Good Vibrations
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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective.

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PART 1 | Musical Commentaries
IN 1976, the summer I was eleven, two things were prevalent on my suburban Michigan street: pot and Peter Frampton. I partook of neither. My squeaky-clean coming of age never resembled the recreational stoner culture nostalgically celebrated in such 1990s films as Richard Linklater’s *Dazed and Confused*, James Melkonian’s *The Stoned Age*, and Adam Rifkin’s *Detroit Rock City*. Instead, my idea of adolescent adventure involved riding my ten-speed bike around the neighborhood with a Panasonic tape recorder belted to the handlebars in hopes of impressing girls known to wear lip gloss and satin shorts. As for the guitar wiz famous for his squawking “talk box” effects pedal, Frampton did nothing but salt my impatience. Shortly to be named “Album of the Year,” the double LP *Frampton Comes Alive!* annoyed me not simply because it was ubiquitous, pouring out of every open window. Clocking in at seventy-eight minutes, it also felt damned interminable—as endless as the drought that withered our green lawns to a crackling dead brown. At the time I considered myself a connoisseur of bubblegum music. I liked my songs done and gone in 2’20” or less, which was why even Wings’ frothy “Silly Love Songs,” at a whopping 5’53” on the 45 rpm, pressed its luck. For going on two years my favorite album (another double platter) had been the Beach Boys’ *Endless Summer*. Exactly one song on that album broke the three-minute barrier, and the majority landed closer to two, so each of the twenty cuts felt like an intense
flash as opposed to a long, drawn-out endurance test. Be it silly joy or pristine sorrow, the emotion in those songs packed such a sonic flare I couldn’t imagine them lasting a second longer than they did. Their bliss would have incinerated me.

Of the many Frampton Comes Alive! devotees I knew that summer, I really only remember one. His name was Jerry, he had just graduated high school, and he was forever offering me the mouthpiece of what looked like a glass hookah bubbling with aromatic smoke. When we were not shooting baskets we hung out in his parents’ basement with several other kids of mixed ages, arguing over music. I was rather alone in my position that the Hues Corporation was better than Led Zeppelin. As my ardent advocacy of Hamilton, Joe Frank, and Reynolds and the Andrea True Connection excited guffaws, I would sneer at the leaden, joyless cock rock of Bad Company and Nazareth. Then, one night that August, somewhere around minute 11 of “Do You Feel Like We Do” on side 4 of Comes Alive!, I played my trump card and explained why Endless Summer elevated me to such a state of ecstasy: “It’s fun,” I philosophized. “The Beach Boys—they’re fun.”

Jerry’s succinct reply was, “They’re not fun—they’re weird.” And to prove it, he pointed to a stack of People Weekly magazines topped by a cover photo of the band, then in the thick of their ursine bearded years. As the rest of the basement imitated ad infinitum the strangely distorted Do you feel . . . do you feel of their cherubic, curly-headed guitar hero’s voice, I pulled up a beanbag chair and devoured an article whose headline declared brian wilson’s back from his crack-up.

And I never experienced Beach Boys music the same way again.

As silly or melodramatic as it sounds to credit People Weekly with altering my personal relationship to art, the blame lay not so much with the periodical as with the type of discourse the article represented. The catalyst for my shift could have easily been Rolling Stone’s November 4 cover story (“The Healing of Brother Brian”), or the contemporaneous coverage in Newsweek, Creem, or Oui, among countless others. It could have even been the August 5, 1976, NBC-TV special produced by Saturday Night Live’s Lorne Michaels that famously featured Brian dragged to the ocean and forced to surf by comedians Dan Akroyd and John Belushi. As Beach Boys fans well know, the talking points of that summer’s poignantly premature “Brian is back” campaign were pretty much the same no matter what the venue. As People told it, “Big Brother Brian Wilson, formative genius of the group,” had suffered an “imaginative flipout” after writing
and producing some of the 1960s’ most essential pop music, becoming a rock-'n'-roll hermit by “spend[ing] three and a half years in bed” (sic). Now, “after an absence of 11 harrowing years, the sensitive, withdrawn oldest brother” was sufficiently “on his way to recovery” to “ventur[e] out again” into music-making, albeit with the demeanor of “an amiable child . . . trying to relearn the simple social graces” (“The Beach Boys Hang 15” 1976, 33–34).

As I would later learn, with minor variations in details, the storyline of this “flipout” dated back even further, to Jules Siegel’s classic 1967 essay “Goodbye Surfing, Hello God!,” the definitive chronicle of the conception and abandonment of the doomed *Smile* album. The basic outline would be reiterated as well for upwards of forty years, as Brian Wilson embarked on a series of consecutive comebacks in 1988, 1995, 1998, 1999–2000, 2004, and all the way up to 2012’s fiftieth anniversary reunion tour with surviving members of the Beach Boys.

Before that issue of *People*, I neither knew nor cared about Brian’s life. His music was simply available for my appropriation, and whether “Surfin’ USA,” “I Get Around,” or my favorite recent song in 1976, “It’s OK,” I used it to channel my own feelings, desires, and fantasies. As my fandom grew and steepened, however, the story of Brian Wilson began to dominate my appreciation of his songbook. My reading about the Beach Boys taught me that their music was the expression of a deeply troubled, tragic figure, and I began to believe that the significance of the songs was tied exclusively to their creator’s personality, or what in literary studies goes by the somewhat discredited term “sensibility.” Two years later in 1978, after reading the first full-length book devoted to the Brian Wilson story—David Leaf’s *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*—I was even conditioned to assume that the importance of a particular track or album was measurable by the degree to which it allowed me to understand the man. To put it another way, Brian’s best music was his most personal music, the songs in which he grappled with his traumas and poured out his feelings. I might identify with that personality and perhaps even define myself through it to some degree, but my primary task as a listener was to interpret Brian Wilson, not myself.

This shift in my consumption aesthetic marked my immersion in a popular culture in which celebrities—whether rock stars, movie stars, sports heroes, or those merely famous for being famous—are as much commodities as their art. As Ellis Cashmore writes, “Instead of just being devices for marketing films, music, or the consumer products they endorse . . . celebrities have become products themselves. They are now
commodities in the sense that they’ve become articles of trade that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. Obviously, you can’t buy them, but you can buy their representations, the sounds and the products with which they’re associated” (Cashmore 2006, 3). What fans specifically pay for is the illusion of “presence,” a sense of familiarity or even intimacy with a performer that fulfills individual needs and aims that can be as varied as human desire itself. Some celebrities function as “articles of trade” by embodying standards of glamor or rebellion that we emulate. Others serve as ambassadors of authenticity by helping us define norms of what we consider real or genuine. Still others represent the savvy craft of bricolage, the determined appropriation if not outright subversion of received marketplace meanings that allows us to imagine ourselves as proactive instead of passive consumers.

Whatever particular moral or value celebrities may emblematize, the discourse that inculcates us in their meanings is extratextual, a supplement to their actual art. As an interpretive tool, this discourse may take the form of standard biographies such as Leaf’s aforementioned volume, or they may be personal appreciations that celebrate a corpus’s contribution to the development of a genre or medium, such as Jim Fusilli’s 2005 tribute to Pet Sounds or Mark Dillon’s Fifty Sides of the Beach Boys (2012). To date, Beach Boys completists have nearly three dozen volumes crowding their bookshelves, and despite their diversity, these texts all reinforce certain narrative plot points that are key to constructing Brian’s sensibility: his abusive upbringing at the hands of father Murry Wilson; his decision after his December 1964 nervous breakdown not to tour with his band but to immerse himself in the recording studio; his reported battles with bandmate Mike Love over the increasingly avant-garde direction of Beach Boys’ music in the Pet Sounds / Smile era; his withdrawal after shelving Smile and the onset of mental illness and drug abuse that for decades rendered him “the Orson Welles of rock” (his “crack-up” or “imaginative flipout”); the numerous efforts on the part of record companies, managers, and handlers to return him, Humpty Dumpty–like, to the productivity of his peak 1962–67 years; his troubling exploitation at the hands of psychologist Dr. Eugene E. Landy in the 1980s and early 1990s; and his return to steady recording and touring since the mid-1990s, despite minor brain damage and a schizoaffective disorder that causes him to suffer auditory hallucinations. Brianistas can recite these narrative threads as easily as they can recite personal data, for the story lines are reiterated incessantly to create the image of the Beach Boys’ founder as a rock-'n'-roll Icarus, an innate musical talent who flew too
close to the sun and has been trying to take renewed flight ever since his precipitous plunge.

