

Letters on Brian Wilson

19 November 2007

The following correspondence was sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to the article, “An evening with Brian Wilson” and two subsequent letters, posted here and here.

I had intended to write down a few thoughts thanking the WSWWS and Robert Stevens, in particular, for his thoughtful article, “An Evening with Brian Wilson.” Sadly, I was not reminded to do so until I read the comments by reader FS. These comments not only smack of cynicism, but they crudely and mechanically attempt to put a political frame around an honest and heartfelt discussion about a beautiful and groundbreaking piece of music.

I’m also puzzled by FS’s sweeping (and ignorant) assertion that “Pet Sounds” “came far too early to be a ‘great album’ as there was no such thing in 1966.” Another reader already challenged the absurdity of this remark on its face, so there’s little sense setting down a list of contemporary and pre-“Pet Sounds” albums by Dylan, the Beatles, the Kinks, or even more obscure masterpieces like the Lovin’ Spoonful’s “Hums of the Lovin’ Spoonful” (a personal favorite of mine). But as it happens, all these artists had by the mid-60s distinguished themselves as songwriters with interconnected stories to tell. In this regard, these artists all recorded early “concept albums” (as did Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys) prior to “Pet Sounds.”

FS apparently feels that he (and presumably a few like-minded, self-described “critics”) alone grasp the “zeitgeist” of the 60s, scolding Wilson and the Beach Boys for “refusing to appear at the crucial festivals of the period” and for their “hackneyed and conventional” marketing. There are a couple of problems with these particular criticisms. First, Wilson recorded “Pet Sounds” at least two years before these “crucial festivals” started. (A more thoughtful critic might also have examined more closely the indulgences—musical and otherwise—surrounding the festivals of the late-60s and early 70s. The recorded and cinematographic

evidence shows us a mixed bag, with some moments of musical brilliance to be sure, but against a backdrop of drug abuse, violence and general silliness.) Moreover, while it is difficult to predict how Brian and his bandmates might have marketed the album if given the choice, the label executives at Capitol Records did not consult with the band on marketing, though Brian’s displeasure with the album cover concept and lackluster marketing of “Pet Sounds” has been well documented.

Anyway, this all somehow misses the point. At 23 years of age, Brian set about recording a complex, beautiful and congruous body of music, deeply connected to his own inner turmoil and emotional frailty. In his article, Mr. Stevens writes movingly about the purity and beauty of Brian’s masterpiece “God Only Knows,” a transcendent song that my 10-year-old son recently discovered and fell in love with—he told me it’s his favorite song of all time, and I told him it’s mine, too. Unlike FS, I have no reason to doubt Paul McCartney’s sincerity when he says the song reduces him to tears every time he hears it. It does the same to me, every time.

Finally, in response to FS’s concern about zeitgeist (a phony and meaningless concept, in my opinion, at least in this context), I would say: Well, there’s zeitgeist and then there’s zeitgeist! Brian’s sense of ambivalence about passing from adolescence into manhood, expressed as a concept throughout the album, not only touches an artistically honest chord, it also seems to echo the passing of the relative social innocence and political tranquility of the 1950s into the upheavals of the 1960s (JFK’s assassination, the Vietnam War, the apex of the Civil Rights movement, and explosive revolutionary struggles around the world). Undoubtedly, Brian failed to understand these and similar events, which very likely contributed to his growing alienation, but as a brilliant and sensitive artist he found a way to reflect all this in his greatest work, the monumental “Pet Sounds” album.

AR

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I am dismayed at what seems to be a developing generational music war taking place. Such statements as, “Any one year of the 60s-70s beats the entire output of anything that came out after Reagan became president” is to dismiss many fine years and many fine artists. It smacks of crotchety “In My Day-ism.” Let us not forget where Sir Paul is today, nor the Rolling Stones’ recent cowardly toning down of their already tepid “protest” song.

To be nostalgic for the music of one’s youth is all fine and good—but to not look at what has become of the music makers of yore (by their own hand), and to write off music after X date is short-sighted at best. Was the music of the time revolutionary? In some cases, yes. But much of it became positively institutionalized and stale through repetition and imitation.

The Reagan years saw quite a bit of good—if not great—music. I think of Midnight Oil (despite Peter Garrett’s subsequent turn); I think of not a few punk, post-punk, and other bands. Early U2, REM, and Prince brought new sounds, new ideas to the fore. They all sang about what was going on in their parts of the world in ways that made clear that the violence, poverty and other social problems were being recognized and in ways that made the listener realize that they were not alone in thinking that something had gone terribly wrong.

In recent years, the global sounds of multilingual bands such as Lhasa de Sela, Manu Chao, and so many others prove that music is not dead, has not stagnated. Please. The world did not end in 1969. For many of us, it had not even yet begun. It is quite aggravating to see so much discounted as unworthy, when, really, it is as yet unexamined.

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