

Michael Waddacor presents

# ★ Strange Brew™

Celebrating seminal rock music | **Edition 09** | Friday August 31 2007

## Brian Wilson dreamt he had a halo over his head

*Pet Sounds*: A new type of sophisticated-feeling music



The cover of The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* album, often rated as "the greatest album ever made".

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Forty-one years later, The Beach Boys' greatest album, *Pet Sounds*, merits a fresh celebration for the Noughties. The group's leader, Brian Wilson, created one of the most majestic music albums of the twentieth century. Producer George Martin and The Beatles – particular Paul McCartney – were amazed by the quality of the album's songwriting and production, and were fuelled to go several steps beyond *Pet Sounds* while writing and recording *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club* in 1966 and 1967. **Michael Waddacor** pays homage to the irresistible "pop genius" of Brian Wilson and his 1966 masterpiece that continues to touch the hearts and souls of a new generation of music enthusiasts.

**R**ELEASED by Capitol Records in May 1966, The Beach Boys' finest album, *Pet Sounds*, remains one of the most enjoyed and eulogised music albums of the twentieth century. *Pet Sounds* is a bold, explorative, innovative, sophisticated and highly intelligent pop record glowing with a rare spiritual luminosity and an invigorating reverence for the foibles of human love and the awkward odyssey from adolescence to adulthood.

*Pet Sounds* glides effortlessly from wistful touches to sanguine moods and back again within a framework of superbly layered vocal harmonies and exquisitely crafted arrangements. Even for those of us who feel lukewarm at best about The Beach Boys' music of the 1960s and 1970s, there is no denying that band's creative leader and principal songwriter, Brian Wilson, was surfing the crest of his biggest creative wave, more determined than ever before to outshine and outsell his biggest rivals, The Beatles. The rivalry between the two famous Bea-groups was friendly and filled with mutual admiration, but it was serious and passionately competitive.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Brian Douglas Wilson was born in Hawthorne, California on June 20 1942 – a mere two days after James Paul McCartney was born in Liverpool, England. For a while, Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys inspired John Lennon, Paul McCartney and The Beatles and conversely, with

each group (especially Brian Wilson and Paul McCartney) citing the other as a major influence and, more important, as a benchmark for writing, arranging and sound-engineering standards.

Besides a few throwaway lyrics by Tony Asher, if *Pet Sounds* has one overriding "flaw" or cause for consternation it is the sheer extent of the ambition and fastidiousness with which it was made. The year was 1966 and bands were being recorded in four-track monaural or monophonic (mono) sound. Insiders have said that Brian Wilson was not enamoured with the early sounds of stereophonic processing (stereo) because he is largely deaf in his right ear and tends to hear sound monophonically.

To settle the debate about whether mono sounds better than stereo, the special fortieth-anniversary edition of *Pet Sounds* – remastered in high-definition compact disc (HDCD) format and released last year (August 2006) by Capitol Record – features the entire album in mono with the programme repeated in stereo on the latter half of disc one.

The second disc is a DVD featuring a 2003 Brian Wilson interview and other documentary material relating to making and promoting *Pet Sounds*. To many of us, the original mono version is excellent and the stereo mix adds little value bearing in mind how Brian Wilson originally imagined the sound and oversaw the album's engineering and mixing.

### Beatle rivalry



*Released in December 1965, The Beatles' groundbreaking sixth studio album, Rubber Soul, inspired The Beach Boys' principal songwriter, Brian Wilson, to imagine and develop a more sophisticated sound and a more cohesive approach towards writing an album's worth of good songs*

Envious of The Beatles' accolades, popularity and, above all, the seemingly unsurpassable songwriting dexterity of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson pushed the proverbial sonic envelope and,

with little doubt, outclassed the sonic quality of The Beatles' immediate pre-*Pet Sounds* album, *Rubber Soul*.

Moreover, Wilson and the rest of his vocal group – ably assisted by part-time lyricist Tony Asher and a veritable constellation of session musicians, including The Wrecking Crew – went on to create one of the most lushly orchestrated, technically adroit and best sung albums of the 1960s. The album features some of Brian Wilson's finest songs, notably *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)*, *God Only Knows*, *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times* and *Caroline No*.

Whereas English producer George Martin and The Beatles were starting to record with tape loops, Indian instruments and an assortment of weird, lysergic-tinged electronic manipulations of sound, Brian Wilson largely kept his vision and hearing comparatively pure.

More than ever, he was determined to exploit new depths, if not unexplored dimensions, in pure natural or acoustic sound. To a frighteningly extensive degree, he realised his ambition. At one point, Bob Dylan wryly quipped about the acuteness of Wilson's hearing: "Jesus, that ear! He should donate it to the Smithsonian."

Here, Wilson tipped his hat homewards, drawing on the mighty Wall of Sound production method of his compatriot, Phil Spector (born 1940), who, perhaps ironically, produced The Beatles' worst album of its time, *Let It Be*, during 1968.

In particular, Wilson learnt from Spector to layer, ever so patiently and precisely, one voice over another and to use a broad spectrum of keyboards and strings, as well as an extensive battery of percussion instruments, some of which were unusual at the time for a rock or pop group [see Phil Spector article in **edition 10** of *Strange Brew*].

Let us not forget that 1966 was one of the biggest turning-point years in the history of rock music. What was foreshadowed in 1964 and 1965 became palpable in 1966: the more ambitious rock groups – particularly those led by adroit songwriters – would become increasingly explorative, original and determined to prove that there would be far more to express lyrically and aurally than their 1950s rock 'n' roll predecessors such as Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley and Little Richard.

In 1966, we got to hear some of the most significant rock – or rock-orientated – albums of the 1960s, most notably Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*, The Beatles' *Revolver*, The Rolling Stones' *Aftermath*, The Kinks' *Face to Face*, The Byrds' *Fifth Dimension* and Cream's *Fresh Cream*.

The year's other significant releases included the eponymous debut albums of Tim Buckley, Buffalo Springfield, The Seeds, The Small Faces and The

Yardbirds, as well as Donovan's *Sunshine Superman*, The Who's *A Quick One*, The Thirteenth Floor Elevators' *The Psychedelic Sounds of the Thirteenth Floor Elevators* and Frank Zappa and the Mother of Invention's *Freak Out*.

### Bordering on genius

More than 40 years later, *Pet Sounds* remains a remarkable work bordering on the genius (a word I normally loathe using) with its breathtakingly fresh production, majestic and often complex arrangements, gorgeous harmonies and heart-felt singing, lush melodies and, at times, poignant lyrics about the loss of innocence and other touching themes about the awkward journey into early adulthood and the foibles and vicissitudes of romantic love.

This journey reflects, at its time, the perspectives of young, naïve and decent conservative American West Coasters raised in comfortably cloistered middle-class homes and not appearing to be overtly concerned about the wider issues of the mid-1960s such as the American Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and potential ecological doom.

As the elevated and inspired leader, Brian Wilson created a compelling work that, at once, was assured, accessible, fluid, transcendental and almost pristine in its balance and beauty, thereby creating a blueprint for making many other classic pop-rock albums of the later 1960s, as well as the 1970s. In particular, Wilson wanted something "sophisticated", as he captured in his compact-disc (CD) album liner notes of March 1990:

"In January [1966], I started making the instrumental tracks for the album. I made each track a sound experience of its own. I was obsessed with explaining, musically, how I felt inside. This, I thought, could be the beginning of a new type of sophisticated-feeling music. I definitely felt the need to compete with The Beatles."

At the time of the nearing the end of the album's recording, editing and mixing, a bewildered, if not irate, Mike Love enquired of Brian Wilson: "Who's gonna hear this shit? The ears of a dog?"

Well, Mr Love (who told Wilson in no uncertain terms "not to fuck with the formula"), Brian's endearing masterpiece has to be the sweetest excrement to have graced millions of ears around the globe. We are glad to see that Brian had the gall to call the album *Pet Sounds* and preserved for posterity the sounds of his pet dogs, Banana and Louie, as part of his unusual soundscape.

Sadly, in many respects, Brian Wilson had intended to make and release the album as a solo work, thereby having more control of his sound and vision, but he needed the complex multi-part vocal harmonies. He also had to fulfil stringent contractual obligations to Capitol Records to release another Beach Boys album for the American summer.

