A further comment on Brian Wilson's life and music

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Brian Wilson's death provides another opportunity for a review of his creative output and artistic struggles. Both were a reflection, if indirectly, of the broader contradictory interaction between the peak of the post-World War II economic boom in the US and the conscious struggle for artistic expression in the 1960s.

David Walsh's essay from 2000 examines the general socio-economic processes at work that formed the broader backdrop of the "California sound" that the Beach Boys contributed towards creating.

The particular factors of Brian Wilson's musical vision and how it developed also deserves a comment, and a good point of departure could be re-dissecting the title of "genius" bestowed upon him since 1966.

"Surfin' Safari" was recorded in 1962, and in it one can already notice the vocal and harmonic interplay that would become one of Wilson's compositional trademarks. In August 1964, Wilson wrote "She Knows Me Too Well," which appeared on the album *The Beach Boys Today!*, released in 1965. The maturation of Wilson's musical sensibilities within just two years (compositionally, melodically and harmonically), with various inflection points along the way, is one of the most astonishing to be found in popular music during the 1960s.

Other artists of the time made their own rapidly progressive developments in their respective musical fields, the most well-known being the Beatles and Bob Dylan, but also other California-based groups like Love (e.g., from their first garage rock album to "Andmoreagain" and "Old Man") and Buffalo Springfield (e.g., from their first record to Neil Young's "Expecting to Fly"), as well as Miles Davis and John Coltrane in the field of jazz. But what explains Wilson's singular development, and what did it reflect about his contemporaneous artistic, cultural, and social milieu?

Before the *Today!* record, Brian Wilson's ear for composition and production was moving more firmly into the style of doo wop and Phil Spector territory than the rock and roll camp. The Beach Boys were heavily indebted to rock and roll (the instrumental "Stoked," the "Johnny B. Goode" riff in the intro of "Fun Fun Fun," etc.), but it was something about pop music, the intricate vocal harmonies found in doo wop and their correspondingly emotional impact that captured Wilson's ear more than the overdriven guitar tones and brash rhythms of rock and roll.

The band members were very young during the early-to-mid 1960s, and one, naturally, comes across many examples of juvenile topics and expressions in their early output ("Chug-A-Lug," "Shut Down," "Surfer's Rule," etc.). As Walsh wrote: "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." On the other hand, the band's early output includes the gorgeously simplistic "Surfer Girl," the big hits that have lost none of their arresting power ("In My Room," "Don't Worry, Baby", etc.), their rendition of "Their Hearts Were Full of Spring" (and their own version of the song, "A Young Man is Gone") and the vocal break in "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?"

While record company executives pushed the band's surfer and hot-rod aesthetics on the market, one of the outstanding inflection points during their remarkably productive pre-*Today!* period is the song "Warmth of the Sun." The background to its composition, noted in James Brewer's obituary, disproves the widely held belief that the band was impervious to the tumultuous socio-political events of the 1960s, but does not disprove it completely.

The Beach Boys Today! was recorded during both the peak of the postwar economic boom in the US, as well as during the intensification of the competition between the most popular music acts on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. These factors, combined with Wilson's increasing fascination with and emulation of Phil Spector's recording techniques, in conjunction with the shift of the band's thematic focus away from surfing and cars, were the objective impulses behind the *Today!* album.

While consistently ebullient ("Do You Wanna Dance?"), the former artistically silly and inconsequential qualities of the Beach Boys's music organically transformed into a more earnest approach to growing up ("When I Grow Up"), love ("Kiss Me, Baby") and heartache ("Please Let Me Wonder"). The album contains the band's most mature, sophisticated, and honest material up to that point, with the voice of none other than Dennis Wilson, who sang the innocent "Little Girl (You're My Miss America)" two years prior, convincingly painting the portrait of a nervous and neurotic young man in love on the album's enigmatic conclusion, "In the Back of My Mind."

The cumulative effect of *Today!* leaves one with the impression that while the band and Wilson weren't explicitly or implicitly addressing the objective conditions of social and political reality in their music (social inequality, war, civil rights), the multifaceted perturbations in postwar America were nonetheless beginning to penetrate and disturb their previously bright and sunny outlook.

The contradiction is that while Wilson reacted *socially* by gazing more inward than outward, his *artistic* response blossomed and became more advanced.

