An Evening with Brian Wilson

The Palace Theatre in Manchester, England—September 23, 2007

Robert Stevens
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I have wanted to see Brian Wilson for a long time and got the chance to do so September 23 when he played Manchester, England on his latest tour.

Although I am not from the ’60s generation my favourite band since I was a teenager growing up in the 1980s has always been the Beatles. I suppose I first came across the name Brian Wilson in the mid to late-1980s when I was reading books about the Beatles and how they developed musically.

Reading around I was fascinated to learn that the Beatles, and in particular Paul McCartney, were greatly influenced by the Beach Boys, their album *Pet Sounds* and the musical innovations Brian Wilson was pioneering on that record. Of course, the Beatles were influenced by many other important artists, including Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and Bob Dylan, but it was the Beach Boys influence that most intrigued me.

At the time I remember thinking that all I know about the Beach Boys is that they sang about surf and sunshine and life in sunny California. What was the connection? *Pet Sounds* at that time was unknown to me. Anyway, I went and bought *Pet Sounds* and after hearing it began thinking of Wilson and the Beach Boys in a completely different light. It has since become a treasured album.

Speaking of probably its most famous song, “God Only Knows,” McCartney said it is “one of the few songs that reduces me to tears every time I hear it. It’s really just a love song, but it’s brilliantly done. It shows the genius of Brian. I’ve actually performed it with him and I’m afraid to say that during the sound check I broke down. It was just too much to stand there singing this song that does my head in, and to stand there singing it with Brian.”

I read another interview with him where he stated that at the time *Pet Sounds* came out in 1966, he played the record so often to John Lennon that his co-songwriter could not have helped but be influenced by it. McCartney said that as a bass player, it was a revelation hearing the bass lines. He found that even the bass lines Wilson played on the tracks of *Pet Sounds* contained beautiful melodies within them.

McCartney said of *Pet Sounds*, “No one’s musical education is complete without hearing that album.”

One gets the definite sense that Wilson’s achievement on *Pet Sounds* literally opened the sonic sluice gates for the Beatles and everyone else who heard it. Upon listening to any Beatles album after 1966, you can hear and feel the influence of Brian Wilson. “Back in the USSR” from the Beatles’ *White Album* is probably the most famous example of them seeking to emulate the Beach Boys style, but it is also indelibly there on many of their other songs and later work.

The influences were reciprocal. It was upon hearing the 1965 Beatles album *Rubber Soul* that Wilson felt compelled to produce a work of uniform quality that would stand comparison. He said of the album, “I really wasn’t quite ready for the unity. It felt like it all belonged together. *Rubber Soul* was a collection of songs ... that somehow went together like no album ever made before, and I was very impressed.”

He added, “That’s it. I really am challenged to do a great album.”

The growing musical maturity of the Beatles on *Rubber Soul* was clearly manifest. Having abandoned live touring the band were for the first time in a position to spend more time in the studio, refine their sound and develop new ideas. John Lennon said it was the first album in which they had complete creative control during recording.

Embarking on the creation of *Pet Sounds*, Wilson had by then also given up touring and concentrated fully on the album.

On *Pet Sounds*, “God Only Knows” is also my own favourite track. Recorded between March and April of 1966, it features no less than 23 musicians including the

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vocalists and many instruments including the harpsichord and French horns heard in the intro. The last minute of the song to the fade out is a wonderful example of harmonic arrangement and reveals Wilson's astonishing talent in bringing out the subtle nuances of the human voice and unifying them within the structure of the whole piece. *Pet Sounds* is resplendent with such production of voice/instrument sound blends, but I think "God Only Knows" in particular showcases his beautiful interweaving of the human voice with the played instrumentation. Indeed with Wilson's arrangement, voices are woven in and become an integral part of the overall instrumentation.

Listening to the song is always an emotional, uplifting experience.

On that note it is interesting to listen to the *Pet Sounds Sessions* album released in 1997. This includes various out-takes and alternate takes of the songs. The sessions demonstrate the extent to which the then just 23-year-old Wilson, almost deaf in one ear, was exploring and developing a new and exhilarating sonic experience.

The Manchester concert was entitled "An Evening with Brian Wilson." Wilson and his superb backing band performed for more than two hours. Among the 18 musicians on stage were the Stockholm Strings 'n' Horns ensemble. The ensemble first played on tour with Wilson in February-March 2004 and recorded strings on his *Smile* album later that year.

The band played many of the Beach Boys' most enduring and popular songs, as well as several covers including "Johnny B . Goode" and "Then He Kissed Me."

Introducing "God Only Knows," Wilson described it as his "greatest musical achievement."

Another highlight of the tour is the main backing singer and guitarist Jeffrey Foskett, who produced a vocal tour de force as the lead vocal on several Beach Boy songs.

During the tour Wilson premiered a new 35-minute song cycle based around the 1949 song "That Lucky old Sun." The song has been covered by, among others, Frank Sinatra, Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash. "That Lucky Old Sun" is based on an old slave song and begins—"Up in the mornin'/Out on the job/Work like the devil for my pay/But that lucky old sun got nothin' to do/But roll around heaven all day."

That part of the set featured some of the 18 new songs written by Wilson last year during a period he recently described as a "creative explosion."

During the cycle a narrative unfolds on a screen behind the band. This features animated visual backdrops of scenes of life in Los Angeles and California in the late 1950s and early 1960s and scenes of Wilson's childhood. Photos are seen of Wilson and his brothers as boys and as the Beach Boys. Stills are also shown of Brian in the recording studio in the mid-1960s at the peak of his creative powers. One of these images of the Beach Boy Brian remains on screen at the end of the cycle, placed inside a setting sun.

In an interview with the *Independent* newspaper, Wilson said the idea to do a version of the song came to him one day when he just suddenly began playing it on his keyboard at home and started singing it. He then went and bought Louis Armstrong's version of the song and recounted that "I was blown away, but I thought it needed some more spiritual chords. I didn't want to do a verbatim version like so many other people have done."

Upon a first hearing the songs some certainly possess the harmonic and melodic resonance associated with his best work. The bittersweet ballad "Midnight's Another Day" and "Going Home" are two of the songs that stood out.

Following the tour Wilson is planning to release his song cycle/narrative of *That Lucky Old Sun* as his latest album.

I thoroughly enjoyed the concert and felt privileged to have been able to spend an evening listening to such wonderful and timeless music. Re-reading David Walsh's 2000 article, "Listening to Brian Wilson," reminded me that it is a fitting, humane appraisal of Wilson. As Walsh pointed out, that Brian Wilson is once again on stage and performing his music is to be heartily welcomed. I concur and think that after decades of torment, mental illness, sadness and anguish including family tragedy, his return represents the triumph of artistic genius and of the human spirit.

A full preview of *Midnight's Another Day* is available to listen to at Brian Wilson's web site:http://www.brianwilson.com/

Some footage of the Manchester concert and many clips of his other 2007 concerts and back catalogue are available on YouTube here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZooRnOg-Cw

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