During the 1960s, Anglo-American popular music and the culture with which it was near-synonymous were transformed in many regards. Enabled in part by rising prosperity and in part by social, demographic, and technological change, the commercial record business burgeoned, both as an industry and as a cultural force. Between 1965 and 1967 in particular, a wave of ambitious artists created innovative, commercially successful work. With the music of the Beatles and Bob Dylan catalyzing many of these transformations, the middle of the decade saw popular music modulate into what would soon be identified as rock, distinguished from its predecessor by its variety, structural innovation, textual depth, and diversity of influence—and by the credibility it was now able to command beyond its own aesthetic and demographic circuits (Gendron 2002, 170–205).

No homegrown American group experienced or advanced these transformations more than the Beach Boys. Following the group’s formation in 1961, its early years had seen chief songwriter Brian Wilson, working alone and in association with various lyricists, addressing a limited set of concerns centered on Southern California’s surfing subculture or conventional pop themes such as romance and cars. Even during this period, Wilson’s melodic gift, arranging skills, and growing command of the recording studio were starting to shift some of the foundations upon which popular music in the United States had for many years stood. But from late 1964 onward, the thematic focus of his songs also began
to change and diversify: on the one hand, deepening their introspective, emotional concerns (a move that in 1966 would culminate in the completion of *Pet Sounds*); on the other, following a wider trajectory to encompass major historical, social, and cultural matters (a move that in 1967 would lead to the noncompletion of *Smile*). In the space of only two to three years, Wilson—with his fellow group members holding on in varying states of anxiety to his seemingly runaway creative train—helped to transform the nature, ambition, and standing of popular music. In the process he also moved well beyond the world in which he had founded the Beach Boys just a few years earlier. Whether such departures saw Brian Wilson (to extend the railroad metaphor) going off the rails or opening up new territories; whether (to invoke surfing associations) they dragged him into deeper waters or bore him to greater heights, this chapter pursues the trip.

I: Underground Formations: Steps Toward a Counter-Cultural Los Angeles

Viewed retroactively, and with an eye on the currents that Wilson would follow in mid-decade, the Beach Boys were launched on fairly calm waters, musical and otherwise. Though hardly flat, the American popular music scene in the early 1960s was one in which the impetus provided by mid- to late 1950s rock ‘n’ roll had slowed; yet to register were the galvanizing effects of the Beatles-led “British Invasion,” Motown’s soul-pop fusions, and the folk revival and folk-rock forms associated with Bob Dylan and the Byrds. Among the white population, at least, economic growth and low inflation underwrote widespread satisfaction with and faith in the American way of life. In the White House, the Kennedy administration was combining rhetoric, symbolism, and Cold War nationalism to sustain allegiance in foreign policy and contain grassroots dissent (most obviously in relation to race relations) at home. Vietnam remained low on the public agenda. Outside the realms of government and party politics, meanwhile, the New Left had scarcely articulated itself; Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* was yet to advance environmentalism beyond the margins of popular attention; juvenile delinquency (source of an earlier media panic) had been successfully restaged as *West Side Story*; and the Beat revolt readily commodified into so many beatnik styles. Such patterns were also evident in the Beach Boys’ home environment. Its growth fueled by large-scale investments in aerospace, real estate, and private automobiles, early 1960s Los Angeles embodied (not least in its own self-representations) the nation’s prosperous, secure, accommodating, and benevolent future.
Though well past its 1940s studio heyday, Hollywood was busy reconfiguring itself as a burgeoning television-based entertainment industry—with popular music its underdeveloped though promising revenue stream (Starr 2009, 3–28, 217–32, 245–66; Sanjek 1996, 345–50).

Yet even as the Beach Boys took their first steps into the latter, the countercultural tide upon which Brian Wilson would later ride was rising. Ironically, given its embodiment of the more hedonistic, consumerist aspects of the American way of life, the surfing craze that afforded Wilson’s group its early profile was not solely, to use Herbert Marcuse’s term, affirmative; if, like other subcultures, it helped sustain the dominant order, it also described, even pushed, some of its limits (Marcuse 1972, 59; Marcuse 1968, 95). It was not so much that surfers had initially received a mixed press, courtesy of associations with risk-taking, juvenile delinquency, and rock ‘n’ roll (May 2002, 96–98). Within their preoccupations with fun, escapism, and youth, as reported by Tom Wolfe in *The Pump House Gang* (1968), there also lay a cult of sensual pleasure, of rejuvenation through immersion in the Pacific’s waves, which, as Wolfe showed in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), might lead into deeper waters of human experience (White 1994, 139–41; Phoenix 2001, 109; Wolfe 1989, 27–46; Wolfe 1968, 320–23). Even at the decade’s outset, intersections between the bohemian dimensions of Southern Californian surf and West Coast Beat lifestyles were emblematic of the latter propensity (Chidester and Priore 2008, 48–49, 68–69). Other musicians embodying the connection between Venice and the city’s growing counterculture included David Crosby of the Byrds and Jim Morrison of the Doors, both of whom lived for a time in the coastal enclave.
One distinctive feature of the Beat scene in Venice—its radical politics—was emblematic of another subcurrent within the rising countercultural tide in Los Angeles. Official state-level investigations had deepened Cold War antiradicalism across California as a whole, and by the early 1960s the postwar red scare was not over. Yet the House UnAmerican Activities Committee hearings at San Francisco City Hall in early 1960 had triggered mass protests, and public fear of both communism and the anticommunist lobby was diminishing (Heale 1986, 17–29; McBride 2003, 116; Goodman 1969, 428–34). If the late 1950s saw a political New Left emerging across the country from (and beyond) the ashes of the Communist Party–associated Old Left, the conflation in Venice of political, social, and cultural radicalism—with the latter providing a good deal of the local impetus—provided a template for similar activity elsewhere in Los Angeles. This was in part because, even as long-established ideological leanings and the intensity of the red scare had kept the political Left relatively weak in the city, its status as a mass-media and mass-entertainment center ensured, as David McBride has noted, that the cultural sphere (and thus cultural radicalism) would be a “fundamental concern” (2003, 111, 116). The fact that Venice had a sizable black population (which the later countercultural scene around Sunset Strip would lack) no doubt underwrote the inclusion of civil rights on the local radical agenda.