As influential as biographies and full-length critical appreciations are, however, they are by no means the only extratextual sources for shaping perceptions of Brian Wilson’s sensibility. Because they are cast in the durable form of books, major retellings of the Beach Boys’ story tend to overshadow more transitory if not disposable media such as periodicals and newspapers. Reviews are the most obvious site of sensibility articulation, for they are as definitional as they are evaluative—they not only tell us whether a particular song or album is “good” but contribute to the construction of the artist’s public image. Interviews are another popular medium that allow the performer to speak with a minimum of editorial intrusion. A less celebrated journalistic form that arguably provides more immediate information for the consumption of celebrities is the personality profile. This narrative genre dates back to the late nineteenth century, as the press fed the public appetite for human interest by publishing biographies that in miniature accounted for accomplished men’s success in business, politics, and civic leadership (Ponce de Leon 2002, 51–57). By the 1920s, with the emergence of movies as popular entertainment, profiles stoked consumer curiosity about whether actors and actresses bore any resemblance in their private life to the public images they projected on the screen—thus the profusion of “stars at home” stories in which the likes of Douglas Fairbanks or Gloria Swanson invited fans to view them “off camera” to ensure their audience they were not manipulating silver-screen magic to deceive (Shield 2013, 18).

By the mid-1960s, when rock-music reporting emerged as a distinct journalistic niche thanks to Crawdaddy!, Rolling Stone, Creem, and other magazines, the personality profile helped validate the music’s aspirations to be recognized as more than just popular entertainment—to be revered as Art with a capital A, in other words. Profiles allowed music reporters to disseminate the values that rock music was supposed to embody, from transgression to innovation to the high seriousness of aesthetic and sociopolitical intent (Keightley 2001, 109). Siegel’s “Goodbye Surfing, Hello God!” is a perfect example of the institutionalization of these ideals. Although not the first to tout Brian Wilson as a musical “genius”—that honor belongs to the numerous articles either written or commissioned by publicist Derek Taylor in 1966—it was certainly the most instrumental in establishing the image of Brian as mercurial in the broader senses of that term: as an eccentric and erratic artist perilously pursuing the muse instead of blithely serving the masses. In Brian Wilson,
my 2012 contribution to Equinox Publishing’s Icons of Pop Music series, I argue that this “genius” narrative defining Brian reflects rock criticism’s investment in auteur theory, the school of criticism that locates meaning in personal vision. What I did not explore there is how personality profiles remain eminently suitable for instilling this aesthetic in readers for a simple reason: the founding idea of auteurship is the singularity of sensibility, the insistence that the greatest voices are the most unique. As a result, this particular genre of celebrity discourse and the content of auteur criticism function in perfect alignment, for both foreground the centrality of personality, emphasizing it as the primary interpretive context for understanding the music.

As an adult, I can look back to my adolescence and recognize how the fan devotion to Brian Wilson I expressed by reading and collecting personality-oriented discourse narrowed my overall listening tastes. Simply put, once initiated in Brian’s story, I found myself drawn to artists celebrated as auteurs. What I lost in the Banana Splits and the Bay City Rollers I gained in Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Pete Townshend, and others defined by their sensibility. Only in recent years have I begun to appreciate what a wealth of music I missed out on enjoying. Well into my middle age I was geared toward contempt for disco, country, and pop stars who did not write their own songs, and even one-hit wonders who lacked the charisma to maintain a career. Peter Frampton is a good example of my indifference for performers who did not meet auteur criteria. I could recite factoids I knew about him—the disastrous Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band movie in 1978 costarring the Bee Gees, something about a career-careening automobile wreck in the late 1970s, his fall into “has been” status, the self-deprecatingly good humor of his recent Geico auto insurance commercial, where he pokes fun at his “talk box” guitar celebrity—but nothing of substance. I could not begin to explain why Frampton Comes Alive! caught the public fancy in 1976; egregiously, I presumed the question was not important enough to ponder.

More importantly, I also recognize how the prejudices inherent in auteur criticism narrowed my ability to appreciate Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. As I previously suggested, my taste, in the most basic of ways, leaned toward songs whose lyrics could be read as autobiographical (all of Pet Sounds, 1971’s “‘Til I Die”) as opposed to efforts that seemed to offer no interpretive context whatsoever, not even one related to the band’s early subcultural identification with surfing and hot rods (say, 1967’s “Wild Honey”). My only consolation is that I have not been alone. Surveying Brian Wilson / Beach Boys criticism, one discovers a consistent
tendency to “read” songs as latest chapters in the biographical narrative in order to make them meaningful. A recent case in point is “Summer’s Gone,” the closing track of the Beach Boys’ 2012 album, That’s Why God Made the Radio. Throughout reviews and profiles of the band during its short-lived reunion, commentators pointed to this lilting, autumnal ballad as a meditation on the group’s own lion-in-winter senescence as its members entered their seventies. Indeed, with a closing line about life’s inevitable decline and the temptation to look back to the past (“We laugh, we cry / We live, we die / And dream about our yesterday”), many suggested the song was a worthy finale to a phenomenal body of work, an appropriately wistful note upon which to end the Beach Boys’ recording career. To be sure, the seed for this interpretation was planted by the album’s coproducer, Joe Thomas, who in an interview with the Daily Beast’s Andrew Romano described how a skeletal version of the song had floated in limbo since 1998 until the time was right for the band to reunite: “Basically what Brian always wanted to do was make that the last song on the last Beach Boys record.” In the early stages of recording, the symbolic import of “Summer’s Gone” was intended to be emphasized by entitling the whole album after it—at least until Brian hedged on whether this would indeed be the final Beach Boys recording ever: “He wanted the original title of the album to be Summer’s Gone. But he had so much fun with Mike and the guys that he scratched that about halfway through the recording process and insisted on changing the title to That’s Why God Made the Radio, because he really didn’t in a lot of ways want this to be the last Beach Boys record. Or he didn’t want that stigma that it had to be” (Romano 2012b). Despite Brian’s change of heart, many fans could not help but hear the song as an epitaph. My point is that celebrity discourse (in this case, an interview) provides a context for understanding what the song is “about.” The fact that Thomas both offers and then retracts that meaning does not negate the possibility of that meaning—if anything, the album’s name change fuels the debate and maintains fan interest by keeping the drama of the Beach Boys ongoing, unresolved. Discussing the shift in the song’s biographical relevance, a fan blogger known as “Arkhonia” makes my exact point about how Thomas’s revelations function extratextually:

So it is perception and context that have given “Summer’s Gone” its meaning—once Brian decided not to close the door on The Beach Boys, the song stopped being “the last song on the last Beach Boys record,” and instead, “it just means summer’s over.” Far as I can tell
from all of this though, the song itself, as originally conceived, didn’t change—but what it was meant to signify did. (Arkhoria 2012)

In what follows, I want to do three things concerning how songs are “meant to signify.” First, I want to explore ways in which “perception and context” can limit what Brian Wilson songs mean when interpretation is restricted to the context of authorial sensibility. Second, I want to examine relatively rare instances when cultural significance has been wrought from Brian’s music outside of his “star image.” Finally, I want to return to the constraints of the celebrity narrative for which Brian is known, to explore how reviews of his live performances invoke biography to compensate for his inscrutable stage presence. Doing so, critics effectively project drama onto a rendition that might otherwise seem passive and detached, the very antithesis of charismatic. As I hope to show, Brian is said to “come alive” in concert at moments when he confronts his complex and legendary legacy, as if even for the man himself, performing music becomes an inevitable reenactment of the celebrity story line that has defined his career and shaped evaluation of his art.