During the band's transition into its musical adolescence, that is, during the uneven transition between the *Today!* and *Pet Sounds*, Brian Wilson explored more openly less conventional modulation technique in the chorus of "California Girls" (which Wilson said in 2010 was influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach), and ramping up his own version of Spector's "wall-of-sound" production, he began sculpting the foundation for "Wouldn't It Be Nice" with the song, "The Little Girl I Once Knew." Both singles challenged the then limits of pop song structure. The Boys also confronted not-so-discreetly the abuse of the Wilson patriarch and their former manager, Murry Wilson, during this time ("I'm Bugged at My Ol' Man").

It is noteworthy that this phase of Wilson's musical evolution took place as Washington was increasing its imperialist machinations in Vietnam, and as the civil rights movement was reaching a fever pitch, among many other domestic and international developments.

Much has been written about the monumental *Pet Sounds* album, including on the WSWS, and it is not the intention to add more to what has already been said many times over at this point. Nonetheless, to paraphrase Walsh, anyone who turns their nose up at "the lyricism, gravity and yearning" of the record is doing themselves a great injustice.

However, the unrealized *Smile* project Wilson embarked on after *Pet Sounds* is where one *truly* comes to grasp his musical ingenuity and his tragically unsuccessful struggle to maintain it.

There are three official renditions of this record—*Smiley Smile*, released in 1967; *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, recorded and released in 2004; and *The Smile Sessions*, released in 2011. It is this writer's opinion that the latter of the three should be consulted and studied the closest.

With Wilson's creativity firing on all cylinders, especially as he sought to best the Beatles in album construction and production, he was inspired to compose what he termed a "teenage symphony to god" during the antechamber of the socio-politically revolutionary 1968–1975 period. The sessions for *Smile* were recorded during 1966–1967, more-or-less concluding before the "long hot summer" of social and anti-war unrest in the US in 1967 but nonetheless occurring during what is considered one of the most momentous years for popular music during the 20th century.

Exhausted by the ferocious demands forced onto him by the music business, plagued by drug abuse and personal problems, disoriented by the countless unhealthy ideologies of the day, stifled by creative tensions within the band, demoralized by getting beat to the punch by the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*, and undoubtedly if only remotely shaken up by the social and political upheavals, *Smile* was ultimately unfinished. An embarrassing grotesque of the work was released later in 1967 to meet contractual obligations, and abbreviated bootlegs were circulated.

But what is contained within those original sessions?

Based on the 2011 track listing, the album can be divided into three sections, with the sections themselves and in aggregate demonstrating a mesmerizing cohesion.

The first two sections open with remarkable inroads into new harmonic and melodic territory: the madrigal-esque "Our Prayer," performed *a cappella*, that indisputably establishes the band's vocal abilities, and the coming-of-age "Wonderful," which is poignant, triumphant and elliptical in equal measure. Each of the three sections conclude with a grandiose example of the "modular" style of composing that Brian Wilson had already begun experimenting with (e.g., "Let's Go Away for Awhile" from *Pet Sounds*)—"Cabin Essence", "Surf's Up" and "Good Vibrations," the latter brilliantly introduced by a fleeting reprise of "Our Prayer."

The myriad different compositional arrangements and recording techniques incorporated into the record, reflected by the quirky, multi-part "Heroes and Villains" to the ambitious odes to the four elements, and above all in the captivating ways Wilson developed the vocal interplay of the band, clearly indicate a break from conventional or traditional pop songcraft and an evolution towards sweeping modes of musical expression. One can hear this amidst the *Sessions'* unpolished fidelity and overall incomplete presentation.

All and sundry, including Wilson, have categorically proclaimed "God Only Knows" as his "greatest musical achievement." But Wilson's efforts for *Smile* were starting to grab the attention of more discerning ears at the time.

The second section contains what is arguably Wilson's boldest attempt at musical expression. Its majestic climax, "Surf's Up," caught the attention of classical musician and television producer, David Oppenheim, who featured it in his documentary, *Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution* (1967). Hosted by Leonard Bernstein, the documentary showcases Wilson performing the song alone at the piano.