But what both communities shared—a cultural dissidence that was also political and social—was scarcely restricted to these neighborhoods. Nor was it previously unknown. During the height of the postwar red scare, what durability progressivism had shown in the region owed more than a little to what Michael Denning later dubbed the “cultural front.” Informal gatherings held by actor Will Geer and his wife, the actress Herta Ware, at their Topanga Canyon ranch, for example, provided an under-the-radar forum for the social networking of fellow radical theater activists and other cultural and political progressives, many of whom had been blacklisted for their Popular Front–era activities and associations. From the late 1950s onward their low-intensity but long-life pilot lights would ignite others (Denning 1998; Gray 2004, 354–55; Rossinow 2002, 104–5; Bell 2012, 64–65).

Playing a notable part within these communities of cultural radicals was a group of folk music collectors, enthusiasts, and artists whose activities constituted an additional indirect tributary of the Los Angeles counterculture. Active in the early postwar People’s Songs group and inspired by the example (and periodic presence) of the Geers’ friend
Woody Guthrie, figures such as Mario “Boots” Casetta and Earl Robinson not only carried the torch through the anticommunist era, particularly for topical songs; their efforts and those of others also provided the basis on which the folk music revival in Los Angeles would later build (Cohen 2002, 47–49, 75–77, 118–20; Cohen and Samuelson 1996, 132–34; Lieberman 1989, 60, 69, 117; Dunaway and Beer 2010, 70–73). In 1957 former union activist Herb Cohen opened the city’s first folk music coffeehouse, the Unicorn, located on Sunset Strip. Over the next year two more folk venues opened in West Hollywood, a few blocks south of the Strip. The Ash Grove featured old-time, blues, and bluegrass artists, and became a focal point for the traditionalist wing of the folk revival. Sharing much of the Old Left’s class-oriented outlook, club owner Ed Pearl supported a range of progressive causes emblematic of the long-standing association between folk music and radical politics, from labor unions via racial justice to nuclear disarmament (Lieberman 1989, 34–46; Sullivan 2009; Nolan 2008). The Troubadour, meanwhile, provided a gathering place for the revival’s modernizing wing; more attuned to the politics of the personal, owner Doug Weston promoted what would later become the contemporary singer-songwriter genre, with its sensitivity to emotional and spiritual concerns (Hoskyns 1997, 74–75). Complementary in their activities and emblematic of its varied aspects, both the Ash Grove and the Troubadour would serve as seedbeds for the city’s nascent underground as the 1960s progressed.

They did so in part by providing the physical venues for musicians—as well as counterculturalists more broadly—to gather. The Troubadour in particular served as a forum wherein the inheritance of traditional music and topical songs sustained at the Ash Grove interacted with the inspirations provided by the folk revivalism of Bob Dylan and the pop song innovations of the Beatles. From as early as 1962, the migration of a number of folk revivalists from New York City and elsewhere led to the coalescence around Los Angeles of a group of musicians—many of them also inspired by the Beats and then the Beatles—keen to create music that eroded the gulf between the supposed depth of acoustic folk-song and the assumed shallowness of amplified pop (Hoskyns 2005, 1–9; Hoskyns 1997, 74–77). The Troubadour became one early fulcrum of these activities. A regular at the venue from 1963, for example, Van Dyke Parks played piano in jam sessions there with a number of influential musicians, including Danny Hutton (later of Three Dog Night), whom he got to know at a Monday-night hootenanny in 1964, and Jim (subsequently Roger) McGuinn, whose meeting with Gene Clark at the club
that March led to the formation of the Byrds. Others crossing the same circle included David Crosby (soon to become the Byrds’ third recruit) and Steven Stills (later of Buffalo Springfield). Such figures would help provide bridges between the musical and cultural crucible of the folk and post-folk-revival club scene and the commercial pop world whose heights Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys had been successfully climbing over the preceding couple of years (Unterberger 2002, 75–80; Rogan 2012, 27–29, 35–36; Greenwald 2003).

Crucial in this connection were the debut performances of the Byrds at the Ciro’s Le Disc club on Sunset Strip in March and April 1965. As Domenic Priore has shown, at precisely this time the area’s club scene was undergoing rapid transformation, with demographic and cultural changes prompting the displacement of an older, more bourgeois, movie-oriented clientele by a younger, predominantly teenaged crowd attuned to pop music (Priore 2007, 16–25, 41–45; Hoskyns 1997, 71–74; Hoskyns 1994, 34–37; Adler 1967, 116–31; Bernhard and Friedenberg 1967, 8–13).

The Byrds’ shows were significant in part because they quickly attracted large numbers of teenagers, the group’s appeal confirmed and further boosted by the rise of their recording of Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” to the top of the Billboard Hot 100 in June 1965. These events also mattered because that success demonstrated the commercial potential of the folk hybrids then being crafted at the Troubadour and elsewhere (Crosby 1989, 10, 64–66, 76–77, 79–84, 88–89, 98–99; Einarson 2005, 38–44; Priore 2007, 73–78; Hoskyns 1997, 76–79; Unterberger 2002, 113–17).