Making Sense of Sensibility

To explore how biography allows listeners to interpret lyrics, we begin with what should seem the unlikely example of a surf song, the genre through which the Beach Boys first came to fame and one that, on the surface, would seem as irrelevant to auteur theory as any category of novelty music can be. As the closing track on All Summer Long (1964), “Don’t Back Down” is perhaps best known for being the group’s final golden-era tribute to the coastal sport it had helped bring to national attention in 1962–63. In addition to its subject matter, “Don’t Back Down” is musically notable for what Philip Lambert describes as its “sense of urgency and forward momentum.” Although nominally built upon a standard blues progression, the song’s structure is given an “interesting,” off-kilter jolt thanks to a half-step key shift up from A♭ to A in the eleventh measure of the verses, a highly unusual place for such a change (Lambert 2007, 155). The resulting jumpiness in the “surging arrangement” has inspired some commentators to detect a corresponding “undercurrent of lyrical anxiety” that is atypical of “the self-assurance of the Beach Boys’ earlier surf numbers” (Schinder 2008, 110). With its admonitions against fear and incitements to “go a little nuts” by “show[ing] ’em now who’s got guts,” the text not only exposes a vulnerability not
heard in the bonhomie confidence of “Surfin’” or “Surfin’ Safari”; it also lacks the invitation-to-join-the-surf-nation quality of “Surfin’ USA” and “Catch a Wave” that was in no small part responsible for the Beach Boys’ early popularity.

What could possibly account for this newfound anxiety? In *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*, David Leaf thought he discovered an answer when he detected Brian alluding to the lyrics when explaining the pressures that led to his post-1967 withdrawal from the music industry:

As Brian sang it, you just “Grit your teeth / They don’t back down.”
Was Brian singing the song to himself? This excerpt from a 1977 interview indicates that it was at least a possibility: “There was a compulsion involved [in pouring out singles]. We did it out of a compulsive drive. You see so many pressures happening at once, and you grit your teeth, and you more or less flip-out.” . . . Before the pressure forced a cave-in, Brian thinks it put him “in a state of creative panic, where you begin to use your creativity to give to people. Something was lacking. I felt the creativity but something was lacking; something was wrong somewhere.” (Leaf 1985, 57)

Since Leaf’s biography, it has become de rigueur to read “Don’t Back Down” as a plot point in the story of Brian’s crack-up. The lyrics serve as evidence of the competitive pressures he felt at the mid-1964 height of Beatlemania; of the exhausting demands for product placed upon him by Capitol Records; of his burgeoning desire to make more personal, challenging music rather than “give to people” the teenage content expected of him. To be sure, such readings are almost decreed by the eerie coincidence of a misprint on the first pressing of the *All Summer Long* jacket that identified the song as “Don’t Break Down”—a typo invariably described as “prophetic” (Leaf 1985, 57). Brian’s most recent biographer, Peter Ames Carlin, even adds a Freudian twist to this interpretation. Seizing upon what Leaf calls the song’s “parental tone” (“Not my boys”), he suggests the lyrical anxiety reflects how Murry Wilson’s hectoring lessons about striving for success, fueled by his own disappointments and failures, left the Wilson brothers “splayed between hope and fear”:

“Kick ass! Kick ass!” their father liked to roar at them. And they already knew whose ass would be kicked if [Murry] began to suspect they weren’t getting the message. . . . [In the guts line of “Don’t Back Down”], did [Brian] realize he was echoing his father lecturing about
fighting for success? Perhaps not, but what seems clear is that, at least in some respects, the California paradise he’d imagined was already fading before his eyes. But now that Brian’s talents had proven powerful enough to allow him and his family to finally complete their journey across the continent, they had nowhere to go. “Kick ass! Kick ass!” Murry kept commanding. So Brian paddled out into the darkness, humming a song to himself.

Don’t back down from that wave! (Carlin 2006, 51–52)

Both Leaf and Carlin rather cagily stage their autobiographical readings as speculation by employing the rhetorical question (“Was Brian singing . . . to himself?”; “did [Brian] realize . . . ?”). Nevertheless, a formalist critic might accuse them of committing that dreaded interpretive sin of the intentional fallacy by presuming the lyric reflects its author’s personal issues at this juncture of the biography. The objection has merit because in the case of “Don’t Back Down” (and many other Brian Wilson songs) we are not just dealing with one author but two: the composition is cocredited to Mike Love, albeit only since 1994, when Love successfully sued to have his name added to this and three dozen other Beach Boys songs for which he claimed he had been denied both authorship and royalties. As Mike angrily told Goldmine in 1992, “‘Don’t Back Down.’ It’s very well-known that Brian Wilson did not surf. I wrote ‘Catch a Wave’ and ‘Don’t Back Down.’ He’s credited 100 percent. He didn’t give me any credit” (Sharp 1992, 14). For Mike Love, suffice it to say, “Don’t Back Down” is not “about” Brian Wilson even at a metaphorical level. If its place in the Beach Boys’ fiftieth anniversary set list is any indication, it is “just” a surfing song that fits seamlessly among “Do It Again,” “Hawaii,” “Catch a Wave,” and “Surfin’ Safari.” I do not make this distinction to invoke the oft-discussed “two Beach Boys” argument, the idea that Brian Wilson’s “art” and Mike Love’s “mass entertainment” are frequently at odds with each other. I make it to ask whether there is any substantive evidence of this biographical valence beyond Leaf’s and Carlin’s hypothetical staging of the possibility. To my knowledge, Brian has never spoken of “Don’t Back Down” as particularly autobiographical in the way that he has “In My Room” or “Please Let Me Wonder” (although it does appear among a list of “personal” songs in the now-disowned Landy-era memoir Wouldn’t It Be Nice: My Own Story, written by Todd Gold supposedly with little participation from its subject [Wilson 1991, 90]). Nor do all critics agree that the text belies an “undercurrent of lyrical anxiety.” Lambert, for one, views “Don’t Back Down” as a departure from the “confession
of fear and need for female reassurance” overtly voiced in contemporaneous hits such as “Don’t Worry, Baby,” favoring “boastful masculine bravado” over sensitive vulnerability (Lambert 2007, 155). To claim the song somehow reflects Brian’s mind-set in 1964 is to fail to acknowledge that biography gives those interpreters who want it enough information to project meaning onto the words—and, in the process, to make the lyric meaningful enough to validate the narrative we are constructing.

While one can question how the biographical interpretation of “Don’t Back Down” is construed, dismissing the reading as erroneous is not quite fair. Indeed, as Lee Marshall writes, arguing against biography as an “arbiter of a meaning of a song” may be even more “intuitively wrong” than presuming authorial intent. In his study of Bob Dylan’s celebrity, Marshall argues that formalist readings of lyrics that deny the author’s significance “make use of a literary perspective” that “overlooks the critical way that stardom itself generates meaning.” Simply stated, unlike a written text, lyrics are delivered through a voice that draws listener attention to the physical presence of the performer. “The meaning of Dylan’s songs is not ‘in the words’ but ‘in the voice,’” Marshall insists. “While we could conceivably remove the authorial figure from our understanding of the songs, we cannot remove the star. . . . Ultimately, it is the star that shapes the meaning of the song, not the words” (Marshall 2007, 25). Celebrity does not affect all listeners uniformly, of course, and an image may change over time so songs acquire multiple meanings. Yet to some degree stardom “always impinges on musical meaning”; Marshall is adamant that “songs can never be innocent.” Dismissing biographical interpretations of songs is therefore naive. “What we need to consider,” he concludes, is “how a particular star-image (of which biography is a part) works to give a song meaning” (Marshall 2007, 26).

