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## **"Summer's Gone:" Rethinking the History of the Beach Boys, 1961-1998**

Grant Wong

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“Summer’s Gone:” Rethinking the History of the Beach Boys, 1961-1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
William & Mary

by

Grant Wong

Accepted for Highest Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)  
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The Beach Boys themselves, Brian, Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, David, Blondie, and Ricky, deserve thanks intertwined with deep admiration and awe. Thank you for your music, which has served as the soundtrack of the past few years of my life, nurtured my very soul, and led me to think harder and more deeply than ever before about the place of pop culture in history. I hope I’ve done your life stories justice in my thesis.

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### Introduction: “From There to Back Again”

“The Beach Boys, in a sense, are not just a band. They’re a lifestyle. They’re a consumer brand. And they’ve never really exploited that,” said Olivier Chasten to *Rolling Stone* in February 2021. Chasten, CEO of Iconic Artists Group, a brand development and managing company, had just struck a massive deal: a controlling interest in the Beach Boys’ intellectual property, “their master recordings, a portion of their publishing, the Beach Boys brand, and memorabilia.”<sup>1</sup> In a literal sense, the group that called itself “America’s Band” had sold out. In the fifty-ninth year of the band’s existence, in a move just in time for the celebration of its sixtieth anniversary, the Beach Boys made another bid towards commercial and cultural relevance.

“They want to preserve the legacy, and if they want to do a little branding, it would be fun,” said Al Jardine, one of the band’s founding members. “I’d like to have some fun, you know? You get to a point where it gets really serious, the business of having a legacy. Maybe we’ll have a little theme park somewhere, or, I don’t know, restaurants. I always wanted to have a Beach Boys restaurant somewhere.”<sup>2</sup> Mike Love, another original member of the band, set his ambitions higher. He imagined a future in which the Beach Boys, with the aid of future technologies, could tour even after they are dead and gone: “As long as it’s presented beautifully and authentically,” said Mike. “The beauty of music is, even though the originators might not be

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I have curated a Spotify playlist designed to accompany this thesis:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0BY6gffoTnoSxjblQZyWND?si=J5wOL3huTuCsYvg6QcAkag>.

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Doyle, “Inside the Ambitious Plan to Monetize the Beach Boys’ Legacy,” *Rolling Stone*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/features/beach-boys-rights-sale-azoff-1129316/>.

<sup>2</sup> Doyle, “Inside the Ambitious Plan.”

there anymore, the music can live on for centuries... Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, you know?”<sup>3</sup>

Even in 2012, it had been a while since the Beach Boys had been “boys.” Following a decades-long estrangement, the band temporarily got back together to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary with a global reunion tour, complete with a new studio album: *That’s Why God Made the Radio*. The band’s earliest surviving members, Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Al Jardine, Bruce Johnston, and David Marks, played to sold-out, cheering crowds across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, preaching visions of endless summer fun. This twenty-first century Beach Boys experience could be summed up with lyrics from their new song, “Spring Vacation:” “As for the past, it’s all behind us / happier now, look where life finds us! / Singing our songs, it’s enough reason / harmony, boys, is what we believe in!”<sup>4</sup> The Beach Boys’ pitch-corrected track (emblematic of their reunion) smoothed out the cracks in their history. Never mind that Carl and Dennis Wilson, two other founding members of the band, were dead – their archived vocals could harmonize with the others on stage. Let us ignore Brian’s vacant stares and flinches, lasting scars of his long battle with substance abuse and mental illness.<sup>5</sup> Why even bother performing more experimental and political tracks when the band could fill its setlist with feel-good surf, cars, and girl-themed hits?<sup>6</sup> They had long relied on that strategy.

The antithesis of this vision came in the form of “Summer’s Gone,” the closing track of 2012’s *That’s Why God Made the Radio*. The album was originally intended as the Beach Boys’

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<sup>3</sup> Doyle, “Inside the Ambitious Plan.”

<sup>4</sup> The Beach Boys, “Spring Vacation,” track 4 on *That’s Why God Made the Radio*, Capitol Records 509996 02824 2, rel. June 5, 2012, accessed April 5, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>5</sup> Kirk Curnutt, “‘Brian Comes Alive:’ Celebrity, Performance, and the Limitations of Biography in Music Writing” in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, Philip Lambert, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> The Beach Boys, *Live – The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tour*, Capitol Records B0018419-02, rel. May 23, 2013, accessed April 4, 2021, Spotify.

final LP, and “Summer’s Gone” ends on a somber, melancholic note: “We laugh, we cry, we live and die / and dream about our yesterday...”<sup>7</sup> What are we to make of this music, so drenched and weighted with memory? The Beach Boys couldn’t tell us. In 2016, Brian and Mike published their respective memoirs, *I Am Brian Wilson* and *Good Vibrations: My Life as a Beach Boy*.<sup>8</sup> They told irreconcilable stories of the band’s past. Brian’s memoir was a bittersweet reflection on a difficult life and career, Mike’s a nostalgic if vindictive defense of his vision of the band and his grievances with Brian. Though confusing, this contrast is unsurprising. Over the course of the band’s history, even the Beach Boys themselves have not known what to make of their collective past. As producers of a brand in a consumer market, the band adapted time and time again to cultural trends, which makes a removed view of their past difficult to pin down. By 2022, the Beach Boys will have been together for sixty years. Their history is one inexorably distorted by memory and myth, remembering and forgetting.

Beneath the modern-day Beach Boys’ veneer of summer fun lies a more complex story. It is the tale of a handful of blue-collar guys in postwar southern California who started a garage band, made it big in the music business, and since then have struggled to reckon with the times they have left behind. First their music was surf rock, then experimental, psychedelic pop; failing this, they then flirted with left-leaning politics, and finally, nostalgia. The Beach Boys have been through a lot in the past fifty-nine years. Becoming America’s best-selling band straight out of

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<sup>7</sup> The Beach Boys, “Summer’s Gone,” track 12 on *That’s Why God Made the Radio*, Capitol Records 509996 02824 2, rel. June 5, 2012, accessed April 5, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Wilson and Ben Greenman, *I Am Brian Wilson* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016); Mike Love and James Hirsch, *Good Vibrations: My Life as a Beach Boy* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016); James Wolcott, “Brian Wilson, Mike Love, and the Psychodrama Behind the Beach Boys’ Sun-Streaked Legacy,” *Vanity Fair*, August 5, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/08/brian-wilson-mike-love-and-the-psychodrama-behind-the-beach-boys-legacy>. I refer to the Beach Boys by their first names in my thesis, given conventional usage and for clarity, as three of them (Brian, Dennis, and Carl Wilson) share a last name.



high school, they labored within an exploitative music industry to rise to the top of the charts, then tenaciously fought to regain their fame following a near-collapse in 1967.

I seek to retell this story through the skeptical lens of the historian and the fickle worldview of the American consumer. The Beach Boys’ tale has often been recounted as distortive myth, clinging to one aspect of its history and imposing it on the band’s entire legacy. The Beach Boys as they exist today espouses one of these visions, as embraced by the band’s current leader, Mike Love. The band’s current arrangement only includes Mike and Bruce Johnston, who joined the band in the mid-sixties, after its success and in the wake of its first crisis. Brian and Al tour separately with different groups. The various arrangements, especially Love’s, offer nostalgia acts that privilege the “good old days” of the 1960s, purportedly a simpler, better age than today. Harmless enough when considered at surface level, this vision takes on greater historical weight when we recall that this creative direction began in the late seventies and early eighties with the rise of Reagan and the New Right.<sup>9</sup> The Beach Boys today have continued to embrace conservative causes. In October 2020, Mike led the band to perform at a crowded Trump rally in October 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrating another right-wing worldview that derives its power from a nostalgic, imagined past.<sup>10</sup> The main competitor to Mike’s portrayal of the Beach Boys is the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth. Invented by publicists and critics and eventually embraced by its subject, this narrative focuses the band’s history around Brian, the Beach Boys’ former leader and foremost composer. It privileges the band’s more experimental music while dismissing its early hits and embrace of

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<sup>9</sup> Pekka M. Kolehmainen, “Reaganized Rock: The 1983 Beach Boys Ban and the U.S. Culture Wars,” *Popular Music and Society* 43 (January 2020): 1-18.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Young, “Vanilla Ice, Mike Love-Led Beach Boys Headline Trump’s Mar-A-Lago New Year’s Eve Party,” *Consequence of Sound*, January 1, 2021, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2021/01/vanilla-ice-beach-boys-mar-a-lago-nye/>.

summer fun as cheap and simplistic, positioning Brian as the sole reason behind the band’s success.

These mythical distortions dominate how the Beach Boys are conceived of by their fans, the music industry, rock journalists, academics, and even themselves. Together, they comprise what cultural critic Kirk Curnutt defines as the “two Beach Boys theory.”<sup>11</sup> Aside from juxtaposing the lives and worldviews of Brian and Mike against each other, these narratives argue for particular views of the band’s history. Brian is the dreamer, the virtuoso, the artist. He pioneered the sentimental, orchestral tracks of *Pet Sounds* and the failed *SMiLE* project, two of the band’s most notable forays into experimental pop. He is *creative*.<sup>12</sup> Mike, for his love of the Beach Boys’ early music and focus on profitability, is derided as a sell-out, as *commercial*.<sup>13</sup> This discourse dominates the band’s history, privileging the real and imagined roles played by Brian or Mike in contributing to the Beach Boys’ success over those of the rest of the band.<sup>14</sup> Mike summed up this binary perception best in his 2012 memoir. “For those who believe that Brian walks on water, I will always be the Antichrist.”<sup>15</sup>

The “two Beach Boys theory” also clouds American cultural history by obscuring the underlying relationships between creativity and commercialism that exist within it. Neither exists

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<sup>11</sup> Kirk Curnutt, *Brian Wilson*, (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2012), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Galluci, “Brian Wilson and his Mad-Genius Influence on Pop Music,” *Ultimate Classic Rock*, June 2, 2015, <https://ultimateclassicrock.com/brian-wilson-influence/>; Alex Petridis, “The astonishing genius of Brian Wilson,” *The Guardian*, June 24, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/24/brian-wilson-interview>; Jeffrey Stillwell, “Why Brian Wilson is a Genius,” YouTube Video, uploaded February 7, 2017, accessed April 2, 2021, [https://youtu.be/4Te\\_ICF69Aw](https://youtu.be/4Te_ICF69Aw); “Musicians on Brian,” *brianwilson.com*, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://www.brianwilson.com/quotes>.

