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A Listener’s Smile

LARRY STARR

The strange, circuitous story of Brian Wilson’s Smile is a familiar one. With good reason, the tale is generally told from the standpoint of the creators: Brian Wilson in particular, along with lyricist Van Dyke Parks, the other Beach Boys, and the many musicians and studio technicians who participated in extensive sessions for the ill-fated album in 1966 and 1967. The events subsequent to these sessions are well known, beginning with the extraordinary disappointment of the project’s collapse by mid-1967. Brian Wilson’s health and creativity declined rapidly thereafter, for a period extending over more than two decades. Meanwhile, as Andrew Flory has discussed in the preceding chapter, there was widespread circulation of bootleg recordings of the original Smile sessions, fueling the many mythologies that flourished surrounding the unfinished and unreleased album. This fire of rumor and speculation was fed further by the occasional appearance of Smile material—both original and re-created, and not specifically identified as such—on Beach Boys albums in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There came finally (or so it seemed) the official public release of a representative selection from the Smile session tapes, now fully identified, on the 1993 Beach Boys box set Good Vibrations.

Nothing up to this point could have led anyone to anticipate what followed early in the twenty-first century: a surprising and inspiring revival of Brian Wilson’s interest in the Smile project. This culminated, of course, in the widely hailed 2004 release of Brian Wilson Presents Smile—essentially a re-creation of the original album’s material with Wilson’s new band. Equally unanticipated was the release in 2011 of Smile Sessions,
A huge compilation that presented to the listening public all of the original session recordings from 1966–67 associated in any way with the *Smile* project. In effect, this returned *Smile* to its point(s) of origin. But for a listener such as myself, who had been following the recorded manifestations of the *Smile* saga chronologically over the decades, *Smile Sessions* created the bizarre sensation of having experienced history in reverse. It raised once again the questions: what, truly, is *Smile*? Is it any one thing at all?

Rather than attempting definitive answers to such questions, which threaten to turn metaphysical, the following chapter will offer a personal, sequential account of the *Smile* music as it was officially released to the public, in terms of the experience of a listener actively attuned to Brian Wilson’s recordings during the entire period, beginning in 1966. This experience was naturally quite distinct from any “private” history of *Smile* as experienced by its principal creator, Brian Wilson.

The Stage Is Set (1966): *Pet Sounds* and “Good Vibrations”

The mid-1960s was a period of burgeoning creativity and excitement in popular music, and by 1966 it could seem to an avid radio listener and record buyer as if every week brought forth a striking new single, and every other week yielded a pathbreaking new album. Vocal groups were constantly expanding the complexity of their harmonies and vocal textures—a tendency embraced and led by the Beach Boys right from the beginning of their career as hit-makers, and one clearly demonstrated in successful 1966 recordings by newcomers such as the Mamas and the Papas (“California Dreamin’,” “Monday, Monday”) and the Association (“Cherish”). The Beatles’ lyrics were revealing a new level of seriousness and introspection, exemplified by singles such as “Help!” and “We Can Work It Out” (from 1965), and “Nowhere Man” and “Eleanor Rigby” (from 1966), and just as strikingly by other songs from the albums *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966). The trend of according greater importance to lyrics doubtless received a fundamental push from Bob Dylan’s new prominence as a singles artist during this same period, beginning with the enormous impact of his “Like a Rolling Stone” in 1965. Increasing sophistication in the instrumentation, arrangement, and production of recordings by rock groups was also in evidence, with the employment of bowed strings on the Beatles’ “Yesterday” (1965) and “Eleanor Rigby” (1966) offering influential examples.
With the release of *Pet Sounds* in 1966, the Beach Boys at once positioned themselves in the vanguard of musicians who were exploring and exemplifying all of these progressive tendencies. *Pet Sounds* established itself immediately as a landmark album for serious listeners and for other musicians, by virtue of its admirably imaginative use of harmony and vocal textures, the remarkable variety in its instrumentation and arrangement from song to song, its touching and introspective lyrics, and the brilliant production values throughout. It even embraced formal experimentation in numbers such as “That’s Not Me” and the instrumental “Let’s Go Away for Awhile,” selections that do not exemplify typical pop song forms. Above and beyond all this, *Pet Sounds* was also arguably a “concept album,” presenting an orderly sequence of songs conveying the progress of a romance, beginning with joyful anticipation in “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” and ending with the hopeless desolation of “Caroline, No.” The album is often cited as the first concept album of the rock era.

The innovations of *Pet Sounds* have received ample attention in the critical literature—most particularly in the work of Philip Lambert (Lambert 2007, 222–52; Lambert 2008)—and do not require additional attention here. My purpose is simply to contextualize the album within the popular music culture of its time. This illuminates the album’s significance for its contemporary audiences, and also helps explain why the Beach Boys albums that followed it occasioned disappointment on the part of so many listeners.

An analogous situation pertains to the Beach Boys singles released in 1966 and those that followed. Leaving aside the anomalous cover of “Barbara Ann” from early in the year, the top-ten singles “Sloop John B.” and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” both cuts from *Pet Sounds*, served to showcase the group’s new levels of ambition and achievement. Nothing, however, quite prepared anyone for “Good Vibrations.” Released in October 1966, this celebrated number-one hit, with its gently psychedelic lyrics, unique instrumentation, remarkable vocal textures, outstanding production values, and unprecedented open-ended form, remains to this day one of the most innovative singles ever made. The Beach Boys appeared to have finished the year at the head of the pack, under the direction of a Brian Wilson who seemingly could do no wrong. Anticipation for their already-announced forthcoming album, to be called *Smile*, approached feverish levels.