The first *Pet Sounds* single, *Caroline No*, though, was released under his name – and not under The Beach Boys' – by Capitol in April 1966 with *Summer Means New Love* on the flipside.

### Rubber Soul inspiration

So inspired was Brian Wilson by the overall quality of The Beatles' masterful *Rubber Soul* (released in December 1965), he devoted January and February 1966 to writing most of the new material for what would become *Pet Sounds*. Wilson reminisced a few years ago about the influence of The Beatles' sixth album:

"When I first heard it [*Rubber Soul*], I flipped. I said: 'I want to make an album like that'. I really wasn't quite ready for the unity. It felt like it all belonged together. *Rubber Soul* was a collection of songs ... that somehow went together like no album ever made before, and I was very impressed. I said: 'That's it. I really am challenged to do a great album'."

Wilson spent a lot of his time directing and editing the writing of the lyrics with Tony Asher, at the time a young Los Angeles advertising executive who specialised in writing jingles. Ironically, Asher had tried his hand at songwriting in the mainstream music industry, but abandoned it in favour of earning more money working in the Los Angeles advertising industry.

Towards the end of 1965, after a series of brief chance encounters at Los Angeles recording studios, Brian Wilson phoned Asher at his office to invite him to write the lyrics for the next Beach Boys album because the group's usual lyricist, Mike Love, was on tour with the group. Wilson said he needed someone who could help him to compete on a higher creative level with The Beatles.

Wilson also is known to prefer to work with a collaborator because writing entirely alone lacks fun and challenge. Later in 1966, he would collaborate with Van Dyke Parks as he lyricist for the aborted *Smile* album.

Surprised at Wilson's confidence in him, and delighted to get on board, Asher took an unpaid leave of absence from his advertising job and began writing lyrics early in January 1966. He completed most of the lyrics by the end of February 1966. In the liner notes to fortieth-anniversary edition of the album (the 2006 liner notes), Asher reminisced:

"Brian didn't really write lyrics to the songs; he edited them. That means he might have simply said that he didn't like a particular line. I would have then tried to convince him of its merits, if I felt strongly about it, or I would have written an alternate in an attempt to get closer to what he seemed to be after.

"None of this is to say that he didn't supply words to some of the songs. He did. But his role was more to react to what I did after I did it, rather than to direct

it before it occurred or even as it was occurring. It's fair to say that the general tenor of the lyrics was always his, and the actual choice of words was usually mine. I was really just his interpreter."

### Searching for cohesion

This time around, after making a hurried cycle of overtly commercial and light-hearted fun-in-the-sun albums for Capitol Records, Wilson did not want his creative process to be rushed or pressured, so he set about crafting an album of immense cohesion, fluidity, honesty and elevated sound.

At the same time, he wanted to highlight themes that young people could relate to, such as hope, forgiveness, loneliness and the quest for love and acceptance in world that was changing fast with the advent of recreational drugs, novel musical idioms and new schools of thought on issues of the day. *Rubber Soul*, in part – along with a few doses of LSD (behind the rest of the Boys' backs) and some deep soul-searching – inspired this approach.

The landmark Beatles album of 1965, particularly the George Martin production, drove Wilson to find a more lustrous, novel and adventurous sound that would stand the test of time.

Wilson had 10 years in mind at the time, but, 41 years later, *Pet Sounds* remains fresh, durable and honest, an immaculate testimony to the importance of "excellent production" and striving to shape a sound that transcends fickle fashions, orthodox arrangements and comparatively restrictive musical idioms such as rockabilly, doo-wop or calypso.

On their previous few studio albums – starting with the debut *Surfin' Safari* (November 1962) and culminating in *The Beach Boys Party!* (February 1966), The Beach Boys focused on celebrating the more frivolous, hedonistic delights of the American West Coast: surfing, beaches, girls, dancing, parties, hotrods and what seemed like an endless summer of all-round fun.

By the time of writing *Pet Sounds*, Wilson and Asher realised that groups like The Beatles, The Byrds and The Rolling Stones were focusing on a broader spectrum of topics.

Much of Wilson's change of direction is attributable to taking his first dose of the psychedelic substance, LSD, in 1965 – as well as his growing reluctance to be a public pop figure subjected to seemingly endless tours and strings of media interviews.

At heart, he was a reclusive who preferred the intimacy of the recording studio rather than the hurly-burly world of concerts and promotional interviews. The *Pet Sounds* writing cycle began his secluded phase. It is said he had already suffered two nervous breakdowns prior to *Pet Sounds* and was beginning to feel the pressure of his peers, particular Mike Love, about the direction of the group's sound and messages.



*Brian Wilson ... pictured around the time of making Pet Sounds*

### Developing novel sounds

Wilson demanded a lot from the album's 50-plus session musicians, a feat made more demanding by his reluctance to write and present formal scores for each instrument.

Instead, each musician was appointed for his or her dexterity on their instrument – and each had to play every piece of unscored music note-perfect with the right feeling.

At all times, sessions were controlled diligently and determinedly by Wilson standing in the control room. Although session musicians have said Wilson usually was affable, patient and good-humoured, there was little time for Beatlesque antics, banter and creative craziness.

Wilson was on a grave mission to cut the finest record ever made in the history of popular music. He was not going to allow anyone or anything divert his creative direction or dilute his passion.

Most of the instrumental and vocal score for *Pet Sounds* was in Wilson's head. He had no formal training in arranging and conducting music, so, to direct the musicians and indicate the parts they were expected to play, he would hum and sing parts, define keys and chord blocks, and gesticulate enthusiastically until the relevant musicians understood the chords, notes and feelings he wanted.

Unlike more recent recording trends, Wilson assembled the musicians to record instrumental tracks together – live-to-tape style. Studio rehearsals often were intensive and prolonged. When it came to recording *God Only Knows*, Wilson got the highly talented musicians to record 22 takes in one night session before expressing satisfaction. In his own words, “Making music has always been a very spiritual thing”.

As a musician and musical director, Wilson also brought a subtle jazz sensibility to his writing, as well as his work in the recording studio, where he encouraged musicians to improvise and not be afraid to experiment, including the use of unorthodox chord blocks and unusual tones.

During the *Pet Sounds* sessions, insiders say Wilson was usually enthusiastic and open to new ideas from session musicians. His approach sometimes was dryly humorous, yet always dominated by an air of tight professional control and uncompromising confidence.

Wilson and Asher, among other inspirational sources, listened to jazz records during their writing tenure, which encouraged Wilson, intuitively, to develop a richer spectrum of chord patterns and to use keys not common to rock and pop music.

Wilson also shifted keys in particular songs, such as *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, which moves from A to F and then D, an unconventional approach in pop music. Similarly, Wilson varied tempi and rhythms, and found subtle – and less subtle – ways to accentuate moods and ideas.

### **Adding humorous inflections**

**F**or all his legendary seriousness in his approach to music, Wilson was not without humour – a subdued quality that would become more pronounced during his original writing and recording sessions for the *Smile* album.

Wilson is a self-confessed Walt Disney enthusiast and drew subtle inspiration from some of the soundtracks of animated Disney feature films of the 1960s, including humorous embellishments and whimsical sound effects.

At all times, he approached his art form as a consummate musical painter, reaching out with acutely delicate care for specific forms, colours, textures and highlights, while also remaining sensitive to symbolic opportunities. Compared with most of his pop contemporaries, Wilson worked with an unusually broad spectrum of sounds, hence his use of graceful shapings and colourations drawn from instruments such as the glockenspiel, vibes, French horn, flute, cello, vibraphone, steel guitar and organ, as well as the ethereal theremin.

He was not afraid to apply whimsical details, usually spontaneously, such as the use of water bottles and Coca-Cola tins for percussion, or the finger plucking

of piano strings to create the right ambient details for a song.

Across *Pet Sounds*, Wilson – both consciously and serendipitously – drew on a wide range of musical idioms and styles of arrangement, including touches of doo-wop, rock 'n' roll, folk, jazz, baroque and Hollywood soundtracks. In another significant move, inspired by Phil Spector, much of Brian Wilson's lustrous approach to arranging and recording *Pet Sounds* is attributable to his imaginative use of instrumental doubling.

To achieve this effect, he would have the same instrument (eg, the electric bass) play the same melody lines twice and record them as two separate instruments. In a variation of this principle, he would get three different pianos – a tack piano, an electric piano and a conventional grand piano – to play the same melody.