<sup>13</sup> Erik Hedegard, “The Ballad of Mike Love,” *Rolling Stone*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-ballad-of-mike-love-170168/>; Luke Winkie, “Mike Love is Kind of an Asshole,” *Vice*, October 2, 2012, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/rjmmb6/mike-love-is-kind-of-an-asshole>; Bill Holdship, “The Beach Boys: Is Mike Love Evil?,” *Mojo*, December 2004, <https://www.rocksofbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-is-mike-love-evil>.

<sup>14</sup> Keir Knightly, “Summer of ‘64” in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, Philip Lambert, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 105-136.

<sup>15</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 405.

without the other. This is a phenomenon that extends beyond the band – art does not exist without money, and vice-versa. The Beach Boys do not even represent the most egregious example of this trope. Take the Monkees, for instance, a band formed by television producers who signed two actors and two musicians to a sitcom and then a record deal: a two-for-one bid for a lucrative pop cultural product.<sup>16</sup> Such deals persist today. Big Time Rush, a band created by the children’s television channel *Nickelodeon* in 2009, was also assembled by corporate suits for maximum commercial appeal. The band enjoyed their own sitcom as well as a couple hits. Its first album, *BTR*, hit number three on the *Billboard* charts.<sup>17</sup> This union of commercialism and creativity also goes beyond the United States, as evidenced by the current international popularity of the South Korean boy band BTS, sold on its personalities just as much as on its hit singles.<sup>18</sup> The Beatles were the inspiration for this trope. In addition to their countless hits, they released five feature films and were the direct inspiration for the Monkees, and through them, a long subsequent line of multi-platform boy bands. No wonder they titled their fourth studio album *Beatles for Sale*.

Historians have intensely grappled with this question of commercialism-creativity. First, we ought to remember that the phenomenon of commercial music existed prior to the 1960s and its subsequent decades. David Suisman’s *Selling Sounds* highlights how recorded sound has always been a commercial enterprise, driven by products intended for mass consumption and, in

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<sup>16</sup> Gerard DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 397-399.

<sup>17</sup> Ben Servetah, “The TV beat talks Nickelodeon: The rise and fall of ‘Big Time Rush,’” *The Michigan Daily*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.michigandaily.com/tv/the-tv-beat-talks-nickelodeon-the-rise-and-fall-of-big-time-rush-2/>.

<sup>18</sup> Chuck Arnold, “‘BTS army’ mania, explained: Why the K-pop band became so popular,” *The New York Post*, March 14, 2021, <https://nypost.com/article/bts-army-mania-why-kpop-band-is-so-popular/>.

turn, massive profits.<sup>19</sup> *Beatlemania* by André Millard emphasizes how cultural, commercial, and technological trends converged to establish the great appeal of 1960s musical acts like the Beatles and Beach Boys. They played an equal, if not larger role when compared to the artists’ creativity in the success of these groups on the rock market.<sup>20</sup> It is also prudent to consider how the conditions for the mass-marketing of music came about. As I will argue in this thesis, an important marker of cultural influence is profitability: how can one be culturally influenced by music if they do not hear it in the first place? In this respect, the findings of *A Consumer’s Republic* by Lizabeth Cohen, *Sold American* by Charles McGovern, and *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff* by Wendy Woloson have greatly enriched our understanding of mass consumerism, highlighting its centrality to the American experience for how it makes and shapes feelings of identity and belonging.<sup>21</sup> Their lessons, applied to the history of the Beach Boys, reveal that the band’s cultural influence both formed and was formed by its profitability.

Popular histories of the Beach Boys, influenced by the “two Beach Boys theory,” tend to neglect this fact. They focus on the myth of Brian at the expense of considering the Beach Boys’ place within their larger musical market. Works like David Leaf’s *The Beach Boys and the California Myth* and (to a lesser extent) Peter Ames Carlin’s *Catch a Wave*, a biography of Brian, subscribe to the band’s mythology uncritically. They satisfy themselves in detailing cultural abstractions and myth while neglecting how the Beach Boys operated as an enterprise.<sup>22</sup> This is unsurprising, as the cultural critic and the historian occupy separate roles, as noted by

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<sup>19</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> André Millard, *Beatlemania: Technology, Business, and Teen Culture in Cold War America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Wendy A. Woloson, *Crap: A History of Cheap Stuff in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> David Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978); Peter Ames Carlin, *Catch a Wave: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Beach Boys’ Brian Wilson* (New York: Rodale Books, 2007).

Elijah Wald in *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll*: “What made something timely is often very different from what made it timeless... The critic’s job is to assign value and importance on an artistic level. The historian’s is to explain what happened in the past, which means attempting to understand the tastes and environment of an earlier time.”<sup>23</sup> However, in the case of the Beach Boys, cultural criticism drives their historical narrative in both disciplines.

This is where I make my intervention: in firmly placing the Beach Boys’ successes, failures, and legacy within the confines of their times. As a brand, the band sought to maintain their bottom line, exploit cultural and commercial trends, and release chart-topping hits. In doing so, they produced art they felt they could be proud of, songs that both drew from and altered the cultural *zeitgeists* of their times.<sup>24</sup> Brian and Mike, for instance, were not at odds in the manner most Beach Boys fans imagine them to be. They were both creative and commercial, working ceaselessly to produce music they would personally enjoy while measuring their success by their record sales. The Beach Boys were artists just as much as they were laborers in the music business.

This is the story I seek to tell in my retelling of the Beach Boys’ history. In pairing biography with the analysis of commercial and cultural trends, I imagine the Beach Boys not as mythologized artists, but as laborers. Through my analysis of rock and fan magazines, interviews, memoirs, videos, and sound recordings, I stress the practical aspects of the Beach Boys’ art: how they crafted their image, sold their records, and created sounds live and in the

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<sup>23</sup> Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>24</sup> This analysis was inspired by Timothy P. Byron (Reddit user hillsonghoods), “Response to ‘Mike Love said that ‘For those who believe that Brian (Wilson) walks on water, I will always be the Antichrist’ What made him a controversial figure in the Beach Boys?,’” *Reddit*, July 1, 2019, accessed April 5, 2021, [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/bfb6ai/mike\\_love\\_said\\_that\\_for\\_those\\_who\\_believe\\_that/elcxmnt/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/bfb6ai/mike_love_said_that_for_those_who_believe_that/elcxmnt/).

recording studio. I have sought to draw upon sources produced by a variety of individuals in and around the music industry, published at the times they speak to, in order to gain a comprehensive overview of the Beach Boys’ story. The history of the band belongs to neither Brian nor Mike, but the entire band, the music industry they worked in, and the American record-buying public. Where such sources have not been available, I use retrospective accounts and judge them not for factual content, but for the feelings they express of a given time or event. Taken together, my body of sources tells a truer history of the band than the mythological accounts that predominate the small but vibrant field of Beach Boys discourse.

In thinking about the Beach Boys as historical actors and their place within the world they inhabited, I use methodological approaches defined in Anna Green’s *Cultural History*.<sup>25</sup> Many of my sources, including interviews, memoirs, magazines, and news articles are highly subjective – they conflict with one another’s narratives and diverge in their assessments of the band’s cultural import. I consider them in relation to each other to gain a holistic sense of how the Beach Boys and their contemporaries viewed and responded to the times they were living in. As the band’s creative process involved tapping into cultural and musical trends, I use my sources to think about how this process was practically carried out. This is where I take a biographical approach, conceiving of the Beach Boys as historical actors to consider the logic behind their personal motives and actions. Conceiving of the Beach Boys as laborers and measuring their success by record charts in a manner reminiscent of business history allows me to objectively consider how well the band was able to adapt to changing markets. In addition to these approaches, I also consider the mythological narratives of the Beach Boys’ story and what they mean for the United States. I draw this approach from the analytical perspectives of *Mystery*

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<sup>25</sup> Anna Green, *Cultural History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 1-10.

*Train*, critic Greil Marcus’ pop cultural classic.<sup>26</sup> However, it must be noted that despite Marcus’ important claim to “America” as an analytical concept, given the United States’ great diversity I recognize that this thesis does not, and cannot, encompass all markers of American identity. It is a broadly American story and one that taps into the greater history of the United States, but it does not purport to speak to *every* American history.