It was not only subsequent record sales that made the shows important, however; grassroots word of mouth—lent strength by Bob Dylan’s brief on-stage appearance with the Byrds on March 26—attracted fellow musicians and other creative types, entertainers and younger movie stars, talent scouts, bohemians, intellectuals, and journalists to Ciro’s. Both the group’s producer, Terry Melcher, and their financier, Eddie Tickner, subsequently described the residency there as a “catalyst,” the latter dubbing it the start of a new “movement that was happening amongst the artists, the poets, and the freaky film people.” While some of its “mythic dimensions” may have been ascribed in hindsight, the circumstances and participants’ recollections suggest that such renderings were not simply hyperbole. Other groups would follow the Byrds onto Sunset Strip: the Mothers of Invention, Buffalo Springfield, the Doors, Love, and more. Insofar as they set the stage, the Byrds’ appearances at Ciro’s were emblematic of a new countercultural complex identifying itself and measuring its potential (Hjort 2008, 27–30; Robbins 1965, 6; Rogan 2012, 100–113).
These events were of particular significance vis-à-vis Brian Wilson because they helped bring together not only people who would make the Los Angeles counterculture a source of creative inspiration, but also those able to link it to the city’s commercial music industry, such as producers, managers and A & R men. Some, like Columbia Records (later Elektra) talent scout and promoter Billy James, played important roles in this regard, but not in relation to Wilson. Others, however, would start to enter the head Beach Boy’s circle over the next year or so. One such was David Anderle, a native Angelino once employed to prepare recorded music for in-car cartridge players, now applying his own Sunset Strip experience as an MGM Records talent scout, and subsequently to be introduced via a family member to Wilson and his group. A second was Massachusetts transplant Michael Vosse, onetime college friend of Anderle and television production assistant, then becoming active behind the scenes as what he called a “facilitator,” liaising between record labels, musicians, other artists, and the burgeoning underground. A third was homegrown Los Angeles Free Press journalist Paul Jay Robbins, a former Ash Grove regular who had persuaded Free Press founder and editor Art Kunkin to publish his review of the Byrds’ Ciro’s shows (in spite of Kunkin’s sense that such events were insignificant vis-à-vis his own Old Leftist concerns). Robbins’s highly literate appreciation not only advised readers of the nation’s second oldest alternative newspaper that these musical engagements were a manifestation of “a very important social and spiritual movement”; his attendance at the shows would also lead to friendships with David Crosby and (himself on the Ciro’s dance floor watching the group) Van Dyke Parks. Looking back two years later, Robbins would write that from their Sunset Strip “launch pad” the Byrds had given voice to a “hymn [that] sounded from the total collective consciousness of a new breed of people” (Holzman 2000, 160, 164–65, 186; Williams 1997, 40–41; Vosse 1968; Hjort 2008, 30).

Particularly in its musical dimensions, such countercultivation could be traced back well before the Byrds’ opening dates at Ciro’s in the spring of 1965. Van Dyke Parks had first met David Crosby when both were performing on the West Coast folk revival circuit during 1963. He reconnected with Crosby, and as noted above, first met Danny Hutton at the Troubadour in 1964. Hutton initially crossed Brian Wilson’s path at Gold Star studios in Hollywood late that year, and would move into his circle toward the end of 1965 after the two had been reintroduced by David Anderle, who had become Hutton’s manager soon after the Byrds’ debut performances at Ciro’s. Though both Anderle and Parks had at-
tended those shows, it was Hutton who introduced them to one another, with the result that the former—having by coincidence also heard Parks at work on an arrangement of the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony at Western studios—agreed to manage Parks, thereafter securing the MGM deal that would lead to the release of that arrangement as his debut single, “Number Nine,” at the end of 1965. The single included the original German text translated into English by Paul Jay Robbins. Also in December 1965, David Crosby took Parks up to meet Brian Wilson at the latter’s home in Beverly Hills following a session at the Troubadour; in February 1966 Parks and Wilson would meet again, this time at the home of Terry Melcher, recently deposed as producer of the Byrds.³ Later in the year Parks would introduce Robbins, and reintroduce Michael Vosse, to Wilson.

From the Ash Grove via the Troubadour and the Free Press to Sunset Strip and Ciro’s (and thereafter into Wilson’s inner circle), Paul Jay Robbins’s trajectory was illuminating. Both a reporter and a participant, he had picked up guitar tips from Woody Guthrie’s protégé Jack Elliott, and prior to the Byrds’ debut at Ciro’s had taken part in the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. In November 1966 he would witness the so-called “riot on Sunset Strip” and work in defense of its youthful partisans. He was therefore in a good position to register the modulations of the counterculture—not just musical—as it took shape. Such rearrangements were certainly generic in part, with blues and country-oriented traditional or topical music styles fading into early singer-songwriter experiments, and both then giving way to the varied innovations subsumed under the catchall label “folk-rock” (Unterberger 2002, 88–99). But they also had racial dimensions, the balance off- and onstage becoming whiter by degree as the catchment area and demographic profile of audiences evolved, while the stress on tradition that had given opportunities to older blues musicians yielded to an emphasis on youth and innovation.⁴ The changes reflected new artistic values, too, as egalitarian, communitarian folk club norms became augmented (or supplanted) by the appeal to self-expression of the nightclub scene.

Insofar as he worked for a publication addressing a variety of interests, Robbins’s journalistic role was similarly illuminating. With roots in the Old Left and an agenda at once New Leftist and countercultural, the Free Press had been founded in 1964 as (in Art Kunkin’s words) “a community newspaper” run by “liberals” (Kunkin 1964, 1). Published at first from the basement of the Fifth Estate coffeehouse, directly opposite Ciro’s on the Sunset Strip, it supported, at least metaphorically,
Beat, folk, and similar less market-oriented creative pursuits while also reflecting, more literally, on the underground’s growing traffic with the higher-profile aspects of commercialized pop culture. It was here and hereabouts that Brian Wilson would tune in: one eye on popular youth trends and the other on musical and cultural innovations.