And then—a long, long silence.
About nine months elapsed between the release of “Good Vibrations” and that of the next Beach Boys single, “Heroes and Villains.” An even longer period, about sixteen months, passed between the release of Pet Sounds and that of their next album of new material, Smiley Smile. It is important to understand that, according to standards previously established by the group itself, and by other groundbreaking artists of the 1960s such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan, these periods seemed little short of eternities. The Beach Boys’ nine main albums leading up to Pet Sounds, for example, had been released over the course of less than three years, a rate of about one every four months. It didn’t help that popular culture itself appeared to be moving at a breathless pace during 1967, pushed along in no small measure by the political unrest accompanying the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. The nine months’ pause between the release of the Beatles’ Revolver and the June 1967 appearance of Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band seemed long enough, and Dylan had been temporarily silenced since the summer of 1966 by a motorcycle accident. (Dylan would not release another album until John Wesley Harding came out in January 1968.) But of course Sgt. Pepper changed everything, and by the time the Beach Boys presented their first new material since “Good Vibrations” to the record-buying public, in the form of an odd-sounding single called “Heroes and Villains” in July 1967, any claim they might have had to a leadership role in popular music was hopelessly lost.

“Heroes and Villains” was a minor hit, but its failure to make a major impact is not simply attributable to an altered cultural climate. The song’s relatively limited appeal may be ascribed to two factors that remained problematic, or sometimes even disappointing, in the Beach Boys’ output for the remaining years of the 1960s: the lyrics, and the production values. “Heroes and Villains” represented the first appearance of lyrics by Van Dyke Parks on a Beach Boys record. Parks is a remarkable lyricist, but both as a 1967 single and as the lead track on the Smiley Smile album, “Heroes and Villains” lacked a defining context in which its playful, nonsequential lyrics might be fully appreciated. (It was only in the larger context of the Smile album itself that the qualities and potential of these lyrics might have been appropriately understood, something that could well be said about most of the song lyrics originally intended for
In fact, the lyrics for “Heroes and Villains,” with their evocations of the American “Wild West,” lacked any context whatsoever in the cultural environment of popular music in 1967, an environment immersed in the emerging counterculture and one that tended to prize lyrics with marked personal or social “relevance.”

In terms of production, the “Heroes and Villains” single was the last Beach Boys record for some time that would bear a production credit for Brian Wilson alone. But even here a significant difference from earlier Wilson productions is discernible, in both the sound and the sound quality. (I should emphasize that I am discussing the original analog recordings, not compact disc reissues, in all my descriptions of the Beach Boys’ output through 1971, in order to characterize accurately the way in which the music was experienced by listeners at the time.) The minimal instrumentation employed in the 1967 version of “Heroes and Villains,” dominated by the organ, produces a somewhat impoverished impression compared with the orchestral variety evident throughout Pet Sounds, or with the exotic-sounding ensemble (of flutes, cello, organ, percussion, and electro-theremin) that makes “Good Vibrations” so colorful. The source of biggest disappointment for listeners, however, may well have been the overall quality of the sound.

Brian Wilson mixed in monophonic sound, and it is no exaggeration to claim that the Pet Sounds mono LP stands as one of the richest and most beautiful monophonic productions in the history of recording. He mixed his singles to achieve maximum impact on the AM car radios and portable radios of the day, and “Good Vibrations” is one of his many triumphs in this arena, one that is particularly notable insofar as the vocal textures on the record, for all their complexity, always emerge clearly; the 45 has a bright and vivid sound quality throughout. In comparison, much of “Heroes and Villains” has a relatively muddy and dim quality. We now know that the “Heroes and Villains” single, and all of the new material on Smiley Smile (which also included a re-release of “Good Vibrations” at the beginning of side 2), was produced quickly in a rather makeshift home studio, representing a complete contrast to the way in which Wilson had worked previously—which involved multiple studios chosen for their individual sound characteristics, the employment of many skilled studio musicians executing often elaborate instrumental arrangements, and numerous takes and retakes in the course of a slow and painstaking creative process to achieve the desired results. It can be uncomfortable to compare the version of “Heroes and Villains” officially released in 1967 with the studio session material from 1966 and early
1967 that is included in Smile Sessions and that documents the extensive work Wilson did on the song while preparing it, he hoped, for a forthcoming Smile album. Even without the benefit of hindsight, however, the original “Heroes and Villains” single sounds thin in light of the Beach Boys recordings that immediately preceded it.4

The 1967 “Heroes and Villains” did not disappoint those who, in the wake of Pet Sounds and “Good Vibrations,” were seeking novel vocal textures, unusual formal juxtapositions, and other elements of musical originality. The record even features varying tempos. After opening with a fast-moving verse, the song continues with a slower chorus, then proceeds to alternate the two tempos in an unpredictable pattern; a further surprise is the brief out-of-tempo a cappella section heard just before the final chorus and fade-out. Whether this all adds up to a satisfying entity is another matter. The song may come across as a somewhat arbitrary, non-integrated mosaic. Hindsight provides additional thrust for this argument, as it is now known that there was much material planned for possible inclusion in “Heroes and Villains” that was excluded from the 1967 version, most prominently a relatively extensive section of contrasting words and music that did finally find its way into the version of the song found on Brian Wilson Presents Smile. (This “In the cantina . . .” material functions in a manner somewhat analogous to that of the “Gotta keep those lovin’ good vibrations happenin’” section in “Good Vibrations.”) Hindsight aside, a simple comparison with “Good Vibrations” would not favor the “Heroes and Villains” single. “Good Vibrations” certainly possesses mosaic-like aspects, but the earlier song’s most remarkable characteristic may well be its quality of formal integration and rightness.

