake of his wife and

children(Hauser).” “Stagger Lee cold-bloodedly kills his opponent(Hauser).” There are different endings to the story. In one version the authorities are too scared to arrest Stagger in others he is arrested and executed(Hauser). Even further in other stories after Stagger Lee’s execution he goes to Hell and is so “bad” he takes it over and turns it into a badman’s paradise(Hauser).

Beck has his own interpretation for the Stagger Lee story involved with “Devils Haircut”(Jovhovic 195). Beck says, “The summer of ’99, electric music and the summer people. Stag-o-Lee has just got out of a penitentiary in Florida. He joins a school bus of camouflage artists tracking across the southern part of the United States. It’s like an inverse freedom ride. Stag-o-Lee has lost his hat, he’s hatless in this new environment(qtd. in Jovahovic 195).”

When questioned about his lyrics Beck has many responses(Kemp 94). Beck says, “I couldn’t just sing songs every night if I thought, ‘Oh I just scribbled this down - it doesn’t really mean anything.’ It’s got to have some connection to me. It’s weird that in America, almost every review I see says, ‘Oh, the lyrics are nonsense; they don’t mean anything: they’re not important: he’s not really saying anything.’ I’ve written hundreds of songs, and I got bored of saying things the same way. I wanted to use language differently(qtd. in Kemp 94).”

An example of this I found in an article when Beck was describing the House of Blues(Dunn 52). There was a musician, Ali Farka Toure performing while he was there visiting and he looked around at the audience(Dunn 52). Beck says, “the audience was just eating and talking and answering their cell phones. Ali Farka Toure was just shaking his head. It left a bad taste in my mouth. Like Utah.”(qtd. in Dunn 52). As a reader I immediately thought Beck was referring to the state of Utah but as the interviewer inquired about the comment the state of Utah was not the case. Instead it was a reference to an Osmond’s song off of a record called Crazy Horses that they made back in ’72(Dunn 52).

Beck thinks that people are just being lazy if they can’t find meaning in his lyrics(Kemp 94). He says, “Be creative; I don’t want to fill out the picture. You fill in the blanks. That’s the way it should be.”(qtd. in Kemp 94). He likes to leave it open so the song is unique to

each listener(Dunn 55). Feel free to have your own interpretation of the lyrics of this song. Sometimes it is good to be able to share art with people but still have your own reasons for liking it too. It would definitely be unique for a Beck concert. There would be hundreds of people there witnessing the same concert but loving it for different reasons. Most of Beck's songs are written this way. They aren't the basic pop music that one can hear on the radio and afterward know what the song is about. In conclusion I would like to end with a quote from Beck's grandfather Al Hansen, "If you know what the end product is going to be then it isn't experimentation"(qtd. in Jovahovic 4).

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