II: Establishing a Beachhead: Brian Wilson Tunes In

Biographies and memoirs offer various accounts of the role played by drugs—marijuana and LSD in particular—in the life and work of Brian Wilson, and in the development of the counterculture whose circuits he plugged into during the mid-1960s. Though politicians and others came to demonize it via scare tactics concerning drugs of which they disapproved, the counterculture was not simply an exercise in substance abuse, and the community finding itself on Ciro’s dance floor was by no means in a narcotic haze. At the time, marijuana use was rare among younger audience members, and psychedelics were only starting to spread beyond their military and psychiatric test beds. Had drugs been “the primary motivation,” the chronicler and firsthand witness Eve Babitz has noted, Ciro’s would not have seen the energy levels it did (Hjort 2008, 30; Priore 2007, 75–76).

Nor was Brian Wilson initially attracted to the scene in order to gain access to narcotics, or necessarily drawn into it by malevolent individuals seeking personal gain by exposing him to them. It appears, rather, that the Beach Boys’ leader first encountered this subculture as part of his quest for creative, intellectual inspiration among the musicians and their associates surrounding his work in the recording studio. He did so at a crucial time, for during the latter half of 1964 his expanding musical ambitions were starting to chafe against a relentless tour schedule, the demands of the Beach Boys’ label Capitol Records for marketable (if not necessarily memorable) product, and his father’s domineering attitude toward his work (all of which may have played a part in Brian’s nervous breakdown at the end of the year). If he was (too) easily impressed by some of his new contacts, that experience also no doubt owed something to his own less-than-cosmopolitan upbringing, which had not exposed him to the sorts of ideas, lifestyles, and modes of artistic expression to be found within the Los Angeles counterculture. (As his first wife, Marilyn, remarked later, “Brian came from Inglewood: Squaresville.”) In any event, Wilson was neither the first nor the only creative individual to cultivate novel ways of stimulating or tapping the imaginative wellsprings
more deeply. To this extent his willingness to try drugs other than alcohol and nicotine was less than surprising (Carlin 2006, 53–59, 61–63; Lambert 2007, 151).

Identifying channels and timing is neither easy nor, in some regards, of prime importance. Wilson appears to have been introduced to marijuana in late 1964 by Loren Schwartz, an employee of the Beach Boys’ representatives William Morris, not long after Wilson had moved into his own apartment in Hollywood. A few months later, most probably in April 1965, the same source gave Wilson access to LSD, supplied by Augustus Owsley Stanley III’s newly established production facility. Schwartz’s West Hollywood apartment served as a regular forum for those (musicians or otherwise) who shared an interest in creative expression and consciousness expansion beyond the mainstream. In addition to Wilson, guests included Byrds’ members Jim McGuinn, David Crosby, and Chris Hillman, Schwartz’s onetime high school friend Tony Asher, and former folk revivalist turned studio musician Van Dyke Parks. Schwartz’s apartment was not unique: Parks’s home on Melrose Avenue also provided a rendezvous point, particularly for writers, performers, producers, managers, and others then starting to reshape the Los Angeles music scene. Along with a number of local meeting-places (such as Ben Frank’s restaurant, Canter’s delicatessen, and Fred C. Dobbs’s coffeehouse), such venues helped advance the city’s countercultural network-building via social interactions, exchanges of texts and ideas, and more: “scores of people,” as Robbins recalled, “clicking antennae together” (Carlin 2006, 64–65; Badman 2004, 73, 87; Gaines 1988, 145, 151–53; Wilson 1991, 103–5).

Perhaps more difficult to pin down precisely is the relationship between the new cultural climate that Brian Wilson encountered and cultivated at this time and his own creativity. Though influences are often asserted, they are not easy to identify and assess, at least in relation to marijuana and LSD; the varied, unpredictable, contingent nature of individual experiences with psychedelics in particular only complicates the task (de Rios and Janiger 2003, 76–87, 108–14; Letcher 2006, 186–91). In Wilson’s case this is all the more so given the many developments in his life from late 1964 onward (the end of touring, married life, a pivotal confrontation with his father, a nervous breakdown) and the musical challenges—at once threatening and inspirational—being posed by the Beatles and others. For an artist whose work had been innovative from the outset, the extent to which any one “radical departure or dramatic advancement in composition elements” might be ascribed to consciousness expansion is thus debatable (Lambert 2007, 186–87, 190–91, 204–6;
Carlin 2006, 65). Yet, as Philip Lambert has shown, Wilson’s experiments with marijuana and LSD can be associated with changes in his writing, arranging, and production work during the first half of 1965: vis-à-vis marijuana on “In the Back of My Mind” and (to a lesser degree) “Please Let Me Wonder”; in relation to LSD (as Wilson himself vividly recalled) on “California Girls.” Such songs were emblematic of a new phase that would climax in the Pet Sounds album the following year and in the Smile project thereafter. Aspects of the change could be heard in the chord progressions, instrumental coloration, and melodic innovation of the songs. They were also discernible in their underlying design, becoming more complex and sophisticated, combining integration, fragmentation, and variation in forms that were subtle, graceful, and ingenious (Lambert 2007, 190–91, 204, 210, 212, 215–16, 221; Wilson 1991, 114–20). Though the Beach Boys can hardly be considered exemplars of acid rock, it is also possible—insofar as any such musical genre can be adequately defined—to identify in their mid-1960s work qualities and trends later associated with psychedelia: greater fluidity, elaboration, and formal complexity; a cultivation of sonic textures; the introduction of new (combinations of) instruments, multiple keys, and/or floating tonal centers; and at times the use of slower, more hypnotic tempos (Hicks 1999, 63–73; Whiteley 1992, 2–5).