Had the album Smiley Smile, which was finally released in September 1967, presented new material of significant substance, in addition to the already-released “Heroes and Villains” and the truly old news of “Good Vibrations,” perhaps Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys could have recouped some momentum. But the new songs are all short in duration by comparison, and give the impression of being either slim efforts or strange experiments, or both. The three tracks on Smiley Smile that we know now as versions of Smile songs—“Vegetables,” “Wind Chimes,” and “Wonderful”—vie for the characterizations of odd, odder, and oddest. While unexpected juxtapositions of textures and formal elements, along with striking vocal effects, certainly occur in each of those songs, and in other new songs on the album, the effect is too often that of inadequately edited home movies rather than that of well-articulated musical conceptions. Writing in 1994, I rather uncharitably suggested that Smiley Smile
might be regarded as “the sounds of a group undergoing a collective identity crisis,” but I confess that the passage of years has not mitigated this assessment for me. In any case, as of September 1967 it was difficult to say which seemed to have done more damage to the reputation of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys: the nonrelease of Smile, or the actual release of its diminutive namesake.

The rapidly following release of Wild Honey just as the year 1967 ended seemed almost an act of compensation on the part of the Beach Boys, and the album represents an almost complete change in direction. It is an extremely modest album in terms of length and ambition, presenting eleven songs in well under half an hour of playing time—nothing like “Good Vibrations” or “Heroes and Villains” here. Wild Honey is also a much more conventional album, in terms of musical style, than those that had preceded it. On some cuts, especially the title song and “Darlin’,” the Beach Boys seem to be reconceiving themselves as a kind of white soul group, a notion that is supported by the inclusion on Wild Honey of a cover version of Motown artist Stevie Wonder’s “I Was Made to Love Her.” Nevertheless, issues involving lyrics and production values continue to shadow the album as a whole. The love song lyrics are routine; a comparison with those for “God Only Knows” or “Caroline, No” from Pet Sounds, or even with those for the significantly earlier “The Warmth of the Sun” (1964) would prove painful. Much of the production has a throwaway quality, revealed most tellingly in the sometimes muddy textures and in careless, hastily abandoned fade-outs.

It could be argued that such observations and comparisons are beside the point, because Wild Honey was aiming for unpretentious simplicity. Surely a cut like “Country Air” radiates a kind of naive charm, while a number like “Darlin’” is compulsively danceable. Yet even these modest virtues have become evident only with the passage of years and decades. At the close of 1967 the vastly reduced ambition and achievement of Wild Honey was seen inevitably in light of the position held by the Beach Boys in the pop music pantheon at the close of the preceding year—when “Good Vibrations” was still emanating from radios and phonographs, with expectations for the Smile album running high. In this context Wild Honey added insult to the self-inflicted injury to the group’s reputation represented by Smiley Smile. Calling attention to the quirky phrase structure of “Darlin’” or to the unusual chord progressions and waltz-like flow of “Let the Wind Blow” at that time would have seemed like grasping at straws, desperately seeking remaining evidence of the masterly innovations that were thought to be Brian Wilson’s inexhaustible stock-in-trade.
The humorous one-minute-long “Mama Says,” which serves as a kind of coda to *Wild Honey*, is an a cappella paean to healthy living that provides a distinctive conclusion to the album. It sounds unrelated to anything else on the record; its constantly repeated lyrics turn it into a type of vocal etude, more akin to *Smiley Smile* cuts like “With Me Tonight” or “Whistle In” than to the more conventionally shaped songs on the later album. In fact, “Mama Says” was pulled out of sessions for the *Smile* song “Vegetables,” and this material eventually reappeared in an altered form as the middle section of “Vegetables” on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*. On *Wild Honey*, it provided a pleasant, oddball conclusion to a very modest album, nothing more.

Treading Water: *Friends* (1968) and 20/20 (1969)

The Beach Boys’ next album, *Friends*, represents something of a return to form for the group musically. Commercially, however, it made by far the poorest showing of any Beach Boys album in their career to date, failing even to make the Top 100 list during its brief stay on the charts, and revealing the extent of the group’s fall from grace. The album’s twelve songs are all short and do not demonstrate extensive ambitions in either their formal arrangements or in their lyrics. Still, musical aspects of many of the songs show that the group was attentive to the details of harmony, instrumentation, and vocal textures—much more consistently than on *Wild Honey*—and the production of *Friends*, while not brilliant, does yield a basically clear and pleasing sound. “Friends” and “Be Here in the Morning,” along with “Let the Wind Blow” from *Wild Honey*, exemplify a brief interest in triple meter during this time, although this is not a common feature in most Beach Boys albums, or in rock-era music generally.

*Friends* broke no major new ground for the Beach Boys, but it is an agreeable album. Ironically, it was probably this very quality of amiability that made *Friends* seem so irrelevant and regressive in 1968. This was the year that brought the assassinations of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the riots and violence surrounding the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, and the heavily electrified musical intensity of number-one albums such as *Wheels of Fire* by Cream and *Cheap Thrills* by Big Brother and the Holding Company (featuring Janis Joplin). By the end of the year, the Beatles had released their “white album” *The Beatles*, a heterogeneous, disunited, and frequently disturbing response to the unsettled times.
The weakest aspect of *Friends* is its lyrics. Some are casually offhand in an unobtrusive way (“Wake the World”), but others push simplicity to the point of self-conscious naïveté (“When a Man Needs a Woman”) or to an equally self-conscious dwelling in irrelevance (“Busy Doin’ Nothin’”). Nevertheless, *Friends*, in its idyllic complacency, possesses an internal consistency not characteristic of either *Smiley Smile* or *Wild Honey*. Might this possibly be because, as we now know, there is no obvious *Smile* material in the album? Had the band finally managed to free itself from the shadow of its unfinished “masterpiece”? Not at all, as it turns out.