To this listener, the most interesting trademark of original Beach Boys recordings responsible for “giv[ing] a song meaning” is the texture of the voices, an integral feature of the band’s “star-image” and, in Brian Wilson’s case in particular, one responsible for shaping perceptions of his sensibility.8 In essence, knowing the disharmony the band suffered throughout its career imbues its vocal harmonies with poignancy: whether in a fast romp such as “Surfers Rule” or in a gorgeously lachrymose ballad like “The Warmth of the Sun,” the vocal blend evokes not just youth and innocence but to post-1960s ears, lost youth and irrecoverable innocence. The losses may be the Beach Boys’ in general (the group’s decline from pop innovators to nostalgia act), or they may evoke the generational mythology of baby boomers’ fall from sixties idealism to
seventies disillusionment; either way, the gravitas of these narrative associations heightens the affective power of the music, giving listeners cognizant of this background an additional aura of pathos that we do not perceive—or have not been taught to perceive—in equally excellent and enjoyable “classics” by, say, the Four Seasons or Little Anthony and the Imperials. Brian’s clarion falsetto, meanwhile, is the device that explains how such a long, agonizing history of abuse and exploitation could befall someone so creative and innovative at his musical peak: the high, expressive voice projects the sensitivity and vulnerability of a soul too guileless and frail to protect itself from personal excess and music-industry avarice. The oft-noted vocal weaknesses Brian has exhibited since the midseventies—pitch problems, poor enunciation, a general aura of detachment and disengagement—in turn reinscribe the sorrowfulness of this story line in latter-day performances: they are further proof of lost genius and suffering.

I spend so much time summarizing how the meaning of a Beach Boys song can be found “not ‘in the words’ but ‘in the voice,’” as Marshall writes, for a very simple reason: a “star-image” can also cause us to misread a song, or at least cause us to presume facts about it that historical evidence may very well contradict. Here is one example. In Song Means: Analyzing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song, Allan F. Moore compares the classic 1966 recording of “Good Vibrations” to the 2004 remake that concludes Brian Wilson Presents Smile. Two elements in particular make the latter distinctly different from its predecessor: different lyrics and the quality of Brian’s sexagenarian voice. In the case of the former, instead of a youthful appreciation of feminine vivacity, the verses present a more mature celebration of the mutuality of relationships, signaled by the new line, “I wonder what she’s picking up from me.” As Moore casually suggests, “the lyrics of the first verse have been rewritten” because Brian’s aged voice cannot convey the naïveté of nineteen-year-old Carl Wilson’s delivery four decades earlier. Yet, in fact, the lyrics to this new “Good Vibrations” are not “rewritten” at all. In rerecording the song Brian retrieved lyrics by Pet Sounds collaborator Tony Asher written before Mike Love scripted the final, familiar version. In other words, the words to the 2004 version are the original lyrics, and the classic version the revision; Asher’s words were simply set aside for forty years until Brian (or his collaborators) decided Smile needed a distinct take on the song instead of a faithful rerecording. (Thus, Brian Wilson Presents Smile also tweaks the compositional structure by including musical passages first attempted in 1966 but not included in the classic version).
What would lead a musicologist as astute as Moore to presume the lyrics were rewritten in 2004? Listeners with even a cursory knowledge of Beach Boys history would likely recognize Asher’s name from credits to *Pet Sounds*. It is also widely known that the collaboration was short-lived, with Brian soon moving on to Van Dyke Parks as lyricist for *Smile*. (Brian and Asher did write a few new songs together in 1996.) Moreover, a great deal of the press *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* generated in 2004 noted that Brian and his team chose to revive Asher’s original lyrics, presumably (so the speculation ran) to spite Mike Love and minimize his claim that he came up with the song’s infectious “I’m picking up good vibrations” hook. Something of an answer to the question appears in an odd sentence that shows up almost as an aside in Moore’s analysis of Brian’s late-in-life voice: “With our knowledge of Brian Wilson’s personal history, it is hard not to hear in this voice the scars of that history” (Moore 2012, 276–77). To his credit, Moore does not literally project the “scars of that history” onto his reading of Asher’s “new” lyrics. He does not, in other words, read the text as an allegory of Brian’s biography. Nevertheless, his knowledge of Brian’s “personal history” does account for why he hears in the voice more than just the infirmities of advancing age and eroded skills. His knowledge of the Brian Wilson story demands a 2004 “Good Vibrations” that somehow speaks to that tragedy. As a result, the “new” lyrics must convey a more wizened and poignant perspective than the giddy original. From a formalist perspective, if read separately from Brian’s performance, Asher’s text is no more adult or mature than Love’s—the differences between the two sets of lyrics are actually very minimal. The significance of the minor verse variations rests entirely on the qualities Brian’s contemporary voice projects. And for Moore, those qualities are inexorably tied to Brian’s history.

Despite Moore’s mistake, I would not reject his assessment of *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*’s “Good Vibrations.” The reason is that his “knowledge of Brian Wilson’s personal history” does not shape a detrimental reading of the song; nowhere in his analysis does Moore betray bias against the star image that unjustly diminishes the composition’s spirit or message. Where I take issue with interpretations is when sensibility is evoked to *deprecate* Brian Wilson songs, many of which have wholly different meanings than detractors presume if we decline to inflect biographical connotations into them. Consider “In My Room,” which invariably inspires comments like this from * Mojo*’s Mat Snow in 2008: “Hearing the music of Brian Wilson [evokes] the decades of breakdown, withdrawal and desolation even in his most carefree music before his
mind crashed in 1967; how tragic with foreboding does ‘In My Room’ sound when you recall the recluse he was to become?’ Rarely do we speak of ‘In My Room’ as reflecting the adolescent propensity for withdrawal or even what in 1963 was for many American teenagers the first-generation luxury of having a bedroom or basement of one’s own to retreat to. Instead, the song is always about Brian’s hermitic reputation.

The downside of that exclusive focus can be illustrated through a Beatles comparison. Many rock critics argue that the intense introspection of ‘In My Room’ parallels the Fab Four’s ‘There’s a Place,’ recorded six months before ‘Room,’ in which John Lennon sings of escaping to another sanctuary, only this time “it’s my mind” where “there’s no time” for sorrow. Beatleologist Tim Riley insists that “Place” is “a much better song than its American cousin” because it celebrates a quality completely foreign to Brian: confidence. To make his case, he cites the venerable Robert Christgau, whose comparison of the two lyrics gives the advantage to “Place” because it is an “avowal of self-sufficiency” that manages “to transcend the isolation [the protagonist] dreads” instead of wallowing in it, as Brian’s narrator seems to. As Christgau bluntly states, “Lennon has better places to go but his room, and better ways to get there than Brian Wilson.”