I make my case as part of a growing number of works that view the Beach Boys history from a dispassionate distance, emphasizing the band as a commercial, collective effort. In this sense I am indebted to Kent Crowley’s Carl Wilson biography *Long Promised Road*, James B. Murphy’s *Becoming the Beach Boys*, and *Why the Beach Boys Matter* by Tom Smucker.<sup>27</sup> Building off of the precedents set by their work, I seek to demystify the Beach Boys, and in turn demystify American cultural history. I also aim not to simply rehash the done-to-death saga of Brian versus Mike, but to bring the rest of the band’s perspectives into the historical narrative: Carl and Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, David Marks, Bruce Johnston, Blondie Chaplin, and Ricky Fataar. This thesis is a story of the Beach Boys, but it is also a cultural, commercial, mythological, and musical story of the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In order to understand the full meaning of the Beach Boys’ place within American cultural history, in this thesis I cover the bulk of the band’s tenure. Chapter 1 (1961-1964) considers the band’s beginnings, detailing how a humble southern Californian garage band made it big in the music business. I argue that the band was a commercial enterprise from its very beginning, as the Beach Boys harnessed their upbringings, musical influences, and image to research, market, and sell their consumer brand. Chapter 2 (1965-1967) focuses on the band’s

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<sup>26</sup> Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: Plume, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Kent Crowley, *Long Promised Road: Carl Wilson, Soul of the Beach Boys* (London: Jawbone Press, 2015); James B. Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys, 1961-1963* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015); Tom Smucker, *Why the Beach Boys Matter* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018).

peak years, especially the development of its two most-mythologized musical projects – their *Pet Sounds* album (1966) and the scrapped *SMiLE* LP, which predicated the band’s severe loss in popular appeal in the late sixties. In this chapter I detail how the Beach Boys maintained their popularity, illustrating the practical processes by which they toured and produced music. Chapter 3 (1968-1998) takes a long-term approach to the band’s later career, tracking how the band regained its solvency by first turning to left-leaning politics, then to right-wing nostalgia, where it remains today. While the Beach Boys were past their commercial peak during this period, it is essential to their story, as it demonstrates how the band adapted to the cultural changes of the seventies and eighties and found success without Brian. Through examining this later period, we also gain insights into how the band shaped its memory and reinvented itself as the Beach Boys we know today.

Why do the Beach Boys matter? As a consumer brand, their history is an invaluable means by which to understand the commercial-cultural *zeitgeist* of the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Beach Boys changed as America did. As artists, laborers, and market researchers, they relentlessly adapted themselves to her tastes.



## Chapter 1: “Do You Remember?” Selling the Beach Boys (1961-1964)

Album Chronology: *Surfin’ Safari* (1962), *Surfin’ USA* (1963), *Surfer Girl* (1963), *Little Deuce Coupe* (1963), *Shut Down Volume 2* (1964), *All Summer Long* (1964), *Beach Boys Concert* (1964), *The Beach Boys Christmas Album* (1964)

In the early months of 1961, the white southern Californians Brian and Carl Wilson, their cousin Mike Love, and friend Al Jardine formed a humble garage band, later adding Dennis Wilson, the middle Wilson brother, and David Marks, a neighbor, to their ranks. Their families, recent migrants to the state, all lived in and around the city of Hawthorne. As small business owners and blue-collar workers, they were neither poor nor rich. They were not for want of necessities and possessed enough resources to allow their young men to form and sustain a band, but still were far from wealthy, valuing frugality and thrift. The Wilsons depended on a family-owned machinery business, the Loves on a small sheet metal firm. Their lives were comfortable, but rested on the continued success of their businesses.<sup>28</sup>

The Beach Boys, originally called the Pendletones, were a makeshift band, as its members started out not even knowing what kind of music or subject matter they wanted to cover – Mike and Dennis did not even know how to play instruments.<sup>29</sup> All Brian, Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and David knew was that they wanted to write, perform, and record music they could be proud of and make enough money to rise out of their humble working-class lives. In the creation of their musical and cultural identity the Beach Boys sold millions of records at home and abroad, influenced musicians across the United States out of their union of jazz harmonies,

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<sup>28</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 31-32, 231-232.

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 96-97.

R&B, and rock ‘n’ roll, and crafted a band and brand that persist today – as of the end of 2021, the Beach Boys mark their sixtieth anniversary.<sup>30</sup>

It is easy to forget why the Beach Boys became successful. As we become further separated from their early years, the cutting-edge commercial and cultural relevance they once possessed becomes unclear. Given the band’s decades-long history and its current manifestation as an oldies act, it is difficult to remember that the Beach Boys were once *boys*, ambitious teens eager to leave their mark on the world. Historians, journalists, and cultural commentators, entranced by poetic narratives of “rise, fall, and redemption” and “California myth,” fail to recognize the true factors behind the Beach Boys’ initial success.<sup>31</sup> What led the band to its initial success was its relentless pursuit of commerce – the Beach Boys wrote and performed music based in their own teenage experiences, which they reasoned would appeal to their peers. They were proven right as they charted twelve singles and eight albums on the *Billboard* Top 40 within the span of three short years. The Beach Boys were superb musicians and artists, but given how greatly their work was guided by commercial instinct, I argue that their art followed their commerce, not the other way around. In retrospect, the Beach Boys may have been better market researchers than they were musicians.

The Beach Boys also served as a powerful commercial and cultural force within the context of the early sixties as one of America’s dominant musical acts. Their early hits, uncritical of politics and celebratory of consumer abundance, fit the spirit of the early 1960s well. They stand perhaps as the truest representations of what David Farber has defined as “the age of great dreams” for how they espoused the values of “a society which place[d] its highest value on the

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<sup>30</sup> Mike Greenhaus, “Al Jardine and Larry Dvoskin: Good Feelings,” *jambands.com*, March 16, 2021, <https://jambands.com/features/2021/03/16/al-jardine-and-larry-dvoskin-good-feelings/>.

<sup>31</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*; Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*.

marketplace of goods and services.”<sup>32</sup> The success of the Beach Boys’ early hits also reminds us that the sixties was more of an age of cultural conformity and vapid consumerism than it is popularly known as, given the dominance of its protests and counterculture in the public imagination.<sup>33</sup> As noted by Gerard DeGroot in *The Sixties Unplugged*, “fun sold better than politics” when it came to popular music.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as America’s youth enjoyed the prosperity of the postwar years by growing up in suburbs (according to David Farber, “by 1960, as many people lived in the suburbs as America’s central cities”), listening to rock ‘n’ roll, and dumping their disposable income into the US’ booming postwar consumer market, the band emerged at just the right time to capitalize on this historical moment.<sup>35</sup> As musical innovators and expert marketers, the Beach Boys were symbolic of their peak decade in how they crafted the musical tastes of an entire generation of teenage consumers.

In this chapter I will detail the key reason behind the band’s initial commercial success: its ability to brand itself effectively. The Beach Boys were masters of product differentiation, offering America an image, sound, and brand familiar enough to its teen market to gain traction, yet also distinctive enough to feel fresh. In combining their teenage interests with a variety of musical influences, primarily jazz harmonies, rock ‘n’ roll, and R&B, the Beach Boys created a wildly popular pop cultural product that differentiated itself from its competitors. The band came to adopt a symbiotic position within the United States’ cultural *zeitgeist*. It drew from it in its evocation and innovation of popular themes in culture and music, and in turn influenced it. Just as the band drew upon their love of going to the beach and cruising around town, they helped popularize surf, hot rods, and rock ‘n’ roll across America and beyond. The Beach Boys sound,

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<sup>32</sup> David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 268.

<sup>33</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 7-24; DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged*, 1-3.

<sup>34</sup> DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged*, 395.

<sup>35</sup> Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 9.

in its union of popular genres, sounded new, like a Chuck Berry record had been whitewashed and injected with surf guitar and layered harmonies. The personalities of the Beach Boys themselves were also highly marketable. As white, clean-cut California youths, they were welcomed by a mainstream audience who viewed them as wholesome entertainment, unlike the African American artists they largely derived their sound from. As such, the personalities of the Beach Boys themselves, Brian, Mike, Dennis, Carl, and Al, were commodified, marketed, and sold alongside the band’s image and sound.

### **Surfing the Cultural Waves**

The Beach Boys began out of a shared passion for music. Ever since they were little kids, Brian (b. 1942) had directed his brothers, cousin, and friends in replicating the complex harmonies of his favorite Four Freshman and doo-wop records. Once a band was formed, the music became something more – a means of accruing fame, status, and money. “A sociologist might say I am trying to generate a feeling of social superiority,” Brian admitted in 1964 on the liner notes of the band’s *All Summer Long* LP. “I live with my piano and I love to make records that my friends love to hear.”<sup>36</sup> Brian was intensely competitive in the band’s early years, and highly conscious of his market: the hordes of teen consumers across the country hooked on rock ‘n’ roll and other popular music genres, just as he and his bandmates were. Brian could care less about money, but he craved the feeling of beating out rival musical acts on the charts. Mike (b. 1941) felt directionless after graduating high school. Stuck in what he saw as a dead-end job, obligated to support the child of an accidental pregnancy, he saw music as a way out. “My path,” he writes in his 2016 memoir, “was unclear. But I could turn a phrase and knew what made a

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<sup>36</sup> The Beach Boys, *All Summer Long*, Capitol Records, ST 2110, rel. July 13, 1964, liner notes.

good lyric... We [the Beach Boys] were just a bunch of blue-collar kids whose ancestors came from the sticks, but there was magic in that gene pool. We just had to set it free.”<sup>37</sup>

The Beach Boys would find their success through researching and knowing their teen market. In its relentless production of songs about “surf, cars, and girls,” the group provided teens across the country music that offered meaningful emotional connection and markers of identity, all with catchy lyrics and danceable rhythms. The themes came first, the music second – the Beach Boys differentiated their products from those of their competitors by leveraging their own understandings of teenage identity and using all of the resources at their disposal to figure out what sonic and commercial trends drove sales. They exploited cultural trends when they could, but moved on when they sensed the times were changing. “We aim to keep up with what young guys and dolls are doing and thinking,” Brian explained in 1964. “We can’t be too dedicated to current crazes because the pressure builds up on us to follow through until they die – and we with them.”<sup>38</sup> The band’s records, its *art*, reflected how it perceived its markets. Even if they did not understand themselves in this manner, the Beach Boys were a brand, and America was buying.