The next album released by the Beach Boys, *20/20*, is as inconsistent in its content and tone as *Friends* is consistent. *20/20* appeared early in 1969, and it was the album that concluded the group’s contract with Capitol Records, the label with which the Beach Boys had been associated virtually throughout their career thus far. The album comes across as a fairly random collection of songs, chosen and ordered with little thought given to creating any coherent overall impression. The production credits are similarly scattered, from cut to cut, among the individual Beach Boys and pairs; there are no fewer than eight distinct credits listed. On the album we find three vastly different cover versions (of the folk standard “Cotton Fields,” of the 1958 rockabilly song “Bluebirds over the Mountain,” and a particularly inspired cover of the Barry-Greenwich-Spector song “I Can Hear Music,” first recorded by the Ronettes in 1966); one clever number in which the Beach Boys essentially parody their own earlier music and image (“Do It Again”); one sentimental-sounding instrumental (“The Nearest Faraway Place”); three Dennis Wilson songs of, at best, moderate interest; two new, gently charming waltzes, continuing the recent trend (“I Went to Sleep” and “Time to Get Alone”); and to conclude, out of the blue, two *Smile*-era selections that stand as previously unreleased finished songs (“Our Prayer” and “Cabinessence”). These two *Smile* songs were redone, without major alterations, on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* in 2004, confirming ultimately their status both as completed numbers and as an integral part of Wilson’s conception for *Smile*. The versions on *20/20* were culled directly from original sessions for *Smile* held several years earlier.

“Our Prayer” and “Cabinessence” represent the first time that material recorded for *Smile* was presented to the public in its original form. Why now? Why did the group use the original session recordings, instead of redoing and substantially altering the songs, as they did with the *Smile*-derived material on *Smiley Smile* and *Wild Honey*? Why these two songs? While “Our Prayer” and “Cabinessence” seem clearly to be finished
songs, selections in an equivalent state of completion were also readily available from the *Smile* sessions, although admittedly most of these “finished” songs had already been released in altered form. Perhaps, in light of *20/20*, a different question arises: why hadn’t the Beach Boys released original *Smile* session material earlier, instead of remaking the likes of “Vegetables,” “Wind Chimes,” and “Wonderful” on *Smiley Smile*?

In any case, “Our Prayer” and “Cabinessence” were obviously usable “leftovers” from the original *Smile* project that could simply be smacked onto an album as they were. It seems a thoughtless way to treat such outstanding material. Not only does the album provide no context for these two selections, which of course were not publicly identified as *Smile* songs in any way at the time, but they provide no context for each other. The brief and lovely a cappella “Our Prayer” was intended as an introduction to the *Smile* album as a whole; placing it after Dennis Wilson’s reworking of a song by Charles Manson, “Never Learn Not to Love,” did neither song any favor. And “Cabinessence,” in the richness and complexity of its lyrics (by Parks) and music, has little obviously to do with “Our Prayer” and nothing whatsoever to do with anything else on *20/20*.8

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An (All-Too-Brief) Renaissance: *Sunflower* (1970) and *Surf’s Up* (1971)

An interval of a year and a half passed between the release of *20/20* and that of the next Beach Boys album, *Sunflower*, their first for Warner Brothers Records, serving as distributor of their own Brother Records label. During this same period, the Beach Boys also failed to score any hit singles, and they would continue to be a negligible presence on the singles charts for many years to come. Consequently, it does not seem surprising that little notice was taken of *Sunflower* at the time. Its songs were neither deeply probing nor topical, limitations that had become typical of the Beach Boys’ output. Yet the album is now acknowledged as a significant accomplishment for the group. Certainly just the sound of the record is revelatory in comparison to that of the post-*Pet Sounds* albums that preceded it; from the opening moments of “Slip On Through,” it is obvious that the production (credited to “the Beach Boys”) is on an exceptionally high level, and the entire LP possesses a crisp, detailed, well-defined, and inviting sound. It is probably no accident that the back cover of the album offers extensive “technical notes” about the recording equipment that was used, a rather unusual feature to find on a pop recording from this period. Fortunately, the production is not the only memorable aspect of *Sunflower*, which presents a good number of fine,
musically inventive songs with competent, if not innovative lyrics—the products of writing contributions from all the members of the group. The instrumentation is imaginative and varies engagingly from song to song.

By far the most unusual and arresting cut on *Sunflower* is the final one, “Cool, Cool Water.” Any listener at the time who was even remotely aware of the legendary *Smile* album—that-never-was could have been excused for suspecting that “Cool, Cool Water” was actually a *Smile* song. The entire selection has an aura at once highly polished and experimental, a combination we can now appreciate as typical of Brian Wilson’s *Smile*-period music. The extraordinary, overlapping vocal textures; the free, open-ended musical form (extending in this instance over a five-minute duration); the sections with minimal, repeated lyrics; the sound effects; the superior production values—I might be describing “Good Vibrations” as well as “Cool, Cool Water.” In fact, “Cool, Cool Water” grew out of some *Smile*-era music recorded in December 1966 and May 1967 that was mysteriously labeled “I Love to Say Dada,” but “Cool, Cool Water” expands and varies this material to an extent that renders it a truly independent, and significant, achievement. (Much later, on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, the “Love to Say Dada” music found its way into “In Blue Hawaii.”)

