

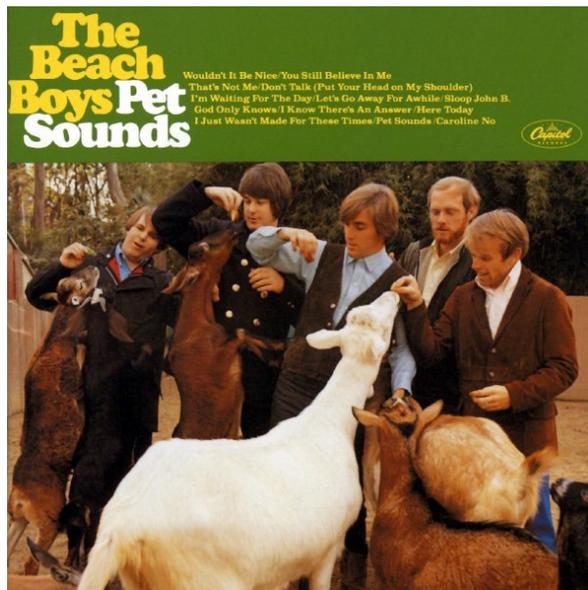
Michael Waddacor presents

★ Strange Brew™

Celebrating seminal rock music | **Edition 10** | Saturday September 01 2007

Trouble in Paradise

The rise and fall of The Beach Boys' mighty wave



The cover of The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* album, often rated as "the greatest album ever made".

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From cute, toe-tapping, adolescent songs about girls and surfing, The Beach Boys evolved into a sophisticated vocal group of the mid-1960s, almost single-handedly inventing the spirit and sound of California pop and rock. Then their leader, Brian Wilson, in the aftermath of releasing their splendid *Pet Sounds*, went into decline, as would the group after the early 1970s. By the time of the 1980s, The Beach Boys had become a parody of themselves.

Michael Waddacor revisits the great vocal group that helped to change the course of mainstream American rock and pop music during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Beach Boys – arguably the most important vocal group of the pre-psychedelic mainstream American Sixties rock scene – formed an important bridge in the creative and technical evolution of rock music by linking the proto-rock 'n' roll inventiveness and good times of Chuck Berry to the mighty songwriting innovation and production prowess of The Beatles.

At their peak between 1964 and 1971, they had few rivals in the vocal-harmony arena. Their leader and principal songwriter, Brian Wilson, had few serious competitors when it came to writing great pop songs with lush melodies, alluring hooks and splendid – and often complex – vocal harmonies.

Many rock writers and critics (notably in the USA) continue to assert that The Beach Boys virtually invented the sound of Californian – or US West Coast – rock. In their early days, the group's songs celebrated a pleasurable and privileged California teen-scene revolving around the glamour of pretty girls, sunshine, surfing and fast cars. To reinforce their preoccupation with fun-in-the sun adolescent scenes, their music was slick, cheerful, glossy and fastidious to the point of being almost faultless.

With global record sales of more than 70-million units, they certainly had popular appeal and, besides The Beatles, The Who and The Rolling Stones, few 1960s groups have enjoyed such massive global popularity and media attention. The Beach Boys had 36 Top 40 hits, the most of any American rock or pop

group. Four of their songs went to number one in the USA, with *Good Vibrations* being the first to sell more than one-million copies in the USA.

Warming up in the sun

The Beach Boys story began in the 1940s with the birth of the three Wilson brothers in the Hawthorne district of greater Los Angeles, California – Brian (June 20 1942), Dennis (December 4 1944) and Carl (December 21 1946). Their parents, Murry and Audree, encouraged them to play sport and develop an interest in music.

In 1961, the original group was formed with the three brothers, their cousin Mike Love (born in Los Angeles on March 14 1941) and friend and neighbour Alan Jardine (born in Lima, Ohio on September 3 1942). First, they were called The Pendeltones (after the popular Pendeltone American woollen shirts) before becoming Kenny and the Cadets (with Brian being “Kenny”) and then Carl and the Passions.

Towards the end of 1961, the group recorded and released their first hit, *Surfin’*, on the Candix label as The Beach Boys – a name suggested by a Candix promotions man. The group played its first live concert on December 31 1961 as part of the line-up for The Ritchie Valens Memorial Concert at the Long Beach Municipal Auditorium.

By now, their tyrannical father, Murry Wilson – who later admitted to being an emotionally and physically abusive father – had become their manager (until Brian fired him in 1964). He secured The Beach Boys a recording contract with Capitol Records in Los Angeles in early 1962 after the Candix label folded. These were the days of The Beach Boys dressed in matching checked or candy-striped shirts and posing slickly with surfboards.

Endless summer

Almost right from the start of their Capitol days, the string of fun-in-the-sun hits, inspired in part by the vocal-rich music of The Four Freshman, began with *Surfin’ Safari* (1962), *Surfin’ USA* (1963) – their note-for-note copy of Chuck Berry’s classic *Sweet Sixteen* (of 1958), *I Get Around* (1964) – their first US number-one single, *Fun, Fun, Fun* (1964), *Don’t Worry Baby* (1964), *Help Me, Rhonda* (1965) and the golden classic, *California Girls* (1965).

Besides middle brother and drummer Dennis, The Beach Boys were not ardent surfers, but their celebration of an almost idyllic Californian beach lifestyle catapulted them into a rarefied zone as the clean-cut, no-excesses boys-next-door of pop music.

Behind the bland, nice-boy demeanour and the exquisite vocal harmonies lay the rock of the band’s appeal: the indisputable songwriting prowess of resident “genius”, Brian Wilson, for whom his mid-1960s hits seemed to be an endless summer. In 1965, the pressures of adulation and touring were starting to take their toll on Brian. He is said to have

suffered two nervous breakdowns before quitting touring and concentrating on a studio-based life. This phase began in 1965 with the preparatory work for *Pet Sounds*, which is celebrated in detail in *Strange Brew* edition nine of August 31 2007.



Despite poor sales and lack of popular acclaim in 1966, *Pet Sounds* remains the group’s crowning glory. This definitive work placed Brian Wilson on a pedestal as a virtual untouchable among classic 1960s rock and pop songwriters. Then came another monster hit, one of the group’s most fabulous songs (and one of the most expensive ever recorded), the evergreen optimism of the psychedelised, theremin-fuelled *Good Vibrations* (1966), which Wilson once described as “a pocket symphony”.

In 1997, Britain’s *Mojo* magazine named *Good Vibrations* “the greatest single of all time”. In 2001, British music TV station VH1 voted the song eight on its list of “100 greatest rock songs”. In 2004, *Rolling Stone* magazine listed *Good Vibrations* at number six on its list of “500 best songs of all time”.

Inspired by the sonic grandeur of *Pet Sounds* and the elevated creativity and cohesion of The Beatles’ *Revolver* album (August 1966 – see *Strange Brew* edition five of January 2007), Brian Wilson began to work on what he had hoped would become his next masterpiece. Recruiting songwriter, lyricist, arranger and producer Van Dyke Parks (born Hattiesburg, Mississippi on January 3 1943) – much to the consternation of the group – the two musicians began writing material for the *Smile* album in 1966.

By now, however, Brian was starting to suffer setbacks, including his neuroses, depression and mood swings, high drug intake and insatiable quest for musical perfection, which often left him emotionally and mentally exhausted. A freak fire near the recording studios where the *Smile* album was being recorded – along with other unusual

blazes in greater LA at the time – had a superstitious impact on Wilson (particularly because he was recording his *Fire* piece for the *Elements* suite). In some form of paranoid rage, he supposedly destroyed some of the *Smile* master tapes and abandoned the near-complete project.

Smile pirated

This debacle – along with his inner demons – led to the decline and, eventually, the demise of Wilson as the band's producer, mentor and principal songwriter. Some of the *Smile* material, however, surfaced elsewhere, including the lovely hit song, *Heroes and Villains* (1967) and the title track of 1971's *Surf's Up* album. More recently, Brian Wilson returned to gather the *Smile* material and ensure its eventual release [see article on page five]. The original *Smile* recording sessions were undertaken between August and December 1966.

Serious Beach Boys fans, for many years, have speculated about what songs were written and recorded for *Smile* and how they may have been sequenced on a final album. We do know that Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks wanted *Smile* to be a continuous suite of songs linked musically and thematically. The rest of the group was also concerned about the complexity of the music and how they would perform it live in concert. Mike Love was particularly belligerent about the *Smile* style and content, and attacked Parks over the lyrics, which he detested.

Besides Wilson's growing drug intake, paranoia, confusion and alienation from the rest of the group, as well as his pyrophobia, other events had conspired to jinx the completion and release of *Smile*. The group was becoming more disenchanting with Wilson's creative direction; relations with Capitol Records were strained; the youngest Wilson, Carl, was embroiled in an American Vietnam War draft-resistance episode; and the majestic technical and songwriting innovation of The Beatles' classic *Revolver* album (released in the USA in August 1966) proved to be too brilliant for Wilson's troubled mind and the exacting musical standards he had set for himself as The Beach Boys' creative leader.