Before they were the Beach Boys, they were the Pendletones. Even before the band possessed a distinct musical identity, it based itself in what it believed its audiences would buy, referencing the woolen Pendleton shirts popular with surfers and Hawthorne high schoolers.<sup>39</sup> “If we hit it big, maybe the company would send us free shirts,” Mike reasoned.<sup>40</sup> In performing an August 1961 audition for local record producers Hite and Dorinda Morgan, the upstart

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<sup>37</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 32-34.

<sup>38</sup> “Brian Births a New Song,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964, [http://bjbear71.com/Beach\\_Boys/Teen-set.html](http://bjbear71.com/Beach_Boys/Teen-set.html).

<sup>39</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 87. See Figure 1.

<sup>40</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 39.

Pendletones learned their first lesson in marketing.<sup>41</sup> Upon performing some R&B tunes by the Coasters and a few Four Freshmen harmonies, they were rejected, mirroring Dorinda Morgan’s assessment of one of Al’s prior failed bands: “they were imitators, not originators.”<sup>42</sup> Dennis, showing the first signs of the band’s marketing brilliance, offered a suggestion. “Dennis said, ‘Why doesn’t somebody write a song about surfing?’” recalled Dorinda Morgan. “Well, surfin’ didn’t mean a thing to us, but I said, ‘we have nothing to lose.’”<sup>43</sup>

Out of Dennis’ idea spawned the band’s first selling point: surfing. The Pendletones shaped their identity around the sport, despite the fact that only Dennis actually surfed. They saw opportunity, as surfing was an emerging trend up and down the California coast. The genre of surf rock existed, but it was largely instrumental, relying on loud, aggressive electric guitar licks to convey the exhilarating feeling of shooting the curl – riding a wave until its waters crept over your head. Southern California-based groups like Dick Dale and the Del-Tones, the Surfaris, and the Challengers spearheaded this trend, and the Pendletones certainly heard their music.<sup>44</sup> Brian, Mike, Carl, Dennis, and Al made the genre their own by being the first surf rockers to add vocals to the mix.<sup>45</sup> Their lyrics added an experiential element to the music, as non-surfers could use them to understand the sport for themselves. This approach inspired the band’s first recorded song – “Surfin’,” a simple tune about going to the beach and surfing with your friends. It was a regional hit, reaching seventy-five on the *Billboard* charts. Most consequentially, it established

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 83

<sup>42</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Byron Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson: The Songs, Sounds, and Influences of the Beach Boys’ Founding Genius* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 33-34.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy J. Cooley, *Surfing About Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 49.

the band’s identity. As Candix Records released “Surfin’” in 1961, conscious of the band’s selling point, the label renamed the band “The Beach Boys.”<sup>46</sup>

Murry Wilson, Brian, Carl, and Dennis’ father, ensured the band had a point of entry into the volatile popular music market. While he occupies an ambivalent position in the band’s narrative due to his abusive parenting and controlling tendencies, his business acumen was crucial to the band’s beginnings. The Beach Boys, just fresh out of high school or still attending, needed a manager that would advocate for them.<sup>47</sup> In 1961, Mike was the oldest at twenty years of age; Carl, the youngest, was only fifteen.<sup>48</sup> Murry provided the Beach Boys with the initial guidance they needed to make their big break, working as their manager up until 1964, when he was ousted by Brian.<sup>49</sup> The band was great at capitalizing on trends, but lacked the entrepreneurial know-how of record dealing. Murry himself was an aspiring pop musician, and had made contacts in the music business in the 1950s; he used his contacts to help his boys get ahead.<sup>50</sup> Hite and Dorinda Morgan had heard the Beach Boys out on Murry’s word, as they had known him for nearly a decade.<sup>51</sup> “[The Beach Boys] weren’t as smooth as the other group Alan had brought,” recalled Dorinda Morgan. “But knowing Murry and whatnot, we figured Brian had talent as a songwriter.”<sup>52</sup>

When Candix Records, the band’s original label, went bankrupt, it was Murry who found an escape clause in their contract and secured a new deal with Capitol Records, aggressively

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<sup>46</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> Brian, Mike, and Al completed high school before their ascent to fame as the Beach Boys. Carl completed his secondary education while in the band, and Dennis dropped out before his senior year in 1962. Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 172.

<sup>48</sup> David Marks would become the youngest Beach Boy when he joined the band in early 1962 at the age of thirteen.

<sup>49</sup> Steven Gaines, *Heroes and Villains: The True Story of the Beach Boys* (New York: New American Library, 1986), 113-114.

<sup>50</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 30-33; Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 17-18.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Priess, *The Beach Boys*, 9.

advocating for the band at every turn. “The people at Capitol didn’t like my dad at all, because he really gave them a hard time,” Carl recounted to *Rolling Stone* in 1971. “A lot of the executives didn’t like him at all – which is perfectly understandable, but we were his kids, you know?”<sup>53</sup> Murry invested in the band, subsidizing it by taking out a mortgage on his business and paying for time spent in the recording studio. He was also a relentless promoter – under his watch, the band performed at every opportunity. Audree Wilson, Murry’s wife and mother to Brian, Dennis, and Carl, recalled that “we [Murry, Audree, and the band] used to drive to San Bernardino, to Fresno, to many other cities [to give free concerts] ... it was actually a smart move.”<sup>54</sup> Murry also ensured the band got airplay, lavishing gifts onto local DJs who, in turn, helped boost the popularity of the Beach Boys by playing their records.<sup>55</sup>

Freed from the pressure of having to deal with business aspects of their work, the Beach Boys were able to devote their time towards researching what would sell, then fine-tuning their sound to the trends they found. They were very conscious of the fact that they had to draw from consumable teenage experiences to have hits. “We can communicate... very well with... the teenage market because, well, we grew up... in the same environment and everything,” said a flustered Carl to an after-show interviewer in 1964.<sup>56</sup> “We usually like to try to identify and associate with teenagers,” said Brian. “Usually, the lyrics are supposed to be aimed at the everyday lives of kids.”<sup>57</sup> “Surfin’” had been inspired by Dennis’ hobby and by what Mike knew of the subculture.<sup>58</sup> The lyrics of “Surfin’ USA,” stacked onto a tune borrowed from Chuck

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<sup>53</sup> Tom Nolan, “Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II,” *Rolling Stone*, November 11, 1971, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/beach-boys-a-california-saga-part-ii-233192/>.

<sup>54</sup> Gaines, *Heroes and Villains*, 80-81.

<sup>55</sup> Gaines, *Heroes and Villains*, 80.

<sup>56</sup> OHS Film and Video Archives, “Ida ‘B’ Blackburn Beach Boys Interview 1964,” YouTube Video, uploaded January 8, 2013, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://youtu.be/6Z4N4BSs4Ic>.

<sup>57</sup> OHS Film and Video Archives, “Ida ‘B’ Blackburn.”

<sup>58</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 27-28.



Berry’s “Sweet Little Sixteen,” were derived from insider knowledge: Brian wrote the song equipped with a list of surfing lingo and locations provided to him by a young surfer.<sup>59</sup> The band developed a sense of what sounds and subject matter would resonate with its audiences, as attested by Mike in his remembrance of writing “Surfin’ Safari:” I wasn’t just thinking about the reality of our experiences but a kind of (as advertisers called it) ‘heightened reality.’ Why go ‘surfin’ when you could go on a ‘surfin’ safari?’”<sup>60</sup>

“Surfin’ Safari” and “Surfin’ USA,” peaking at a respective fourteen and three on the *Billboard* charts, marked the Beach Boys’ ascendance from regional appeal to national appeal. “Surfin’ USA’s” opening, “if everybody had an ocean / across the USA...” resonated with teens across America as the Beach Boys’ airplay helped popularize the surf craze. Even acts that formed before the Beach Boys did jumped on the surf bandwagon, most notably Jan and Dean, a duo that enjoyed a number-one hit with “Surf City” in July 1963, a song co-written by Brian. The pair went on to record covers of “Surfin’” and “Surfin’ Safari,” backed by the Beach Boys themselves.<sup>61</sup>

By July 1963, the UK magazine *Record Mirror* was reporting on “the latest US craze to hit the scene” and noted how the Beach Boys were the first to popularize it; the band had embraced surf rock “when it was completely unexploited.” In contrast, Dick Dale, the progenitor of the genre, was “taking quite a while to get national.”<sup>62</sup> Just as the band had helped kick off the surf craze, the band enjoyed a lot of free publicity as the fad spread, as the article attests: “there’s a ‘you-scratch-my-back, I’ll-scratch-yours’ thing about it. The disc companies help the

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<sup>59</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 46.

<sup>61</sup> Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 79-83; Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Jones, “Let’s Go Surfin’ ...,” *Record Mirror*, July 20, 1963, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/lets-go-surfin>.

manufacturers of surf boards and swimming gear; and vice-versa. It’s a hot-loot fad which they are determined to keep alive.”<sup>63</sup> By January 1965, the British press was still publishing articles on surfing, with *Fabulous* magazine hailing it as “possibly, the biggest sound to come.” By then, the Beach Boys were “selling more albums than any American group.”<sup>64</sup> However, by then, the Beach Boys had already released their last surfing song, “Don’t Back Down,” on their 1964 *All Summer Long* album.<sup>65</sup> The band had moved on: “they are all mad on sports, and potty about surfing but the latest craze is hot rodding...”<sup>66</sup>

“It probably isn’t much of a surprise to Beach Boys fans that the most popular surfing group in the land has jumped right up to take its place as the most popular hot-roddin’ group too,” read the album sleeve of the band’s 1963 *Little Deuce Coupe* album, the latest pressing of the Beach Boys brand.<sup>67</sup> Like any good business venture, the band had decided to diversify. As early as their 1962 single “409,” the band had begun singing about hot rods alongside surfboards. Though hot rodding had been a fad in southern California since the 1940s, the Beach Boys’ music served to revive interest in the trend and adapted the general musical approach of surf rock towards automobiles. Impeccably commercial, the Beach Boys’ records were released in tandem with a general marketing push.<sup>68</sup>

Surf and cars went hand-in-hand. As noted by David Ferrandino, on three different singles Capitol Records paired surfing A-sides with hot rod B-sides as a means to widen the

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<sup>63</sup> Jones, “Let’s Go Surfin’.”

