

Listening to Brian Wilson

By David Walsh
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Brian Wilson, once the leading figure of the Beach Boys, the American popular music group, is on tour this summer in the US. The center-piece of each concert is a performance by Wilson, his ten-piece band and a full-scale symphony orchestra of the music from the 1966 album, *Pet Sounds*.

However one feels about the music, and I am an admirer, Wilson's appearance is deeply affecting. That he has regained sufficient emotional stability, after many years of considerable distress, to perform before live audiences is welcome. Astonishingly, he not only appears, but he entertains and moves. His musicians perform impeccably.

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? The premise of this piece is that it is. Anyone who feels otherwise should probably read no farther, since there will be little effort made to convince the skeptical.

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 June 20, 1942 in Hawthorne, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Twenty-one years earlier his grandmother and her five children arrived in southern California from Hutchinson, Kansas, meeting up with his grandfather, a plumber, who had gone on before. To his grandmother's consternation, the entire family was initially obliged to live in a surplus army tent. Twenty-one years after his birth Wilson was the leader of one of the most popular musical groups in the US. Between 1921 and 1963 the US, and California in particular, underwent immense change.

Wilson's grandparents were participants in the vast internal movement of Americans that occurred in the decades following World War I. Kevin Starr, in the second volume—*Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920's* (1990)—of his two-volume history of the region, has the following to say: “Between 1920 and 1930 two million Americans migrated to California. Three-quarters of these, or 1.5 million, settled in Southern California. Of these, some 1.2 million settled in Los Angeles County alone; and of these approximately half, or 661,375, settled in the City of the Angels, arriving at a peak rate of 100,000 a year between 1920 and 1924. ... By 1930 Los Angeles had a population of 1,470,516, which represented a tripling of its population over ten years. It was now the fifth largest city in the nation. ... In 1923, the peak year of the boom, an astonishing 62,548 building permits for some \$200 million in building projects were being issued.”

Great numbers arrived from Midwestern states, like the Wilsons of Kansas. Many were middle class and of retirement age. H. L. Mencken groused at the time that Los Angeles was a “Double Dubuque,” referring to the city in Iowa. Indeed the annual picnics organized by the Iowa Society were renowned, or infamous, sometimes attracting as many as 125,000 people. Radical social critic Mike Davis, in *City of Quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*, describes the process this way: “For

more than a quarter century, an unprecedented mass migration of retired farmers, small-town dentists, wealthy spinsters, tubercular schoolteachers, petty stock speculators, Iowa lawyers, and devotees of the Chautauqua circuit transferred their savings and small fortunes into Southern California real estate.”

Starr observes that the “Los Angeles of 1926 was a predominantly white city. Of a population of 1.3 million the census for that year revealed 45,000 Hispanics, 33,000 blacks, and 30,000 Asians.” Davis, as is his wont, puts the migration of Midwesterners in the worst possible light, describing “the ideology of Los Angeles as the utopia of Aryan supremacy—the sunny refuge of White Protestant America in an age of labor upheaval and the mass immigration of the Catholic and Jewish poor from Eastern and Southern Europe.”

A certain section of the population prospered immensely out of the city's “real estate, construction, oil, port, manufacturing, entertainment, and aviation industries” (Starr) in the 1920s. Like many other middle and working class people Brian Wilson's grandfather, Buddy, achieved some degree of economic stability, (by 1930 94 percent of all dwellings in Los Angeles were single family homes!), without ever realizing the dreams that had lured him out to California in the first place. He spent much of his life an angry, bitter man, abusive to his wife and family. His son, Murry, Brian's father, seems to have been infected with similar anger and bitterness, almost from birth.

Hawthorne (named after the great novelist and short-story writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne), “The City of Good Neighbors,” was incorporated in 1922. According to one source, it was “largely settled by emigrants from the Oklahoma and Texas dustbowl.” In 1939 Northrup Aircraft moved to Hawthorne; dozens of firms moved to the city to acquire Northrup subcontracts. “From that time on,” the same source has it, “industrial and commercial development in Hawthorne proceeded at a steady pace. Northrup and Hawthorne enjoyed a long period of prosperity and cooperation.” Murry Wilson worked in a lower management capacity for a number of employers, including aircraft and tire manufacturers.

