

# Recordings: The Beach Boys Sing a Rock Prayer

By RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

"I'M writing a teen-age symphony to God," Brian Wilson announced to a magazine writer some months ago. At the time, an album lay half-completed on spools of black acetate. The rest existed only in spurts of rhythm and harmony in Brian Wilson's head.

As producer, writer, maestro, and magician for a group of sturdy California pop-gods called the Beach Boys, he had chosen to fill the tracks of their next album with authentic rock-hymns. Through "vibrations," or musical intimations, he was attempting to create a pantheistic prayer to the divine presence in ordinary objects and relationships. His litany would transcend the structural shackles of pop music by using some of the most fragile melodies ever heard in rock. Falsetto voices set in filigree would chant the simple text while a cathedral organ boomed in the background. Listeners would find themselves kneeling, not in a pew, but on a cloud.

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It was a task worthy of any "serious" composer, but when Brian Wilson suggested it as a goal for the Beach Boys, skepticism rebounded like too much echo. His ideas were widely condemned as a put-on, or a grandstand play for hippy allegiance. At most, critics grudgingly classified Wilson's rock mysticism as an acid-vision and filed it away under "groovy insanity." Their doubt was understandable. At 25, Brian Wilson had made his fortune on the surf sound, a hard, white rock filled with ecstatic worship of chrome, tickytack, and the great air-conditioned outdoors. Could the possessor of the cleanest, leanest falsetto in all pop music, hope to probe the mysteries of nature, chanting prayers that make a listener weep with their frail, hip beauty?

On tour, in candy-stripe shirts and pressed wheat jeans, the Beach Boys looked like anything but a choir. Brian himself—steeped in the neon spires of Los Angeles—seemed as esthetically pure as Grauman's Chinese Theater. But, with its love of motion and its ethic of instant enlightenment, L.A. was actually the perfect birthplace for Brian Wilson's sunshine litany. And when his downy melodies and harmonies first appeared in late 1966 on an album called "Pet Sounds" (Capitol—T 2458), the effect was trend-shattering.

Suddenly, the Beach Boys

possessed something they have never worried much about: reputation. In England, their popularity topped even the Beatles. Wilson the producer became far more important than Brian the Beach Boy; he emerged as one of the most important studio innovators in rock. The other members of the group became his willing orchestra.

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Meanwhile, Wilson was developing an idea he had introduced peripherally in "Pet Sound"—the song fragment, or movement. He calls these melody clusters "scenes or sections, a mood moment." In late 1966, the Beach Boys released "Good Vibrations", a truly contemporary art song. Most of what has happened in Los Angeles music since that time can be traced to innovations in this song.

Wilson had smashed the verse-and-chorus mold which always dominated rock. He substituted a multi-rhythmic composition with organic themes and codes which swirled around his lyrics like rising smoke. An organ, breathing heavily over voices hushed with wonder, created the elusive sound that has been associated with the Beach Boys ever since.

"Good Vibrations" became a hymn for the flower children. With an expanded audience clamoring for a follow-up, Brian Wilson lifted his robes and retired to the studio. There he spent almost a year collecting pretty pebbles of sound and cementing them into a wall of tone. He edited and re-edited, sometimes dropping whole pieces because their "vibrations" were inappropriate. Studio fees soared ("Heroes And Villains," the much abbreviated single, cost \$40,000). Finally a lawsuit in which the group won the right to their own subsidiary label, Brother Records, kept the finished album out of circulation. Now it has been released. "Smiley Smile" (Brother — ST 9001) is a dazzling, confusing work, unlike any other rock album. Though it lists 11 different songs, it is really a casual grouping of many more musical themettes. The harmonies that Wilson used as brilliant accessories in his earlier work are now major motifs. They break loose from their moorings and float from song to song. The organ bounces like a helium balloon. And the text is sung only a touch above a whisper.

One soon stops listening for liturgy. For although God is mentioned occasionally in



Brian Wilson  
An acid vision?

this album, the Beach Boys seem far more willing to accept Him as love than as ritual. They express their reverence accordingly.

For the most part, "Smiley Smile" is filled with homilies — odes to wives, families, and possessions joyously embraced. They boast softly:

"My children were raised  
You know they suddenly  
rise  
They started slow long ago  
Head to toe  
Healthy, wealthy and wise."

"Smiley Smile" hardly reads like a rock cantata. But there are moments in songs such as "With Me Tonight" and "Wonderful" that soar like sacred music. Even the songs that seem irrelevant to a rock-hymn are infused with stained-glass melodies. Wilson is a sound sculptor and his songs are all harmonious litanies to the gentle holiness of love — post-Christian, perhaps but still believing.

"Wind Chimes," the most important piece on the album, is a fine example of Brian Wilson's organic pop structure. It contains three movements. First, Wilson sets a lyric and melodic mood ("In the late afternoon, you're hung up on wind chimes"). Then he introduces a totally different scene, util-

izing passages of pure, wordless harmony. His two-and-a-half minute hymn ends with a third movement in which the voices join together in an exquisite round, singing the words, "Whisperin' winds set my wind chimes a-tinklin'." The voices fade out slowly, like the bitter-sweet afternoon in question.

The technique of montage is an important aspect of Wilson's rock cantata, since the entire album tends to flow as a single composition. Songs like "Heroes and Villains," are fragmented by speeding up or slowing down their verses and refrains. The effect is like viewing the song through a spinning prism. Sometimes, as in "Fall Breaks and Back to Winter" (subtitled "W. Woodpecker Symphony"), the music is tiered into contrapuntal variations on a sliver of melody. The listener is thrown into a vast musical machine of countless working gears, each spinning in its own orbit.

Listeners may dissect "Smiley Smile" like a laboratory frog. But dissection is a parochial game to play in the name of criticism. There are weak songs on "Smiley Smile" which are structurally brilliant. In "Gettin' Hungry," two enchanting melodies are so dissimilar that the song jerks like a car trying unsuccessfully to change gears. "She's Going Home," with four complex movements, utilizes vocal distortion, recitative and hilarious parody of rock clichés.

"Smiley Smile" walks a thin line between the delicate and the precious. Harmonic effects seem to attract Brian Wilson like molasses. Sometimes the sound he creates are sticky-sweet enough to be a Disney vision of the psychedelic.

But the album remains memorable, if disjointed, experience, and a truly religious one as well. One must decide for oneself whether the sermon is worth listening for.