Five-year reclusion

With the next wave of albums, *Wild Honey* and *Friends* (1968), *20/20* (1969), *Sunflower* (1970), *Surf's Up* (1971), *Carl and the Passions – So Tough* (1972) and the ecologically themed one recorded in Amsterdam, *Holland* (1973), the other group members were moving to the fore as songwriters and Brian Wilson's role was virtually non-existent – an absence that was reflected in the mostly lacklustre and disappointing music. After leaving Capitol Records, the launch of *Sunflower* in November 1970 was their first release on their custom label, Brother Records, in association with Warner Brothers.

By this time, Wilson was in the early stages of his tormented five-year hiatus, living mostly in the

seclusion of his Bel Air mansion overlooking Los Angeles. During this time, however, he ran for a short while a West Hollywood health-food shop, The Radiant Radish, wrote and recorded some songs in his home studio (at the piano with his bare feet in a box of sand) and, in 1972, he produced an album of songs for his wife, Marilyn, and her sister, Diane Rovell. In 1976, after undergoing rehabilitation for substance abuse, Brian rejoined The Beach Boys for the making of the *15 Big Ones* album.

Ironically, for Brian Wilson, he had consumed large doses of LSD and sensed some of the creative and psychic possibilities of the hallucogenic substance, but failed to grasp the intrinsic meaning and purpose of the psychedelic movement. The Beach Boys – dogged by their dreary philosophy, unhip image and superficial outlook – had become ultra-conservative and musically fey with the advent of the hip, new West Coast bands, such as The Byrds, The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead and Love, and their post-psychedelic successors of 1969-1975.

From here onwards, sadly, The Beach Boys would become a parody of their former selves and their subsequent story is rich with tragedy. Among other maladies, there were futile arguments among group members, prolonged lawsuits, instances of embezzlement and financial mismanagement, and lots of mediocre music, sloppy concerts and reshaped hits, as well as dalliances with pseudo-mysticism, eccentric ecological musings, overblown egos and, tragically, the deaths of two of the Wilson brothers.

A deeply troubled Dennis Wilson – once linked to crazed cult leader and killer, Charles Manson – drowned off the coast of California on December 28 1983. On February 6 1998, Carl Wilson succumbed to lung cancer. In between their deaths, oldest brother, Brian, was struggling to recover his mental health and rebuild a career for himself as a songwriter and musician of repute.

Degeneration

To say there was trouble in paradise probably is a gross understatement. It is profoundly lamentable that a group with so much pioneering enthusiasm, harmony and creativity fell into such an inextricable malaise and would never again recapture even a glint of their Sixties endless summer.

If you can borrow (rather than buy) a copy of their DVD capturing them performing live at Knebworth in Hertfordshire, England, on June 21 1980 (*The Beach Boys Live at Knebworth 1980*; Eagle Vision, 2001), you will catch a glimpse of their self-parodying frolics – and they all seem so blissfully unaware of the prolonged, open-air tragedy.

An obese and bored Brian Wilson is withdrawn into the background as some sort of casual, uninspired keyboard support musician or tinkering technician; brother Dennis is incoherently drunk and manic, and can barely sing or drum; an exasperating Mike Love's gigantic ego looms larger than ever as if threatening

to engulf the entire Knebworth audience; a prissy Bruce Johnston looks like a squeaky clean Southern Baptist, smiling incessantly, at a religious rally; and Al Jardine – all dressed in a Panamanian-styled white outfit – also looks misplaced.

Only a somewhat mystified, casual and adorable Carl Wilson seems to have any sense of occasion and belonging – and he proves his point so eloquently when he sings the touching lead vocals on the standout song, the timeless *God Only Knows* – from *Pet Sounds*, of course! ■

That distinctive sound!

The genie of the genes

Brian Wilson directed the sound and the concept of The Beach Boys right from their inception. He wanted the human voice – particular higher, smooth and intricately arranged vocal harmonies – to dominate their sound, with the instrumentation providing a sympathetic, but understated backdrop.

Inspired by vocal pop (eg, The Four Freshmen, The Everly Brothers, The Four Seasons, The Ronettes and The Crystals), R&B, rock 'n' roll (eg, Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley) and doo-wop (eg, The Coasters), among other idioms, he wanted the group's vocal sound to be rich, expanded, distinctive and, above all else, memorable. Right from their inception in 1961, when Brian was a mere 19, The Beach Boys' pure, almost velvety voices were lustrous, well tuned and agile, despite each of them having little or no formal vocal coaching.

From about 1958 onwards, Brian Wilson was especially enamoured with the rich, four-part vocal harmonies of the Barbour brothers of The Four Freshmen. As a teenager, he learnt to sing each of the four parts of almost every Four Freshmen song note for note without losing tune – an amazing accomplishment.

Expanded sound

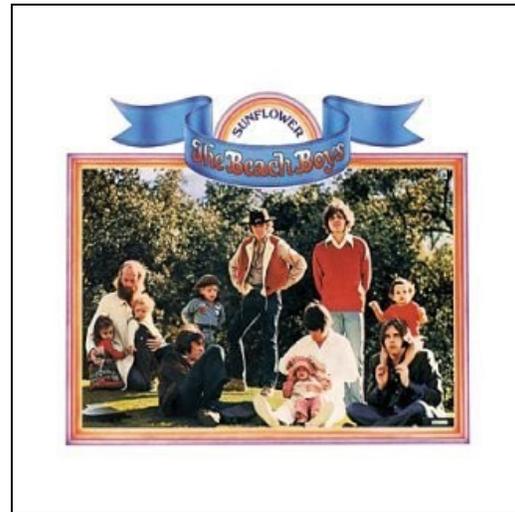
Musicologists often have cited the likes of The Beach Boys and The Four Freshmen being fortunate to have shared genetics and a common accent, which enables them to sing richer, purer harmonies. As musicologists appreciate, the human voice is the truest or purest musical instrument and can stay in tune over a wide range. More significantly, when three, four or more voices join together in harmony, they create what is known as expanded sound, which creates the impression that additional voice are singing. Expanded sound occurs when you sing ringing chords created by singing in tune and achieving common timbre and enunciation.

One senses from various accounts about Brian Wilson, that he was born technically adroit when it came to such musical rudiments as tone, timbre,

harmony and structure. He seemed to have some sort of instinctive, almost mathematical knack for musical perfection. To boost Wilson's inherent role as musicologist and musical director, each of the group brought his own distinctive tastes and pleasures. For example, Mike Love had an acute ear for doo-wop sensibilities and enlivened many of their more complex vocal pieces with cleverly improvised doo-wop-styled vocal parts sung in baritone. ■

Earlier album discography (1962-1973)

Classic West Coast tracks

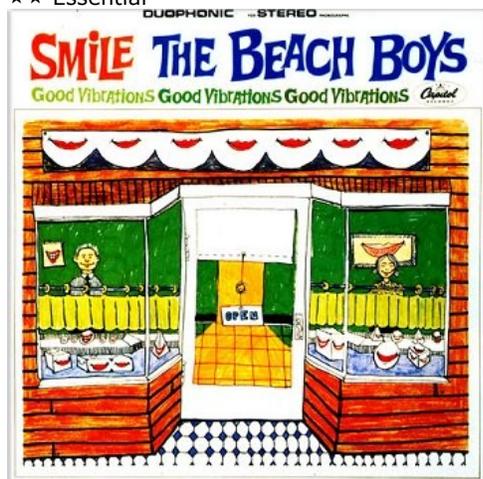


Despite lacking Brian Wilson's magical touch, Sunflower remains one of The Beach Boys' most enjoyable post-Pet Sounds albums with songs like Add Some Music to Your Day, Deirdre, Tears in the Morning and the refreshing Cool, Cool Water

Surfin' Safari (Nov 1962)
Surfin' USA (Apr 1963) ★
Surfer Girl (Sep 1963) ★
Little Deuce Coupe (Oct 1963) ★
Shut Down, Volume Two (Jul 1964) ★
All Summer Long (Jul 1964) ★★
Beach Boys Concert (Feb 1965)
The Beach Boys Today! (Mar 1965) ★★
Summer Days (and Summer Nights!) (Jul 1965) ★★
Beach Boys' Party! (Feb 1966)
Pet Sounds (May 1966) ★★
Smiley Smile (Nov 1967) ★★
Wild Honey (Mar 1968) ★
Friends (Sep 1968) ★
20/20 (Feb 1969) ★
Sunflower (Nov 1970) ★★
Surf's Up (Nov 1971) ★★
Carl and the Passions – So Tough (Jun 1972)
Holland (Jan 1973) ★
The Beach Boys in Concert (Nov 1973)

★ Nice to have

★★ Essential



Other Beach Boys works to investigate

Endless Summer (double-album compilation of pre-*Pet Sounds* hits) (1974) ★★

Ten Years of Harmony

(double-album compilation) (1979) ★

Good Vibrations: Thirty Years of The Beach Boys (box set) (1993) ★★

The Pet Sounds Sessions (box set) (1997) ★★

Major Beach Boys singles (1961-1969)