Sound, in any event, was not the only means by which countercultural and psychedelic inspirations manifested themselves: innovation in Wilson’s writing also took lyrical form, and any assessment of countercultural influences therefore invites attention to his songs’ words. Firsthand and secondary accounts agree that the creative, inspirational bookshelf to which Wilson gained access from late 1964 included poetry and prose (by Kahlil Gibran, Hermann Hesse, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and others) as well as cultural criticism (Arthur Koestler’s recently published The Act of Creation often being cited, not least by Wilson himself). It also featured diverse expressions of non-Christian religions and belief systems: Native American creeds; Hinduism, as embodied in the Bhagavad Gita; Confucianism, refracted via the I Ching or Book of Changes; various types of Buddhism, particularly Tibetan and Zen; Subud, a newer religious movement rooted in Islam; and other persuasions, from scientology via astrology to numerology (Carlin 2006, 65, 99; Gaines 1988, 152; Wilson 1991, 104). The countercultural bookshelf found room for the promotion of related practices, too, such as meditation and yoga, as well as disciplines like vegetarianism, in which Wilson evinced an interest. A number of these beliefs and activities were associated with the

Testimony from close associates and his own statements at the time confirm that Wilson made himself familiar with various aspects of underground thought; and it is possible to discern links between compositional innovations noted by Lambert and countercultural aesthetic and psychological precepts (concerning representation, form, and identity, say). No more than experience, however, does reading necessarily shape creativity. Wilson was in any case less adept (perhaps less self-confident) in his use of words than of music, and during this period he continued to work with lyricists, as had been his custom since the Beach Boys’ first recordings. If this complicates matters, the fact that the Los Angeles countercultural network included people who wrote song lyrics, rather than furnishing narcotic connections alone, also extended its value to him: during the two years following his introduction to marijuana and LSD, the innovations that marked his use of sounds would be matched lyrically, not only on individual tracks but on entire collections of songs.

III: From Flatlands to Highways: Sounding Out the Territory with Asher and Parks

Wilson’s two main lyricists during these years, Tony Asher and Van Dyke Parks, brought to their collaborations distinctive experiences, interests, and skills. Born in England though raised in and around Hollywood, Asher had dabbled in jazz but by the time he met Wilson (at some point during 1965) was employed by the Carson-Scott advertising agency writing jingles for commercials. A native of Mississippi later domiciled in Florida and Pennsylvania, Parks had exchanged a classical music education for the world of West Coast folk clubs and, latterly, work as a jobbing Hollywood studio musician. Asher’s career trajectory was consistent with what he called his “pretty conservative” outlook; Parks, raised in a progressive family active in campaigns for social change, had taken risks. Though each played piano, perhaps the main thing the two men shared (in light of their self-ascribed lack of credentials) was surprise at the opportunity to work with Brian Wilson: both had met the Beach Boys’ leader socially on occasion, but neither boasted a track record as a lyricist, nor did Wilson know all that much about their musical backgrounds (Abbott 2001, 39–40; Leaf 1996, 37; Gaines 1988, 173–74; *Endless Summer*
Whether Wilson’s invitations were more a function of instinct or of his assessment of their respective ways with words in conversation, they were emblematic of his own stance at the time, and of the leanings of youth-oriented American popular music: one foot in the entertainment industry’s commercial, mass-market-oriented world; the other stepping into less familiar domains. Just as these domains tended to be less risk averse, so those entering them were more likely to draw on novel inspirations and unconventional resources, to speak to new communities, and to offer alternative types of musical expression.

The nature of Wilson’s successive working relationships with Asher and Parks throws light on the trajectory of his songwriting between early 1965 and early 1967. Both men were familiar with the Los Angeles underground (thus Loren Schwartz’s recommendation prompted Wilson to invite Asher’s participation; see Leaf 1996, 17). Within that common context and their shared lyrical remit, however, what they brought to their work with Wilson, what he sought from them, and how their joint efforts took shape, differed in varying degrees. Asher’s contributions were based on in-depth conversations with the Beach Boys’ leader about either personal relationships and emotional states or spirituality and religious faith, in which he served as a sounding board-cum-amanuensis for what Wilson later called his “single-minded pursuit of a personal vision.” While the two men also discussed a range of musical styles, Asher played a reactive part in that regard, at times having little idea of how songs to which he had contributed would sound until he heard the finished recordings (Abbott 2001, 41–44; Wilson 1991, 140; White 1994, 255–57). Parks, though also engaged for his facility with words, brought to his work with Wilson more diverse musical experience inside and outside the studio; he was invited both to observe and to take part in recording sessions. Perhaps more importantly, Parks was given greater scope not only in realizing their objectives lyrically but also in formulating them. (As he wrote in 2006, “Wilson asked me to take a free hand in the lyrics and the album’s [Smile’s] thematic direction.”) More precise assessments are rendered difficult by the varying emphases both men have placed on their collaboration over time. But if the primary themes of Pet Sounds (“autobiography: the gospel of Brian,” in David Leaf’s words) were compatible with—perhaps invited, even demanded—Asher’s essentially interpretive role, such a reading is less persuasive vis-à-vis Parks’s part in the making of Smile. Even taking Asher’s own characterization into account (“autobiography, but . . . I wouldn’t limit it to Brian’s autobiography”), Pet Sounds had lyrical precursors in the Beach Boys’ recordings; only to a much lesser de-
gree could this be said of *Smile* (Leaf 1997a, 40; Jensen, n.d.; Staton 2005, 58–61; Parks 2006, 57; Priore 2005, 82–83; Leaf 1996, 39).

Most of *Pet Sounds* was written and recorded between July 1965 and April 1966 (with the lion’s share of the studio work completed in the last four months of this period); if “Good Vibrations” is included, work on *Smile* began in February 1966 (if not, then May 1966) and was abandoned in May 1967. Regardless of precise dates, witnesses and participants have reported difficulties in separating the two projects. Insofar as both post-dated Wilson’s introduction to marijuana and LSD, in any case, it makes little point to distinguish between the two albums in terms of their differential impact. (Wilson has explicitly acknowledged the influence of LSD on his writing of the earlier work; see Badman 2004, 96, 117, 126, 131–32, 187–88; Abbott 2001, 114–15; Holdship and Doggett 2007, 50.)