<sup>64</sup> Vicki Wickham, “The Beach Boys: In The Space Age Will It Be Surf?,” *Fabulous*, January 15, 1965, <https://www.rockedbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-in-the-space-age-will-it-be-surf>.

<sup>65</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Wickham, “The Beach Boys.”

<sup>67</sup> The Beach Boys, *Little Deuce Coupe*, Capitol Records ST 1998, rel. October 7, 1963, vinyl record.

<sup>68</sup> David Ferrandino, “Irony, Intentionality, and Environmental Politics in the Music of Cake” in *This is the Sound of Irony: Music, Politics, and Popular Culture*, Katherine L. Turner, ed. (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 149; Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 104.

band’s appeal and “double [its] commercial value.”<sup>69</sup> Two entire Beach Boys LPs were based around cars: the forementioned *Little Deuce Coupe* and *Shut Down Volume 2*. *Shut Down* had been a compilation album issued by Capitol based around car songs. It had peaked at seven on the *Billboard* charts. The increasingly popular Beach Boys were trusted enough by their label to provide a best-selling follow-up.<sup>70</sup> It helped that the Beach Boys genuinely loved and understood cars in a way that they had not with surfing; they had previously received negative backlash from actual surfers, who viewed their music as “inauthentic.”<sup>71</sup> This was not the case with cars.

Though the Beach Boys were familiar with hot rods, they still called upon expert knowledge in branching out into this new genre. Brian, in the early stages of the Beach Boys’ career, worked with two collaborators alongside Mike in conceptualizing the band’s new creative push: Gary Usher, a fellow musician, and Roger Christian, a DJ of the prominent Los Angeles radio station KFWB, referred to him by Murry. Both were avid car enthusiasts.<sup>72</sup> Artistically, they helped Brian conceptualize new kinds of approaches to the band’s music, but more importantly, they advised him on what would sell.<sup>73</sup> “409” had been a collaboration, penned by Brian and Mike with the help of Usher, who was also eager to spend long nights with the band recording car sounds to add onto their tracks.<sup>74</sup> Christian, as a DJ, was uniquely positioned as a curator of the public’s musical tastes. “I’d try to come up with a story lyric, and I’d also have a rough idea for a melody, which Brian would promptly dismiss,” Christian recalled in 1976. “Sometimes he would improve on a lyric... just phrasing them so they’d sing a little better.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ferrandino, “Irony, Intentionality, and Environmental Politics,” 149.

<sup>70</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 300.

<sup>71</sup> Jadey O’Regan, “When I Grow Up: The Beach Boys’ Early Music,” in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 149.

<sup>72</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 261.

<sup>73</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 65.

<sup>74</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 39-40.

The Wilson-Christian songwriting duo became a lucrative partnership, producing hit singles that remain classics to this day: “Shut Down,” “Little Deuce Coupe” and “Don’t Worry Baby,” all charting at top spots in the *Billboard* Top 40.<sup>76</sup>

Songs about girls became an important part of the Beach Boys’ catalogue as well, often paired with cars and surf for maximum appeal. “Fun, Fun, Fun,” “Don’t Worry Baby,” and “Surfer Girl” were all hit singles that fit this billing. Girls and teenage romance were no exception to the band’s ability to relentlessly commodify and market. “It’s a new kind of song for The Beach Boys,” read the liner notes of the band’s 1963 album *Surfer Girl*. “All the things you’ve heard until now have had that great rockin’ surfer beat... ‘Surfer Girl’ is entirely different... This song is fast becoming the romantic ballad of the day, and it’s making thousands of new friends for the boys.”<sup>77</sup> Thousands of new “friends?” Such a sensibility was also expressed in the band’s new lyrics, a prime example being those of 1964’s “The Girls on the Beach:” “the girls on the beach / are all within reach, if you know what to do.”<sup>78</sup> Naturally, such expressions were ripe for commercial tie-ins. In 1965 a film was released on the strength of the song, *The Girls on the Beach*, its music written by Brian’s pal Gary Usher. The Beach Boys received top billing, and performed the movie’s title song over its opening credits.<sup>79</sup>

For all this talk about surf, cars, and girls, it bears remembering that in these fields, the Beach Boys were not just chasing trends – they set them. They were true innovators in how they drew upon niche subcultures and fads and translated them into forms accessible to general

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<sup>76</sup> “Shut Down,” “Little Deuce Coupe,” and “Don’t Worry Baby” peaked at twenty-three, fifteen, and twenty-four, respectively.

<sup>77</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surfer Girl*, Capitol Records ST 1981, rel. September 16, 1963, vinyl record.

<sup>78</sup> The Beach Boys, “Girls on the Beach,” track 9 on *All Summer Long*, Capitol Records ST 2110, rel. July 13, 1964, accessed May 13, Spotify.

<sup>79</sup> Luciano Garcia, “The Girls on the Beach 1965,” YouTube Video, uploaded October 19, 2018, accessed March 16, 2020, [https://youtu.be/jlkqKl\\_FcPA](https://youtu.be/jlkqKl_FcPA).

audiences. Before the Beach Boys, surf rock was intense, loud, and difficult to parse for the non-surfer. The group reshaped the genre in their image, softening its tones and explicitly inviting teens across America to take part in the fad, as they did in “Surfin’ Safari:” “Let’s go surfin’ now / everybody’s learning how! / Come on a safari with me.”<sup>80</sup> The liner notes of *Surfin’ Safari* speak to how early the band took up the trend, as the marketing team at Capitol found it necessary to define the word “surfing” for potential record-buyers. “Here is a definition of ‘Surfing,’” read the LP’s album sleeve. “*A water sport, in which the participant stands on a floating slab of wood... and attempts to remain perpendicular while being hurtled towards the shore... on the crest of a large wave.*”<sup>81</sup> In crafting car music, the band started up a trend of their own, reorienting their surfing sound to a pastime more common amongst their listeners. “I Get Around,” perhaps the band’s most famous hot rod track, shot to the number-one spot on the *Billboard* charts on the week of July 4, 1964 in patriotic defiance of the then-fledgling British Invasion. However, the Beach Boys’ early success amounted to more than their ability to tap into the cultural *zeitgeist* of their times. To stay on top, the Beach Boys had to produce sonic product of good enough quality to uphold their brand and maintain their initial big break – this was the Beach Boys sound.

### Creating the Beach Boys Sound

In order to differentiate their songs from those of their competitors, the Beach Boys developed a unique, self-contained style of composition, instrumentation, and songwriting. Their music was composed of an innovative blend of popular genres, namely jazz harmonies, rock ‘n’

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<sup>80</sup> “The Hot 100: Week of July 4, 1964,” *Billboard*, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1964-07-04>.

<sup>81</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surfin’ Safari*, Capitol Records T 1808, rel. October 1, 1962, vinyl record.

roll, and R&B. Just as the Beach Boys distinguished the images and themes of their sonic products by tapping into cultural and commercial trends, they did the same with their music. As avid musical consumers themselves, the Beach Boys sought to innovate on existing trends – they professionalized their musicianship, learned from their peers in the industry, and thoroughly researched their markets in order to craft sounds that would sell.

The band first needed a musical identity, a means to stand out in a sea of competitors catering to the same market. In crafting this vision, the Beach Boys drew upon what they knew: their own popular music tastes, which they mixed together into a successful blend. Each Beach Boy brought something new to the table. Brian drew inspiration from doo-wop and jazz harmonies, as sung by groups like the Four Freshmen and Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers.<sup>82</sup> Carl, Dennis, and David imbued the band’s music with a rock ‘n’ roll sound derived from Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Ritchie Valens.<sup>83</sup> Mike’s lyrical sensibilities were based in R&B, influenced by acts like James Brown, Chubby Checker, and Fats Domino.<sup>84</sup> Al, a fan of the Kingston Trio, was a folk music devotee.<sup>85</sup> Just as the Beach Boys contributed to the musical soundscape of the sixties through their sonic innovation, their roots in the popular music of their times ran deep. In creating their own distinctive style, they differentiated their product just enough to attract sales while still sticking to tried-and-tested sounds.

As the band originated out of a musically-oriented family, Brian, Dennis, Carl, and Mike were already used to harmonizing. They had performed together at family gatherings and school events; one of Brian’s favorite pastimes was listening to the harmonies of the Four Freshmen,

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<sup>82</sup> See Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 1-20 for a comprehensive analysis of Brian’s early influences and musical tastes.