Brian Wilson and his two brothers (Dennis, born in 1944, and Carl, 1946) grew up in the “barren, treeless tracts of Hawthorne,” in the words of a popular music historian. Their father, by all accounts, was something of a monster, verbally and physically abusive. Another commentator notes: “In the 1950's, post-World War II life afforded younger people freedom to pursue more leisure in life. Things like pop music, cars, surfing, and fast food restaurants were in abundance for Murry's children. Something Murry, who was brought up in the Depression, may have envied. Looking to his sons to help furnish his displaced dream [of becoming a songwriter], Murry put pressure on the boys to excel in his favorite pastime: music. As Dennis puts it, if the boys failed to get something done to Murry's liking, ‘BOOOOM!...CRACK!’” Murry Wilson was the Beach Boys' first manager, in which capacity he continued his abuse until Brian was forced to fire him in 1964. When the senior Wilson died at a relatively young age, in 1973, neither of his two eldest sons attended the funeral.

The Beach Boys was formed as a group in 1961. The name was chosen by a record company executive. Brian was no surfer, he was allegedly

afraid of the water. Even Dennis' dedication to life on the ocean seems to have come after the group formed, life imitating art. ("They were pure white trash, West Coast hillbillies," asserts one record company official who met them at the time.) Brian had been given recording equipment by his father. He was obsessed as a teenager with harmonics and melody.

Barney Hoskyns in *Waiting for the Sun* (1996) writes: "Wilson's melodic genius, almost unparalleled in the history of pop, was fashioned as much by Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* as by the close-harmony singing of groups such as the Four Freshmen: from an early age, his taste inclined towards the complex, the ambitious, the operatic. But little brother Carl turned him on to Chuck Berry guitar riffs, and his well-off cousins the Loves converted him to the R&B on Johnny Otis's KFOX show ... Out of these different tributaries came the cheap, garagey sound of the Pendletones, later rechristened the Beach Boys. 'Really, they were the first garage band, and the first innocent band,' says [record producer] Nik Venet. 'They had none of the musical aspects I'd been trained to look for!'"

The Beach Boys was a family music group like practically no other of such stature or popularity, consisting of three brothers and a first cousin, Mike Love (Murry's sister's child), out of five founding members. They banded together to advance a certain sound and at the same time perhaps to defend themselves against an older generation that was not sympathetic. Davis associates their music with "the mesmerizing version of a white kids' car-and-surf based Utopia." This seems superficial to me, more or less the way things look at first glance.

Instead of viewing the Beach Boys' music as the continuity, simply carried into the postwar period, of the philistinism and narrowness of the middle-class Midwesterners of previous decades, doesn't a closer examination suggest the sort of rupture it represented?

Even in politically stagnant and opportunist times, life, including social life, goes on and even progresses in certain areas. The gloomy radical sees only the California dystopia, one endless nightmare. But facts are stubborn things. Conditions *did* improve for large numbers of Americans in the 1950s and their opportunities did expand. 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.

In any event, the decisive issue is the degree to which the music is emotionally and spiritually charged. Previous generations of the Wilson clan and others of their background might have joined their voices in supplication to God or sentimental crooning. Approve of it or not, the Beach Boys' music is secular, down-to-earth and realistic, it is about their lives, and it is not hypocritical. And it has that sound, that utterly distinctive sound.

Brian Wilson's "obsession with harmonics" is so psychologically and socially suggestive that it can't be ignored. There is of course no way of establishing with any degree of certainty the stimuli operating in such a socially unconscious environment, one can only point to certain tantalizing possibilities.

A concern for harmony seems appropriate, first of all, in such an obviously discordant family atmosphere, presided over by a father whom nothing would satisfy, who nit-picked and complained and lashed out at his sons for the smallest offenses. Beyond that, the central social issue embroiling the US in the late 1950s and early 1960s was the civil rights movement, the struggle against racial segregation and for equality. News footage of demonstrators set upon by club-wielding police and dogs was broadcast on a regular basis. It had to enter the internal life of any

sensitive human being. They may take elementary forms, but the notions of solidarity, rather than selfishness, and of tolerance, that people ought to be able to get along peacefully, are present in the lyrics and, perhaps more significantly, the *structure* of Wilson's music.