But do Riley’s and Christgau’s interpretation of “In My Room” as a hermitic ode accurately reflect its message? Does the song really advocate isolation from the world? Not to all readers. In a study called The Lyrics of Civility: Biblical Images and Popular Music Lyrics in American Culture, Kenneth G. Bielen argues that by retreating to his room the narrator creates a sanctuary for prayer or meditation that allows him to cope with his fears, as the third verse explicitly states (“Now it’s dark / And I’m alone / But I won’t be afraid”). Interestingly, appreciating this character growth for Bielen requires disassociating the song from its author, of not reading it as “a first glimpse into Brian Wilson’s reclusive side”:

Without ignoring the biographical elements of the song, it can be argued that the lyrics go beyond the idea of closing the door on reality, or discovering a protective musical cocoon. . . . In revealing his secrets [the narrator] is not talking to himself. He recognizes the idea of a sacred order, though as is the usual case, there is no specific reference to God. There is someone outside the room who aids in bringing about the peace he finds in his quiet refuge, so he is empowered to “laugh at yesterday.” (Bielen 1999, 54)
Armed with Bielen’s reading, we can return to Riley’s and Christgau’s to appreciate how their interpretation of the differences between “In My Room” and “There’s a Place” is influenced as much by Brian Wilson’s and John Lennon’s respective public images as the actual text. Lennon is privileged as utilizing “better ways” because the brand of dreaming associated with him celebrates imagination as a transformative device that better the world, whereas Brian’s is stereotyped as escaping from it (those “better places” to get to “than Brian Wilson”). In essence, we have here the difference between “Imagine” and “Your Imagination,” between sociopolitical engagement and living in one’s own reality, Walter Mitty–like. Remove the meaning supplied by star images, however, and the difference between the lyrics virtually evaporates, for both are “about” coping. “Place” may do it by discounting sorrow (“there’s no time”) while “Room” embraces sadness to overcome it, but the net result is that both narrators persevere. Ultimately, “In My Room” may sound more melancholy than its counterpart, but that is a product of melody, harmony, tempo, and production, not the literal level of the words.

To differing degrees, these examples reveal how thoroughly perceptions of Brian Wilson saturate perceptions of Brian Wilson songs. They reflect how we rely upon authorial sensibility and biography to create meaning, whether explicitly associating it with a life story (as Leaf and Carlin do) or more unconsciously allowing the star image to influence an interpretation (as in the case of Moore, Riley, and Christgau). Admittedly, I do not address here how pop stars encourage author-centered readings by explicitly invoking their own biography. In Brian’s case, such songs may range from the ethereal (2008’s “Southern California”) to the baticetic (1990’s unreleased “Brian,” from the doomed, Landy-contrived fiasco Sweet Insanity). However they differ in quality, such songs share an autobiographical specificity that distinguishes them from those generally considered personal statements, though at a more figural level. Works as varied as “‘Til I Die,” “Still I Dream of It,” “Happy Days,” and “Midnight’s Another Day” are interpreted either as postcards from the thick of Brian’s private despair or retellings of his recovery. Either way, the “I” in these songs is not scripted to refer exclusively to Brian Wilson; one can follow the lyrics and ply them to one’s own life as easily as Brian’s, which is not the case with “Southern California” or “Brian.” Obviously then, one element affecting the degree to which listeners allow stardom to mediate their reception of popular music is the degree to which a song requires that reaction. That said, I would argue that Brian Wilson
criticism, because of its investment in the auteur aesthetic, has not even begun to broach the question Stephen Scobie posed of Dylan scholarship nearly a quarter-century ago: “What purpose has been served by determining a biographical reference? Does it really contribute anything worthwhile to our critical understanding and appreciation of the songs themselves?” (Scobie 2003, 88). By way of encouraging that question, I turn now to interpretations of Brian Wilson songs that do not rely on their author to make sense of lyrics.

Beyond Sensibility

According to Marshall, songs accrue meaning apart from their author’s life through usage over time: “The meaning of the text changes because of its social circulation, because of how we as listeners [create] meaning” (Marshall 2007, 20). For critics, appreciating this “social circulation” requires reception or reader-response analysis as opposed to creator-oriented interpretation. Marshall’s central example of the process is the Bob Dylan line “Even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked” from “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding).” As he notes, this line was written in 1964 but did not really gain valence until a decade later during the Watergate era. Its sudden relevance to Richard Nixon is captured on the live album Before the Flood (1974), where Dylan’s delivery of it is greeted with a combustive crowd cheer that all but stops the song in its tracks. The reaction became such an iconic moment in rock music that to this day crowds reenact the outburst when Dylan performs “It’s Alright, Ma” live, although the line’s meaning perforce changes depending on the context of the current presidency. While it may be hard to imagine “Little Deuce Coupe” or “Help Me, Rhonda” sparking such a sociopolitically powerful moment, in at least two instances Brian Wilson songs have prompted significant cultural commentary that has nothing whatsoever to do with their author’s celebrity story line.

Interestingly, both examples involve Pet Sounds, which is not only celebrated as Brian’s masterwork—finished masterwork, anyway—but also his most intensely personal collection of songs. Twenty-four years after its original 1966 vinyl release, the album’s first-ever appearance on CD was celebrated in a five-strip story-arc in the syndicated political cartoon Doonesbury by Garry Trudeau. The context of celebration was very different from the auteur discourse within which Pet Sounds is usually heralded, however. The character obsessing over the music was Andy Lippincott, who first identified himself as gay in a 1976 appearance and who since
1989 had been suffering a terminal battle against AIDS. Predictably, the treatment of Andy’s illness proved controversial, with a handful of newspapers refusing to publish the installments. Commentary on the censorship was overshadowed, however, by Brian’s unexpected invocation in the climactic installments. The Beach Boys had never before been identified with gay audiences; nor were they among the celebrities and performers who in the late 1980s and early 1990s protested homophobic misunderstandings of AIDS. For a gay man to profess his love for *Pet Sounds* during his dying days thus challenged perceptions both of Beach Boys fans (usually depicted as middle-aged heterosexual white men in Hawaiian shirts) and of gay listening tastes (usually stereotyped as preferring dance music and female vocalists of the “diva” variety).

Trudeau’s handling of the story line also proved refreshing in the way it avoided the melodrama that mars many AIDS narratives of the era, including the Jonathan Demme film *Philadelphia* (1993). Most obviously, the five strips proved surprisingly funny for a tragedy of such personal and political import. As Andy listens to the barking dogs coda of “Caroline, No,” for example, he speaks of being overwhelmed by the memories that the album’s finale evokes. “Of your first love?” his friend Joanie Caucus asks. “No,” Andy replies. “My first dog” (Trudeau 2010, 318). In the sequence’s most famous panel, Andy dies while listening to “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” the opening song on *Pet Sounds*. To this day, the image of his body curled on its side in bed as the song plays remains one of the most iconic in *Doonesbury*’s forty-three-year history, often crediting with helping humanize AIDS victims when both gay and straight sufferers were severely stigmatized. As a sign of the story’s importance, Andy Lippincott remains the only fictional character represented among the 48,000-plus panels on the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt commemorating the pandemic’s victims.