Surfin' / Luau (Dec 1961)

Surfin' Safari / 409 (Aug 1962)

Surfin' USA / Shut Down (Mar 1963)

Surfer Girl / Little Deuce Coupe (Oct 1963)

Be True to Your School / In My Room (Nov 1963)

Fun, Fun, Fun / Why Do Fools Fall in Love (Mar 1964)

I Get Around / Don't Worry Baby

(Jun 1964) #1 (USA)

When I Grow Up (To Be a Man) / She Knows

Me Too Well (Oct 1964)

Dance, Dance, Dance / The Warmth of the Sun

(Jan 1965)

Do You Wanna Dance? / Please Let Me Wonder

(Feb 1965)

Help Me, Rhonda / Kiss Me Baby (May 1965)

#1 (USA)

California Girls / Let Him Run Wild (Aug 1965)

The Little Girl I Once Knew / There's No Other

(Like My Baby) (Dec 1965)

Barbara Ann / Girl Don't Tell Me (Feb 1966)

Sloop John B / You're So Good to Me (Apr 1966)

God Only Knows / Wouldn't It Be Nice (Jul 1966)

Good Vibrations / Let's Go Away for Awhile

(Oct 1966) #1 (USA & UK)

Then I Kissed Her / Mountain of Love (Apr 1967)

Heroes and Villains / You're Welcome (Aug 1967)

Darlin' / Here Today (Dec 1967)

Friends / Little Bird (May 1968)

Do It Again / Wake the World (Jul 1968)

I Can Hear Music / All I Want to Do (Feb 1969)

Break Away / Celebrate the News (Jun 1969)

NOTE: This list is not definitive. The Beach Boys' lesser singles have been omitted from this list. ■

The aborted *Smile* album

The doomed masterpiece

[Look! Listen! Vibrate! SMILE!]

After painstaking weeks of intensive writing, recording, reflecting and editing his follow-up masterpiece to *Pet Sounds*, head Beach Boy Brian Wilson – in one of the craziest moments of rock music – aborted his *Smile* album within days of Capitol Records advertising that its release was imminent.

Capitol had gone as far as printing 400,000 album covers for the American market – a few hundred of which survive today as highly desirable collectibles (see low-resolution artwork to the upper left).

Besides a few songs being culled from the sessions and placed on subsequent albums by The Beach Boys, including the 1993 *Good Vibrations* box set, the *Smile* master tapes that escaped Brian Wilson's wrathful destruction lay in the vaults of Capitol Records for more than three decades.

With the advent of the popular Internet age, websites began to spring up with suggestions for self-compiling your own *Smile* album, such as the enthusiasm of fans about "the lost Brian Wilson masterpiece" – the inspired album that was supposed to have been a "teenage symphony to God".

Despite Wilson's conservative demeanour and his group's largely orthodox approach to singing and making music, the legendary *Smile* sessions were far from orthodox and, in some instances, far out.

Just as The Beatles and George Martin worked with increasing dedication and imagination to make each new group album better than its predecessor, Brian Wilson was obsessed – to the point of insanity – about outclassing each Beach Boys album with its successor. And, *Smile* would be no exception.

Emotionally bruised and mentally perturbed by the dire lack of popular and critical warmth expressed towards *Pet Sounds* at home in the USA after its release in May 1966, Wilson tried to regroup his creative faculties by starting work on his next musical project, the infamous *Smile* album (originally called *Dumb Angel*).

Collaborating with Parks

Now living as a semi-recluse, spending much of his time at home in his Bel Air mansion and some of his time in the recording studios in and around Hollywood, he roped in a musical and lyrical sparring partner in the form of Van Dyke Parks, determined to take his next quantum leap in musical creativity and

direction. Wilson had met Parks in Los Angeles in 1965.

The latter had earned some repute not only as a quirky lyricist, but also as a musician, arranger and producer. Parks had arranged the song, *The Bare Necessities*, for the animated Walt Disney film, *The Jungle Book*, before moving on to work with several West Coast rock and pop artists, including The Byrds, The Fifth Dimension, Judy Collins, Randy Newman and Ry Cooder.

While Wilson emphasised on many occasions that he enjoyed his collaboration with the talented *Pet Sounds* lyricist, Tony Asher, he wanted a fresh lyrical approach with *Smile* and his intuition led him to Parks, whom he felt would create a more otherworldly and offbeat feel.

At times, Wilson was alone noodling at his home piano, connecting to the Pacific vibe by keeping his bare feet in an 80-square-foot sandpit. He smoked lots of marijuana, dropped LSD (which he later referred to as "a religious experience that helped me to make spiritual music") and went as far as recording some of his material at the bottom of an empty swimming pool.

He, too, went as far as making his orchestral session musicians wear cheap, plastic replicas of fireman helmets for the recording of his *Fire* part of the original *Elements* suite. These were fiery times – and, ultimately, it was some form of rampant fire within Wilson's drug-soaked psyche that compelled him to abandon the project.

During the recordings of the *Fire* piece, for which the fireman helmets were introduced to the studio, along with smoke, a fire broke out near the studio. Wilson lapsed into deep superstition, believing the incident to be some sort of omen from a wrathful God that the *Smile* sessions should be terminated.

Wilson returns to the vaults

Sometime in 2003, Wilson decided it was time to revisit his *Smile* master tapes and determine whether it was a project he really wanted to complete. Wasting little time, he contacted the album's original lyricist and studio collaborator, Van Dyke Parks, and asked him to help complete the *Smile* project.

On September 28 2004, the album finally emerged on CD under the name of Brian Wilson and was supported by a concert tour – backed by the 10-piece Wondermints – dedicated to performing the album in its entirety.

When Parks and Wilson commenced their original collaboration, they started with *Heroes and Villains*, which would become a single (released in August 1967) and a key song on the *Smiley Smile* album (released in November 1967).

Working heatedly, the two completed writing the song in about five hours, according to Parks in a January 2004 interview with Sylvie Simons published

in the March 2004 edition of *Mojo* magazine. The song remains one of Wilson's favourites of that era and he loves Parks' lyrics.

The basic melody for *Heroes and Villains* was written at home with his piano and his bare feet in his sandbox, as were the melodies for *Cabin Essence*, *Surf's Up* and *Wonderful*. The Wilson pets, however, began to use the sandbox as an indoor toilet, so Wilson's first wife, Marilyn, insisted it be removed from the house.

Within their first days of writing and recording the *Smile* material, Wilson and Parks soon realised they were heading towards a cohesive theme and focusing on their love of Americana, which touches on topics as diverse as settler shipwrecks, cowboy songs, barnyards, cabins, railroads and iron horses, surfing, environmentalism and a "blue Hawaii".

Wilson envisaged his next album being a "teenage symphony to God", this time with a more unorthodox approach than the one used for crafting *Pet Sounds*. Breaking from the style adopted when he collaborated with Tony Asher, Wilson and Parks developed a more eccentric cut-and-paste approach to writing fragments of songs and then coalescing them into suites.

Sunnier days

As with the making of *Pet Sounds*, Brian Wilson worked with a veritable assortment of LA session musicians to write and record the instrumental tracks of *Smile* while the rest of The Beach Boys were away in tour. To the rest of the group's comfort, these were sunny days.

Despite the disappointing sales of *Pet Sounds*, the irresistibly joyous *Good Vibrations* single had topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic and became their first single to sell more than one-million copies. Going further, the group toppled the supposedly invincible Beatles in the 1966 *NME* music polls in Britain. The world had warmed to The Beach Boys!

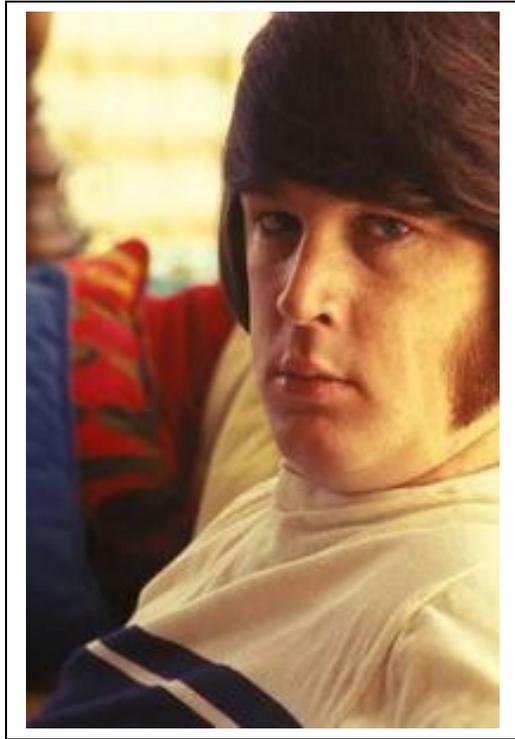
After a successful British tour, The Beach Boys returned to Los Angeles in November 1966 to find Brian had gone further out in his madness than he had while recording *Pet Sounds*.