<sup>83</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 15-16, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 14.

then teaching the parts one by one to his brothers.<sup>86</sup> “It was early 1961 when Mike Love and Al Jardine were coming over to the house,” Murry Wilson remembered. “Brian was teaching them songs, with Carl. They sang Four Freshman songs almost like the Four Freshman, except they had a sweeter, younger sound.”<sup>87</sup> This vocal blend became the foundation of the Beach Boys’ musical identity. As Brian, Dennis, and Carl were brothers, their genetics helped them layer their voices onto each other’s seamlessly; contrasted with Mike’s nasal lead tenor, they created a smooth, distinctive sound.<sup>88</sup>

However, the Beach Boys did find themselves lacking in non-vocal instruments. When “Surfin’” became a hit in 1961, the band only had three instrumentalists; on “Surfin’,” Carl played rhythm guitar, Al strummed an upright bass, and Brian beat a snare drum with a pencil.<sup>89</sup> Brian may have originally conceived his band as a doo-wop group, but upon realizing the potential to capitalize off of surf music, the Beach Boys moved strategically to learn how to play the instruments that would allow them to enter the genre.<sup>90</sup> To get signed to a label, they would need to build off this niche by creating a self-contained sound. “I was going to play guitar, but we didn’t know who was going to play the other instruments,” Carl recalled in 1976. “Alan could play stand-up bass, Brian could play keyboards... Dennis just chose the drums. And Brian said, ‘Well look, I’m going to play the bass, and you play guitar, and then it will be like a rock sound, it’ll be rock and roll.’”<sup>91</sup> Mike trained on the saxophone, as at the time it was a surf, rock ‘n’ roll, and R&B staple, though its popularity soon faded.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Nolan, “Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

<sup>88</sup> Ted Hendrickson, “A Lifetime of Harmonies,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2013, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324468104578245884029346770>.

<sup>89</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 51.

<sup>90</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 85; Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 97.

<sup>92</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 68.

An often-overlooked aspect to the Beach Boys’ beginnings was the instrumental training they received. It was the band’s intensive live performance practice and adaptation to Brian’s emerging composition style that allowed the group to blend different genres of music into its own unique sound. The Beach Boys’ first-ever live performance at the Rendezvous Ballroom in Newport Beach on December 23, 1961 was badly received due to the band’s lack of experience, but was a marker of things to come.<sup>93</sup> Like the vast majority of musical groups of their time, the Beach Boys learned to play their instruments by performing live and learning from their peers; also present at the Rendezvous were well-established surf groups like Dick Dale and his Del-Tones, the Surfariis, and the Challengers.<sup>94</sup> Carl and David had taken formal lessons before the band’s formation with John Walker (of later Walker Brothers fame), a friend of the famous rock ‘n’ roller Ritchie Valens. From Walker they picked up the Chuck Berry-style riffs they would use to complement Brian’s jazz harmonies and Mike’s R&B-style lyrics on hits like “Surfin’ USA” and “Fun, Fun, Fun.” “John taught us how to do that strum which you can do on our ballads like ‘Surfer Girl’ and ‘In My Room,’” David remembered. “He also taught us how to do the Chuck Berry boogie and how to play single-string leads – he was a tremendous influence on our playing.”<sup>95</sup>

In addition to learning how to play electric bass, Brian scoured Los Angeles throughout the early sixties to network with up-and-coming artists and refine his understanding of the recording studio. Though the very first Beach Boys hits were produced by Hite and Dorinda Morgan and the production of the songs on *Surfin’ Safari* and *Surfin’ USA* are credited to Capitol producer Nick Venet, Brian and Murry were generally the most involved in engineering these

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<sup>93</sup> Keith Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary of America’s Greatest Band on Stage and in the Studio* (San Francisco, CA: Backbeat Books, 2004), 17; Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 42-43.

<sup>94</sup> Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 33.

<sup>95</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 38-40.



early records, and by 1963’s *Surfer Girl* Brian had taken charge as the band’s sole producer.<sup>96</sup>

Beach Boys narratives tend to uncritically praise Brian’s “genius” (a mythological concept I will analyze in Chapter 2) rather than recognize the sheer effort he put into learning his trade.

“He was totally naïve,” Brian’s then-girlfriend Marilyn Rovell recalled. “Because of his talent, he was taken to the best studios in town... the hip part of the industry... It was like a kid growing... grabbing everything he could. He was going ‘Oh, that’s great! I want to use that! I want to get to know that! He took it all in.’”<sup>97</sup> What Rovell describes as “naivete” characterizes both Brian’s ambition to produce innovative pop music and his status as a novice in the music industry. Brian sat in on the recording sessions of Phil Spector, a popular record producer hailed as “The First Tycoon of Teen. From Spector, Brian learned to produce in the style of the “Wall of Sound:” a production technique that piled on countless takes of vocals and instruments onto each other in an orchestral fashion that left individual parts indistinguishable. This entangled sonic blend was designed to sound good on monophonic speakers, and it helped the Beach Boys’ records stand out from those of their competitors.<sup>98</sup> Brian also looked to peers like Jan and Dean, Gary Usher, Roger Christian, and vocal group the Jaguars for advice in arranging his songs. Speaking of the Beach Boys’ early music, the Jaguars’ lead singer Val Poliuto noted that “a lot of the things in the harmony, if you listen to what the Jaguars do, you’ll hear some of that... that’s what I had to explain to [the Beach Boys] at the time...”<sup>99</sup> Brian’s networking was key to the band’s early success, as the Beach Boy learned how to succeed in the music business by learning from its foremost innovators.

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<sup>96</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surfin’ Safari / Surfin’ USA*, Capitol Records CDP 7 93691 2, rel. 1990, liner notes; Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 38.

<sup>97</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 43-45.

<sup>99</sup> Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 28.

Putting these lessons into practice, Brian worked his way up to the status of the Beach Boys’ sole producer. Ousting Capitol’s assigned producer, Nick Venet, as well as his father Murry, by the release of the band’s 1963 LP *Surfer Girl* Brian was fully in charge of the band’s sound. With Brian at the helm of their recording sessions, the Beach Boys exercised an unprecedented degree of creative control over their music.<sup>100</sup> This development was not due to “genius,” but hard work. That the quality of the Beach Boys’ early musical product was so consistent was not because of innate talent, but because it was not what Brian trained on. He did experiment and made mistakes, but with largely-forgotten musical acts – not with the Beach Boys. In between Beach Boys sessions, Brian worked with musical acts like the girl group the Honeys (which included his girlfriend Marilyn), the male vocal quartet the Castells, television star Paul Peterson, and Sharon Marie [Esparza], an obscure singer Brian found with Mike.<sup>101</sup>

The group as a whole was also greatly concerned with how their tunes would sound, and by extension, sell. Brian, ever the perfectionist, went so far as to ditch stellar recordings he felt were not up to par. “Every time Brian had a hit, I promise you, there were four records that he just buried that would have been Top 10,” recalled Fred Vail, the band’s promoter in the early sixties, in 2018.<sup>102</sup> Brian would also alter takes and change the band’s stylings based on his sense of commercial appeal. “Brian was trying to make some of his records appeal to two crowds,” Vail continued. “The Chicano crowd... the low riders... and the all-white surfing crowd, which was an all-white crowd.”<sup>103</sup> All of the Beach Boys were involved in quality-checking their sound, often taking the time to play their records on the kinds of cheap speakers their listeners

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<sup>100</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 38.

<sup>101</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 17; Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 319.

<sup>102</sup> Stephen J. McParland, *Bull Sessions with the Big Daddy: Interviews with Those Who Helped Shape the California Sound*, (New South Wales, Australia: CMusic Publishing, 2018), 291.

<sup>103</sup> McParland, *Bull Sessions with the Big Daddy*, 290.

would use.<sup>104</sup> On a rehearsal track of a cover of the Four Freshmen’s “Graduation Day,” the band can be heard arguing over its vocal blend. “I like the bass voice,” Brian asserts. Another Beach Boy, likely Carl, replies with commercial concerns: “but will it come across on the little two-inch speakers on the TV?”<sup>105</sup>

Brian’s forays into record production went hand-in-hand with the band’s developing musicianship. The Beach Boys adapted to Brian’s production as they learned to play their instruments and layered their vocals, collectively creating their own self-contained sound. Carl, Al, and later David adapted their guitar stylings to fit the band’s creative direction – as noted by Carl biographer Kent Crowley, “unlike the vast majority of bands emerging in the 60s, the Beach Boys built their style on a piano-based boogie-woogie foundation rather than guitar-based blues.”<sup>106</sup> The Beach Boys also improved their instrumentation by working with Los Angeles’ best, the collective of studio musicians known as the “Wrecking Crew.” As Brian hired the same instrumentalists employed by Phil Spector to supplement the band in the recording studio, they likely taught the Beach Boys a thing or two as they accompanied the Beach Boys.<sup>107</sup> Carl in particular came into his own as a talented guitarist. “He played great,” recalled drummer Hal Blaine. “He fit in with everybody and he knew what he was doing and had great chops.”<sup>108</sup>

As the band secured its instrumental prowess, it also looked to commercialism in the penning of lyrics, primarily the domain of Brian and Mike’s songwriting partnership. Mike always concerned himself with the playability of a record. “Our collaborations were usually interactive,” he recalls. “Either one of us might come up with the concept – what’s this song

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<sup>104</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 52.

<sup>105</sup> The Beach Boys, “Graduation Day (Session Excerpt And Master Take/2012 Mix),” disk 2, track 7 on *Made in California*, Capitol Records B0018509-02, August 27, 2013, accessed April 5, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>106</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 41.

<sup>107</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 100-101.

<sup>108</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 103.

about? Brian started with a melody... my specialty was finding the hook, or phrase, which drew people in.”<sup>109</sup> Mike often had a part in writing the band’s most memorable early hits – “Surfin’,” “Surfin’ USA,” “409,” “Be True to Your School,” and “Fun, Fun, Fun,” to name a few.<sup>110</sup> When such lyrical sensibilities combined with the Beach Boys’ knack for tapping into cultural trends, the band found itself with a winning formula that spoke to the spirit of its times. “We became the storytellers, but it wasn’t just my story,” recalled Al. “It was the story of the generation, an innocent generation of kids that hadn’t really been through a major war. We were a postwar generation.”<sup>111</sup> By basing their songwriting in relatability and playability, the Beach Boys created a productive process by which they could continuously provide new content for an increasingly demanding Capitol Records.