In the case of *Sunflower*, as in that of *20/20* and *Wild Honey*, the ending of the album rather abruptly offers material taken from, or derived from, the music originally intended for *Smile*, and in all these instances the *Smile* material creates a marked contrast with everything else on the record. The anomaly is arguably less jarring on *Sunflower* in light of the album’s high overall quality; still, “Cool, Cool Water” seems to transport us to some previously unforeseen, if delightful, place. The next Beach Boys album, *Surf’s Up*, also concludes with *Smile* material—the song “Surf’s Up”—that has been re-created in a similarly imaginative and respectful manner. But nothing in *Sunflower*, or any other album, could have prepared listeners for the remarkable concept underlying *Surf’s Up*. Here, the song from *Smile* was not simply a final add-on, inspired or otherwise, to an album that had nothing really to do with it; instead, the song was employed as the source of inspiration and the point of departure for an entire album that bears its name. This concept was carried through with a thoroughness enabling one to claim that “Surf’s Up” provides the basis for the mood, content, and ordering of all the other songs on the album. *Surf’s Up*, then, is an integrated cycle of songs that is carefully structured to build toward its title song in a manner that makes “Surf’s Up” its ap-
propriate finale and culmination. This is a singular achievement, making *Surf’s Up* both extraordinary and unique in the entire output of the Beach Boys. “Surf’s Up” is arguably the greatest of the *Smile* songs, so the creation of an album worthy of it represented a huge challenge, and it is wonderful that the band was able to meet it. This is especially true because, of the nine new songs on the album, Brian Wilson was involved in the writing of only two.9 *Surf’s Up* may well represent the finest work the Beach Boys produced all together as a band.

To validate this praise, it is necessary to start with a brief look at “Surf’s Up” itself, the song around which the album was constructed. Van Dyke Parks’s poetic and allusive lyrics articulate the progression from a condition of disillusionment with a decadent and materialistic culture to the glimpse of a possibility for hope and renewal. This is all conveyed via an abundance of musical references and imagery. Finding himself at a fancy, formal concert led by “a handsome man and baton” in service to a “blind class aristocracy,” the poem’s narrator (or the song’s singer) seeks instead “a song dissolved in the dawn.” It remains nighttime, however, and a “carriage across the fog” arrives only at a scene of farewell (literal or metaphoric, or both) offering but a “cellar tune” and a somber “Auld Lang Syne” in which “the laughs come hard.” Still, hidden in the rising surf accompanying a “tidal wave,” the potential for a young spring of renewal exists, if only the “word” be heard and the song—a "children's song"—be joined. Particularly admirable is the way in which Parks embeds a hint of the “children’s song” within the opening evocations of the overly formal concert, as the question “Are you sleeping?” develops in its second occurrence into “Are you sleeping, Brother John?” In the music, these words are accompanied by the appropriate melodic quotation, underlining the import of the lyrics; the quotation is introduced into Wilson’s expressive and complex melody line with a seemingly spontaneous smoothness. (The poet/singer should not be sleeping, since he wants to be awakened to the “song dissolved in the dawn”—presumably the “children’s song.”)

Brian Wilson’s music offers a sensitive setting for Parks’s lyrics, illuminating and occasionally even illustrating the words. While retaining sufficient internal repetition to remain accessible, the song never returns to the music of its opening two stanzas, but changes and develops along with the words, and ends with previously unheard music to depict the “children’s song.” On the level of detail, the phrase “Columnated ruins domino” brings forth a melodic line that begins as a stepwise ascent, then leaps dramatically upward, and falls back; the “muted trumpeter’s
“Surf’s Up” existed as a complete song in the material originally prepared for *Smile*, in the form of a solo version by Brian Wilson accompanying himself at the piano. There were also takes for an elaborate instrumental track to be used for the first two stanzas of the song. For the *Surf’s Up* album the Beach Boys created a beautifully produced composite that employed the existing instrumental track, with new vocals, for the song’s opening section, followed by Brian’s solo performance of the second section, utilizing the tape from the *Smile* sessions. The profound inspiration of the entire enterprise was the adaptation of additional *Smile* material, the fragment called “Child Is Father of the Man,” to overlay the coda of “Surf’s Up” as it fades out. This enhances the impact of the “children’s song” immeasurably. (The conception was almost certainly part of the original plan for *Smile*, since the version of “Surf’s Up” on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* ends in the identical fashion, albeit without the final fade.) The care evinced in the re-creation of the title song is clearly seen and heard in all other aspects of *Surf’s Up*, from the production values throughout, to the selection and sequencing of songs, to the album cover, to the design of the lyrics insert.

“Surf’s Up” is a very serious song, with an underlying somber tone for much of its duration that is leavened by wordplay, melodic beauty, and the near-miraculous turn toward hope as it ends. Its dark atmosphere is perhaps its greatest deviation, among many, from the features typical of the Beach Boys’ work, and fashioning an album effectively around it obviously called for some strong measures. The establishment of a radically new tone begins with the album cover itself, which tellingly transforms the image associated with Beach Boys’ Brother Records logo; the picture of a proud Native American on horseback, with arms outstretched, fearlessly lifting his chest to the sky—which may be found on the record label—has here become that of a drooping, defeated-looking figure on an equally weary horse, hardly even holding his long spear as it points uselessly down to the ground. (Or is the man only sleeping, waiting to be awakened to the “song dissolved in the dawn”?) Accompanying the LP inside is a folded-over insert that opens up to reveal the lyrics and credits for all the songs. This is a first for the Beach Boys, and another indication of the album’s serious intent. On the outside of this sheet, however, is a photograph of a dry, cracked beach.

There is a sense of bitter irony in these images, and that tone is taken
up immediately by music and lyrics as soon as the tone arm hits the vinyl. What could be more perverse than a Beach Boys album opening with a song called “Don’t Go Near the Water”—a song that commences with these same lyrics? Even during the first seconds of this joint effort between band members Al Jardine and Mike Love, before the lyrics are articulated, the music suggests something seriously amiss, with a dissonant keyboard part that produces a deliberately “out-of-tune” effect. “Don’t Go Near the Water” decries the pollution of the waterways and urges the listener to help “avoid an ecological aftermath.” The overt simplicity of its vocal tune sits disconcertingly atop the complex arrangement, the dissonant effects, and the frequent changes of musical texture; the impression created is something like a merciless parody of a “typical” Beach Boys song from their early, carefree days. “Don’t Go Near the Water” sets the tenor of the album perfectly, and launches a musical journey that will end with a return to the water, when the surf is up, inviting us to hear once again the children’s song of hope and spring.