Because these “doubled” or “trebled” instruments were not all precisely in tune, Wilson derived a rich chorusing effect, a technique often exploited by symphonic composers and conductors when working with a string or horn section, for example. With bass lines, to create additional warmth and subtle intrigue, for example, Wilson loved to blend the sounds of an upright acoustic bass with a Fender electric bass.

Carol Kaye played most of the electric bass lines and, to achieve the harder, punchier sound Wilson favoured, she used a hard pick, a ploy seldom used by bass players.

### **Disorientating the group**

At a time when most rock and pop groups were expected to record, edit and mix a complete album in a few days – or maybe a fortnight, if they were fortunate, Brian Wilson wanted the luxury of having several weeks. With lyricist Tony Asher on board and the rest of the group away on a three-week tour of Japan and Hawaii, Wilson moved into one of the studios at Western Recorders in Los Angeles and laid down the tracks for six of the songs with his favourite engineer, the late Chuck Britz, during January and early February 1966.

On their return to Los Angeles, the rest of the group was invited into the studios to hear Wilson's masterpiece in the making. Mostly, they were bewildered and, as Al Jardine remembers, “it took some getting used to”. Asher is blunter:

“The group was less than enthusiastic about the material. [The Beach Boys] were hoping and expecting more of what had been hits for them all along ... . They had just returned from a very successful tour. So they didn't see the wisdom in changing the formula.”

Going further, Wilson recalls in the 2006 liner notes: “With *Pet Sounds*, there was resistance. There was a little bit of inter-group struggle. It was resolved in that they figured it was a showcase for Brian Wilson,

but it [still] was The Beach Boys. In other words, they give in."

Towards the end of February 1966, Brian Wilson had a much clearer idea of the new album's content and material he wanted featured.

He presented an initial working list of 10 tracks to the Capitol artiste and repertoire (A&R) executives: *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, *Caroline No*, *Good Vibrations*, *You Still Believe in Me*, *That's Not Me*, *Hang on to Your Ego*, *Sloop John B*, *The Old Man and the Baby*, *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)* and *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*. He said he wanted to add two other tracks: an instrumental and a song he had not yet titled.

Over the next few weeks, Wilson continued to explore his options. After some pressure from the group, *Hang on to Your Ego* was reworked and renamed, *I Know There's an Answer*. Most disconcerting, however, was his decision to omit one of the finest songs of his career, *Good Vibrations*, which Capitol released as a single in October 1966. In the 2006 liner notes, Al Jardine recalls:

"At the time, we all had assumed that *Good Vibrations* was going to be on the album, but Brian decided to hold it out. It was a judgement call on his part; we felt otherwise, but left the ultimate decision up to him."

Wilson said he wanted the single to be more prominent by gaining special attention as a non-album song. A similar big-song omission controversy would repeat itself a year later when George Martin and The Beatles finalised the track listing for *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It was agreed to omit two of the group's best songs from their *Sgt Pepper* sessions, *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *Penny Lane*, which George Martin later admitted to being the "greatest single mistake" of his career.

### **Demanding vocal efforts**

Most of March and the first fortnight of April 1966 was devoted to rehearsing, recording and finalising the vocal tracks with the rest of the group. According to Mike Love, the group invested considerable effort into the vocal recordings, which left them all exhausted. In the 2006 liner notes, Love says:

"[Brian] was going for every subtle nuance that you could conceivably think of. Every voice had to be right, every voice and its resonance and tonality had to be right. The timbre of the voices just had to be correct, according to how he felt. And then he might, the next day, completely throw that out and we might have do it over again."

What is so remarkable about Wilson's approach to arranging, producing and mixing his instrumental tracks is that he did these as standalone sessions. During these sessions, he had to use his imaginative inner ear to sense where and how, several weeks

later, the final vocal tracks would be featured. His inner, abstract attention to detail embraced his impulses about which individual parts would be sung by Jardine, Love, Johnston and brothers Carl and Dennis. It seems that Wilson sensed, well in advance, the grand aural synergy that would emerge when the final vocals tracks were superimposed on the polished instrumental tracks.

Wilson was meticulous in directing each of the vocal parts and how the vocal microphones should be placed and used in the recording studio. The core five-piece vocal group generally was recorded using three distinctively chosen microphones: one for Jardine, Carl and Dennis; one for Brian for his solos; and one for Mike Love not only because his voice was the deepest, but also because it was comparatively weak and needed greater amplification.

After Bruce Johnston joined the group, there were times when the vocal arrangements required Al Jardine to share a microphone with Brian Wilson. Because Wilson was so much taller, Jardine had to stand on a box or a step. As with the instrumental sessions, Wilson also employed his "doubling" technique for most of the vocal tracks.

The near-perfect vocals tracks to a non-technical musical enthusiast do not hint of anyone singing out of tune or out of key, although I am certain there are keen-eared experts who have heard a few vocal blemishes. With his vocals as perfect as he could hope them to be, Brian Wilson presented the Capitol A&R executives with the final track listing and mixes around mid-April 1966.

### **Crying with Marilyn**

When the first few copies of the album were pressed for advanced promotional use, Wilson took a copy home to play for his wife, Marilyn. She later revealed that they both listened to the album in its entirety, without speaking, and burst into tears at the end.

While Wilson was proud of the final product, the market did not respond nearly as warmly as he had hoped. *Pet Sounds* became the group's first studio album in three years not to be certified gold for sales of 500,000 units in the USA. Perhaps the saddest irony of *Pet Sounds* in its day was Capitol Records' apparent reluctance to promote it seriously and, worse, its comparatively poor sales, which became a serious affront to Brian Wilson's creative ego.

So damaging was the disappointment, an upset exacerbated his sheer creative exhaustion because of his intense commitment to making the album, it seemed as if Brian Wilson never fully recovered his creative muse. He did, however, come close to emulating *Pet Sounds* at times with some of the work he wrote for *Smiley Smile*, *Sunflower* and *Surf's Up*, which included a few of the songs from his aborted *Smile* project.

As time flows by, however, *Pet Sounds* continues to endure and, if Brian Wilson is remembered only for

this album and a clutch of great 1960s hit singles, then he has left an impressive legacy.

Besides Paul McCartney and George Martin, scores of musicians, producers and engineers have eulogised the songwriting, singing, arranging and overall quality of production on *Pet Sounds*.

Wilson's notable *Pet Sounds* fans over the years have included the late American composer and conductor, Leonard Bernstein, Pete Townsend and Roger Daltrey of The Who, Eric Clapton, The Bee Gees, Neil Young, Glen Frey of The Eagles, Jackson Browne, Elvis Costello, Tears for Fears, Andrew Loog Oldham, Phil Ramone and Queens of the Stone Age.

At the end of his 2006 liner notes, Wilson recalls: "During the production of *Pet Sounds* I dreamt I had a halo over my head. This might have meant that the angels were watching over *Pet Sounds*."

Well, that is how it still sounds today with its perennial glow of spiritual beauty! ■



*Brian Wilson photographed in the mid-1980s. This low-resolution picture has been reproduced without permission in the higher interests of promoting the legacies of Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys.*

The 1,000-word *Strange Brew* review

## Brian Wilson's crowning glory continues to glow

*Strange Brew* rating: ★★★★★

**F**orty-one years after its release in 1966, The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* remains their masterwork – a superbly conceived and executed suite of 11 songs and two instrumentals that inspired many groups, songwriters, producers and engineers to rethink and elevate their approach to making music. Many musicians, producers and music enthusiasts continue to cite *Pet Sounds* as the best album ever made.

The Beach Boys' creative guiding light, Brian Wilson, wrote, recorded and produced most of the album's material in Los Angeles between December 1965 and April 1966. To add depth and freshness to his vision, which was fast shifting away from The Beach Boys' frivolous trademark sun-and-surf themes, he drew profound inspiration from The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* album and Phil Spector's mighty Wall-of-Sound production method, and went as far as appointing Los Angeles adman Tony Asher to act as his alter ego by writing the lyrics.

The near-faultless *Pet Sounds* is mandatory listening if you want to gain any meaningful appreciation of the music of the latter half of the twentieth century, particular the mainstream American rock and pop music of the 1960s.