Timing should not be ignored altogether, however. For whereas both *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* may be characterized as countercultural to varying degrees, the former clearly carried the Beach Boys’ previously well-established romantic themes into the psychedelic realm (witness the variant title of—and lyrics for—the *Pet Sounds* song “I Know There’s an Answer”: “Hang On to Your Ego”). If *Smile* had romantic dimensions too (which it did), these were aesthetic and political rather than personal in nature, and were informed by more than firsthand experience. By the time Wilson and Parks got to work during the early summer of 1966, in effect, the musical, psychological, and spiritual beachheads opened up via “In the Back of My Mind,” “California Girls,” and *Pet Sounds* had made room for (and were being extended by) an array of reinforcements, historical, social, political, and countercultural. While no single influence alone explains such advances, Wilson’s choice of a new lyricist clearly played a part in the shift between the fields of vision of *Pet Sounds* and of *Smile*. Cosmopolitan, liberally educated, and well-read, Van Dyke Parks drew inspirations from the Beats, the folk revival, and more toward *Smile*.

In their occasional get-togethers, Wilson had no doubt recognized Parks’s verbal dexterity; he may also have gleaned a sense of his interests, knowledge, and musical abilities (Carlin 2006, 92; Wilson 1991, 145–46; Priore 2005, 34–40). Yet whether it was anything more than his way with words that appealed is hard to say, not least because assessments have differed as to the breadth of Wilson’s own horizons at this time. Abbott argues that in spite (or perhaps because) of his new countercultural leanings, career demands caused Wilson to be “isolated from . . . current affairs and world issues” during late 1965 and early 1966, and he displayed no interest in political concerns. Priore, however, refers to Wilson’s intrinsic or nascent social conscience preceding his meet-
ings with Parks, and senses growing pacifist and environmental sensibilities between the early spring and summer of 1966. Reum credits the Beach Boys’ leader with similar feelings during the period in which he and Parks worked on Smile (Abbott 2001, 41; Priore 2005, 39, 65, 79, 83, 89–91; Allen 2004, 16). Clearly Wilson was broadening his outlook and knowledge: by the summer, for example, he was expressing fears about urban pollution and an interest in healthy lifestyles (Carter 2013, 47–49).

Whatever latent concerns about American values, beliefs, and practices he was beginning to harbor were, in any event, familiar territory to his new cowriter. Parks, moreover, brought to the collaboration not only historical, social, and cultural knowledge but also an established interest in creative writing that would enable him to articulate his and their ideas. As a result, imagery and wordplay, allusions, quotations, and more would make of Smile a complex palimpsest of songs whose vision was sustained in words as well as sound.

Though witnesses suggest an understandable degree of struggle to realize the composers’ objectives, the work’s close interlocking of musical and lyrical motifs evinced a sharing of ideas, back and forth. On the premise that its performance decades later completed, rather than reconstructed, the original effort, Smile was certainly assuming an overall form and direction. But its bearing was not only geographical, across the nation from east to west, as many observers have noted. It was also social and political, ideological and cultural, across the varied contours of the so-called movement of the 1960s as it grew: from New Left to counterculture. Even as Wilson recognized the concerns Parks had voiced—about racial conflict at home, a militarized Cold War strategy abroad, and the nation’s conflicted self-definitions and historical track record—so their exchanges yielded a work in progress in which current, more explicitly politicized radicalisms were effectively articulated via countercultural figurations of natives, nature, and the naïve. As important, in the course of this repositioning, Smile also traversed complex landscapes of faith: from national allegiance and ideological persuasion to religious belief and spiritual devotion, it drew listeners through history and experience into the mystic (Priore 2005, 73, 77).

IV: Beyond Terra Firma: On Smile’s Contested Ground

Articulating a journey that moves to and fro between realms of innocence and experience, Smile picks up where Pet Sounds leaves off. More
precisely, it describes a similar trajectory across congruent yet more varied terrains, in effect turning its predecessor’s personal, intimate, introspective vision into an exploration of the nation’s historical, social, ideological, and cultural identity. This common trope is signified in a variety of ways. At a superficial level, both albums announce departures (on bicycle and train), literally making the right noises for travelers of all ages; by sail and steam, shipping extends their metaphoric range. More substantively, both rely on trusted countercultural lodestars: love, self-knowledge, and personal commitment provide orientation throughout the bildungsroman of Pet Sounds, and are supported in Smile by native wisdom and natural piety, alternative religions, and altered states of consciousness. Destinations in both journeys remain unclear, of course: some routes are unmapped or lead nowhere; terrain can be broken or choppy. Motivated and sanctioned by emotional, material, or spiritual desire, moreover, protagonists on each album discover that the quest for individual experience or collective wisdom brings neither security nor clarity but only uncertainty and mystery. Pet Sounds begins and ends with personal questions: yet as the hopeful speculations of “Wouldn’t It Be Nice?” give way to the mournful resignation of “Caroline, No,” so romantic disenchantment becomes the price of adolescent enlightenment. Smile carries a greater—not solely individual but also national—burden, yet it describes a similar figure: the historical, social, ideological, and emotional promises of the American dream that are at stake in “Heroes and Villains” (a west “lost and gone,” “unknown” back east on the city upon a hill) yield to the nightmare conflagrations of “Mrs. O’Leary’s Cow” in return for the briefest of tastes of the beloved community in “On a Holiday” and a mere hint of universal illumination, itself dislocated and inexplicable, in “Good Vibrations” thereafter.