“Don’t Go Near the Water” ends with the suggestion that we might all try to “help the water.” The immediately following song, however, muses on how difficult it is to “answer future’s riddle” or to “plant the seed of reform.” “Long Promised Road,” credited to Carl Wilson and Jack Rieley, is as lyrically complex as “Don’t Go Near the Water” is straightforward, and this second song on Surf’s Up introduces a gently philosophical theme to the album as it ponders, without resolving, the challenges of living meaningfully in the world. The contrast between the direct depiction of specific concerns and the meditative consideration of life’s meaning that is established in these first two songs continues to resonate throughout the album. Jardine and Winfrey’s “Take a Load Off Your Feet,” the third song, brings the issue of healthy living down to the purely physical level, and on the second side, Brian and Jack Rieley’s “A Day in the Life of a Tree” reiterates ecological problems. “Feel Flows,” another coeffort of Carl and Jack Rieley, and Brian Wilson’s “’Til I Die,” both on side 2, are contemplations of life’s direction and purpose; the former seems at least open to hope, while the latter despairs of hope utterly. “Surf’s Up” concludes the album by combining vividly specific imagery with a metaphorical evocation of the search for meaning. Acknowledging despair, it comes down finally, inspiringly, on the side of hope. The title song serves at once as the summary and the apotheosis of the album’s themes.

The concept of musical parody, strongly suggested in “Don’t Go Near the Water,” resurfaces pointedly with the two songs that conclude side 1 of Surf’s Up, Bruce Johnston’s “Disney Girls (1957)” and “Student
Demonstration Time.” The former offers a retreat from all serious problems, back into the culture in which the Beach Boys (and, presumably, most of their audience) grew up. The singer, fleeing from reality, seeks a “fantasy world,” with “Disney girls,” the songs of Patti Page, and a “local girl in a smaller town” who will be his “forever wife” in a “peaceful life.” The setting of these words as a slow, sentimental waltz (like those often sung by Patti Page) is ideal for the purpose; the song accomplishes the neat trick of being simultaneously nostalgic and a commentary on nostalgia.11

The self-conscious sweetness of “Disney Girls (1957)” is shattered brutally by the onset of “Student Demonstration Time,” a parody of a completely different sort. “Student Demonstration Time” directly borrows the music of a 1954 rhythm-and-blues classic by the Robins, “Riot in Cell Block #9” (composed and produced by the legendary team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller), and provides the tune with new words written by Mike Love. “Riot in Cell Block #9” was a novelty number about a jail uprising; the deliberately exaggerated manner of the lead bass singer, an inspired synthesis of threat and swagger, prevented listeners from taking the record too seriously. Love’s own lead vocal on “Student Demonstration Time” sounds as if it is being sung through the kind of megaphone that might have been used at the rallies described in his lyrics, and it may also represent his own parody of the bass singer’s style on the Robins record. “Student Demonstration Time,” however, with its recounting of contemporary protest movements, is anything but a novelty song or an indulgence in nostalgia for the age of 1950s rhythm and blues. It is, literally, dead serious, concluding with an account of the killing of four students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in May 1970, and advising those “fed up with useless wars and racial strife” to “stay away when there’s a riot going on.” While “Disney Girls (1957)” appears to celebrate escapism into a fantasy world, “Student Demonstration Time” bluntly confronts the political realities of the early 1970s and then urges retreat. A sense of musical irony operates within both songs, as well as in their juxtaposition.

Side 2 of Surf’s Up returns to the meditative mode with “Feel Flows,” then dips briefly into sobering economic realities with Jardine and Winfrey’s sketchy, barely hopeful “Looking at Tomorrow (a Welfare Song).” “A Day in the Life of a Tree” and “‘Til I Die” follow, both very dark songs, the first bemoaning ecological catastrophe caused by pollution, and the second lamenting a loss of personal direction attributed to no specific cause other than “I lost my way.” These two songs introduce
the direct contemplation of death to the album’s subject matter. Indeed, Brian Wilson’s exceptionally poignant “’Til I Die” might have concluded Surf’s Up powerfully by itself; it is one of his most moving songs, and only something quite stunning could succeed it appropriately. “Surf’s Up,” however, is up to that challenge, and more. Poetically and musically the most elaborate and sophisticated song on the album, it grapples directly with the despair of “’Til I Die,” acknowledging the “broken man too tough to cry” while pointing him back toward life. The complex harmonic language of “’Til I Die” also prepares that of “Surf’s Up” exceptionally well.

Much more could be said about Surf’s Up, but let this brief exegesis serve as some indication of its many riches. The album has inconsistencies of quality both within individual songs and among the songs considered as a group. But a majority of the songs are satisfying, certain ones outstandingly so (“Long Promised Road,” “Disney Girls (1957),” “’Til I Die,” and of course “Surf’s Up”); “Don’t Go Near the Water” impresses especially with its imaginative arrangement and its variety of textures; and every song on the album contributes in some way to the striking effect achieved by the entire conception.

Like almost everyone else in the listening public, in 1971 I knew nothing about Smile (apart from vague rumor) and was given no confirmation that “Surf’s Up” was a song originally written in 1966 and intended for an album that had never appeared. But when I first heard the album Surf’s Up in 1971 I became convinced, as I hadn’t been since 1966 (which had brought Pet Sounds and “Good Vibrations”), that the Beach Boys were still a very creative group that demanded to be taken seriously. This conviction was doomed to be short-lived. Unfortunately, for the Beach Boys Surf’s Up marked an end as well as a beginning. The group had never done anything like it before. But they never produced new work that was anything like it again. Their next LP, Carl and the Passions—So Tough (1972), inaugurated a series of very spotty albums that lacked both the ambition and the achievement of Surf’s Up. There were no further attempts to resurrect or rework Smile material. Meanwhile, the generous reissuing of the group’s older work, often with spectacular success, both on Capitol and on Brother Records, only served to underline the limitations of their fresh material.