Wilson was obsessed with pursuing perfection, innovation and, above all, outsmarting his admired rivals, The Beatles. In the process, he turned one of his curses to his advantage. He hated touring and travelling, and, it seemed, was starting to loathe the adulation and demands of audiences and the media. Preferring to concentrate his energies on writing and recording, as The Beatles would do after performing their final concert in August 1966, Wilson immersed himself in the studio. Bar by bar and riff by riff, he sketched on the piano the inspired material that would become *Pet Sounds*, including the "one that got away", the masterful hit single, *Good Vibrations*.

### Power of 50-plus talents

Getting the lustrous and complex vocal tracks right was a given because he had the talents of brothers Carl and Dennis to draw on, along with those of cousin Mike Love, friend Al Jardine and newcomer Bruce Johnston. While the rest of The Beach Boys were on tour, he began his feverish writing cycle and, at the same time, handpicking some of the finest American West Coast session musicians to bring extraordinary fresh colours and textures to his

musical outlines. In the end, more than 50 musicians were brought into the studios to add their unique touches across a broad range of keyboards, horns, woodwinds, and stringed and percussion instruments.

Able assisted by his favourite engineer, the late Chuck Britz [see **edition 10**], Wilson realised his vision of achieving a pure acoustic sound, despite the apparent limitations of using four-track monaural (mono) recording and mixing technology, without resorting to Beatlesque gimmicks such as sitars, tablas, tape loops, copious varispeeding and artificial double tracking (ADT).

Instead, Wilson exploited the sonic possibilities of more conventional Western instruments, among them the mandolin, accordion, harpsichord, French horn, clarinet, tympani and other forms of orchestral percussion. He and Britz, with extensive support from their guest musicians, created one of the most beautifully orchestrated and imaginatively arranged albums of the rock era, even if seems to have too much of a slickly scored Hollywood sound today.

In the wake of writing a string of masterful mid-1960s hit singles such as *Help Me, Rhonda* and *California Girls* (1965), Wilson stepped up a gear and not only proved that they he could write an album's worth of great melodies, but that he could plumb new depths of concepts and meanings with the help of lyricist Tony Asher. He sets the tone exquisitely on the opening song, the gorgeous hit single, *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, with its infectious melody, heartfelt choruses and beautiful arrangements – including those deliciously rocking accordions in the introduction – to express the need for the freedom and joy to live with someone you love.

### **Creativity and craftsmanship**

To complement the power of his opener is the compelling poignancy of the album's closing song, *Caroline No*, one of Wilson's most haunting ballads about the loss of a lover. In between – besides the odd and contentious choice of the cover song, *Sloop John B*, based on a 1920s Caribbean folk song – he sustains a high level of creativity and craftsmanship.

While some fans and critics tend to regard the two instrumentals, *Let's Go Away for Awhile* and the title track, as disposable filler, they provide refreshing relief from the high-energy and fastidious vocal tracks. They also allow Wilson to express his ideas sonically beyond the scope of The Beach Boys' impeccable harmonies and reinforce his determination to produce, at the time, a fresh and novel-sounding album based on pure acoustic sound for its expression.

As for the rest of the songs, he adheres mostly to themes of young love, moving from the reassuring tenderness of *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)* and the darker anxiety of self-reflection and self-discovery in *That's Not Me* to the lushly sung *God Only Knows*, the one song that stands out as an

arousing tribute to Phil Spector's Wall-of-Sound method. The touching confusion and disenchantment of *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*, sadly, seems to foreshadow the decline of his creativity that would follow *Pet Sounds*' release.

Wilson brought to *Pet Sounds* a remarkable tenderness and sincerity, even if some of us think the music and lyrics were not dark and daring enough. Set against a luxurious and stimulating suite of instrumental tracks, Wilson poured his heart out on behalf of a new generation of adolescents and young adults exploring the foibles and vicissitudes of romantic love. With Asher as his alter ego, he penned his own compact aural novella about the loss of innocence and the search for meaning in a world seemingly devoid of that innocence.

If anyone wants a definitive introduction to Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds* provides an excellent starting point. As Paul McCartney once quipped: "No one is educated musically until they've heard *Pet Sounds*. It's a total, classic record that is unbeatable in many ways." **Johnny Neophyte ■**

## Other views

**Brian Wilson:** "I'll never surpass *Pet Sounds*."

"I wanted to create something that I thought would bring an adequate amount of spiritual love to the world." (1996)

**George Martin**, producer for The Beatles (date unknown): "Without *Pet Sounds*, *Sgt Pepper* wouldn't have happened. *Pepper* was an attempt to equal *Pet Sounds*."

"The first time I heard *Pet Sounds*, I got that kind of feeling that happens less and less as one gets older and more blasé ... that moment when something comes along and blows your mind. Hearing *Pet Sounds* gave me the kind of feeling that raises the hairs on the back of your neck and you say: 'What is that? It's fantastic!' It gives you an elation that is beyond logic."

American producer, **Bob Irwin**, quoted in the Charles L Granata book, *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times: Brian Wilson and the Making of Pet Sounds* (2003): "*Pet Sounds* is the ultimate album to use in illustrating the beauty of a mono mix and the way that things can be understated, yet play such an important part that your mind automatically lifts them up and out of the mix. That's the secret of a good mix and, if you're in the business of making records, you'd best understand it. Brian [Wilson] certainly did."

**Colin Larkin** in *All-Time Top 1,000 Albums* (2000): "The intense beauty of this record grows with age and Brian Wilson should not feel any failure or underachievement in the face of the four mop-tops from Liverpool. They had George Martin; Brian had



only himself, some sibling rivalry and a cousin to deal with."

**Jason Fine** in *The Rolling Stone Album Guide* (2004): "Pet Sounds was [Brian] Wilson's attempt to make an entire coherent, emotionally honest record – a song cycle of loneliness, hope and the search for love. It was also his most elaborate production, for which Wilson created complex, unorthodox instrumental landscapes to give his songs breathtaking majesty."

**Uncredited writer** in *The Mojo Collection: The Ultimate Music Companion* (2003): "With the notable exception of *Sloop John B* (a hit single that Capitol stuck on the album against Brian's wishes), every song on *Pet Sounds* evinced a spiritual tenderness that opened new doors in rock."

**Seth Jacobson** in *1,001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die* (2005): "The tenor of the album is radically different from previous [Beach Boys'] releases. Gone were the one-dimensional sun 'n' surf anthems; in their stead, a more complex sound emerged, joyous but tinged with deeper, troubled emotions."

**Uncredited writer** in *Rolling Stone's The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time* (2005): "The deeply personal nature of the songs, which [Brian] Wilson co-wrote primarily with lyricist Tony Asher, further distinguish the album from The Beach Boys' typical fare. Its luxurious sound conveys a heartbreaking wistfulness, as songs such as *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times* and *I'm Waiting for the Day* bid farewell to the innocent world of the early Sixties and to The Beach Boys' fun-in-the-sun hits."

**Uncredited writer** in the *Rolling Stone* website (1997): "Recorded and released in 1966, not long after the sunny, textural experiments of *California Girls*, *Pet Sounds*, aside from its importance as Brian Wilson's evolutionary compositional masterpiece, was the first rock record that can be considered a 'concept album'; from first cut to last, we were treated to an intense, linear personal vision of the vagaries of a love affair and the painful, introverted anxieties that are the wrenching precipitates of the unstable chemistry of any love relationship."

"This trenchant cycle of love songs has the emotional impact of a shatteringly evocative novel and, by God, if this little record didn't change only the course of popular music, but the course of a few lives in the bargain. It sure as hell changed its creator, Brian [Wilson], who, by 1966, had been cruising along at the forefront of American popular music for four years, dolling out a constant river of hit songs and producing that tough yet mellifluous sound that was the only intelligent innovation in pop music between Chuck Berry and The Beatles."

**Mick Houghton** in *The Rock Primer* (1980): "An almost faultless album, *Pet Sounds* was the culmination of a growing maturity in The Beach Boys' music that was already evident from songs such as *California Girls*, *Help Me Rhonda* and the neglected

masterpiece, *Don't Worry, Baby*. Brian Wilson was no longer simply documenting the California surfing/dragster culture but, retired from touring since 1965, was exploring new possibilities in pop music and sound techniques."