Whereas Pet Sounds concludes in a personal disillusion for which any emotional maturity appears scant compensation, however, Smile does conceive of a collective redemption and reenchantment for which historical declension may serve as necessary precondition. The former album moves from innocence to experience, describing a fall that, as Lambert explains, is written musically into its fabric by way of recurring melodic arches, minor-third key changes, and descending stepwise bass lines (Abbott 2001, 88; Lambert 2007, 227–28, 230, 232–33, 234–35, 236, 238, 249; Lambert 2008). Metaphorically at least, Smile recapitulates and combines, transposes and inverts those movements, both embedding and articulating personal, social, and historical trajectories via the repeated figure—melodic, textual, and symbolic—of the wave, rising,
falling, and rising again. Waves of settlement, of wheat and of Indians; tidal waves, airwaves, and heat waves; sound waves and cosmic waves: all resonate across and beneath *Smile*’s surfaces, from “Heroes and Villains” and “Roll Plymouth Rock” via “Cabin Essence” and “Surf’s Up” to “Mrs. O’Leary’s Cow” and “Good Vibrations.” On *Pet Sounds* the protagonist seeks security (to stay together, to retain the familiar, to go home) and tends to see change as loss; on *Smile*, no loss is final—indeed loss and gain are no more than parts of a whole—and the vibrations, if intangible, are ultimately good.

In keeping with Wilson and Parks’s desire to write an avowedly, unashamedly American work (in part to show the Beatles and Rolling Stones raw materials that could not be misappropriated), *Smile*’s recoveries are distinctively New World—and more precisely star-spangled (Beard 2005, 3–4, 6–7; Carlin 2006, 97–98). Thus it enacts a captivity narrative in which the city upon a hill, fallen or at risk, is ultimately redeemed via an errand into the wilderness; it fixes nature’s nation’s broken heart by way of some Franklinite workshop tinkering; it rehearses the frontier experience to have the downtrodden, overridden, Jeffersonian yeoman reborn as a new wave-riding American Adam; and if it overturns Thanksgiving (or bids it farewell) in Plymouth, it does so only to see it restored in Hawaii. As these examples suggest, the exceptionalist myths that sustain its protagonists beyond the fall are in turn underwritten by faith. The latter is often Christian. *Smile* is thus a latter-day Puritan jeremiad—“just see what you’ve done!”—that enables atonement and recovery. Its errant subject’s descent into the fiery pit leads to absolution and baptism; its children’s *New-England Primer* prayer seeks mercy and salvation (Madsen 1998; Bercovitch 2012).

Yet insofar as *Smile*’s countercultural precepts include both an anti-establishment skepticism toward religious institutions and an interest in alternative belief structures, the album’s exceptionalist leanings in no way constrain its spiritual strivings. Thus the ritual blessings it enacts may be Native American and the mysteries it alludes to pre-Christian; the elements it invokes appear classical, Egyptian, or Hindu; the mysticism toward which it gravitates, given its ultimate stress on vibrations, sounds at once psychedelic and Zen Buddhist. Whether guided by nationalist ideals or Christian precepts, romantic dreams or philosophical, alchemical, astrological, or spiritual inspirations, *Smile*’s recovery program brings together immortal girl and beloved community, common prayer and chosen land, enlightened vision and perfect wave: “their song is love / and the children know the way.”
As realized on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* in 2004, the ecstatic transcendence of “Good Vibrations” brings *Smile* to a more uplifting conclusion than does the grieving declension of “Caroline, No” at the end of *Pet Sounds*. Yet even though the “Good Vibrations” single enjoyed critical acclaim and commercial success in 1966, neither *Pet Sounds* nor *Smile* took off as their principal creator desired. Based on melodic fragments and what Wilson called “feels,” which he “planned to fit . . . together like a mosaic,” each of these collections broke new but also untested and demanding ground, musically and lyrically, thematically and vocally (Umphred 1997, 31–32; Carlin 2006, 79, 90; Lambert 2007, 222; Badman 2004, 148; Wilson 1991, 131). They led Wilson, his cowriters, studio musicians, and the Beach Boys as a whole on demanding, hazardous journeys into unfamiliar territories, much like their subjects and protagonists. That in the process they prompted less confident travelers within their orbit to advise Wilson that such trips were unnecessary and unappealing, in light of the perceived risks, was less than wholly surprising. Accounts of some of the Beach Boys’ unhappiness with the overall tenor of *Pet Sounds* (“Brian’s ego music,” as one described it) and with selected lyrics on *Smile* have often been repeated; so too reports of Capitol Records’ halfhearted approach to promoting the former (Gaines 1988, 177–83; Abbott 2001, 93–96; Carlin 2006, 83–85, 113–17).

Yet musical differences among group members and tensions born of their label’s devotion to its own short-term balance sheet were not the only problems that hindered *Pet Sounds*’ reception and helped prompt *Smile*’s abandonment. Again, most accounts suggest that if some of Wilson’s fellow Beach Boys harbored reservations about his new creative directions, then their unease also applied to the external influences to which they felt the new music was closely linked. At least in the eyes of his established circle of family and group members, as Wilson began to plug into the burgeoning Los Angeles counterculture during 1965 and 1966, so a small coterie of its adepts did the same to him. Not only were established songwriting partnerships sidelined and long-standing social relationships displaced; those marginalized felt that in the process Wilson’s energies were drained, his talents squandered, and his faculties endangered. In feeding and feeding off him, they believed, the underground—with its radical ideas and avant-garde literature, its alternative religions and mind-bending substances—was slowly burying the Beach Boys’ leader, at least metaphorically. By contrast, those who followed in Loren Schwartz’s wake, such as Vosse, Anderle, and Robbins, saw themselves as catalysts, helping to broaden Wilson’s personal experiences, expand his

Not unlike the angelic bicycle rider negotiating Smile’s conceptual and lyrical contours, Wilson himself turned, back and forth, between the heavens and the earth: a hero fallen among villains or a hero-cum-villain balanced precariously (as he later described it) on a seesaw (Was 1995). In the wake of his breakdown and release from the rigors of touring in late 1964, and alongside his introduction to the burgeoning Los Angeles underground, countercultural inspirations had penetrated the back of his mind, encouraging and enabling him to wonder and wander, creatively, as he had wished. The consequences, in musical terms, were and are evident: recordings that in terms of ambition and innovation matched the new standards being set by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and others.