Two questions remain regarding Surf’s Up. The first, probably unanswerable, is, What inspired the Beach Boys to come together for this one time around a resurrected Smile song and weave such an unprecedented album around it? The second is, Why has Surf’s Up remained
such an underappreciated work in the critical literature? Although the album performed reasonably well on the sales charts compared with other post–Pet Sounds albums by the Beach Boys, most commentators seem to single out Sunflower as the memorable effort from this period of the group’s activity. Might it be the case that Surf’s Up is so atypical of Beach Boys music that, despite its merits, it doesn’t serve well as “representative” work? Representative or not, I was profoundly moved by this album the first time I heard it, and it has lost none of its power for me over my forty-plus years of listening to it.

And my “listener’s Smile” now stops for a long hiatus. It is only with the dawning of the CD era that material from the original Smile sessions began at last to creep into public consciousness. Here was audible proof not only that Smile was more than a myth, but that there was music intended for Smile existing in listenable and nearly “finished” condition. First to arrive was an “alternate” version of “Heroes and Villains,” released in 1990 as a “bonus track” on the CD reissue of Smiley Smile / Wild Honey. Then, in 1993, came something of a bonanza.

Yes, There Really Was (Supposed to Be) a Smile! And Now There Is a Smile—or Many Smiles! Where Do We Go from Here?

The five-CD box set Good Vibrations, released in 1993, included enough Smile-era music to construct a hypothetical version of the missing album, and many listeners, following the suggestion by David Leaf in his notes accompanying the box set, did just that—myself included. There was of course no one way and no obviously “correct” way to create this conceptual Smile. The CD format enabled one to experiment with various programming possibilities, including the omission of certain tracks, or the creation of a composite version of “Heroes and Villains” employing some or all of the extensive session material that was released for that particular song. Of particular importance was the now-explicit public acknowledgment that “Our Prayer” and “Cabinessence” from 20/20 were in fact Smile songs taken directly from the original sessions; that “Surf’s Up” was a song that had been intended for Smile; that “Mama Says” from Wild Honey had had its origins as a section of the Smile song “Vegetables”; and that several of the songs on Smiley Smile were adaptations of Smile songs, adaptations that compared most unfavorably to the versions present on the original Smile tapes. Good Vibrations established that Smile had been an incipient masterpiece, and that much wonderful music had been created for it before the project was abandoned.
The importance of all this cannot be overstated, and yet it also served ultimately to underline how disappointing it was that Brian Wilson had never completed his *Smile* album. Perhaps it was the very richness and fluidity of the material itself that had discouraged its arrangement into a final form? In any event, the surprise arrival of *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* in 2004 seemed to resolve any number of questions and conjectures. Ironically, it also opened up new issues.

*Brian Wilson Presents Smile* is an extraordinary achievement by any standards. It has been amply and appropriately celebrated by many, and its virtues need not be enumerated again here. The album appears to fix a “definitive” version of *Smile*, the more so because it serves as a permanent record of the version of *Smile* that Brian Wilson and his band were presenting on tour during the period surrounding the album’s release. This version is further documented in a DVD of a live performance, adding weight to the notion that it is indeed “definitive.” Yet even listeners who enthusiastically admire *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* might wonder: in the wake of this version, what happens to the previously released recreations of the *Smile* material? Are they superseded by the versions in *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*—or even nullified, rendered “inauthentic”? Should *Smiley Smile* be officially withdrawn? Should *Surf’s Up* be reissued with the substitution of Brian’s “authentic” version for the one created for the album?—or even without its title song entirely, since *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* reveals the “authentic” placement of “Surf’s Up” as the final number in a suite of three other songs (none of which are on the *Surf’s Up* album)? And what about the session material released on *Good Vibrations* that never found its way into *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*? (I, for one, was always very taken with a harmonica melody and its accompanying vocalise that was recorded for “Heroes and Villains” but not used; I offer this only as one such example.)

History cannot be undone, of course. And in the age of digital technology, when “alternate” versions and “unreleased” takes proliferate everywhere, and any listener with standard sound-editing software can cut, copy, and paste existing music together in any fashion, regardless of the original intent of that music’s creator, the kinds of questions being posed here may seem irrelevant, or perhaps silly. Those whimsically inclined might suggest that *Smile’s* apparent malleability could represent just one additional illustration of the extent to which it was ahead of its time. Nevertheless, at the time when the *Smile* music was originally being recorded, Brian Wilson obviously was intending it for an album with very specific content and ordering. Fans, music historians, and even the mild-
ly curious may be forgiven for wondering—after all the years, rumors, myths, and false hopes—just what that content and ordering might have been. If *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* appeared at the time of its release to offer the closest thing to an answer that we were likely to get, the release in 2011 of *Smile Sessions* reopened the magic *Smile* box once again, and threw everything into glorious disarray.

With Brian Wilson’s evident assent and cooperation, and with the help of an engineering and production team that demonstrated an archaeologist’s attention to detail, *Smile Sessions* presented every available scrap of music preserved on tape from the periods in 1966 and 1967 when the Beach Boys were actively working on *Smile*. These tapes themselves document aspects of the creative process in an often fascinating way, but they also enabled the producers of the project to do something else. *Smile Sessions* offers, both on CD and in “original” LP format, a version of a *Smile* album that employs the original session material, ordered essentially along the lines of *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*. Here is yet another *Smile*, fashioned from the period tapes, with the session musicians Wilson personally chose to play his music, and the voices of the Beach Boys from 1966–1967!