"Aside from assimilating the production methods of Phil Spector, Wilson's particular flair for melody was enhanced by his unusual combinations of musical instruments. While others, The Byrds and The Beatles, Wilson's declared rivals, were experimenting with backwards tapes and electronic trickery, he was dabbling in pure acoustic sound."

**John Alroy** online in *Wilson and Alroy's Music Reviews* (www.warr.org) (date unknown): ★★★★★ "A startling jump forwards, and one of the greatest records in rock history – The Beatles and many others were spurred on to greater heights by it [*Pet Sounds*]. Every track is a masterpiece, including the two bizarre, richly crafted orchestral instrumentals. Much of it features Brian [Wilson] singing solo (*Don't Talk; Caroline No*), but the [Beach Boys] harmonies are as brilliant as ever (*You Still Believe in Me; Sloop John B*) and one of the best tracks showcases Carl [Wilson] (*God Only Knows*).

"There are amazing touches everywhere, ranging from inventive instrumentation to startling a capella harmony breaks to astoundingly complex orchestration. It's sometimes said to be the first 'concept album', but that has mostly to do with the record's consistent high quality, unified tone and serious, introspective lyrics, all of which were highly unusual for a pop record at this time."

**Uncredited writer** in the *Guinness Rockopaedia*® (1998): "After months of painstaking work, Brian's masterpiece, *Pet Sounds* (1966), emerged: an intimate, dreamy pop symphony of often contradictory moods, from the heartening *Wouldn't It Be Nice* and *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)*, through the ecstatic *Let's Go Away for a While*, *God Only Knows* and *Pet Sounds*, the confusion of *That's Not Me* and *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times* to the despair of *Caroline No*, described by [fellow Beach Boy] Bruce Johnston as 'the death of a quality within him that was so vital ... his innocence'."

**Nick Logan and Bob Woffinden** in *The Illustrated NME Encyclopaedia of Rock* (1977): "The masterwork, *Pet Sounds*, was ... put together under heavy contractual pressures from Capitol [Records] and not at all approved by the rest of the group when they returned to the US. On release in 1966, it was received well by critics and by Beach Boys aficionados in the UK, but bombed in the US."

"However, though not as influential as the contemporary Beatles album, *Revolver*, *Pet Sounds* did set totally new standards in arrangement and production that diverted pop on to [an] unforeseen track."

## Ratings

*Pet Sounds* is rated 18/1,000 in the third edition of Colin Larkin's *All-Time Top 1,000 Albums* (Virgin, 2000). It was rated 3/1,000 in the first edition of 1994 and 6/1,000 in the second edition of 1998. The album is rated 2/500 in *Rolling Stone's The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time* (Wenner Books, 2005).

All four editions of *The Rolling Stone Album Guide* awarded it a peerless five stars, while Martin Strong, in his *The Essential Rock Discography* (2006), rates the album 10/10. In addition, Colin Larkin awarded the album five stars in *The Virgin Encyclopaedia of Sixties Music* (1997). In Britain in 1995, a panel of rock musicians, songwriters and producers appointed by *Mojo* magazine voted *Pet Sounds* as "the greatest album ever made". ■



## Album fact-file

**Release date:** May 16 1966 (USA)

**Record label:** Capitol Records (1966 vinyl LP: T-2458; 2000 standard CD: 527319-2; 1997 four-CD box set: CDS 837662-2; and 2006 expanded CD: LC 0148)

**Recording studios and dates:** Western Recorders, Sunset Sound and Gold Star studios, Los Angeles, July 1965 and November 1965 to April 1966

**Producer:** Brian Wilson

**Principal engineer:** Chuck Britz

**The musicians:** The Beach Boys – Brian Wilson (vocals and keyboards), Carl Wilson (vocals and some guitar), Dennis Wilson (vocals and some drums), Mike Love (vocals) Al Jardine (vocals) and Bruce Johnston (vocals) – plus session musicians, 52

of whom are credited in the liner notes of the fortieth-anniversary edition.

### Credited session musicians:

Arnold Belnick (violin)  
Chuck Berghofer (bass)  
Hal Blaine (drums and percussion)  
Norman Botnick (viola)  
Glen Campbell (guitar)  
Frank Capp (percussion, vibraphone and glockenspiel)  
Al Casey (guitar)  
Roy Caton (trumpet)  
Jerry Cole (guitar)  
Gary Coleman (percussion)  
Mike Deasy (guitar)  
Al de Lory (piano, harpsichord and organ)  
Justin DiTullio (cello)  
Steve Douglas (saxophone, clarinet, flute and percussion)  
Jess Erlich (cello)  
Carl Fortina (accordion)  
Ritchie Frost (drums and percussion)  
Jim Gordon (drums and percussion)  
Bill Green (saxophone, flute and percussion)  
Leonard Hartman (English horn and clarinet)  
Jim Horn (saxophone and flute)  
Paul Horn (saxophone)  
Harry Hyams (viola)  
Plas Johnson (saxophone, flute and percussion)  
Carol Kaye (electric bass)  
Barney Kessel (guitar and mandolin)  
Bobby Klein (saxophone)  
Larry Knetchel (organ)  
William Kurasch (violin)  
Leonard Malarsky (violin)  
Frank Marocco (accordion)  
Nick Martinis (drums)  
Terry Melcher (vocals and tambourine)  
Mike Melvoin (harpsichord)  
Jay Migliori (saxophone, clarinet and flute)  
Tommy Morgan (harmonica)  
Jim Nimitz (saxophone)  
Bill Pitman (guitar)  
Ray Pohlman (bass and mandolin)  
Don Randi (piano)  
Lyle Ritz (acoustic bass and ukulele)  
Alan Robinson (French horn)  
Joseph Saxon (cello)  
Ralph Schaeffer (violin)  
Sid Sharp (violin)  
Billy Strange (guitar)  
Ernie Tack (bass trombone)  
Paul Tanner (theremin – an electronic musical instrument)  
Darrel Terwilliger (viola)  
Julius Wechter (percussion and vibraphone)  
Jerry Williamson (percussion)  
Tibor Zelig (violin)

**US chart position:** 10

**UK chart position:** 2

**Platinum award:** In 2000, Brian Wilson eventually received long-overdue recognition from the music industry and Capitol Records when the Los Angeles-based record company presented him with a

platinum award in recognition of *Pet Sounds* achieving sales of more than one-million units.

### The 13 tracks

- (01) *Wouldn't It Be Nice*  
(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher-Mike Love)
- (02) *You Still Believe in Me*  
(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (03) *That's Not Me* (Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (04) *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)*  
(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (05) *I'm Waiting for the Day*  
(Brian Wilson-Mike Love)
- (06) *Let's Go Away for Awhile* (Brian Wilson)
- (07) *Sloop John B*  
(traditional: arranged by Brian Wilson)
- (08) *God Only Knows* (Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (09) *I Know There's an Answer*  
(Brian Wilson-Terry Sachen-Mike Love)
- (10) *Here Today* (Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (11) *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*  
(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)
- (12) *Pet Sounds* (instrumental: Brian Wilson)
- (13) *Caroline No* (Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)



## Down to the petting zoo

While *Pet Sounds* continues to boast a distinctive and memorable album-cover design, it remains unimaginative and aesthetically dull.

This is particularly irksome in the light of Brian Wilson investing so much creative energy into the 13 tracks and being so inspired by The Beatles *Rubber Soul* (and how many of us continue to adore that iconic 1965 Fab Four portrait by British photographer Robert Freeman).

The group gathered at the petting section of the San Diego Zoo on the morning of February 15 1966 to do the photographic shoot for the album's front cover. The photos of Al Jardine, Mike Love and the three Wilson brothers feeding a small herd of eager goats was supposed to have been a visual pun on the album's title, *Pet Sounds*. Interestingly, one notes that Mike Love seems a little withdrawn and is only one of the five Beach Boys not feeding the goats.

Newcomer Bruce Johnston was precluded from the photo shoot because he was still under contract with a competitive label, Columbia Records. The photographs were taken by an uncredited photographer, George Jerman, who was also a sound engineer and record producer. ■

## The concept album debate

### Pioneering the AOR principle

The formal start of writing of the *Pet Sounds* album was not focused on writing what would later become known in rock music as "the concept album". Many critics cite the release of two British rock albums in 1968 as the genesis of the concept album: The Pretty Things' *S F Sorrow* and The Who's *Tommy*.