When all of these factors combined – jazz-based vocal harmonies, rock ‘n’ roll instrumentation, “Wall of Sound” production, commercially-driven lyrics – the Beach Boys created their characteristic sound. Brian, for one, recognized the distinctiveness of his band’s product. “I hate so-called ‘surfin’” music,” he told *16 Magazine* in 1965. “It’s a name that people slap on any sound from California. Our music is rightfully ‘the Beach Boys’ sound – if one has to label it.”<sup>112</sup> That the “Beach Boys sound” based itself in African American music – jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and R&B – also helped it stand out from its competitors. As the Beach Boys adapted Black sounds for largely white audiences, they gentrified their market, tailoring rock ‘n’ roll to suit their suburban, white, middle-class markets. Though the Beach Boys acknowledged and

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<sup>109</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 39.

<sup>110</sup> Mike lacks an official writer’s credit on “Surfin’ USA,” but both he and Brian have noted that they collaborated on the lyrics, as noted in steel7866, “Brian Wilson - Jim Pewter Interview 1974 (audio),” YouTube Video, uploaded October 9, 2012, accessed March 17, 2020, [https://youtu.be/379l\\_T3MRpE](https://youtu.be/379l_T3MRpE) and Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 62-63.

<sup>111</sup> Ken Sharp, “Al Jardine: A Beach Boy Still Riding the Waves,” *Goldmine*, July 28, 2000, <https://troun.tripod.com/al.html>.

<sup>112</sup> “The Beach Boys Reveal: ‘The Things We Hate and the Things We Love,’” *16 Magazine*, September 1965, <http://smileysmile.net/board/index.php?topic=19228.0>.

praised their Black predecessors, most notably in the *All Summer Long* track “Do You Remember?” (1964), they nonetheless contributed to the whitening of rock ‘n’ roll, a process which would deepen with its transformation into “rock,” a process I discuss in Chapter 2.<sup>113</sup> The Beach Boys, limited in their understanding of the cultural specificities of the lives of the Black artists they drew from, stuck to experiences and places they were most familiar with as white teenagers. Black music served as the backing tracks to predominantly white experiences. As clean-cut white suburbanites, the band reached audiences unreceptive to Black music, who found the Beach Boys sound unique and fresh. “If I could find a white boy who could sing like a black man I’d make a million dollars,” record producer Sam Phillips supposedly said before he encountered Elvis Presley.<sup>114</sup> Such a quote also applied to the Beach Boys.

When these influences were blended together and innovated upon by the Beach Boys, the results became irresistible to white teen audiences. Perhaps the best example of all of the band’s musical elements coming together in a single song was “Fun, Fun, Fun.” It had it all – a rocking Chuck Berry-style riff courtesy of Carl, stacked blues harmonies contrasted by Mike’s lead, a consumer-driven story about a girl and her hot rod, Brian’s production, and to top it all off, a memorable hook – “and she’ll have fun, fun, fun / ‘til her daddy takes the T-Bird away!”<sup>115</sup> Commercial relevance, cultural relatability, and innovative instrumentation – these were the qualities that brought the band success. Peaking at a stellar five on the *Billboard* charts, “Fun, Fun, Fun,” alongside numerous other classic Beach Boys hits, stood as testaments to the profitability of the Beach Boys’ sound.

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<sup>113</sup> The Beach Boys, “Do You Remember?,” track 9 on *All Summer Long*, accessed May 13, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>114</sup> Mark Steyne, “The Man Who Invented Elvis: Sam Phillips (1923-2003),” *The Atlantic*, October 2003, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/10/the-man-who-invented-elvis/302809/>.

<sup>115</sup> Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, 127-129; The Beach Boys, “Fun, Fun, Fun,” track 1 on *Shut Down Volume 2*, Capitol Records ST 2027, rel. March 2, 1964, vinyl record. Spotify.

## Beach Boys for Sale

As the Beach Boys were defined as a brand, it is also important to consider how Brian, Carl, Mike, Dennis, and Al were marketed as personalities – the “Beach Boys Five” – and commodified for the record-buying public.<sup>116</sup> This aspect of Beach Boys history has often gone overlooked, partly due to how the band has been overshadowed by the Beatles in the greater history of rock. Even Mike has subscribed to the idea that the Beach Boys lacked good marketing, as shown in his 2016 memoir: “what is often overlooked about the Beatles is how smart they were in their marketing, merchandise, and publicity, and in that regard, they ran in circles around us for [referring to the mid-sixties] the next several years...”<sup>117</sup> The Beach Boys, oddly enough, tend to not be popularly considered a “boy band,” in spite of how they were promoted on their personalities and their appeal to the teenage market.<sup>118</sup> We must consider the band as part of this greater commercial narrative, if only to recognize how important the Beach Boys’ personalities were to their brand.

To begin with, the Beach Boys (or at least Murry and their marketers at Capitol), were intensively concerned with the band’s image. The consistency of the Beach Boys’ aesthetic from 1961 to 1964 demonstrates how they sought to appeal to the teenage market. Clean-cut and wholesome! That was the Beach Boys brand. On the band’s album covers, ranging from 1961’s *Surfin’ Safari* to 1964’s *Shut Down Volume 2*, they demonstrate none of the cultural exclusivity of their predecessors in the surf and car genres. Just as their smooth harmonies dulled the edges

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<sup>116</sup> “Girls Girls Girls = Fun Fun Fun,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964, [http://bjbear71.com/Beach\\_Boys/Teen-set.html](http://bjbear71.com/Beach_Boys/Teen-set.html). See Elizabeth Barfoot Christian, ed., *Rock Brands: Selling Sound in a Media Saturated Culture* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011). While the collection of essays focuses on the contemporary branding of rock acts, its conceptual findings very much apply to this section’s analyses.

<sup>117</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 88.

<sup>118</sup> “Reader’s Poll: The Best Boy Bands of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, March 28, 2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/readers-poll-the-best-boy-bands-of-all-time-11312/>. Tellingly, the Beach Boys continue to be left out of popular histories and narratives such as Maria Sherman, *Larger Than Life: A History of Boy Bands from NKOTB to BTS* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2020).

of the aggressive surf guitar riffs the genre had been known for before their debut, the band’s album covers gentrified the band’s subject matter to make them more palatable for a wide teenage market. *Surfin’ Safari*, for instance, depicts five excited, Pendleton-clad teens pointing towards the ocean.<sup>119</sup> *Shut Down Volume 2* shows the Beach Boys posing coolly next to cars in matching blue jackets, hip but thoroughly unintimidating.<sup>120</sup> The Beach Boys were never intimidating.

The attitudes and image of the Beach Boys on tour were also shaped to reflect clean-cut respectability. Murry charged himself with this task, ensuring the band looked and acted to the standards expected of their white teenage audiences. “There was nothing vulgar,” he asserted to *Rolling Stone* in 1971. “Even their wearing apparel was purchased so it wouldn’t be vulgar. There wasn’t any vulgarity on stage.”<sup>121</sup> Here, Murry demonstrates how he negotiated the Beach Boys through concerns of middle-class respectability, reflecting both his own values as a parent and his perception of the band’s target demographics. Dressing them up in preppy striped shirts donned in emulation of folk group the Kingston Trio and chastising them for cussing, Murry recognized that as a brand, the Beach Boys primarily marketed to young girls.<sup>122</sup> He did not want any teen dollars to go unspent due to any parental concerns of impropriety.

Murry also directly supervised the band’s behavior and went so far as to fine them money when they failed to meet his standards of respectability. “I traveled around with my kids, worrying about them, getting rid of girls with shady characters... On tours, I said, ‘*No Drinking...*’”<sup>123</sup> Mike had already gotten a girl pregnant – twice – before the formation of the

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<sup>119</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surfin’ Safari*. See Figure 2.

<sup>120</sup> The Beach Boys, *Shut Down Volume 2*; Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 47-48. See Figure 3.

<sup>121</sup> Nolan, “Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

<sup>122</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>123</sup> Nolan, “Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

band; it is likely that Murry was trying to keep the rest of the band out of such trouble.<sup>124</sup> “I was tough on them,” he recalled. “Once, I assessed a \$300 fine to one of them... for drinking a cocktail.”<sup>125</sup> It was this close supervision that drove David out of the band, even though his surf guitar had helped secure the band’s rise through their first four LPs. He just did not fit the band’s intended image, as Brian recalled: “I liked David as an artist but his attitude was terrible. He really could have brushed up on his attitude a little.”<sup>126</sup> As David was significantly younger than the rest of the band, he lacked the maturity and social consciousness needed to effectively represent the Beach Boys’ brand.

Personality pieces on the “Beach Boys Five” also spoke to the band’s marketing priorities.<sup>127</sup> Liner notes on album jackets allowed the band to communicate directly with its fans and demonstrate teenage authenticity. Dennis affirmed his credibility in his liner notes for *All Summer Long* as the embodiment of the California lifestyle the band sang about: “They say I live a fast life. Maybe I just like a fast life of driving my Sting Ray and XKE, playing my drums, and meeting so many guys and girls (especially girls).”<sup>128</sup> Brian assured the band’s young listeners he was attuned to their emotions and desires in his liner notes: “The feelings you get from going to school, being in love, winning and losing in sports – these are my inspirations.”<sup>129</sup> The existence of these liner notes showed Capitol’s willingness to market the band on its personalities and include them as part of their products. They also allowed the Beach Boys themselves to express thanks to their listeners, adding a personal touch to their merchandise. “To Mom, Dad; Brian, Dennis, and you [the listener]: I hope you are proud of us. You know we owe

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<sup>124</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 32-33.

<sup>125</sup> Nolan, “Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

<sup>126</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> “Girls Girls Girls = Fun Fun Fun.”

<sup>128</sup> The Beach Boys, *All Summer Long*.