They were confused, bewildered, disorientated and angry – and Mike Love went as far as describing the material as "a whole album of Brian's madness". They were asked to lay down the final vocal tracks so the album could be ready for its touted release on New Year's Day in 1967.

Capitol Records commissioned artist Frank Holmes to draw and paint the front-cover illustration, while Brian Wilson presented a list of the envisaged final material in running order to the label's A&R executives.

Then, unexpectedly, in January 1967, Wilson made it clear that *Smile* had been aborted despite entailing

an estimated 80 recording sessions. A month later, in an amazing turnabout of events, the group sued Capitol Records over alleged financial impropriety and demanded to be emancipated from the contract they had signed in 1962. Litigation ended after five months when Capitol agreed to allow The Beach Boys to establish their own label, Brother Records, in association with Warner Brothers.



In later years, Wilson cited *Smile's* overall weirdness, lack of commercial appeal and lack of appropriateness as the main criteria for not releasing the album. In an interview with Jason Fine for *Rolling Stone* magazine (published on September 22 2004), Wilson said *Smile* was "too far ahead of its time, so I junked it".

The long-awaited release of *Smile* by Nonesuch Records in September 2004 brought comfort, smiles and, one imagines, also a few tears to devoted Wilson fans. Was the wait worthwhile? I do not know, but the album, as a whole, is a joy and a must-have work if you are a Brian Wilson devotee. The next article explores the 2004 album in more detail. ■

Strange Brew rating: ★★★★★



Brian Wilson Presents *Smile* (2004)

Gotta keep those lovin' good vibrations a-happenin'

Forty years later, *Smile* is joyful and mesmerising, but flawed and dated

Once touted as one of the greatest rock albums never made and once deemed The Holy Grail of 1960s music, Brian Wilson's aborted 1967 album for The Beach Boys, *Smile*, was completed without his original group and released in September 2004 to largely enthusiastic reviews.

Johnny Neophyte revisits Brian Wilson's *Smile* three years after its release by Nonesuch Records – and asserts that it is worth buying if you are a fan, despite it being a little flawed and lacking in what one imagines would have been the original luminosity and quirkiness created during those heady 1966 recording sessions, smoking hash and making fire.

Almost thirty-eight years may have been a long wait for Brian Wilson to return to his "unfinished masterpiece" of 1966, but, for many fans, the final presentation of *Smile* – without The Beach Boys – was worth the wait. Almost three years after its release on September 28 2004, Brian Wilson's *Smile* largely remains a joyous and seductive work, but it does not rival *Pet Sounds* in overall grandeur of sound, deftness of songwriting and poignancy of spirit.

This album is certainly not a belated US West Coast-flavoured *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Given the all-new approach to recording the tracks and sequencing the final material, it hardly makes any sense to compare *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* with any of the other distinctive and enduring rock and pop "novel" albums released in 1967 and 1968 such as *Odyssey and Oracle* by The Zombies, *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* by The Kinks, or *Electric Ladyland* by The Jimi Hendrix Experience.

When Nonesuch Records released the 2004 version of *Smile*, the work was not a complete surprise for two main reasons.

First, some of the album's most appealing songs, notably *Heroes and Villains*, *Cabin Essence*, *Surf's Up* and the perennial psych-pop classic, *Good Vibrations*, found their way on to other Beach Boys studio and compilation albums. Second, handfuls of Beach Boys fans around the world were compiling and pirating approximations of the album, copies of which could be found on the black market.

To the musician's credit, thanks to encouragement from friends, fans and his wife, Melinda, Brian Wilson began the entire 2004 *Smile* album project afresh, working with a new group of young musicians. These musicians mostly featured members of the whacky, Los Angeles-based power-pop group, The Wondermints, as well as members of the more sedate Stockholm Strings 'n' Horns ensemble.

Arranged and produced by Wilson, using much of the original material he wrote with American lyricist (and singer-musician-producer), Van Dyke Parks, the album's base tracks were recorded over five days at Sunset Sound in Hollywood, California, between April 13 and 17 2004 with Mark Linett as the recording and mixing engineer. Many of the original *Smile* sessions were recorded at Sunset Sound.

The overdubbing and mixing were completed over a series of sessions during April-June 2004 at the Your Place or Mine recording studios at Glendale, also in Los Angeles. Key to revisiting the aborted album was the memory-jogging role of Parks and the seemingly tireless musical secretary, singer and keyboardist, Darian Sahanaja. Sahanaja also collaborated as Wilson's co-producer during the mixing stage.

Competent and enjoyable

In the aftermath of the effusive global adulation that has continued to embrace *Pet Sounds*, *Smile* is a competent, imaginative, enjoyable and eccentric cycle of 17 songs and instrumentals set into three suites. Gorgeously arranged and sung, with spirited instrumental playing and an almost childlike sense of adventure and wonder, *Smile* 2004 does not qualify for top rating as an indispensable, five-star outing, but it is excellent and definitely worth exploring.

Had the entire album sustained the majesty of the best instrumental passages and strongest songs – including *Heroes and Villains*, *Surf's Up*, *Song for Children*, *Child Is Father of the Man* and Brian's famous "pocket symphony", *Good Vibrations* – then it is possible that Wilson would have rivalled *Pet Sounds*.

Sadly, compared with its supposed predecessor, *Smile* is marred by vacillating songwriting standards and, above all, irksome moments of disposable silliness and even the tasteless sonic nonsense and meanderings (like celery and other crispy vegetables being crunched) one comes to associate with indulgent avant-garde experimentalists and incorrigible stoners. Nevertheless, at least we know Wilson has amplified his sense of humour and not lost his quirkiness for constructing unusual soundscapes and defying prosaic musical trends.

Smile also showcases the weirdest lyrics of the entire Beach Boys oeuvre, thanks to the eccentric abstractions of Van Dyke Parks. For all the Beatlesque leanings, however, *Smile* proves that the Americans lack the innate cultural knack of the British to write delectable and digestible songs of

silliness, nonsense and bizarreness. Wilson and Parks created sonic mischief in songs like *Barnyard* and *Vega-Tables*, but they are a far cry from The Beatles' more bizarre, yet endearing, songs like *I Am the Walrus*, *Lovely Rita*, *Happiness Is a Warm Gun*, *Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey*, and *You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)*.

Legend has it that the original 1966 Wilson-Parks collaboration entailed a considerable amount of hashish smoking, and there are times when the lyrics and arrangements sound too goofy, idiomatic and even downright obscure and inscrutable.

But, with its otherworldly themes of Americana (all part of a determined ploy to set themselves apart from Lennon and McCartney, it seems), Wilson and Parks moved away considerably from Mike Love's traditional fun-in-the-sun Californian themes and Tony Asher's down-to-earth sensitivity about the vicissitudes of adolescent love.

The original *Smile* recordings were completed over 70 to 80 mostly intense and prolonged sessions, but, on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, we sense far less studio time was devoted to its recording. One intuits that a more mature and less fastidious Wilson was content to focus on efficiency and polish. More than anything, we sense he wanted a clean, competent sound without too much intricacy or experimentation.

After nearly four decades, one also feels Wilson had lost his adventurous spirit, his once seemingly indefatigable patience and his endearing passion for prolonged and technically challenging recording sessions. Here, one thinks of the affable *Pet Sounds* sessions in which deft instrumentalists were given generous opportunities to render different versions of their melodic lines before committing the most favoured one to tape.

Angelic voice sounds tarnished

Key to understanding Brian Wilson after all his isolated years in a drug-induced hell, is his innate mental coherence, which, we sense, has been damaged irreparably by excessive substance abuse. This malady has also tarnished his once angelic, multi-octave soprano voice, which has since lost its full range and some of its subtlety and tenderness.

Wilson also developed a speech impediment over his years of abuse, and this characteristic, while sometimes quirky and heart-warmingly amusing, has affected his enunciation to the point where he sounds like a bar-room singer on the brink of confessing he has drunk one too many – and must head home.

On the sensitive Beach Boys subject of "voices", some fans will have lamented the absence of the unrivalled vocals of Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love and Bruce Johnston. However, given the death of Brian's two brothers and the more recent history of acrimonious activities and soured

relations with the surviving Beach Boys, Wilson had to find other voices. His band of younger musicians rose to the occasion – and there are times when they find their own majestic rings, as on the imploring opening a capella track, *Our Prayer/Gee*, a sublime hymnal type of eulogy to the bounty of life, the spellbinding beauty of *Child Is the Father to the Man* and the new-century rendition of the perennial *Good Vibrations*.

One gathers from the CD booklet credits that at least seven other musicians contributed to the often lush vocal parts, Scott Bennett, Nelson Bragg, Jeffrey Foskett, Probyn Gregory, Taylor Mills, Darian Sahanaja and Nick Walusko, all of whom seemed to have excelled as Wilson's post-Beach Boys choir.

