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 the spouts 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. It was a 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.

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, ticketyack, 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 Downey melodies and harmonies first appeared in late 1966 on an album called Pet Sounds (Capitol—T 2438), the effect was trend-shattering.

Suddenly, the Beach Boys possessed something they have never worried much about: reputation. In England, their populability toppled even the Beatles. Wilson the producer became far more important than the 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.

Meanwhile, Wilson was developing an idea he had introduced peripherally in “Pet Sounds”—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 work. 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, rushed 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 places 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 901) 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 themes. 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

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