

Brian Wilson (1942-2025) expressed both joy and tragedy through his harmonies

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The death of Brian Wilson on June 11 has inspired a myriad of tributes. He has been compared to classical musical figures and been the subject of adulation by many well-known musicians, including Paul McCartney, Sting, Elton John, Bruce Springsteen, Carole King and many more. Actor John Cusack, who portrayed Wilson in the 2014 film *Love & Mercy* (and met him at the time), commented, “I was so inspired by his genius. ... What he was able to give the world was seismic; he broke it all open for everybody else.”

Wilson was the principal founder of the Southern California group the Beach Boys. His death at 82 followed a period of illness and reclusiveness. According to Al Jardine, his lifelong friend and bandmate, he was suffering from the long-term effects of COVID-19, mostly uncommunicative and unable to walk.

There was no trauma to speak of until that very last tour in '22. He kind of went silent and began to suffer the effects of long-term COVID, I was told, so I think that was a turning point for him. He became detached. His infirmity must have been really depressing, not being able to walk again.

Despite his music, which generally sought to project sunshine and happiness, Wilson himself was deeply troubled for most of his life.

World Socialist Web Site Arts Editor David Walsh wrote a comment on Wilson’s work in September 2000. “Listening to Brian Wilson” probed the significance of his music in the broader historical context of the contradictory phenomenon of the postwar era in America.

In discussing the source of Brian Wilson’s musical appeal, one question needs to be dealt with at the outset. Is the music of the Beach Boys, whose songs initially concerned themselves primarily with surfing, girls and fast cars, worthy of serious consideration? ...

A second, more complex and potentially more productive question arises. Are the life, career and difficulties of Brian Wilson bound up with the contradictions of postwar America in a fashion that might shed some light on the latter? My intuition is that both his music and his dilemmas have some larger significance.

Wilson was born in Hawthorne, California, in 1942. Until the 1930s, the community was what was called a “sundown town.” Blacks were not allowed within the city limits after dark, a part of the reality that starkly contrasted with the later picture of sun and fun that was embraced by the Beach Boys’ music.

Wilson’s Beach Boys, initially, along with duo Jan and Dean (Jan Berry and Dean Torrence), epitomized the new music genre called “surf music.”

The two groups gigged together, and Jan and Brian became fast friends, eventually collaborating on numerous tunes that focused on the stereotypical high school interests of surfing, hot cars and girls. Together, they co-wrote “Surf City,” which was recorded in 1963 by Jan and Dean and became surf music’s first number one hit.

The Beach Boys originally consisted of Brian, his two brothers Carl and Dennis, a cousin Mike Love and, as noted, Brian’s close friend Al Jardine. Drawing on the vocal traditions of doo-wop groups of the 1950s, the hallmark of this new music was its intricate harmonic vocals.

Starting out as a garage band in the late 1950s, the Beach Boys then signed with Capitol Records. Their first album, released in October 1962, was titled *Surfin’ Safari* named after its title track, as did many of the 10 studio albums that followed in the next four years. The music industry was cashing in on the new youth market for long-playing records (LPs) and putting pressure on the group for more hits.

The WSWS suggested in 2000 that the Beach Boys’ sound spoke to new conditions and possibilities in the postwar years:

After the despair of the Depression and the traumas and restrictions of the war period, money in one’s pocket and the ability to lift one’s head and have a little freedom of movement must have been welcome. Songs about automobiles and playing about in the ocean and teenage romance may have their inane features, but how many generations of middle or working class young people before the Wilson brothers’ had had the opportunity to enjoy the experiences those themes invoke? There is something celebratory about the music, and legitimately so.

Pushed by both his label and his tyrannical father, who was also the band’s manager, until 1964, Brian became more adept and prolific as a songwriter, deepening his use of multi-part harmonic arrangements.

Their music was heavily influenced by the burgeoning rock ‘n’ roll movement, in turn a variation on the 12-bar blues originating from the South. The title track of their second album, “Surfin’ USA”, became the Beach Boys’ first national hit. The melody reproduced Chuck Berry’s “Sweet Little Sixteen.” Originally produced as a tribute to the artist often referred to as the “father of rock and roll,” it became cause for a bitter copyright infringement lawsuit.

The music that was being formed by new generations of postwar American musicians influenced the sensibilities of Wilson and the Beach Boys. Notably, the Four Freshmen and the Kingston Trio were early influences. The striped shirts worn by the Kingston Trio inspired the Beach Boys’ early look.

By their third album, *Surfer Girl* in 1963, the melancholy ballad “In My Room” portended both the future complexity of the group’s vocal harmonies, as well as the deep anxiety that Brian would succumb to.

Wilson had become hugely enamored with the studio work of Phil Spector, known for his “wall of sound” technique of overlaying multiple tracks of instruments performing the same melody. The Ronettes’ August 1963 hit “Be My Baby,” produced by Spector, led to the Beach Boys’ “Don’t Worry Baby.” It appeared on the somewhat uneven album, *Shut Down, Vol. 2*, released in March 1964.

Wilson’s brilliance begins to be heard on a few of the tracks released in this LP. While lyrically evoking the story told in the 1955 James Dean film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, “Don’t Worry Baby” employs the kind of deep-layered harmonies that would feature in later Beach Boys songs. Another track, co-written by Jardine, “The Warmth of the Sun,” was composed in the early hours of November 22, 1963, the morning after John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Jardine describes it as follows:

In the weeks that followed, that song written in the wee hours of November 22nd was recorded in a studio charged with emotion. I’ll never be able to hear or perform that song without recalling the loss of President Kennedy fifty years ago. “The Warmth of the Sun” was filled with a depth and a range of feeling rarely experienced in the life of any performer or band. Every time we sing it, the memory of that day is present. It is transcendent.