Wilson admitted in interviews in 2004 that he was pleased to have worked with The Wondermints because "they're better than The Beach Boys".

Besides being a wonderful studio band, The Wondermints – unlike the 50-plus session musicians used for the original *Pet Sound* sessions – were able to take the music of *Smile* on to the stage, into the studio and then back to the stage again with comparative ease.

Above all else, though, one congratulates and thanks Brian Wilson – after all his isolated years in what may well have been hell on Earth – for completing his abandoned (near) masterpiece and sharing it not only with die-hard fans of The Beach Boys, but a new generation of rock enthusiasts and commentators.

In our strange and often depressing times – exacerbated by the ever-proliferating streams of mediocre and even downright banal pop music emanating from the world's giant sausage-machine of a music industry – this excellent (even if flawed) album lives up to its sanguine title and artwork. ■

Other views on *Smile*

Tim Page in *The Washington Post* (2004): "The songs themselves? Gorgeous, giddy, ambitious, strange. I've always felt that Wilson was better judged as a creator of electro-acoustical soundscapes than as a traditional songwriter. [The original] *Smile* was made up of fractured, elaborately ornamented musical tableaux, distinguished by their brevity, their vaporous, all-but-tangible beauties and their sheer sonic splendour.

"It is this last quality that I find missing from *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*. The original *Smile* recordings were enveloped in a luminous sheen that was attainable only through countless hours of in the studio (there was a total of 72 sessions before the project was abandoned); this could truthfully be described as electronic music, however wilful and eccentric.

"*Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, on the other hand, sounds like what it is: polished, efficient work from a terrific, versatile band that visited the studio to lay down some tunes and Get the Record Finished."

Robert Christgau in *Rolling Stone* (2004): "Although stoned confusion and mild pastoral pessimism are endemic, the world they [Wilson and Parks] evoke is as benign as a day at the beach – yet less simplistic (and deceptive) than the Beach Boys' fantasies of eternal Southern California teendom.

"In this the lyrics are of a piece with the jokey songlets of *Smiley Smile*, where five *Smile* titles first surfaced, and the good-natured rock 'n' roll recidivism of *Wild Honey*. What elevates them into something approaching a utopian vision is Wilson's orchestrations: brief bridge melodies, youthful harmonies more precise and uplifting now than when executed by actually existing callow people and an enthralling profusion of instrumental colours.

"Trombone, timpani, theremin and tenor sax brush by and disappear; a banjo shows its head; strings vibrate around; woodwinds establish unexpected moods and pipe down."

Burhan Wazir in *1,001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die* (2005): "...*Smile* is a joyous ode to the sun-drenched harmonies of The Beach Boys. The album opens with *Our Prayer*, an a capella hymn, before bursting into the colourful collision of *Heroes and Villains*.

"*Surf's Up*, a poignant eulogy to youth, leads into the defiant *I'm in Great Shape* and the comic *Vega-Tables*. Throughout, Wilson's voice – though occasionally cracking from age, past illnesses and misuse – proves the record's most versatile instrument."

Greg Kot and Milo Miles in the fourth edition of the *Rolling Stone Album Guide* (2004): "And while rock's most famous lost recording could not possibly live up to its own legend, *Smile* 2004 is a joy on its own terms – filled with majestic harmonies, lush string and horn arrangements, gorgeous melodies and Wilson's sly sense of humour.

"Shaped largely by Darian Sahanaja, the musical director of Wilson's touring band, the album is arranged into three suites, built around key compositions: *Heroes and Villains*, *Surf's Up* and *Good Vibrations*.

"And while none of these familiar songs is necessarily better sounding than the original version listeners have heard before (Wilson's voice is nowhere near as expressive as it was once and clearly strains in parts), the arrangements are terrific: *Smile* pieces together bits and pieces of Wilson's humour and

genius into a majestic song cycle that's funny, poignant, irreverent and totally wonderful."

Album fact-file

Release date: September 28 2004

Record label: Nonesuch Records (7559-79846-2)

Recording studios: Basic tracks recorded at Sunset Sound, Hollywood, CA (April 2004) and overdubs and mixing at Your Place or Mine Recording, Glendale, CA (April-June 2004)

Running time: Almost 47 minutes

Producer and arranger: Brian Wilson

Recording and mixing engineer: Mark Linett

Mixing producers: Brian Wilson and Darian Sahanaja

Assistant engineers: Kevin Deane, Pete Magdaleno and Daniel S McCoy

Mastering engineer: Bob Ludwig at Gateway Mastering

The 17 tracks over three suites

All tracks written by Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks, unless otherwise denoted in brackets

- 01 *Our Prayer/Gee*
- 02 *Heroes and Villains*
- 03 *Roll Plymouth Rock*
- 04 *Barnyard*
- 05 *Old Master Painter/You Are My Sunshine*
(Haven Gillespie/Beasley Smith)
- 06 *Cabin Essence*
- 07 *Wonderful*
- 08 *Song for Children*
- 09 *Child Is Father of the Man*
- 10 *Surf's Up*
- 11 *I'm in Great Shape/I Wanna Be Around/*
Workshop
- 12 *Vega-Tables*
- 13 *On a Holiday*
- 14 *Wind Chimes*
- 15 *Mrs O'Leary's Cow* (instrumental: Brian Wilson)
- 16 *In Blue Hawaii*
- 17 *Good Vibrations*
(Brian Wilson/Michael Love/Tony Asher)

The featured musicians

Brian Wilson (lead vocals and keyboards)
Scott Bennett (vocals, keyboards, mallets and guitar)
Nelson Bragg (vocals, percussion, whistles and celery)
Jeffrey Foskett (vocals, guitar and hammer)
Probyn Gregory (vocals, guitar, brass, tannerin and whistles)
Jim Hines (drums, mallets, saw and sound effects)
Bob Lizik (bass guitar and beret)
Paul Mertens (woodwinds, saxophone, harmonica and semi-conductor)
Taylor Mills (vocals, power drill and leg slap)
Darian Sahanaja (vocals, keyboards, mallets and drill)

Dave Stone (acoustic bass)
Nick Walusko (vocals, guitar, eye-patch and carrots)

Plus the **Stockholm Strings 'n' Horns**

Staffan Findin (bass trombone)
Andreas Forsman (violin)
Erik Holm (viola)
Anna Landberg (cello)
Malin-My Nilsson (violin)
Bjorn Samulsson (trombone)
Viktor Sand (saxophone, flute and clarinet)
Markus Sandlund (cello)

Package design and art: Mark London

Graphic layout: Dennis Loren

Photography: Jasper Dailey, Guy Webster and Melinda Wilson

Liner notes: David Leaf

Dedication wording: "To all the fans who have waited all these years for me to finish *Smile*. I dedicate this to you ... Brian Wilson"

The weird Russian connection

Wilson shared one of Lenin's joys

Long before the advent of the mellotron (listen to early King Crimson and Moody Blues) and the arrival of Robert Moog's first big-name synthesizer and the subsequent generations of synthesizers, such as the various ARP, VCR3, Opus, Yamaha, Korg, Roland and Oberheim models, an intriguing electronic musical device was creating new sounds on the fringes of mid-twentieth-century music: the theremin.

This instrument, which exploits the heterodyning principle of sound, is believed to be the first one designed to be played without being touched – a bizarre notion for a tactile musician.

This instrument, as an evolved, keyboard-based "electro-theremin", was played on *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*, the eleventh track of *Pet Sounds*, by Dr Paul Tanner. At the time, Tanner was a music professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as an enthusiastic trombonist and a former member of the original Glenn Miller Band.

A Russian physicist, inventor and amateur cellist, Professor Lev Theremin (1896-1993), invented the instrument sometime between 1917 and 1923 (the dates vary in different reference books). From most

accounts, it seems the date was either 1917 or 1919. Theremin developed the instrument, with sponsorship from the Soviet socialist regime, while conducting research into proximity sensors.

Not long after developing his electronic instrument, a young Theremin demonstrated it to the Soviet leader, Vladimir Lenin. So enthralled was Lenin with the theremin, he learnt to play it and commissioned 600 of them to be built and distributed throughout the Soviet Union (USSR) to promote Soviet technology and culture. In 1928, not long after arriving in the USA, Theremin patented his device with the US Patents Office (US patent number 1661058).

Manipulating sound ethereally



Lev Theremin doing his thing some time during the 1920s or 1930s

Also known as a thereminvox or an etherophone, a traditional theremin comprises a wooden box that houses radio tubes and other electronic components that produce oscillations at two sound-wave frequencies above the normal hearing range. The musician – or traditional thereminist – controls the instrument’s pitch by moving either his/her hands or handheld batons towards or away from the two metal antennae.

One antenna is straight and mounted upright on top of the main box. The other antenna is looped and mounted on the side of the box. The distance of the player’s hand from the one antenna determines the frequency and therefore the pitch, while the distance of the other hand from the second antenna determines the amplitude and therefore the volume.