Nevertheless, the final album – in terms of the subjects, the vocabulary, the vocal harmonies, the melodic motifs, the arrangements and the overall atmosphere – is remarkably cohesive for its day. The main thread of the lyrical content, in particular, mostly is devoted to a young man's thoughts and feelings about the vicissitudes of romantic love.

In general, lyricist Tony Asher kept his words simple, precise and earnest. Often they convey an emotional rawness and honesty without delving into complex ideas and emotions. In hindsight, Brian Wilson has at times described *Pet Sounds* as comprising "all inspirational songs" and being "a heart and soul album".

### Promoting the album over the single

Rather than debate about whether *Pet Sounds* is a concept album, it is more valuable to note that The Beach Boys – along with The Beatles, The Byrds, The Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan – were the pioneers of album-orientated rock (AOR) in 1965 and 1966.

Each would enter the studio with precise ideas about the type of songs (usually 10 to 14 of them) they wanted to record – and how they should be arranged, produced and sequenced for the final album tracks. They also drew on the expertise of imaginative producers and competent recording engineers.

If you listen to some of the albums by other pop and rock groups at the time, such as The Animals, The

Kinks and The Grass Roots, you get the impression that albums housed two, three and maybe four hit or standout songs padded with lesser songs. With the arrival of AOR, provided you enjoyed the artist or band, you were guaranteed enjoying at least 80 per cent of the material.

### **Intimate chats and piano “feels”**

Much of the album’s inspiration for writing came from two spontaneous techniques, mostly conducted during January and February 1966 at Brian Wilson’s home on Laurel Way in Bel Air:

- Asher and Wilson having earnest and explorative discussions about romantic relationships in general, as well as their own romantic experiences; and
- Wilson playing on his grand piano what he called “feels” – short melodic sketches, unusual chord progressions and experimental mood pieces.

Despite his young age and comparative greenness as a songwriter, Asher proved to be an ideal creative sparring partner for Brian Wilson and produced a suite of eight lyrics for the album’s 10 original songs (ie, excluding *Sloop John B* and the two brief instrumentals).

In general, Asher’s lyrics are balanced, honest, intelligently simple, succinct and at times moving, even wistful.

There is nothing extravagant about the approach to writing the lyrics. When compared with The Beatles’ *Rubber Soul* album, however, *Pet Sounds* lacks the rich and unusual imagery that John Lennon and Paul McCartney created with powerful songs like *Drive My Car*, *Nowhere Man*, *In My Life* and especially *Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)*. ■



*Happier days in the sun ... and also one of the best Beach Boys albums, 1965’s underrated Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!!), which hosted Help Me, Rhonda and California Girls*

## The 1997 box set

### Extravagant *Sessions* treat

**I**n an unusual development for the music industry, *Pet Sounds* became the subject of an exhaustive four-CD box set compiled and released by Capitol Records, *The Pet Sounds Sessions*.

Released in November 1997, the *Sessions* box set is an indispensable archival item for die-hard fans of Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys. It, too, is recommended listening for any rock and pop enthusiast looking to become a record producer or sound engineer.

Co-produced by Brian Wilson, Capitol Records producer Mark Linett and Beach Boys historian and biographer David Leaf, the collection contains a wealth of notes and related documentation on the album’s making.

Linett and Leaf were responsible for most of the Capitol releases of the classic Beach Boys albums, some of which were featured as two-in-one compilations. For example, in 1990, Capitol Records released these 10 classic albums together in pairs on CD:

- *Little Deuce Coupe* with *All Summer Long*
- *The Beach Boys Today!* with *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!!)*
- *Smiley Smile* with *Wild Honey*
- *Friends* with *20/20*
- *Sunflower* with *Surf’s Up*

### Encyclopaedic detailing

*The Pet Sounds Sessions* is indispensable because it explores different aspects of writing, recording and mixing an album. Almost encyclopaedic in its comprehensiveness, the lovingly curated box set spans more than five hours of intimate musical detail.

Besides having the opportunity to hear “alternate versions” of songs, you get to hear many of the backing tracks without the vocals and their counterpart tracks with vocals only. As a real treat, you also get to pore through an illustrated, 125-page information booklet.

This was also the first time that the album’s songs were rendered in both mono and stereo. While purists tend to eulogise the original mono mix, many fans and producers have welcomed the stereo

rendition because of its greater spaciousness, luminosity and attention to subtler sounds in the original arrangements. The stereo version was developed by Mark Linett in consultation with Brian Wilson.

Curiously, due to various technical niceties within Capitol Records' 1960s archiving systems, the original mono version of *Wouldn't It Be Nice* on *Pet Sounds* omitted Mike Love's vocals on the bridge and featured Brian Wilson. When it came to producing the stereo mix, Wilson and Linett were able to find the original tapes that had featured Love's vocals for the bridge.

The box set was nominated for a Grammy Award. Based on online searches in August 2007, the box set is available from Amazon.Com at an advertised price of US\$36,97 (about R260) excluding shipping from the USA and customs duty and VAT (value-added tax) in South Africa. This is excellent value! ■

## Track-by-track highlights

# Plumbing *Pet Sounds* in greater detail

### (1) *Wouldn't It Be Nice*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher-Mike Love)

The *Pet Sounds* album opens optimistically, if not jubilantly, with the gorgeous hit song, *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, one of Brian Wilson's most buoyant of his mid-1960s hit singles. It is his ardent attempt, with the help of an infectious melody, heartfelt choruses and beautiful arrangement, to express the need for the freedom and joy to live with someone you really love.

The sentiment, as with much of the album tends to be prissy and naïve, but this is quintessential mid-1960s Wilson. Besides Mike Love's minimal contribution as a coda during the vocal recording sessions ("Good night, oh baby / Sleep tight, oh baby"), Tony Asher wrote the entire lyric without any editing or modifying by Brian Wilson.

The main instrumental track – with its cleverly structured tempo changes and delicious legato parts – was recorded at Gold Star Recording Studios in Hollywood with engineer Larry Levine as early January 22 1965, long before thought was given to a *Pet Sounds* concept.

The basic rock arrangement is complemented by a piano, an organ, a trumpet, saxophones and mandolins, as well as tympani, bells and other forms of percussion.

Those cheerful, rocking accordions in the introduction remain a distinctive Brian Wilson arrangement ploy. Wilson sings lead vocals on the verses and Love sings lead on the bridge. The vocal tracks were recorded at Columbia Studios in Hollywood over various sessions during March and April 1966 with the help of engineer Ralph Balantin.

### (2) *You Still Believe in Me*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

The sunny, lushly orchestrated arrangements are sustained on the notably tender *You Still Believe in Me*, a song about an immature and unfaithful adolescent boy's bewilderment that a young girl still believes in him.

This was the first song that Wilson and Asher wrote together for *Pet Sounds*. The song originally was called *In My Childhood*, but the title was abandoned after Asher wrote a fresh set of lyrics. The enchanting sounds of a bicycle bell and a horn, designed to reinforce Wilson's original childhood musings, could not be removed from the complex mixes, but add to the album's themes of innocence and adventure.

The main instrumental tracks were recorded at Western Recorders on November 1 1965 and January 24 1966 with the group's regular engineer, Chuck Britz. Session musician Al de Lory plays lovely, sympathetic motifs on harpsichord. The vocals were recorded over several sessions during January and February 1966 with Brian Wilson singing the honeyed soprano lead.

In his own words, this is Wilson's "little Boys Choir-type song" and one hears him assuming a more feminine vocal touch than usual.

### (3) *That's Not Me*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

The percussive-flavoured *That's Not Me*, with its pretty, ethereal background vocals, is another of the album's more tender and reflective songs, this time addressing youthful doubt and anxiety in the form of a young man's odyssey from a smaller town to a larger city, and from self-doubt, ignorance and perhaps even self-loathing to self-discovery and acknowledging the importance of having someone at home who really loves you.

In hindsight, Asher said he would love to have had the opportunity to improve this song's lyrics.

The main instrumental track was recorded at Western Recorders on February 15 1966 and additional instruments were recorded during February or March. Interestingly, this is the only song in which the Wilson brothers played the

instruments – Brian on organ, Carl on guitar and Dennis on drums.

It is also the album's only song not lavished with strings, horns or woodwinds. A few other instruments were later added to sweeten the track, including bass, percussion and the 12-string electric guitar parts played by Glen Campbell, who briefly was a member of The Beach Boys in 1964-1965 before pursuing a solo career.