While describing "Surf's Up" as "too complex to get...the first time around", Oppenheim says that "It could come only out of the ferment that characterizes today's pop music scene." He continued: "Poetic, beautiful even in its obscurity, 'Surf's Up' is one aspect of new things happening in pop music today. As such, it is a symbol of the change many of these young musicians see in our future."

Van Dyke Parks, Wilson's creative partner during the *Smile* sessions, wrote in a tribute to Wilson that the two were consciously attempting to "reinvent the song form" while composing "Surf's Up." The band later took great pride in the classical world's acknowledgement of its singular greatness. The song was officially released later in 1971 on an album bearing the same name.

What Walsh wrote about the Beach Boys in general can be especially emphasized for "Surf's Up": "Those extraordinary, unearthly falsetto voices soaring one upon the other express, in my view, an unconscious desire for a more exalted, more perfected reality, something transcendent. There is no other way to explain their enduring power and meaning." And yet, the cryptically social-conscious lyrics ("a blind class aristocracy, back through the opera glass you see, the pit and the pendulum drawn"; "columnated ruins domino"; "a children's song, have you listened as they played, their song is love, and the children know the way"), suggest, much like the conclusion to Love's *Forever Changes* (also released in 1967), a semi-conscious, unsettling recognition that the skies on the horizon of society were starting to gray.

Six songs from the *Smile* sessions were later released on *Smiley Smile*. Aside from "Good Vibrations", the remaining five are vastly different versions of the same material from the sessions. It's enough to briefly sample "Fall Breaks and Back to Winter," "Wind Chimes" and "Wonderful" from *Smiley Smile* and compare them with their *Smile Sessions* equivalents to immediately realize just how artistically confused and bad of a personal state Wilson had been reduced to in so short of a time.

During the years 1962 to 1967, Wilson was a supernova in the world of popular music that, thanks to a steady access to musical and financial resources, managerial and media promotions and a healthy competitive spirit, was able to burn brightly. Wilson's Icarus, however, was one that imploded internally amid flight rather than having his wings scorched by the heat of the sun. In any case, he plunged fast and hard down into the ocean, and aside from paltry glimmers of resistance (a release of "Our Prayer" and "Cabin Essence" on the *20/20* album, the dreamy "All I Wanna Do" from the *Sunflower* record, even the novel albeit musically insipid "Student Demonstration Time" from *Surf's Up*), Wilson's musical vision faded out and the band's social relevance waned right at the start of the 1968–1975 period.

Put another way, the purpose of the Beach Boys music, namely, what Wilson was trying to achieve, had been lost. There's the oft referenced lyrics from "I Just Wasn't Made For These Times," but one of Wilson's last great songs, "'Til I Die," reflects this inner *and outer* reality in the most stark, even bleak manner possible. The story of his listening to the Ronettes-Spector's "Be My Baby" on repeat after he retreated into his room during the 1970s seems to indicate more of a grasping at something lost—an unperfected, intangible musical ideal—than a psychological disorder, though the latter should not be discounted.

This also points to why the band, in the absence of Wilson's direction, would ultimately revert into an oldies act come the 1970s to protect and prolong their revenue stream, culminating in the woefully retrogressive "Kokomo."

The painful conclusion that should not be avoided is that Brian Wilson *the musical genius* deceased sometime in the early 1970s. For at least 50 years, he contributed next to nothing musically that came remotely close to the apex that was original *Smile Sessions*.

Pitiful ridicules, political prostration and lackluster revamps and rehashes of old material robbed of his magnificent falsetto and singular leadership (*Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, reunion tours, etc.) are some of

the stinging fits of agony that piled on top of Brian Wilson losing his musical vision to oblivion.

To conclude, Wilson's more serious executions of his distinct vision of pop music, distinct particularly to the historical setting of the US during the 1960s, was an oblique yet important artistic reflection of the short-lived postwar economic boom and all of its unstable contradictions that eventually exploded.

At the peak of his creative powers, aesthetically exploring while precariously shouldering one of the particles of contemporary musical vocabulary amidst the socio-political volcano rumbling in the background, Brian Wilson strove for and demonstrated a profound synthesis of different compositional styles along with complex harmonies and accessible melodies. In this way, he really was someone that was born exactly for the times that he flourished in.

The cultural consciousness of posterity is enriched by Wilson's 1962–1967 output. His greatest accomplishments during that period remain relevant, genuine, substantial, and intensely moving.