Not very much of the popular music of the 1960s, including nine-tenths of the supposedly more serious artistic or socially conscious efforts, can still be listened to. Much of Brian Wilson's work retains its strength. An artist accomplishes little, with the noblest of intentions, unless he or she addresses the artistic problems of his time. Real progress in that direction is never purely formal, one discovers, but the translation of the human situation into sensuous form. In the case of the Beach Boys, 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. "Harmony," after all, has been historically a Utopian conception.

I think anyone who holds him or herself back from the lyricism, gravity and yearning of *Don't Worry, Baby* or *In My Room* or *Caroline, No*, for example, is making a mistake. The superficial observer, who wants his or her artistic seriousness served on a silver platter, will have problems with Brian Wilson. One might even be controversial enough to suggest that the radical critic who can't conceive of the social layers to which Wilson's family belonged producing any work of lasting or substantive value, despite its perhaps unpromising exterior, may find it difficult to discern signs of opposition and discontent within quite broad layers of the American population.

It seems almost unnecessary to add that personal difficulties, the insatiable profit appetite of the recording industry and the larger social situation combined to shatter beyond recognition the golden dreams seemingly represented by Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys.

The delights and pleasures held out to young people of Wilson's generation by postwar American society proved ephemeral, even for substantial sections of the middle classes. Or if financial success was possible, it came at a heavy price, co-optation into the elite of an increasingly brutal and polarized society. The black ghettos, including Watts in Los Angeles, exploded in riots in the mid-1960s. The movement in opposition to the war in Vietnam assumed a mass character. These developments left no one unaffected.

In the early days of the Beach Boys Wilson worked like a demon. Incredibly the group produced eight albums in the first little more than two years of its existence, six of which were arranged and produced by Brian. In addition, he wrote 63 out of a total of 84 songs on the records. The demands of Capitol Records and his own desire to counter the threat from British pop music drove him on, to the breaking point.

Wilson suffered his first emotional collapse in December 1964 while on board an airplane headed from Los Angeles to Houston. According to Timothy White's *The Nearest Faraway Place: Brian Wilson, the Beach Boys and the Southern California Experience* (1995), "Five minutes outside Los Angeles the screaming started." Eventually Wilson fell to the cabin floor, sobbing, crying out: "I can't take it, I just can't take it any more." He stopped touring regularly with the group after that. *Pet Sounds* appeared in 1966, to critical acclaim but disappointing sales. Differences about its direction surfaced within the group. *Smile*, an album on which Brian Wilson spent many hours, was shelved and never released. Thoughts about loneliness, fear and the difficulties of adult relationships entered into his songs of the late 1960s more consciously than before.

In the 1970s Wilson retreated into a shell. He took to his bed for years on end. *In My Room* became his reality, grotesquely so. He reportedly listened to the Phil Spector-produced *Be My Baby* one hundred times a day. He took massive quantities of drugs, prescribed and illegal. And massive quantities of food; his weight soared to 320 pounds. Eventually he came under the oppressive care of a psychiatrist who acted as a guru

and surrogate father. Legal action was taken by his family to end that relationship.

Other members of the group, although in less spectacular fashion, also became disoriented and endured personal unhappiness. Mike Love fell under the spell of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Dennis Wilson became dangerously involved with Charles Manson and his "family," later jailed for involvement in the murders of nine people in August 1969. Manson and Wilson actually collaborated on several songs. Marriages broke up. Dennis, a member of the most successful popular music group in American history, flirted with financial difficulty. In 1983 he drowned, while searching underwater for memorabilia that had fallen or been thrown off a boat he'd been forced to sell.

Audree Wilson, Brian's mother, died in 1997. Carl Wilson died two months later of lung cancer. Remarkably, the most emotionally vulnerable member of the family is its last survivor.

A great deal of sadness surrounds the figure of Brian Wilson. As long ago as 1966 he sang that he "just wasn't made for these times." He seems something of an innocent, mangled by processes about which he's never had more than the vaguest comprehension. Generally, at this point, one says something like "Well, at least the music endures." But music is composed by living, suffering human beings. It doesn't seem out of place to hope that the creator of so much beauty might know some inner calm.

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