

Letters on "Listening to Brian Wilson"

8 September 2000

To David Walsh,

I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the piece on Brian Wilson and to add a few comments that may be of interest.

I read recently that the average teenager in the US in the 50s earned as much—\$10 a week—as an entire family had 15 years before. This enabled them to buy portable radios and record players, taking them away from the Victrola in the lounge room. Music then served as a new agent of assembly, I suppose. The chap who wrote the article said it was the first step to the focus of retailers on the youth and much of the “youth culture” that has ensued.

I saw an interview with Brian on a recent documentary—not a bad one, at that—called something like—“I Wasn't Made for these Times”. It traced his music—most interestingly, the song writing techniques and collaborations—his life and the groups history.

He talked openly and honestly about many aspects of his life. It really looked as if he'd made some peace with the world. At the end of it, in an interview—with his daughter sitting next to him—he was asked if he still felt he wasn't “made for these times”? He said, “No”, he felt he “...belonged”, etc. He seemed truthful.

The worst was watching the side effects of psychotropic drugs on him; speech and neck muscles, etc.

It also shows the making of “Pet Sounds,” which Paul McCartney says was the necessary inspiration for “Sgt. Pepper.” McCartney, in an interview a few years ago, said “God only Knows,” was the greatest pop song ever, and further one of the greatest songs of all time. As McCartney is one of the most well-rounded songwriters of the post-war period—or any other—his opinion is not to be sniffed at. (Myself I prefer “Wouldn't it be Nice”—just for the bit where all the music sounds as if it's standing around waiting to go somewhere—and then suddenly does.)

Interviews with the musicians on the album were

revealing. They talked of over-dubbing several instruments to get a new and distinctive sound—not just the “Theremin” and that sort of thing—but they'd lay down a cello track, and then overdub a guitar or a piano on top of the same notes—to get a cumulative tonal feel. One of them called him—“The Mozart of Pop”—in reference to the assured and delicate handling of many instrumental voices.

When you speak of harmonies there's a point or observation that Lomax makes in the “Land Where Blues Began”. (Based on his worldwide cantographic and choreographic studies.) It is that the differences in the society call forth different scales and intervals. He says that in rural society we have wide intervals—the 5-note or pentatonic scale—that reflect the few and wide groupings in static societies.

There is a whole separate but interrelated subject here in the making of tonal—even tempered—instruments rather than the standardised tempered scale we have. A recent BBC music series called “Howard Goodall's Big Bangs” went into this in detail.

The only instruments you can make without higher maths are those within the Pythagorean scale; flutes, lyres, etc. They are based on the octave, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 7th, scale. (Did you know Bach wrote the “Well Tempered Clavier” before one was in existence?—I didn't.) Howard says China is the only country whose music is still pentatonic.

The standardised tempered scale was part of the drive of capitalism to the standardisation of weights, measures, languages. Just as in a national marketplace requires common measures so does a national music. It also makes the mass manufacture of instruments possible.

To return to blues music Lomax traces the movement of the different groups of African tradition; herding, hoeing, boat rowing, etc. Each job had a separate “music” drawn from the physical motions of the job and the purpose. A rowing song will have a different

emphasis—put the oar in, pull it through, take it out, etc.—to a herding song—aimed at calming and reassuring the cattle, calling them in, etc.

If you think about it, the rower has to exert his breath anyway, in the pursuit of his keep. To take that breath and shape it and give it words and emotions is to make it music. It's a very human response.

When they got to the US not only were all the separate tribes and castes pushed in together, but all the different song traditions also. This forced a rapid and vigorous cross pollination of the various traditions.

Added to this was the unfamiliarity of different tunings and the instruments of the west. So to keep the vocal quality of Africa they had to make some changes as to how they played them. From the diddley bow to the slide guitar, for example. He shows how the old 5-note scale gets its 7th notes flattened. (Occasionally the relative minor chord will appear as well.) So we get the mixture of the natural scale played along side the tempered scale. This gives the dissonance and vibrancy to blues.

When we get to jazz the differences are marked large. The jazz scale goes outside the notes of the octave and extends them to 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, etc.—flattened, augmented or diminished, etc. We get chords like a C flattened 7th, flattened 9th—so there is a refinement, a reinforcement on top of the 7th of the 9th. They are superimposing a higher and more intricate scale on top of the root scale. In other words the musicians reflected and expressed the new discriminations in society.

With Wilson, one of the most unusual harmonic structures he uses is “crushed chords.” The only way I can explain this is to say these are chords which fold in on themselves and then open out. He doesn't stay with just the standard 3rd, 5th, 7th harmonies either. (A record producer I know tells me it is noteworthy that he does favour a wide tonal range with an emphasis on the 5th in some of the earlier songs. And that the falsetto is taken to the point where it almost cracks.)

He follows the musical idea of whatever he is putting forward and doesn't let the singers fall back on the well used, compliant harmonic creed. They are pushed to harmonise “outside of themselves” and become one with the emotional direction. They find in themselves an answering note to the new chords of society.

Anyway it was a nice article about him, I wish I could have see him. I suppose it's a colonial thing. All we've

had out here was that crew Mike Love brought out.

Regards,

TC

Sydney

Dear editor,

I have always liked the Beach Boys, at least their later music, and now I know why. A wonderful piece!

MM

Dear editor,

I, too, have always loved the music of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, thank you for the insightful review. I know Brian would indeed feel some “inner calm” were he to read your beautiful, sensitive words.

DAS



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