The movement of the hands changes one of the inaudible frequencies. The resultant sound’s harmonics or component tones can be filtered out to create several tone colours over a range of six octaves. The sounds, resembling violin-string sounds, are spacey or ethereal and can be eerie and disquieting.

The theremin uses the heterodyne principle to generate an audio signal. The heterodyne principle, in electronics, entails the production of a lower-frequency signal from the combination of two almost equal high-frequency signals, as used in a radio transmission. The instrument’s internal electronic circuitry includes two radio-frequency oscillators.

The one oscillator operates at a fixed frequency and the other at a variable frequency. The two inaudible frequencies, when combined, produce a lower audible frequency equal to the difference in the rates of vibration. The sound is amplified and emitted through a traditional loudspeaker.

[Extensive technical information is available on the Internet using a search engine such as Google or Yahoo if technophilia is one of your passions].

Wilson encounters the theremin

Two composers, the French-American Edgard Varèse (1883-1965) and the American Henry Cowell (1887-1965), both wrote music for the theremin.

During the 1920s and 1930s, in the heydays of radio, the theremin became a popular instrument and was mass-produced. RCA – in a licensing agreement with Lev Theremin – manufactured and distributed a range of RCA-branded Thereminvox machines in the USA, where one found its way into the home of a musician friend of Brian Wilson’s parents.

Around 1950/1951, Wilson recalls his first encounter with the theremin: “When I was an eight-year-old kid, my dad and mom took me over to their friend’s house, and he had a theremin. The guy was playing it, and I was scared to death of the sound – it really frightened me a lot. I really got scared. I didn’t want to hear that sound. It sounded like one of those horribly scary movies – weird trip, weird facial expressions – almost sexual.”

[From the illuminating book by Charles L Granata, *I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times: Brian Wilson and the Making of Pet Sounds*; London: Unanimous Ltd, 2003].

Composer Miklos Rosza featured the theremin in his score for the 1945 Alfred Hitchcock film, *Spellbound*. In 1958, Paul Tanner and an American electronics engineer, Bob Whitesell, developed their version of the instrument, which they dubbed electro-theremin. Unlike the traditional theremin, Tanner and Whitesell’s version could be played with a conventional keyboard.

While their version was not as fine in sound as the original Russian version, it was easier to play. Brian Wilson also commissioned Paul Tanner to play the electro-theremin on two other Beach Boys songs, *Good Vibrations* and *Wild Honey*. The theremin fell out of vogue for a while because a new generation of more advanced electronic instruments began to emerge during the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, it appealed to hobbyists, eccentrics and inventors, one of whom, Robert (Bob) Moog, developed homemade theremins at high school as a hobby.

Moog went as far as publishing articles on building theremins and being a thereminist, and sold theremin kits for self-assembly at home. Moog later said that his passion for theremins led directly to his invention of his first groundbreaking synthesizer, the Minimoog, in 1964.

A year after Lev Theremin's death in 1993, a resurgence of interest in the instrument occurred after the release of the documentary film, *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey* (1994).

According to the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, companies such as Moog Music, Wavefront Technologies and tVox produce performance-quality theremins and, although many modern synthesizers can approximate the sound of a theremin, enthusiastic thereminists enjoy the novelty, uniqueness and tonal or atmospheric expressiveness of the genuine item. Moog Music, as well as PAiA Electronics and Theremaniacs, also market and sell theremin kits for DIY enthusiasts.

In more recent decades, several bands and artists have used a theremin in making their music. These include The Damned, The Decemberists, Fishbone, The Flaming Lips, Jean-Michel Jarre, Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, Phish, Pixies, The Polyphonic Spree, the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Supergrass, Pere Ubu and Keller Williams. Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page sometimes played the theremin during live renditions of *Whole Lotta Love*.

Note: Depending on the reference, Theremin's name is transliterated from the Russian as Léon Theremin, Lev Sergeivich Theremin and Lev Termen (born in St Petersburg). ■



Portrait of a troubled genius

From paradise to hell and back again

Almost single-handedly, Brian Wilson virtually invented the sunny sound of Californian pop music at the precocious age of 19. Over his five-year purple patch, from mid-1962 to mid-1967, not longer after he aborted The Beach Boys' *Smile* album, Wilson reigned as the leading West Coast songwriter, arranger and producer.

During his golden years, he wrote a string of peerless hits from *I Get Around*, *The Warmth of the Sun* and *California Girls* through to *Help Me, Rhonda*, *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, *Good Vibrations* and *Heroes and Villains*. At his peak in the mid-1960s (1964-1966), Brian Wilson had few rivals as imaginative and skilled writers of evergreen pop tunes. Besides the more obvious choice songwriters of the day, such as Lennon and McCartney, Bob Dylan, and Jagger and Richards, only a small constellation of notable pop writers spring to mind.

These writers include Ray Davies of The Kinks, Pete Townshend of The Who, John Phillips of The Mamas and the Papas and Gene Clark, Roger McGuinn and David Crosby of The Byrds. What separates Wilson from these writers, however, is his rare gift as an imaginative arranger, mini-choir director and record producer on top of his considerable songwriting abilities.

His sublime approach to making music, from shaping chords, layering vocal harmonies, breaking verse-and-chorus structural conventions and exploiting new colours and textures in arrangements, would touch, move and inspire hundreds of artists.

These artists include Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend of The Who, The Bee Gees, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, The Eagles, Jackson Browne, John Cale, Elvis Costello and Tears for Fears. In more recent times, his avowed admirers include Bon Jovi, Barenaked Ladies, Matthew Sweet, Daft Punk, Queens of the Stone Age and Pete Dinklage, to name just a few bands and singers.

Brian Wilson – as the *Pet Sounds* album testifies so eloquently and poignantly – remains one of the undisputed great talents of the 1960s rock and pop scene and rarely has the world of music seen the rise of such an influential talent. His subsequent decline into obesity, reclusion, deep angst, antisocial behaviour and mental illness is one of rock's most tragic and heart-wrenching stories.

Then came the heart-warming part of the protracted Brian Wilson saga: his eventual triumphant return to glowing health, greater sanity, the public spotlight and, above all, his return to the recording studio, which climaxed in 2004 with the release of his new-century near-masterpiece, *Smile*.

Blending Berry with The Freshmen

Born in the working-class Hawthorne district of greater Los Angeles, California, in the USA on June 20 1942, Brian Douglas Wilson grew up in that district – at 3701 West 119th Street – and showed a strong musical inclination from a young age.

Hooked on the West Coast FM radio stations of the 1950s, most notably Hollywood's KFVB, his earlier musical heroes included rock 'n' rollers like Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley, pioneering rock producer Phil Spector and the American jazz vocal group, The Four Freshmen. He has also cited Bill Haley, Henry Mancini, George Gershwin and Rosemary Clooney as inspirational artists during his adolescence.

Wilson was obsessed with The Four Freshmen and spent as much time as he could listening to them and working out their songs on the family piano at home. His parents, Murry and Audree Wilson, encouraged Brian and his brothers to explore music and filled their home with several musical instruments, including a piano. Murry Wilson, sadly, largely was a failed songwriter and it seemed he hoped his sons, particularly Brian, would enjoy better fortunes.

Growing up, Brian Wilson sang in a local choir for the Inglewood Covenant Church. Despite being deaf in one ear (supposedly as a result of his father's violent tendencies), Brian had a pure soprano voice and perfect pitch, which astounded his choir director. His love of singing harmonies inspired him to encourage his two brothers to join him in singing harmony pieces at night before going to sleep.

The boys shared a bedroom, so, in many, respects this is how The Beach Boys begun. Instrument-wise, Brian first mastered the accordion and then moved to the piano, which he began to master at a young age.

During his Beach Boys tenure, he was best known for playing bass and keyboards.

Family sing-alongs were extended to accommodate Audree Wilson's sister, Glee Love, who lived with her husband, Milton, and their six children, including Michael, at nearby View Park. Mike Love joined the Wilson brothers and would sing the bass parts, while Carl sang the middle parts and Brian the higher parts. The fifth member would soon join them, a high-school friend, Alan Jardine, who adored The Kingston Trio. Brian and Al Jardine became friends in 1957.

Dennis was not that interested in music, showing little inclination and preferring to spend his recreational time surfing and enjoying beach life. Mother Audree insisted that Dennis be considered a member of a singing group and, serendipitously, his inclusion around 1961 would lead to the group writing and singing about surfing and other fun-in-the-sun themes.

Genesis of the group

Brian Wilson formed The Beach Boys in 1961 at the age of 19 with the intention of combining a Chuck Berry-styled rock 'n' roll with elements of doo-wop and generous dosings of lush, Four Freshman-inspired vocal harmonies. The first song they wrote about surfing – a collaboration between aspiring lyricist Mike Love and pianist-cum-melody writer Brian Wilson – was the first big hit, *Surfin'*.

This song, after being rehearsed and recorded at home, was taken to Hite Morgan of Guild Music to be recorded with an Ampex 200 tape recorder on September 16 1961. Carl Wilson provided the sparse instrumentation on acoustic guitar, while he, Brian, Dennis, Al Jardine and Mike Love sang the vocals. Impressed with the results, Morgan arranged to have a better recording made through Candix Records.