Yet the social, physical, emotional and psychological costs were also considerable. Family and personal relations were clearly strained; commercial and legal disputes between the group and Capitol Records scarcely helped. Creatively, the principals were pushing their own limits and making enormous efforts to realize their artistic ambitions: in words and music, rhythm and arrangement, melody, myth, and symbol. Psychedelically, and for reasons unlikely to be resolved, Wilson was not prepared—at least not adequately or fully—to go with the flow. Though he showed a genuine interest in many things countercultural, he appears to have lacked the time or energy to pursue or maintain them all (while opting for rhetoric over practice when it came to healthy living and diet). Though his autobiography has him telling his wife that LSD had enabled him to see God, some in his new circle felt that his satori was not theirs. Though he had told one of them that laughter was “one of the highest forms of divinity,” others felt his humor was less childlike than childish: whatever his reading of Arthur Koestler or the title of his latest work in progress, it was unlikely to enable the kind of enlightened smile displayed by the Buddha at the end of Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha (Wilson 1991, 116–18; Vosse 1968). Nor did his chief collaborator on Smile see all aspects of Wilson’s lifestyle and behavior at this time as beneficial. Parks, of course, had himself contributed to the extension of Wilson’s circle of countercultural friends, but he ultimately lamented the extent to which they and their concerns intruded on their songwriting: “It wasn’t just Brian and me in a room,” he later recalled, “it was . . . all

One direction synonymous with both the counterculture and psychedelia was posted on the destination board of the celebrated bus carrying author (and early LSD adept) Ken Kesey’s merry pranksters in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968): further (or, as it was misspelled, “furthur”—see Wolfe 1968, 61; Torgoff 2004, 89–92, 113–18). Through *Pet Sounds* and on to *Smile*, Brian Wilson went further. The trip was, in many ways, an act of faith—an errand into the wilderness, or at least the Wild West—and his accounts have often emphasized how feelings of spirituality provided guidance en route; both Tony Asher and Van Dyke Parks have offered variations on this theme. *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* are each in their own way explorations of belief. One of Parks’s lines in “Wonderful”—“farther down the path was a mystery”—is in this sense a description of a child’s errand, an invitation to a nascent curiosity, and a punning appeal to the Almighty for guidance. But as the line and the song also imply, if the destination is unknown, the journey entails risk—a fall in which the harvest may be lost. Elsewhere, the corn being embraced (and allusively blessed) in “Cabin Essence” may wave and nourish, but the hovering crow suggests otherwise. If these songs invoke Greek myth rather than Christian authority or American poetic epic, moreover, the mysteries involved only provide for the corn maiden’s return at great cost: woe betide those who take the seeds.

Wilson, it seems, himself appealed to yet another spiritual authority to gauge the changes involved, and the chances being taken, in their collective journey toward *Smile*. “All of us,” the *I Ching* told him according to Michael Vosse, had been brought “together to . . . involve ourselves in a creative project” (of which *Smile* was the centerpiece) but “everything was going to collapse later.” In Wilson’s casting, however, “something else” lay beyond for all involved: that most distinctively American of experiences, the second chance to recoup one’s bad luck or atone for one’s failings (Carlin 2006, 80–81; Vosse 1968). Almost forty years further on, in his reflections on *Smile*’s pivotal “Surf’s Up,” songwriter Jimmy Webb felt the stakes had been higher, the voyage into the mystic more apocalyptic, and the happy ending less assured for one and all. Here, he told *Smile* documentary-maker David Leaf in 2005, was “a premonition of what was going to happen to our generation and . . . to our music—that some great tragedy that we could absolutely not imagine was about to befall our world.” “Surf’s Up,” he went on, “seem[s] to say, watch out, this is not gonna last” (Leaf 2005).
NOTES FOR CHAPTER 6

1. In addition to the published sources cited, this chapter draws on a number of interviews with individuals involved in or witness to Brian Wilson’s life and work during the period covered. Among others, I remain particularly indebted to David Anderle, Danny Hutton, Terry Melcher, Tom Nolan, Van Dyke Parks, Paul Jay Robbins, and Paul Williams for sharing their recollections. None of the interviewees, of course, are responsible for the readings advanced here, or for any factual errors.

2. Such links are considered tenuous by Walker 2006, xv–xvi.

3. In his ghosted memoir, Wilson implies that he may have met Parks (or at least heard of him) via a mutual friend as early as December 1964. See Wilson 1991, 104–5.

4. This is not to claim that by this time Sunset Strip clubs practiced racially exclusive or preferential policies vis-à-vis performers. As Domenic Priore has noted, the club scene was gradually desegregated during the 1950s, and by the 1960s any number of African American and Latino artists (as well as acts from other ethnic backgrounds) appeared, working in many musical genres, notably soul and jazz. The comparison being made here deals with tendencies and comparisons, and is restricted to the new generation of groups performing on Sunset Strip at this time. See Priore 2007, 31–34, 276–83.

5. Sources are inconsistent on the precise time at which Asher first met Wilson. Peter Carlin dates their initial get-together as early as the start of 1963, when both men happened to be working at the Western studios in Hollywood, not long after the Beach Boys had begun recording there. While the location is confirmed by Asher and other accounts, most date the first meeting to 1965, though more precise timings vary. It may be that prior to their studio meeting, Asher and Wilson both attended one or more get-togethers with Loren Schwartz at some point from late 1964 onward, but this is unclear. See Leaf 1996, 36–37; White 1994, 255–56; Abbott 2001, 39; Carlin 2006, 76; Gaines 1988, 173–74; Wilson 1991, 131; Badman 2004, 104.