What strikes me as particularly useful about this example is the moving way it dramatizes the effect of the Beach Boys’ music. With some qualification, it can be seen as celebrating the emotional power of *Pet Sounds* without simply asserting Brian’s genius or the personal motivations behind the album. I say “some qualification” because Andy’s last words, found scribbled on a notepad at his deathbed, are “Brian Wilson is God.” (“Hmm,” his doctor decides. “He must have gotten hold of the *Pet Sounds* CD” [Trudeau 2010, 318].) At first glance, this wry appropriation of the famous 1960s “Clapton is God” graffiti from London’s Islington Tube Station would seem as auteur-centric a celebration of a rock legend as possible. Yet in the context of mortality itself the phrase
conveys appreciation for the comfort that music in general provides in moments of human suffering, functioning less as an assertion of Brian’s brilliance than of Andy’s choice to die to a soundtrack of uplift. In other words, the strip provides a graceful, poignant modeling of the optimism with which one may confront mortality, with “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” serving as the vehicle for inspiring that acceptance. Blogger Jeff Price’s open letter to Andy on the eighteenth anniversary of his death captures what I attempt to articulate here:

Eighteen years ago your death filled me full of sadness. . . . I cried. I had followed the last tragic weeks of your life as AIDS overwhelmed your ability to resist the inevitable. Every time you fought back it just got stronger and still you faced it all with a stoicism I couldn’t understand. If I had been you I would have been so angry. I would have spat out my frustration and railed against the world. Instead you checked out listening to the Beach Boys playing “Wouldn’t It Be Nice.” (Price 2008)

As this example suggests, within the world of the AIDS crisis, the power of Andy’s death rests in the attitude exhibited by the song selection, not the song itself. “Brian Wilson is God” may celebrate the ability of *Pet Sounds* to evoke that poignancy—and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” is a song often described as unbearably poignant—yet the sensibility *Doonesbury* is interested in isn’t Brian’s but Andy’s. Indeed, among writers and artists celebrating positive representations of gay men in popular culture, it is not at all uncommon to find sentiments like these from Batman and Spiderman cartoonist Ty Templeton: “I will say this, the song from *Pet Sounds*, ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice?’ [sic], made me sob like a baby for years because of Andy’s relationship to that song. It no longer belongs to Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. . . . It’s Andy’s” (Templeton 2010). It may overstate the case to describe “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” as a gay anthem, but the comfort Andy derives from *Pet Sounds* provides an opportunity to talk about the consolations of Beach Boys music by focusing on its affective power instead of reverting to valedictories of genius.11

Another, far less serious example of how songs accrue meaning outside of biographical context centers on another *Pet Sounds* cut. For many years, critics counted “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” among the most personal of Brian Wilson songs, said to capture Brian’s resentments toward band and family members who did not support the more sophisticated musical direction he plotted for the Beach Boys
in 1966. Its significance in the biographical narrative is captured in this passage from Leaf’s biography: “In the midst of his masterpiece, Brian was already coming to an awareness that if he wanted to pursue his artistic muse, there were going to be major changes in his life. What these changes would have been won’t ever be known, because Brian abandoned his art rather than break from his life as it was” (Leaf 1985, 80). Because Leaf’s thesis is that the Beach Boys (or at least Mike Love) were partly responsible for derailing Brian’s ambitions at the peak of his experimentation, “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” has proved essential to constructing the tragedy of the auteur’s fall. In 1995, producer Don Was borrowed the title for his documentary on Brian’s career, despite not including the actual song in the movie or on the soundtrack. So identified is this song with Brian’s personal feelings in 1966 that one struggles to find commentary on it before 2012 that is not biographical. If liner notes to the 1990 Pet Sounds CD, the 1993 Beach Boys box set Good Vibrations, or the 1996 box set The Pet Sounds Sessions are any indication, the song only makes sense as a personal artistic statement.

That impasse broke on April 22, 2012, however, with the unexpected use of “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” as the score for an iconic scene of the AMC-TV series Mad Men (in an episode entitled “Far Away Places”). The specific sequence did not involve an alienated adolescent or artist as the lyrics might lend themselves to illustrating. Instead, the scene centered upon an LSD trip undertaken by the show’s World War II veteran / gray fox, Roger Sterling, who, one hazards to guess, would not have been either a Brian Wilson or a Pet Sounds enthusiast in the mid-sixties. Several aspects of the relationship between song and plotline render the relevance of the former downright confounding for Beach Boys fans. For starters, the song’s playing is a scripted action in the scene, with the wife of the psychotherapist administering the LSD cueing it up on a reel-to-reel tape player. Because of its musical sophistication and introspective lyrics, Pet Sounds has the reputation as a quintessential “headphones album,” a listening experience best enjoyed privately, between one’s own ears, so to speak. Fictional or not, the premise that a nonadolescent audience in 1966 would consider “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” appropriate music for a party—never mind an acid party—jarringly removes the record from the context with which fans are most accustomed to associating it, thereby challenging our conceptions of its meaning. Moreover, Sterling’s acid trip is depicted as a slapstick moment, his hallucinations played for laughs, generating further interpretive disso-
nance from the somber, introspective music. Finally, the scene’s closing moments are overlaid with a second, prerock generation song Sterling seems to hear in his own head, Connie Conway’s “I Should Not Be Seeing You” (1954), calling attention to the generation gap the character feels between himself and his much-younger wife, Jane, and raising questions about whether he is even aware that Pet Sounds’ eleventh track is playing.

Because of these ambiguities, Mad Men’s use of “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” ignited Internet debate. Some commentators complained that the lyrics were too literal in underscoring Sterling’s alienation from the social changes of the 1960s; others appreciated the fact that producers had not selected a song notorious for its LSD connotations (such as the Beatles’ “Tomorrow Never Knows,” which appeared in a subsequent episode in a nondrug context). Either way, the song’s appearance accomplished unexpected things. It popularized “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” to the point that the Beach Boys themselves added it to their fiftieth anniversary set list in the weeks after the episode’s broadcast. More importantly, it popularized this heretofore cult classic entirely outside the context of the Brian Wilson story line, giving it new and surprising relevance that is no longer simply biographical but cultural, as a reflection of the 1960s itself. Given how much discourse Mad Men has generated since its 2007 debut, one suspects that the name Roger Sterling will arise alongside Brian Wilson’s in many future references to the song.

Such idiosyncratic uses of Beach Boys songs remain relatively rare, but they are invigorating. They remind us that the band can evoke more than surfing and summer (as important and fun as those experiences are) and that Brian Wilson himself can stand for more than the tragedy of the auteur (as compelling as that narrative is). The past twenty years have witnessed an increasing tendency to recontextualize Brian and his band outside of their chosen iconography and narrative associations. One thinks of the use of “Sloop John B.” as a Vietnam allegory in Forrest Gump (1994), or the playful weirdness Fabulous Mr. Fox (2009) achieves with a montage scored to “Heroes and Villains” (whose cartoon images can finally breathe once freed from the shelving-of-Smile story line) and its use of the unreleased 1968 a cappella spin on “Ol’ Man River.” Despite this variety, however, sensibility and the star image have proved inescapable in rock discourse. For the final section of this chapter, I want to show how the biography has been essential to encoding Brian Wilson’s in-concert demeanor in order to illustrate the connection between performance and celebrity.
Brian Comes Alive: Sensibility in Action

An enduring mystery from that summer of 1976 when Peter Frampton was all the rage: what did it mean to “come alive,” as his album title insisted he was doing? Why not just call the record *Frampton Live* or *Frampton in Concert*? According to Fred Goodman, the star and his management wanted the double album to stand out in a marketplace saturated with live albums using those generic designations, many of them perfunctory contractual obligations by this point in rock history. Because *Comes Alive!* was the culmination of a five-year plan to make Peter Frampton a star in the United States through constant touring, the record needed to announce itself to the audience as a career breakthrough (Goodman 1997, 312–13). Even so, most commentators agree that the name has a certain pompous ring to it, its pretention underscored by the fact that it has been parodied and spoofed more than any other live-album title in rock history.12

Outside of Frampton and as simple slang, to “come alive” is an expressive act, the performative moment the star most fully inhabits a song, whether musically (as in an “on fire” guitar solo), lyrically (by sincerely conveying the drama of the words), or through gesture (by physically rendering the song’s mood through a dance move or an impassioned motion such as an airborne scissor-kick). As many critics have argued, live performance for rock stars is a credential of authenticity. By “coming alive,” they demonstrate their innate talents and virtuoso skills to distinguish themselves from “mediated” stars who require devices of extrinsic spectacle to sell a song. Live performance is also the truest test of charisma, for commanding audience attention requires creating a sense of engagement and connection that can break down the barrier between stage and seat. In simplified terms, “coming alive” is an apotheosis of presence.