After the rapid rise of The Beach Boys in 1962, he and the group became American celebrities, spending much of their time on hectic tours throughout 1963-1965. His distaste for touring and his decision to dedicate himself full-time to writing, arranging and recording in 1965 enabled him to indulge his talent and mature rapidly as a songwriter, arranger and producer.

He built on the foundations of The Beach Boys' first few albums by writing mostly excellent material for two masterful pop albums, *The Beach Boys Today!* (released in March 1965) and *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!!)* (released in July 1965). Inspired by the success of these albums, along with coherence of The Beatles' superlative *Rubber Soul* album (released in December 1965), he set about in earnest to write his crowning glory, the near flawless *Pet Sounds* album.

Aborting the *Smile* album

After the disappointing response to *Pet Sounds* in the USA and his sudden, seemingly irrational impulse to abandon the *Smile* album, Brian Wilson's personal life and creativity declined. Plagued by deteriorating mental health, including paranoia, and growing drug and alcohol abuse, he became a recluse (with his first wife, Marilyn) at his Bel Air mansion in Los Angeles. He also indulged his insatiable appetite for cake and allowed his body weight to swell beyond 300 pounds (120 kilograms).

After aborting the near-complete *Smile* album in early 1967, Wilson prepared one of the songs he had written with Van Dyke Parks for release as a single, *Heroes and Villains* (released in August 1967). The song reached number 12 on the *Billboard* singles chart and then fast disappeared from American radio playlists. Again, as with the tepid response at home to *Pet Sounds*, Wilson was bitterly disappointed.

During the years 1967-1970, Wilson gradually relinquished the reins as The Beach Boys' principal writer, arranger and producer, a role his youngest brother, Carl, would assume. Much to the consternation of avid fans, Wilson maintained a lower profile and influence during the production of the next three Beach Boys albums, *Smiley Smile* (1967), *Wild Honey* and *Friends* (both 1968), although he was more involved in making *Friends*. In later years, Wilson said that while *Pet Sounds* is his "best work", *Friends* is his "favourite".



Friends (1968) ... Brian's favourite Beach Boys album

Wilson was barely involved in making 1969's *20/20*, the group's final album for Capitol Records before signing with Warner Brothers and creating their own label, Brother Records. To exacerbate his predicament, his dabbling with cocaine became a grave addiction, which was aggravated by the dismal performance of The Beach Boys' mid-1969 single, *Break Away*.

Then came his pitiful five years of seclusion, spending time alone at home, sleeping, overeating, taking drugs and becoming increasingly complex, eccentric and depressed. The death of his father, Murry, in 1973 hastened another crisis. Refusing to attend his father's funeral (as did brother Dennis), he escaped LA for a few days.

Stemming his self-destruction

In 1975, Wilson's first wife, Marilyn, by now desperate to stem her husband's decline into self-destruction and The Beach Boys' ailing commercial appeal, enrolled the services of a controversial West Coast therapist, Dr Eugene Landy. Working with Wilson over a few months, Landy managed to guide the ailing musician towards being more social and productive again.

For a short while during 1975 and 1976, Brian was back, playing on stage with The Beach Boys and helping in the studio, notably on the 1976 album, *15 Big Ones*. This disappointingly mediocre album was not a commercial success. The group's fortunes improved a little when they released *The Beach Boys Love You* in April 1977. While an unremarkable work, the 1977 album sold well and saw Wilson reinstated (albeit briefly) as the group's principal singer, writer, arranger and producer.

A year later, at the end of her emotional tether, his wife, Marilyn, left him, taking with her their two young daughters, Carnie and Wendy (later of short-lived Wilson-Phillips fame).

Spaced out at Knebworth

Wilson's spaced-out appearance with The Beach Boys as the headlining act at Knebworth 1980 in Hertfordshire, England reveals an overweight, poker-faced background character tickling his piano keyboard, but with the impression that he is so far removed from the spirit of the group and the expectations of a massive crowd of rock enthusiasts, one wonders where his mind has taken him.

Wilson's purported "comeback" of the latter 1970s seems to be one of rock music's great anticlimaxes and, before long, his behaviour, work ethic and health were declining.

In 1982, with his first wife long gone, Wilson had become a hapless, if not pathetic, character: obese, paranoid, drunk and depressingly doped-out on cocaine and a veritable cocktail of other non-prescription drugs. Fearing that his life was fast ending, Landy's services were sought again (by mother Audree and The Beach Boys), this time with a request for a more radical treatment.

Sadly, his stringent treatment commenced with the other five Beach Boys dismissing him from the group he founded. Landy then took him from LA to Hawaii and placed him on a strict regime of health food and exercise, as well as intensive counselling.

During the emotional and mental rollercoaster days with Landy, Wilson regained much of his physical health, a better state of mind and a better quantum of self-respect.

Although Wilson revealed graciously in a 2002 interview that Landy "saved me" and that he "loved the guy", the therapist's total onslaught, approaching the pathologically despotic, supposedly enabled him to gain control of Wilson's mind, emotions, body, social life, finances, business affairs and even much of his weakened creativity.

After regaining much of his vitality and affability, Wilson returned to The Beach Boys fold and joined the group on stage at Live Aid in Philadelphia in 1985. He also joined the group to record their eponymous – and lacklustre – studio album released in June 1985.

First solo album

In July 1988, almost 27 years after founding The Beach Boys, Wilson released his first solo album, *Brian Wilson*. This promising, but seemingly incomplete album, was marred by his excessive use of a dated synthesizer sound and a few weak, unimaginative songs. He recalled some of his 1960s glory on a few of the better songs, such as *Love and Mercy*, *Baby*, *Let Your Hair Grow* and *Melt Away*.

That same year, the musician published his autobiography, *Wouldn't It Be Nice: My Own Story*, which remains controversial because the indeterminable extent of Eugene Landy's influence on the final text. In this supposedly frank account of his life and career, Wilson touches on his difficult relationship with his abusive and despotic father, as well as his "lost years".

The book later became the subject of a lawsuit, with Wilson declaring to an American judge that he had not read and approved the final manuscript. The book – also said to have included plagiarised extracts from other books about the group – was withdrawn a few years later.

Dismayed at the domineering manner in which Landy was controlling Wilson's life and art, The Beach Boys intervened and ousted the therapist. Wilson then had to be weaned off his high intake of illegally prescribed psychotropic drugs.

A California Superior Court judge, by legal decree, terminated all professional and personal ties between Landy and Wilson, a turning point that would see the musician starting to blossom again as an artist and as a person. Around this time, Wilson was diagnosed with bipolar-type schizoaffective disorder, which (among other conditions) entails hearing voices in one's head.

Wilson maintained a low profile for several years. In September 1995, he released his second solo album, *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*. Produced by Don Was, the album featured mostly rerecorded

Beach Boys material (eg, *The Warmth of the Sun* and the more funereal *Til I Die*), as well as reworkings of demo recordings from 1976 and a few of his more recent solo songs (eg, *Melt Away* and *Love and Mercy*). That same year, he married Melinda Ledbetter, with whom he adopted two girls, Daria and Delanie, and, in 2004, a son, Dylan.

In 1995, Wilson also released an album in partnership with Van Dyke Parks, *Orange Crate Art*. Arranged and produced by Parks, who wrote most of the songs, Wilson was featured as the lead vocalist and support writer. While being a Parks-dominated outing, the album enabled Wilson to again stretch his voice and re-explore some of his former glories as a multi-octave singer.

In 1996, he participated in his final album with The Beach Boys, *Stars and Stripes, Volume 1*, featuring a few American country-music artists singing lead vocals. Wilson was just one of the album's several contributing writers. After rebuilding a relationship with his two daughters from his first marriage, Carnie and Wendy, he joined them to write and release a 1997 album under the name of *The Wilsons*.

In June 1998, he returned to the limelight with *Imagination*, his third solo album and the second one of all-new self-composed compositions. Among other flaws, this album was marred by his poor choice of collaborators, among them the mediocre Jimmy Buffett.

Banishing stage fright

Towards the end of the 1990s, Wilson started to cope with his stage fright and returned to the concert arena. Among other highlights, he fulfilled one of his long-standing dreams of performing *Pet Sounds* live, which resulted in the May 2002 release of a disappointing album, *Brian Wilson Presents Pet Sounds Live*.

In the latter half of 2003, Wilson began to attract considerable media attention and fan frenzy when it was established that he would return to his aborted *Smile* project of 1966-1967 with new musicians.

Gathering a new group of musicians, most notably a young singer, keyboardist and arranger, Darian Sahanaja, and other members of the retro-styled power-pop band, The Wondermints, along with the original album lyricist, Van Dyke Parks, Wilson reworked his material and debuted his live performance of *Smile* at London's Royal Festival Hall in February 2004.

Fans from around the globe gathered in London's famous concert hall and, after an emotionally charged performance, Wilson and his band received a standing ovation.