It seems that Wilson wanted to keep this song's arrangement pared, if not a little bleak, to reinforce the anguish of the young man undergoing his painful odyssey. The vocals were recorded at Western Recorders with Love singing lead on the verses and Wilson and Love singing lead on the choruses.

#### (4) *Don't Talk* (*Put Your Head on My Shoulder*)

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

The album's notably tender love song, the strings-drenched *Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)*, is made all the more imploring by Wilson's soft falsetto singing and the poignancy of Asher's lyrics without the rest of the group providing background vocals.

The particularly sensitive lyrics evolved from a conversation between Wilson and Asher about romantic dating and non-verbal communication, an idea encapsulated so simply in the lines: "I can hear so much in your sighs / And I can see so much in your eyes".

Seldom has Brian Wilson sounded so sincere, earnest and reconciliatory, making this one of his memorable songs of his Beach Boys tenure.

Wilson recorded his instrumental tracks and the lead vocals at Western Recorders on February 11 1966. He added the string overdubs at the same studio on April 3 1966. Wilson was particularly pleased with his singing on this song, remarking in the 2006 liner notes:

"I felt very deeply about that line [the imploring *Listen to my heart ... beat*]. One of the sweetest songs I ever sang. I have to say I'm proud of it. The innocence of youth in my voice, of being young and childlike. I think that's what people liked."

More so than the other songs, Wilson uses the track's main instrumental parts in a supportive and sympathetic way, as in Carol Kaye's clean electric-bass lines mimicking the beating heart of a young lover.

#### (5) *I'm Waiting for the Day*

(Brian Wilson-Mike Love)

A spectre of Spector looms with echo chambers and other touches on *I'm Waiting for the Day*, another of his more perceptive and sensitive love songs, this time one that is more optimistic in its yearning. This song was written long before the *Pet Sounds* sessions, having been copyrighted in February 1964.

In search of another song for *Pet Sounds*, Wilson delved into his back-catalogue of unrecorded songs and opted to freshen *I'm Waiting for the Day*. For this song, Wilson preserved the original Mike Love lyric – a simple story – about a love-jilted boy, muddled with resignation and a yearning optimism, who hopes for the return of his girlfriend and her love. The subtle shifts from heavier, more dramatic instrumentation to lighter and subtler arrangements reinforce the boy's dilemma. Wilson later remarked about this song:

"[This is] the one cut off the album I didn't really like that much... . It's not a case of liking or not liking it; it was an appropriate song, a very, very positive song. I just didn't like my voice on that particular song."

Wilson and Britz recorded the main instrumental track and the string overdub at Western Recorders on March 6 1966. The vocals were added at Columbia Studios with engineer Ralph Balantin a month later.

Wilson may not have been enamoured with his voice, but the song has delightful details, such as tempo changes, the symphonic songs of the three superbly played flutes and the touching flourishes of the English horn played by Leonard Hartman.

#### (6) *Let's Go Away for Awhile*

(Instrumental: Brian Wilson)

The sixth track, *Let's Go Away for Awhile* – the first of the two instrumentals that often have been criticised (perhaps unfairly) as album filler – provides welcome relief from the relatively generous dosings of impeccable, high-energy, multi-part vocal tracks. Wilson felt strongly about this track, as captured in the 2006 liner notes:

"I think that the track, *Let's Go Away for Awhile*, is the most satisfying piece of music I have ever made. I applied a certain set of dynamics through the arrangement and mixing, and got a full musical extension of what I'd planned during the earliest stages of the theme.

"The total effect is ... 'Let's go away for awhile', which is something everyone in the world must have said at some time or other. Most of us don't go away, but it's still a nice thought. The track was supposed to be the backing for a vocal, but I decided to leave it alone. It stands up well alone."

If anything, this tasteful instrumental – a rare feature for a rock and pop album of the time – provided an ideal opportunity for Wilson to

demonstrate his rapidly evolving skills as a composer and arranger. In a sense, we hear a success-hungry, 23-year-old-composer paying tribute to fellow American pop composer and pianist, Burt Bacharach.

Along with his lyricist partner, Hal David, Bacharach wrote scores of memorable 1960s and early-1970s hits, including *The Look of Love* (for Dusty Springfield), *Do You Know the Way to San Jose?* (for Dionne Warwick), *What's New Pussycat* (for Tom Jones), *What the World Needs Now Is Love* (for Jackie DeShannon) and *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head* (for B J Thomas).

Recorded at Western Recorders on January 18 1966, this instrumental has delightful chord changes and certainly is not easy to hum or whistle. The track features several musical instruments, including 12 violins, four saxophones, oboe, vibes, trumpet, piano, tympani and two guitars, one of which was played with a Coca-Cola bottle. The overdubs of the strings and flutes were recorded on January 19. This instrumental was used as the B-side of the *Good Vibrations* single released on October 10 1966.

## (7) *Sloop John B*

(Traditional: arranged by Brian Wilson)

*Sloop John B* – released as an A-side single on March 21 1966 – is one of the more contentious album choices for three main reasons: it is a cover song; many critics loathe its inclusion on the album at the time when Wilson's own songwriting was peaking; and there remains some cloudy debate about whether Wilson really wanted the song on the album.

Some critics and fans consider this song to be the album's nadir, although I believe Brian Wilson brought to it a remarkable pop dignity that outclasses previous recorded versions of the song. The Beach Boys had enjoyed a few previous hits with cover songs, most notably *Then I Kissed Her* and *Barbara Ann*.

While largely well sung, novel and, in places, even infectious, it is, perhaps, a bland choice for a cover song and, sadly, was not raised to the highest arranging standards achieved elsewhere on the album. It is a 1920s Caribbean folk song whose writer's identity seems to have eluded musicologists and historians. It is thought that the song was written some time during 1926 or 1927 about the recovery of a ship, the *John B*, wrecked off the coast of Nassau in the Bahamas.

Singer Al Jardine, who admired The Kingston Trio's rendition of the song, suggested the group develop and record their own version without any obvious West Indian patois. He had performed an Americanised version of this song with his own pre-Beach Boys vocal group, The Islanders. Jardine spent a long time trying to convince Wilson of the song's merits. Wilson was not enamoured with folk music and did not want to be limited to a simple, three-chord song already familiar to millions of Americans.

Over a few days, however, Jardine and Wilson devised a more elaborate chord structure for the song on piano and conceived a richer, more complex vocal arrangement. Within 24 hours, Wilson was inspired about the song and the entire instrumental track was scored, rehearsed and recorded.

Ultimately, The Beach Boys transformed a likeable, but rather ordinary Caribbean folk song into a delectable Beach Boys song with superlative vocal harmonies and an all-round infectious ring.

The instrumental track, recorded at Western Recorders on July 12 1965, was unusual, technically, because it was recorded on a three-track tape and then bounced twice on to four-track tape to create enough recording space for the vocals and the additional instrumental overdubs.

The vocals, with Brian Wilson and Mike Love on lead, were recorded on December 22 1965, the same day that Billy Strange was brought in to overdub the 12-string electric guitar pieces. In January, the group recorded the high harmony lead vocals along with additional backing vocals.

## (8) *God Only Knows*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

The outstanding *God Only Knows* – with its impressive ensemble of voices – features a notably tender Carl Wilson on lead vocals and has lovely instrumentation. One wonders why brother Carl, with his warm, earnest and reassuring tenor voice, was not brought to the fore more often and why Love was not held back more.

This moving song – often rated by critics as Wilson's crowning glory – features three bass parts, piano, organ and two accordions, as well as strings, woodwinds and horns. *God Only Knows* forms the apex of the album and had long been a highlight of the group's concert sets while Carl Wilson was alive. Several songwriters, among them Paul McCartney and Jimmy Webb, have cited this as their all-time favourite song.

This is a particularly complex song in structure and its features include notably refined vocal harmonies (among the best ever recorded by The Beach Boys), the skilful playing of the main bass line in an inverted key and the use of diminished chords. Influenced by tinges of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century baroque music, including hints of J S Bach, the ornate *God Only Knows* instrumental track was recorded at Western Recorders on March 1 1966.