As with most values invoked to define rock authenticity, “coming alive” is also a construct. In reality, a rock star’s stage moves are rarely spontaneous, tending rather to be a carefully cultivated repertoire of tics and maneuvers that audiences are groomed to expect and cheer as if on command. Nor is the performer’s engagement with a song objectively assessable, for we have no clue as to what truly passes through his or her mind during a performance. Despite the fact that we cannot peer behind the facade of exhibition, the idea of “coming alive” remains entrenched in the critical vocabulary. For reviewers, it often provides a
dramatic trope for assessing the structure and flow of a concert experience. Audiences look for moments when the performer “comes alive” to decide whether the star is merely a proficient entertainer or a transcendent artist.

What is interesting about the concept of “coming alive” in regards to Brian Wilson is how, at first glance, it seems an utterly inapplicable measure. Few musicians from the rock generation are more famous for not igniting the stage than Brian. Aversion to live performance is an integral part of his legend, from his 1965 retirement from touring to his remote detachment a decade later when he was coerced into rejoining the Beach Boys’ road show. Even since striking out as a solo draw since 1999, Brian has been a notoriously aloof stage presence, often described as downright gnomic in his impassivity. Perched behind a keyboard that he only randomly touches, reading lyrics off a teleprompter, occasionally snapping his fingers or making motions that can seem the dictionary definition of the word “stilted,” he remains as awkward and unnatural a marquee attraction as pop music has ever produced.

Yet despite Brian’s dispassionate, even disinterested, demeanor, the “comes alive” motif is prevalent throughout reviews of his live appearances. Typically the idea plays out along the lines of Andrew Romano’s assessment of the early fiftieth anniversary shows, where a competent but uninspired appearance with the reunited Beach Boys at the New Orleans JazzFest was followed by an unexpectedly engaged show at New York’s Beacon Theater. “I’m not sure what I’m expecting,” Romano writes as the curtain goes up at the Beacon. “Not much, at this point. The same cardboard nostalgia [the Beach Boys] conveyed at JazzFest; the same sad void where Brian Wilson should be. I’m quickly proven wrong.” Without warning, Brian’s voice in the middle-eight of “Surfer Girl” sounds achingly emotive, leading to deliveries of “Please Let Me Wonder,” “When I Grow Up (to Be a Man),” and others that are “each lovelier and more alive than the last.” The high point for Romano is “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times,” where the technical imperfections of Brian’s present-day voice (his pitch problems and propensity for slurring) invest the song with enough pathos to transform its meaning into something wholly distinct from that of the studio original:

When Brian wrote the song in 1966, it was about his budding ambition (“to look for places where new things might be found”) and his fear of letting himself down (“each time things start to happen again . . . what goes wrong?”) But now, forty-six years later, “Times”
sounds more ragged than before, and in its fragile beauty, it seems to be saying something new, something that every grown-up eventually discovers: that even when things go wrong—when your youthful ambitions don’t pan out—you can still find your way back. The applause begins before the last note fades away. “Thank you,” Wilson says, laughing. “Thank you. That’s enough!”

Time and time again in commentary on live appearances, one finds reviewers like Romano fixating on this moment when Brian’s performance unexpectedly rises to the soulfulness of his prebreakdown years. This happens not by Brian recapturing the purity of his trademark falsetto and tenor, but by virtue of his “raggedy,” aged timber, which, not unlike Moore’s reading of the voice, now conveys the heartbreak and tragedy suffered since the Beach Boys’ youth. Romano ends his essay wondering what accounts for the difference between a “faithful rendition” of a song and a powerfully “moving” and “alive” one. His answers seem perfunctory at best, though, suggesting Brian’s need for emotional support will inspire him on a good night to come out of his onstage shell (“Maybe it was seeing his wife, Melinda, in the audience”).

A more intriguing answer is implicit in the critic’s interpretation of how this weathered, imperfect performance of “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” turns the song into “something new.” For Romano, the message changes from capturing the fear of failing one’s ambitions to a survivor’s acceptance of failure, the idea that when “youthful ambitions don’t pan out . . . you can still find your way back.” This perceived change is not a product of rewriting or revision; the lyrics are not updated to reflect Brian’s current circumstance. Rather, the new meaning is purely the result of interpretation, the “something new” arrived at by Romano’s reading the lyrics in the context of its composer’s biography. What, after all, is this narrative of “finding one’s way back” after thwarted ambitions other than a concise recapitulation of Brian’s perpetual comeback after his post-*Smile* fall? What we have here, in other words, is another example of how the star image is projected upon a performance in order to generate meaning. The ultimate significance of that meaning may be universally applicable according to Romano (“something that every grown-up eventually discovers”), but the “finding one’s way back” story line is very much Brian Wilson’s. It is the same “recovery-after-the-imaginative-flipout” plot that *People* introduced me to way back in 1976.

As many reviews will testify, since the late 1990s there have been concerts when Brian never came alive. There are also inevitable instances
When his sudden engagement with the music he performs has no logical biographical relevance. When I attended the Atlanta stop of fiftieth anniversary reunion tour, for example, Brian’s most animated moment occurred during the cover version of the Mamas and Papas’ “California Dreamin’,” when he stepped in for Carl Wilson’s lead on the second verse (“Stopped into a church . . .”) with a surprisingly soulful approximation of his late brother’s delivery.14 Responding to a crowd cheer, Brian spun toward the audience as he hit the words “and I began to pray” to cap his “coming alive” with a large-hearted thumbs-up. The moment was endearing in its spontaneity, but it bore no relevance whatsoever to the legend of Brian Wilson. If anything, it seemed an opportunity for the performer to inhabit somebody else’s music without the burden of having to be himself. Nevertheless, surveying assessments of Brian’s shows, the “comes alive” moment seems to occur disproportionately during songs with autobiographical relevance such as “Break Away” or “Sail on, Sailor” rather than amid “Drive-In,” “Girl Don’t Tell Me,” or “Fun, Fun, Fun.” This in itself should be telling: it should call attention to our desire as critics and reviewers to find performative instances rich in narrative significance. The problem for Brian Wilson criticism is that the auteur story line of his fall and rehabilitation seems the only significance we can ever find.

When the Beach Boys released That’s Why God Made the Radio, the track that most captivated me was not “Summer’s Gone” but “From There to Back Again.” Here finally was everything that for decades I had been wanting in a new Brian Wilson / Beach Boys’ song: lush chords and harmonies, tumbling bass lines and reverb-laden guitar figures, a segmented structure that takes the listener to unexpected places, and a whistling coda that captures the wistful quintessence of sunshine pop, all of which somehow sounds evocative rather than derivative, capturing the promise of an adult Beach Boys in a way that Brian either with or without the band has only sporadically attempted since his heyday (“The Night Was So Young,” “Still I Dream of It,” the live version of “Love and Mercy”). What cemented my fixation was the lack of even a subtextual hint of Brian’s story. Unlike “Summer’s Gone” or earlier solo efforts credited with living up to the Pet Sounds legacy (again, “Midnight’s Another Day”), the lyrics did not rely on biographical references to bolster their sense of poignancy and serious import. On its own, the text seems elliptical if not unremarkable, the words serving the musical emotion rather than calling attention to any extratextual significance (or any poetic pretense, for
that matter). For that reason alone, I found “From There to Back Again” freeing. It enabled me to enjoy the listening experience without relating it to Brian’s sensibility, something that had happened only intermittently in the past forty years.