In June 2004, Wilson released his next solo album, another disappointing work, *Getting' in Over My Head*. It features contributions from Paul McCartney,

Eric Clapton, Elton John and his late brother, Carl, whose vocals were preserved posthumously on lovingly archived tapes. Most of the songs were drawn from his back catalogue of unreleased material.

The release of the long-awaited *Smile* album at the end of September 2004 – more than 37 years after aborting the original sessions – would become the crowning glory of Wilson's post-Beach Boys career and one doubts if we shall again hear such a magnanimous album from him. Until 2004, many fans relied on a series of roughly assembled bootleg albums, none of which comes close to the near flawless qualities of the 2004 *Smile* album.

Ironically, for a musician and producer renowned for his adroitness at arranging the human voice, Brian Wilson's *Smile* earned a Grammy award for best rock instrumental (*Mrs O'Leary's Cow*). Wilson followed up the album with the release of the *Smile* double DVD featuring a documentary on one disc and concert footage of the recent *Smile* tour on the other. He devoted much of the second half of 2005 to touring and ended the year with his nadir offering: a dismal Christmas album, *What I Really Want for Christmas*. He also performed at the Live 8 concert in Berlin on July 2 2005.

Also in 2005, Wilson met the ire and frustrated greed of a desperate Mike Love, who tried to sue the musician for "shamelessly misappropriating ... Love's songs, likeness, and The Beach Boys trademark, as well as the *Smile* album itself" in promoting the 2004 *Smile* album. As Wilson's lawyers had hoped, Love's case eventually was dismissed as "meritless" on May 16 2007.

Promoting *Pet Sounds*

Several of the world's major rock publications and radio stations acknowledged the fortieth anniversary of *Pet Sounds*, as did Capitol Records when it released a deluxe, two-CD edition of the album with a green fake-velour cover. Wilson, too, celebrated the anniversary later in the year on November 1 when he took the album's songs and a stellar group of 12 musicians – including Al Jardine – to UCLA's Royce Hall in Los Angeles. Wilson and his band received a standing ovation.

On November 14 2006, Pink Floyd guitarist and singer, David Gilmour, inducted Wilson into the UK Music Hall of Fame. He performed *God Only Knows* and *Good Vibrations* at the induction ceremony.

This month (September 2007), Wilson is due to debut a new song cycle, *That Lucky Old Sun (A Narrative)*, at London's Royal Festival Hall – the renowned English venue he often has cited as his "spiritual home".

Today, as a devoted father of three younger children, Wilson works hard to keep himself busy and involved, but admits to being plagued by continuing bouts of depression and anxiety, for which he takes

prescribed medication. He visits a therapist three times a week and upholds a strict regime of daily exercise, including a seven-mile run, and healthy eating. He also spends the first hour of his waking day at the piano for therapy and for and exploring new song ideas.

While Wilson continues to write new songs and record ideas, it probably is fair to say that his best work remains *Pet Sounds* and his string of peerless hit singles from the mid-1960s, most notably *California Girls* and *Good Vibrations*. Despite his many demons and maladies, a far mellow and wiser Brian Wilson can look back at his career – and his legacy – at the age of 65 with a lot of pride, gratitude and joy ... and SMILE. ■

Recording engineer **Chuck Britz**:
"Without Brian, there wouldn't have been any Beach Boys."

The Brian Wilson album discography (1988-2005)

Brian Wilson (Jul 1988) ★
I Just Wasn't Made for These Times (Sep 1995) ★
Imagination (Jun 1998) ★
Live at the Roxy Theatre (Jun 2001) ★
Brian Wilson Presents Pet Sounds Live (May 2002)
Getting' in Over My Head (Jun 2004) ★
Brian Wilson Presents Smile (Sep 2004) ★★
What I Really Want for Christmas (Oct 2005)

With Van Dyke Parks
Orange Crate Art (1995) ★

The Wondermints

Whacky retro artists

When Brian Wilson was mulling over the idea of resuscitating his abandoned 1966 songs written for The Beach Boys' doomed *Smile* album, he had a chance encounter in a nightclub with a young Los Angeles band, The Wondermints.

Impressed with their musicianship and their sound, much of which has a strong retro feel, he invited them to work with him in concert and in the studio.

Tagged as a power-pop band, The Wondermints were formed in 1992 and released their debut single that same year, *Proto Pretty*. The band's core musicians feature singer and keyboardist Darian Sahanaja,

guitarist Nicky Walusko (aka Wonder) and percussionist Mike D'Amico.

Eccentric – especially by American standards, The Wondermints love the sounds of late-1970s and early-1980s New Wave pop (such as Elvis Costello and the Attractions) and 1960s lounge and crooner music, while their lyrics address whacky, sci-fi-type topics.

Over the years, other key band members have included singer and guitarist Probyn Gregory, bassist Brian Kassin and singer and percussionist Nelson Bragg.

The band went on to record and release four albums: *Wondermints* (1995); *Wonderful World of Wondermints* (1996 – a covers album); *Bali* (1998); and *Mind If We Make Love to You* (2002). Band members have also performed with Arthur Lee and Love, Baby Lemonade, Eels and Kim Foxx, among other artists. ■

Phil Spector & Wall of Sound

Brian's aural catalyst

Legendary American producer, Phil Spector, was a notable inspiration for Brian Wilson, who was impressed by how he produced The Ronettes' 1963 hit single, *Be My Baby*. For Wilson, Spector was a "huge influence" and a mentor, although the two did not collaborate on any recordings sessions.

Relying on his acute hearing, great musicological skills and instincts, and his fastidious nature, Wilson was able to disassemble and reconstruct in his mind the Spector approach to making records, right down to the use of echo chambers, layered vocals and even specific drum and guitar sounds.

So enamoured was he with Spector's production style, Wilson managed to spend some time attending a few Spector-directed recording sessions in Los Angeles. During these few sessions at Gold Star Recording Studios, Wilson took every opportunity to watch and learn from Spector and ask pertinent technical questions.

In a break from the pioneering traditions of earlier rock 'n' roll recording sessions, such as those conducted by Sam Phillips at Sun Records in Memphis, Spector recorded and produced his instrumental and vocal tracks separately – something that would inspire Wilson's approach to making albums for The Beach Boys.

Spector insisted that his sound should be deep, textured and in mono – and not the earlier form of stereo. He liked to have several instruments playing in unison, using up to two basses, three pianos and six guitars on one song.

Wilson also favoured recording in mono, so, if he had recorded music through a two-track stereo system, he would "bounce" the multiple recorded tracks to a single mono track on another four-track tape.

This technique would leave him with another three tracks to host the vocals and additional instruments to embellish or "sweeten" his sound. Extensive planning and precisely directed creativity were needed to achieve this.

Los Angeles' famed Gold Star Recording Studio – the birthplace of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound creation – was founded in 1950 by Dave Gold and Stan Ross.

The studio was located on 6252 Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. Gold Star was established as an independent facility, with the initial focus on cutting demo recordings for aspiring musicians. The small 20- by 22-foot studio had a notably low ceiling, which contributed to the distinctly warm and intimate sound of its recordings. ■

Chuck: patient right-hand man

Brian Wilson's favourite engineer, the late Chuck Britz, engineered most of the *Pet Sounds* recordings sessions in 1965 and 1966 at Hollywood's Western Recorders. Sadly, not much information appears to be readily available on Britz, but one surmises that he began his career as a sound engineer in the latter 1950s, recording rock 'n' roll groups.

He earned his reputation working as a diligent, patient and friendly engineer at Western Recorders at 6000 Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. His adept work with The Beach Boys would elevate his stature after 1963. Britz is said to have adored and respected Wilson immensely, and was notably adroit at turning the musician's abstractions into concrete specifics during their long recording sessions.

While he was not nearly as fastidious as Wilson, he had excellent technical knowledge and a knack for capturing sound in a pure, natural form in a disciplined manner. More than anything, Britz liked to keep the recording environment relaxed and informal. He died in August 2000. ■

Surfing Safari – useful websites

- www.brianwilson.com
- www.thebeachboys.com
- www.thebeachboysfanclub.com
- www.capitolrecords.com/thebeachboys
- www.rollingstone.com/artists/beachboys

Heroes and Villains – good books

Fusilli, Jim. *Beach Boys' Pet Sounds*. New York: Continuum Books, 2005.

Granata, Charles L. *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times: Brian Wilson and the Making of Pet Sounds*. London: Unanimous Ltd, 2003.

Leaf, David. *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*. Los Angeles: Delilah, 1978.

White, Timothy. *The Nearest Faraway Place: Brian Wilson, the Beach Boys and the Southern California Experience*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1994.

Good Vibrations!

The double *Pet Sounds*/Beach Boys edition of *Strange Brew* (editions nine and ten) is dedicated to two cherished friends in music, **Derek** and **Lu**, with heartfelt thanks for sharing your passion for The Beach Boys' music and lending me helpful research material: Michael Waddacor.

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