The subjects of the Beach Boys tunes did not include the explosive developments of the 1960s, assassinations, civil rights and antiwar protests and ghetto rebellions, but as Wilson’s internal suffering melded with those social convulsions, he became more removed from life around him and more concentrated on the harmonies he heard in his head.

Wilson’s anxieties plagued him and his mental health deteriorated. In December 1964, while on a flight en route to Houston for a performance, he had a panic attack, collapsing in the aisle and sobbing. This was symptomatic of a general nervous breakdown, which necessitated removing himself from the band’s touring schedule.

Until March 1965, he was replaced by Glen Campbell, a versatile studio musician who, as part of the group of studio musicians known later as the “Wrecking Crew,” played guitar on several Beach Boys recordings. He was subsequently replaced by Bruce Johnston, an associate from Wilson’s Jan and Dean connections when Campbell went on to advance his career as a country music artist. His removal from the touring schedule allowed Wilson to bury himself deeper into his songwriting.

Starting in 1963, “Beatlemania” was sweeping across the US, eclipsing much existing American music. In December 1965, the Beatles released *Rubber Soul*, marking a turning point in recorded music. It was the beginning of the transformation of the concept of the record album from an assortment of songs released as singles to an internally cohesive collection of related tunes. Wilson recognized that this would require that he up his game.

For a large part of the year, Wilson wrote and arranged, working on what would arguably become the Beach Boys’ best album, *Pet Sounds*, released in May 1966. On YouTube, there are many videos available of the painstaking studio sessions. The interested reader can find them on his/her own. While the rest of the band was touring, Brian was in the studio handing the studio musicians sheet music, notably Hal Blaine (drums) and Carol Kaye (bass guitar) and laying down the instrumental tracks for the new album.

Barely stepping off the plane after their Japan tour, the rest of the Beach Boys were hustled into the studio by an excited Brian to listen to the backing tracks for *Pet Sounds*. Exhausted and jet-lagged as the story goes, the Beach Boys then recorded the vocals, led by Brian.

The result included Wouldn’t It Be Nice, God Only Knows and Sloop

John B. Despite the album’s initial low sales, it has since been recognized as one of the best pop albums ever made. Every song on the album made use of radical non-traditional harmonic methods to highlight the vocals: multiple key and tempo changes, chord inversions and unconventional instrumentation. Paul McCartney of the Beatles praised “God Only Knows” as a masterpiece and his favorite song ever written. Wilson himself described the competition between the two bands: “The Beatles and the Beach Boys were chasing each other up a spiral, like a never-ending spiral.”

Because of the pressure by the label to release *Pet Sounds*, the work on a tune that would be called “Good Vibrations” was left unfinished. Brian by then had been using psychedelic drugs, including LSD, and it influenced his mental state as well as his creative process. Unlike previous studio sessions, he didn’t provide written music to the musicians. The concept of the tune was stored just in his imagination, so the musicians were completely in the dark about what they were doing.

Wilson’s method was unprecedented at the time. In his words, “I had a lot of unfinished ideas, fragments of music I called ‘feels.’ Each feel represented a mood or an emotion I’d felt, and I planned to fit them together like a mosaic.”

The end product was 3 minutes, 37 seconds long, at that time, exceeding the three-minute limit imposed by radio stations for airplay. But more than 90 hours of recordings and weeks of studio time went into that one song, costing an estimated \$70,000, about a half million in today’s dollars and roughly three times the cost of producing an average pop album. The instrumentals were recorded in several different studios. Again, according to Wilson, “‘On Good Vibrations,’ we would go from one studio to another because they had the instruments that I needed at those studios.”

So we go to the studio, use the piano ... “thanks, guys, we’re done”; take the tapes over to RCA, put the cello on, get the theremin on, take the tapes over, get the bass over at Western, the bass sound that I like, and then put the tambourine on at CBS, and you got “Good Vibrations.”

In September 1966, several months after *Pet Sounds* was released, “Good Vibrations” was released as a single. It received high praise from critics and fans alike. When McCartney heard it, he remarked, “How are we going to compete with this?”

The 2015 dramatization of his life, *Love & Mercy*, directed by Bill Pohlad and starring Paul Dano and John Cusack as Wilson in different periods of his life, portrayed the years that he was virtually held captive by his therapist, Eugene Landy, played by Paul Giamatti.

In his book, *I Am Brian Wilson*, he described his condition in the 1970s that led his wife at the time, Marilyn, to call Landy for the first time:

Back then, I wasn’t going anywhere most days, and when I was in the house I didn’t even move around much. I felt stuck because I was depressed, and that caused me to gain weight, and then I felt stuck because I had gained weight. I got up to over 300 pounds. I wasn’t going onstage with the group. I could write songs, but I did it less and less. I needed help desperately and people close to me were desperate to get it for me.

For a period of over 10 years, Landy, who had diagnosed Wilson with schizophrenia, ruled over him using the fear of sending him to a mental hospital as a threat to subjugate him, dominating every aspect of his life. That period finally ended when he met Melinda, who became his wife in

1995.

Despite Wilson's life difficulties and complexities, or perhaps because of them, he treated his work as a gift to his listeners. Yet, he regarded his music with an unusual humility. Musically, he felt that his personal demons expressed a universality and grappled with them through his artistic work. Perhaps it could be said that his harmonies were a product of that struggle.



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