The legend of Brian Wilson is certainly not going away anytime soon. Between the time this article was written and this book’s publication, a major Hollywood biopic entitled Love and Mercy (named after the first single from Brian’s 1988 solo album) was released to positive reviews and several award nominations. Director Bill Pohlad and screenwriter Oren Moverman were congratulated for the film’s unconventional structure, which contrasts the buildup to Brian’s 1967 breakdown to his efforts in the late 1980s to free himself from Eugene Landy’s perfidious clutches. The divide between Brian’s rise and fall and his subsequent redemption through his marriage to Melinda Ledbetter was made vivid by the unusual choice to employ two different actors who look nothing alike to portray the icon in his twenties and in his forties (Paul Dano and John Cusack, respectively). Critics also praised the script’s emphasis on the creative aspects of art to refresh the stale “great man” approach to the biopic genre: in several scenes, Brian’s compositional and recording innovations are painstakingly recreated so general audiences can appreciate why Pet Sounds and Smile are considered such musical milestones. Yet while the movie is refreshing in its aversion to sensationalism, the emphasis on its subject’s genius reinforces Brian’s star image by encouraging biographical analysis instead of challenging or complicating our attraction to it as consumers of popular culture. In other words, Love and Mercy makes it all the harder for listeners to ignore the specter of Brian Wilson’s celebrity while enjoying his music. For scholar/fans, the challenge is to understand how that stardom contributes to song meanings without letting those meanings obscure others that may accrue through social usage. As the examples of Doonesbury and Mad Men demonstrate, familiar music can gain meaning in surprising ways outside the auteur aesthetic. Exploring these usages allows us to appreciate just what breadth of beauty, love, and pleasure a Brian Wilson / Beach Boys song can add to our day.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 1

1. After years of circulating on the black market, this special is finally available in an authorized format as Good Vibrations Tour, released by Eagle Rock Entertainment.
2. Rock historians generally credit Jon Landau, Bruce Springsteen’s eventual manager, with establishing auteur theory as the critical norm in rock journalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One formative comment in particular is cited pervasively: “The criterion of art in rock is the capacity of the musician to create a personal, almost private, universe and express it fully.” Quoted in Marshall 2007, 102.

3. The most thorough examination of Frampton’s rise and fall is Goodman’s, but it remains a dissatisfying assessment. Goodman makes no effort to account for the popularity of *Frampton Comes Alive!* with audiences, asserting instead that its massive sales were simply engineered through “years of touring [that] provided Frampton with a following and produced the explosive sales” (Goodman 1997, 312). In assessing how the relentless tour schedule ultimately derailed Frampton’s career through oversaturation and inferior follow-up product, Goodman also fails to acknowledge that since the 1990s the guitarist has enjoyed a lucrative if not spectacular career on the nostalgia circuit, where he often performs *Frampton Comes Alive!* in its entirety.

4. “The Beach Boys’ Crazy Summer” is Romano’s “official” article on the reunion. “The Joe Thomas Interview” is a transcript of a Q & A held during research for the piece that Romano published on his Tumblr account.

5. As it turns out, “Summer’s Gone” may prove the Beach Boys’ final song after all. As the fiftieth anniversary tour wrapped up, Mike Love’s plan to return to touring under the band’s name without Brian or Alan Jardine was interpreted as him “firing” his bandmates. Most of the reports misrepresented the incident, failing to appreciate that Mike was simply doing what he had planned all along after the anniversary wrapped. The controversy inspired competing editorials by Mike and Brian in the *Los Angeles Times* (or by their representatives) that in turn made the possibility of further collaboration unlikely—at least for the time being. Of course, Beach Boys’ fans long ago learned never to say never. In the meantime, Brian began an unexpected collaboration with British guitar legend Jeff Beck, including a short fall 2013 coheadlining tour and an impending album.

6. I intentionally use simplified terms such as “sensibility” here to avoid the jargon that renders much academic criticism on celebrity painful to read. By “sensibility” I refer to what theorists often call a celebrity’s “star image.” As Greco explains, “The star image of a celebrity refers to an interaction between various aspects of a celebrity. These elements include the discourse that might surround a celebrity away from, or in conjunction with, his or her performance. This includes the biography of the performer, as known publicly and as constructed in narrative form. Also, these elements include the roles with which a performer is associated, which have certain continuities and discontinuities between them. Finally, the celebrity can be thought of as a performer as part of a certain kind of tradition, which he or she embodies or transforms. It is in the interaction of these different parts of celebrity that a star image takes form” (Greco 2011, 95).

7. “Do It Again” would reestablish the Beach Boys’ connection to surfing a mere four years later, but by 1968 they could only evoke beach life nostalgically instead of as a contemporary fad.
8. See also my *Brian Wilson*, where I explore the sensibility conveyed by Brian’s classic falsetto and tenor (Curnutt 2012, 68–75).


10. One issue I do not have space here to address is the fact that many of these “autobiographical” lyrics are authored by collaborators speaking for Brian in the first person, sometimes at his insistence (as in *Pet Sounds*), sometimes with only his most ambivalent participation (“Brian”). In my book I explore how *That Lucky Old Sun* lyricist Scott Bennett specifically evoked Brian’s breakdown in “Midnight’s Another Day” in order to bring gravitas to that 2008 project (Curnutt 2012, 129–31).

11. Or maybe it is becoming one. In recent years “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” has been performed at numerous rallies against anti-gay marriage legislation, with the line “Wouldn’t it be nice to live together / In the kind of world where we belong” proving a LGBT rallying cry.

12. The only other live title that comes close to inspiring as many spoofs is *At Budokan*, inspired by 1978’s *Cheap Trick at Budokan* and 1979’s *Bob Dylan at Budokan*.

13. The star image is not always invoked to describe such uplifting in-concert moments. Reviewing a 2006 London rendition of “Break Away,” for example, *Mojo* critic Peter Doggett notes how the autobiographical relevance of the second verse’s casual reference to hearing “voices in my head” became uncomfortably vivid as Brian seemed to grapple with its implication: “As Brian reached [the line], his hands dropped abruptly to his side, and blind panic crossed his face. For a moment, the mood changed from celebration to freakshow. It was impossible to forget that this is a man who frequently hears voices in his head, threatening to kill him” (Doggett 2007, 54).

14. The Beach Boys first recorded “California Dreamin’” in the early 1980s with a nasally first-verse vocal by Mike Love. Produced by future “Kokomo” cowriter and producer Terry Melcher, it appeared on an obscure album called *Rock and Roll City* that was sold only at the electronics retailer Radio Shack in 1983. Three years later, the band released an altered version showcasing Alan Jardine. (Both versions feature Carl Wilson’s soulful lead on the second verse.) The 1986 version appeared on the otherwise perfunctory compilation *Made in the USA* with the guilty pleasure “Rock ‘n’ Roll to the Rescue” and charted as a single, reaching number fifty-seven on Billboard. A music video was released to both MTV and VH-1 to promote the song; depending on one’s affection for the Hawaiian shirt-laden “Kokomo,” which also features clips from the Tom Cruise movie *Cocktail* (1988), “California Dreamin’” has the distinction of being the
best Beach Boys’ music video—mainly because, unlike videos for “Getcha Back” (1985) or “That’s Why God Made the Radio” (2012), the imagery does not exploit Beach Boys nostalgia. The Beach Boys’ rendition of “California Dreamin’” became an amusing source of trivia in 1988 when the punk band Dead Milkmen namechecked it in their classic single “Punk Rock Girl” (“We went to the Philly Pizza Company. . . . Someone played a Beach Boys song / On the jukebox / It was ‘California Dreamin’ / So we started screamin’ / ‘On such a winter’s day’”); many listeners, unaware of the Beach Boys’ cover version, assumed the Milkmen mistakenly thought the original “California Dreamin’” was by the Boys, not the Mamas and the Papas.