The lush vocals – with their inherent spirit of otherworldly reverence – were recorded over several arduous sessions with engineer Ralph Balantin at Columbia Studios. After first developing a far more over-the-top vocal arrangement, Brian Wilson opted for a more pared and straightforward vocal

arrangement to preserve the song's earnest, heart-felt message.

Seldom has a bittersweet song, mixed with angst, pathos and optimism, sounded so beautiful and evocative. The song's lushly arranged bridge is played staccato and intensifies the effect Wilson wanted. Alan Robinson's gliding French horn motifs are among the album's notable instrumental highlights.

### (9) *I Know There's an Answer*

(Brian Wilson-Terry Sachen-Mike Love)

One of the album's more anxious and imploring songs, *I Know There Is an Answer*, features Love and Jardine on lead vocals in the verses and Brian Wilson on lead in the choruses. The instrumental track was recorded at Western Recorders on February 9 1966 and the vocals were recorded over several sessions during February and March.

Originally called *Hang on to Your Ego* (a version of which featured as the sole bonus track on the expanded fortieth-anniversary edition), the original title and lyrics caused consternation for the group (notably Mr Ego, Mike Love) because Wilson, after consuming LSD, was preoccupied with the notion of preserving the ego versus transcending the ego.

Mike Love and road manager Terry Sachen helped Wilson to rewrite the lyrics. Love has been on record several times as a vehement opponent of any form of recreational drug usage.

Interestingly, too, Wilson used an unusual 14-bar verse structure comprising an eight-bar A-section and a six-bar B-section. Most verses in conventional songwriting tend to comprise eight, 12 or 16 bars.

### (10) *Here Today*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

*Here Today* – featuring Love on lead vocals – shifts the album into a more pessimistic, doubtful mood. The song alludes to the painful transience of love. Again, to reinforce this notion, Wilson employed an unorthodox and at times awkward bar structure for the verse and chorus. For example, each of the song's three choruses features seven bars rather than the more customary eight.

To the keen-eared, *Here Today* features snippets of conversations recorded accidentally in the studio during the instrumental bridge. One can also hear Wilson instructing the engineer: "Top, please". The instrumental track was recorded on March 11 1966 at Sunset with engineer Bruce Botnick, who would later gain repute working with The Doors, Love and other LA rock bands. The vocals were recorded at Columbia Studios on March 25 1966.

### (11) *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

Keeping his commentary clear, but subdued, Wilson elevates his sense of disenchantment and alienation on his imploring song, *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times* – and, boy, did he connect with many of us at deeper soul level with this heart-felt song about feeling socially dislocated, if not alienated. In many ways, this is one of Wilson's most personal, if not autobiographical, songs.

Perhaps it was appropriate that Wilson used on this song for the first time in The Beach Boys' recordings an unusual instrument, the theremin, an experimental electronic instrument developed by a Russian inventor, Lev Theremin [see **edition 10**]. UCLA music professor, Dr Paul Tanner, played this weird instrument on the song.

The instrumental track was recorded at Gold Star Recording with engineer Larry Levine on February 14 1966. The vocal tracks – featuring Brian Wilson on lead – were recorded over different sessions during March and April at Columbia Studios with engineer Ralph Balantin.

### (12) *Pet Sounds*

(Instrumental: Brian Wilson)

The instrumental title track originally was called *Run, James, Run* because it was envisaged as a piece of music to be used in a James Bond film. Wilson recorded the song with Chuck Britz at Western Recorders on November 17 1965. Wilson also played the piano parts. Drummer Ritchie Frost was also credited for "percussion" by playing on two empty Coca-Cola cans under Wilson's instruction.

Although masterfully written and performed, the *Pet Sounds* instrumental probably is the album's greatest oddity, a status reinforced by its placement between two of the most gorgeous Wilson ballads. As with the rest of the album, however, the title track is sumptuously performed and superbly arranged. Although there are no lyrics, the instrumental – marked by exotic percussion – whisks the listener away to some delightfully fresh destination.

### (13) *Caroline No*

(Brian Wilson-Tony Asher)

As Wilson rightly admits, the wistful and sombre closing song about the loss of innocence and lifestyle simplicity, *Caroline No*, is one of his prettiest and most personal songs – and a superlative album closer. Fittingly, too, Capitol Records released this as a "solo" single on March 7 1966 under the name of Brian Wilson – and not The Beach Boys. Tinged with melancholy and pathos, this remains one of Brian Wilson's most gloriously touching ballads, with the singer seldom sounding so eloquent and engaging.



In the 2006 liner notes, Wilson says: "Caroline No was my favourite on the album, the prettiest ballad I've ever sung. Awfully pretty song. The melody and the chords were like Glenn Miller ... a Glenn Miller-type bridge. The fadeout was like a 1944 kind of record ... Listen for the flutes in the fadeout."

Caroline – in one sense – appears to be a reference to a blonde, high-school cheerleader, Carol Mountain, over whom Wilson had a crush towards the end of the 1950s. Lyricist Asher, however, says in the 2006 liner notes that he recently had broken up with a dancer girlfriend called Carol at the time of writing the album's lyrics. When Asher introduced the lyric to Wilson, he sang "Carol, I know", which Wilson mistook for "Caroline, No" – and this stuck because he liked its ring.

At the suggestion of his father, Murry, Wilson changed the original key during recordings from C to D. To achieve this effect, engineer Britz placed some form of wrap around the tape-machines recording head to accelerate the playback and alter the key, a technique known as varispeeding used by George Martin and engineer Geoff Emerick during recording sessions for The Beatles at Abbey Road in London.

Wilson double-tracked his lead vocal without any support vocals from the rest of the group. All recordings were completed in a day at Western Recorders on January 31 1966.

The exquisitely recorded concrete sounds at the end of the album – the 20-second trailer not incorporated at the end of the song as a seven single – feature a passing diesel locomotive and barking dogs. The train sounds – complete with ringing signal bells at a railway crossing – were taken from a sound-effects tape, while the dogs were Wilson's pets, Banana and Louie, recorded at the studios on March 22 1966. ■

## All Summer Long!

To celebrate the advent of the southern-hemisphere spring, *Strange Brew* continues its celebration of Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys in **edition 10** of September 1 2007. This edition features a brief biography of The Beach Boys, the story behind the making (and aborting) of the original *Smile* album, an in-depth review of Brian Wilson's 2004 *Smile* album and a portrait of Brian Wilson, as well as an article on that fascinating electronic musical instrument, the theremin. Here's wishing you lots of "good vibrations" this summer. ■

## Good Vibrations!

The double *Pet Sounds*/Beach Boys edition of *Strange Brew* (editions nine and ten) is dedicated to two cherished friends in music, **Derek** and **Lu**, with heartfelt thanks for sharing your passion for The Beach Boys' music and lending me helpful research material: Michael Waddacor.

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## Album discography (1962-1973)

### Making big waves



*Despite lacking Brian Wilson's magical touch, Sunflower remains one of The Beach Boys' most enjoyable post-Pet Sounds albums*

*Surfin' Safari* (Nov 1962)  
*Surfin' USA* (Apr 1963) ★  
*Surfer Girl* (Sep 1963) ★  
*Little Deuce Coupe* (Oct 1963) ★  
*Shut Down, Volume Two* (Jul 1964) ★  
*All Summer Long* (Jul 1964) ★★  
*Beach Boys Concert* (Feb 1965)  
*The Beach Boys Today!* (Mar 1965) ★★  
*Summer Days (and Summer Nights!)* (Jul 1965) ★★  
*Beach Boys' Party!* (Feb 1966)  
*Pet Sounds* (May 1966) ★★  
*Smiley Smile* (Nov 1967) ★★  
*Wild Honey* (Mar 1968) ★  
*Friends* (Sep 1968) ★  
*20/20* (Feb 1969) ★  
*Sunflower* (Nov 1970) ★★  
*Surf's Up* (Nov 1971) ★★  
*Carl and the Passions – So Tough* (Jun 1972)  
*Holland* (Jan 1973) ★  
*The Beach Boys in Concert* (Nov 1973)

- ★ Nice to have
- ★★ Essential

## Other works to investigate

*Endless Summer* (double-album compilation of pre-*Pet Sounds* hits) (1974) ★★

*Ten Years of Harmony* (double-album compilation) (1979) ★

*Good Vibrations: Thirty Years of The Beach Boys* (box set) (1993) ★★

*The Pet Sounds Sessions* (box set) (1997) ★★