This “new” *Smile* album is not “complete.” *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* does include some freshly created material, in “On a Holiday” and “In Blue Hawaii,” that has no direct parallel on the original *Smile* session tapes. Was this material that existed on tape at one time but is now lost, or does it reflect plans for the original album that never reached tape? In addition, *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* incorporates transitional material between songs that was created by a member of his band, Darian Sahanaja. On the other hand, the version of *Smile* on *Smile Sessions* presents certain material in an order different from that found on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, for reasons that are not stated. Further, *Smile Sessions* is packaged with two 45s, supposedly representing projected single releases of *Smile* songs from the time when the original project was still developing, and one of these 45s is a double-sided “Heroes and Villains” that is different from any other version found anywhere of this song! (I am pleased to report, however, that this version does include the harmonica and vocalise music I so enjoy!) It is difficult to dismiss this studio-engineered *Smile* constructed from period tapes, and its accompanying singles, simply as what-might-have-been conjectures, and this is above all because of Brian Wilson’s own statement in the book accompanying *Smile Sessions*: “Probably nothing I’ve ever done has topped the music I made with Van Dyke, my old crew in the studio and the voices of youth—me and the
Beach Boys.” Certainly the reconstructed Smile on Smile Sessions sounds magnificent. Does this then mean that the version of Smile we can hear on Smile Sessions is the music that actually brings us closest to what Brian Wilson was imagining nearly five decades ago? In some way does this supersede even Brian Wilson Presents Smile?

I prefer to think that the idea there could be a “definitive” Smile decades after Brian Wilson abandoned the project was always chimerical, and that—intentionally or not—his agreement to issue Smile Sessions represents his acknowledgment of this. Why not let “Surf’s Up” have multiple identities within the repertory of American popular song: as the title song and finale to a brilliant album that bears its name; as the concluding number of a breathtaking suite within Brian Wilson Presents Smile; and as a major event midway through the version of Smile on Smile Sessions (and as a single of the same version extracted from Smile Sessions)? Analogous questions could be posed about other Smile music. At last it may come to seem curiously appropriate that the music of Smile itself, considered as a whole, ultimately resists finalizing, especially when we consider that the music of some Smile songs recurs in varied form within other Smile songs (as is the case with “Heroes and Villains” returning in “Roll Plymouth Rock,” “Child Is Father of the Man” returning in “Surf’s Up,” and “Our Prayer” returning to connect “In Blue Hawaii” with “Good Vibrations”), and that many songs in Smile elide directly into other songs without having conventional endings. How sweet it is that an album most people, including its composer, thought could never be born has ended up having multiple lives! For Smile is vibrant, life-affirming music, and it lives!

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 9


2. Another contributing factor, particularly for those closely following the work of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, was the fact that Brian’s solo performance of the new song “Surf’s Up” on the television special Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution, which aired in April 1967 and was hosted by Leonard Bernstein, heralded no forthcoming release on record of the obviously extraordinary song. (The performance had in fact been recorded the preceding December.) “Surf’s Up” had been intended for Smile and remained unreleased in any form until a version of it was included on the 1971 Beach Boys album for which it served as the title song.

3. Among major hit singles of that year exemplifying these characteristics were Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” Bobbie Gentry’s “Ode to Billie Joe,” the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love,” Scott McKenzie’s “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair),” and even the Monkees’ “Pleasant Valley Sunday.”
4. In the unpaginated book accompanying Smile Sessions, Brian Wilson writes of this record: “I finished a version of ‘Heroes and Villains,’ but it sure wasn’t what Van Dyke [Parks] and I originally had in mind.”

5. See Starr 1994, 46. For a more sympathetic view of the Smiley Smile music, see Harrison 1997, 46–49.

6. In his article “Lost and Found: The Significance of Smile,” found in the unpaginated book accompanying the Smile Sessions box, Peter Reum claims that “Little Bird” from Friends “quoted horn parts” from the projected Smile song “Child Is Father of the Man.” I confess that I am unable to discern this connection. I can hear a slight resemblance between a horn line in “Wake the World” and one in “Song for Children” from Brian Wilson Presents Smile, but this relationship seems to me inconsequential, if it is not accidental.

7. The element of nostalgic parody would reappear to particularly strong effect on the 1971 album Surf’s Up, to be discussed shortly.

8. On Brian Wilson Presents Smile, “Cabin Essence” (as it is titled on that album and in most other sources) comes as the concluding number of the first “suite”; six other selections separate it from the opening “Our Prayer,” creating an aesthetic experience totally different from—and vastly superior to—that which results when the two songs are directly juxtaposed, as they are on 20/20.

9. Doe and Tobler 2004, 78, and Lambert 2007, 296 credit Brian Wilson as a cowriter on “Take a Load Off Your Feet,” but the original LP label and the lyrics insert for Surf’s Up credit him only for “A Day in the Life of a Tree” and “‘Til I Die,” in addition to “Surf’s Up.”

10. “Caroline, No,” the despairing finale of Pet Sounds, certainly comes to mind as another instance of a dark Beach Boys song, but the despondency in “Surf’s Up” is related to cultural as well as personal matters.

11. This “neat trick” is carried out over the length of an entire album in That’s Why God Made the Radio, the excellent 2012 release that marked the surprise reunion (and viability) of the living Beach Boys. At first, the band seems to be playing along with the expectation that they could only be a jolly nostalgia act, until the tide begins to turn on the song “Strange World.” The concluding number, “Summer’s Gone,” which gently evokes “Caroline, No,” is among the saddest songs Brian Wilson ever wrote. The Beach Boys’ reunion marked yet a third unanticipated event in the twenty-first-century career of Wilson, following the appearance of Brian Wilson Presents Smile in 2004, and the release of Smile Sessions in 2011.

12. For one extensive account of how important the release of Smile material seemed at this time, see Starr 1994.

13. My own discussion of the album may be found in Starr 2007.

14. The DVD (Rhino Home Video R2 970415) offers no specific information about the live performance, other than “recorded in Los Angeles, CA.”