<sup>129</sup> The Beach Boys, *All Summer Long*.



so much to you,” wrote Carl.<sup>130</sup> In expressing such sentiments the Beach Boys revealed their knack for expressing authenticity, yet another marketing technique they used to sell themselves.<sup>131</sup>

The Beach Boys’ marketing was also highly cognizant of the band’s primary consumers: teenage girls. Press coverage focused heavily on the band’s taste in women, as revealed in a 1965 article in *16 Magazine* written on the “loves” and “hates” of the Beach Boys. Al hated “to see young girls dressed in black or dark sophisticated clothes.” Carl loved “girls who are cute, but don’t act conceited.” Mike loved “young girls, for they don’t seem to be as artificial as the older ones.”<sup>132</sup> The list went on. *The Teen Set*, a magazine published by Capitol, offered similar reporting. Its first issue – they were free – was timed to coincide with the release of the *Beach Boys Concert* LP in October 1964.<sup>133</sup> Though at this point the Beatles had begun their ascent, *The Teen Set*’s first issue focused solely on the Beach Boys, speaking to the band’s status as the US’ most popular native musical act. Within less than a year the magazine had over 20,000 active subscriptions; Capitol had not even released its second issue. In March 1965, *Billboard* hailed it as “the most successful merchandising tool ever devised for Capitol’s teen product.”<sup>134</sup> The contents of *The Teen Set*’s first issue, focused entirely on the Beach Boys, reveals the record label’s marketing approach, including contests to win Honda motorbikes, surfboards, and albums, “Exclusive New Pix” of the band, and most notably, personality profiles of the band and “Special Feature: The Beach Boys Pick Their Mates!”

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<sup>130</sup> The Beach Boys, *All Summer Long*.

<sup>131</sup> Curnutt, *Brian Wilson*, 8-9.

<sup>132</sup> “The Beach Boys Reveal: ‘The Things We Hate and the Things We Love.’”

<sup>133</sup> Don Armstrong, “TeenSet Magazine Part 1,” *Music Journalism History*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.music-journalism-history.com/2019/10/21/teenset-magazine-part-1/>.

<sup>134</sup> “Capitol Puts Out 2d Edition of ‘Teen Set’,” *Billboard*, March 20, 1965, <https://books.google.com/books?id=aUUEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA10#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

The pages of *The Teen Set* dare the teenaged female reader to imagine themselves as a girlfriend of one of the Beach Boys. The magazine’s profiles of each member of the band are eerily reminiscent of how boy bands like BTS, the Backstreet Boys, or Big Time Rush have been recently marketed, with each Beach Boy being assigned a “personality.” According to *The Teen Set*, Brian was “The Creative One,” Mike “The Personality Boy,” Al “The Quiet One,” Carl “The Cool One,” and Dennis was “The Sexy One.”<sup>135</sup> Every Beach Boy was embellished with sexual appeal. “Dark-haired, hazel-blue-eyed, sturdy framed, treetop-tall Brian Wilson is a genial genius...” the article wrote of Brian. Of Al, the piece covered his most trivial preferences to flesh out teenybopper fantasies: “Loves to dress in expensive jackets, tailored slacks and good casual clothes... Favorite color is red... Loves liver...” the list goes on. Perhaps Dennis’ profile, as the group’s sex symbol, was the truest to life. “When I look into the big baby blue eyes of a long-haired girl I can agree with anything she says,” he admitted.<sup>136</sup> No wonder Dennis got the loudest, shrillest female screams at all the band’s concerts.<sup>137</sup>

*The Teen Set*’s appeal to its female readership became even more explicit in an article glaringly titled “Girls Girls Girls = Fun Fun Fun.” “Girls loom Very Big in the eyes of the Beach Boy Five,” it read. “They think about girls, dream about ‘em, talk about ‘em and serenade all types of ‘em.”<sup>138</sup> The article went so far as to imply its readership ought to pursue the Beach Boys for themselves. “Dennis Wilson has such a practiced perfect 20-20 eye for super-femininity... he can gaze over a sea of 100,000 lovely faces and girlish figures in the audience, select the one of his choice and send her an RSVP message... to meet him backstage after the

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<sup>135</sup> “The Beach Boys,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964, [http://bjbear71.com/Beach\\_Boys/Teen-set.html](http://bjbear71.com/Beach_Boys/Teen-set.html).

<sup>136</sup> “The Beach Boys,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964.

<sup>137</sup> The Beach Boys, *Beach Boys Concert*, rel. Capitol Records TAO 2198, October 19, 1964, vinyl record; The Beach Boys, *The Beach Boys: The Lost Concert*, performed March 14, 1964 (Los Angeles: Image Entertainment, 1999), DVD, 22 minutes.

<sup>138</sup> “Girls Girls Girls = Fun Fun Fun,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964.

show.” Al’s blurb implied he was still open to female charms, despite his marriage: “Al Jardine, happily wed to a childhood sweetheart, notices that the gals who flirt so brightly and merrily with Brian, Mike, Dennis and Carl don’t mess around with him... This is not to say Al is blind to the charms of the dollings he meets on treks and tours.” The Beach Boys seemed girl-obsessed enough to the point of sexualizing themselves by playing with ambiguous language: “Love live love!” proclaimed Brian. “Girls play a different role in each of our lives... Mike is the most intense girl-watcher, Dennis is a man of action. Carl is the dark horse that might pass the others yet.”<sup>139</sup> In making such statements, the Beach Boys, like other musical groups of their day, sold their fans the possibility of romantic relationships – love lives in which they could imagine themselves. As lucrative as their records were, it is important to remember that the Beach Boys were not just selling their music and image, but their very personalities in one immaculately-marketed package.

## Conclusion

As 1961 recedes further into the past, it is important to avoid a romantic account of the Beach Boys’ early years. Instead, we should focus upon the more likely factors that made them famous: their ability to tap into cultural trends, the distinctiveness of their music, and their marketing machine, which sold the concept of the “Beach Boys” themselves just as much as it did their music. When considering these aspects of the band’s history, the Beach Boys’ success becomes more comprehensible: Brian, Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and David were at the right place at the right time, and they possessed the talent, initiative, effort, and connections to successfully distinguish themselves in the music industry. Knowing their audience, they tailored their art to

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<sup>139</sup> “Girls Girls Girls = Fun Fun Fun,” *The Teen Set*, October 1964.

the ears of their listeners, filling them with tales of endless summer backed by whitewashed African American jazz harmonies, R&B, and rock ‘n’ roll. It was a growing, almost boundless market, and a highly profitable one. For a short period in the early sixties, the Beach Boys were on the cutting edge of music, the most popular band in the United States.

But in 1964 came the British Invasion, the beginnings of the countercultural shifts of the sixties, and the transition of rock ‘n’ roll and pop to “rock.” The music was no less commercial than in the early sixties, but the Beach Boys’ dominance faltered as they felt greater pressure from Capitol Records and their new competition, the Beatles, to produce and perform more music than ever before. Surf, cars, and girls would no longer suffice as the record-buying public’s tastes turned to psychedelia and a more “artistic” sound. The Beach Boys were expected to innovate on top of ever-more relentless commercial demand, splitting apart their productive process between studio and stage. However, this arrangement would not last. In 1967 the Beach Boys would break apart over their commercial pressures.

## Chapter 2: “You Still Believe in Me:” Producing Teenage Symphonies to God (1965-1967)

Album Chronology: *The Beach Boys Today!* (1965), *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*

(1965), *Beach Boys’ Party!* (1965), *Pet Sounds* (1966), *Smiley Smile* (1967)

In a 1965 article in Capitol Records’ *TeenSet*, a music magazine published by the record label to promote its latest rock ‘n’ roll releases, Brian recounts what will be remembered by fans, journalists, and historians as one of the most pivotal events in Beach Boys history:

We were on a tour, December 23rd, 1964. We were going to Houston to kick off a two-week tour. I said goodbye to Marilyn. We weren’t getting along too good. The plane had been in the air only five minutes when I told Al Jardine I was going to crack up any minute. He told me to cool it. Then I started crying. I put a pillow over my face and began screaming and yelling.<sup>140</sup>

This event would mark a turning point for the band, as following this breakdown Brian would largely refrain from touring to focus on the Beach Boys’ studio productions. 1964 had been a tumultuous, wildly successful year for the band. Eager as always to profit fully on what it saw as a passing teen fad, Capitol had worked the Beach Boys harder than ever, pressing for new singles, new albums, and new touring dates – by the end of the year the band had played over ninety-eight live shows across the US, Europe, and Australia.<sup>141</sup> The corporation reaped a great reward: Brian, Mike, Carl, Dennis, and Al pumped out hit after hit after hit, releasing four LPs in a mere eight months.<sup>142</sup> All of these records were certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America [RIAA] for selling over one million dollars’ worth of copies, not

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<sup>140</sup> Tom Nolan, “The Beach Boys: A California Saga,” *Rolling Stone*, October 28, 1971, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/beach-boys-a-california-saga-244579/>.

<sup>141</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 46-79.

<sup>142</sup> The Beach Boys, *Shut Down Volume 2*; The Beach Boys, *All Summer Long*; The Beach Boys, *The Beach Boys’ Christmas Album*, Capitol Records ST 2164, rel. November 9, 1964, vinyl record; The Beach Boys, *Beach Boys Concert*.

counting the four top ten singles the band released during this period.<sup>143</sup> As 1965 began, the band would enter a new period in its history as it struggled to maintain the momentum it had built in 1964. Allocating their time between touring, headed by Mike and Carl, and studio production, led by Brian, the Beach Boys ushered in a new era of their history. This productive arrangement would come to define the band’s commercial and creative zenith, lasting from the beginning of 1965 up until Brian’s gradual scrapping of the Beach Boys’ highly anticipated *SMiLE* album in the May of 1967.<sup>144</sup>

In this chapter, I interrogate the creative and commercial issues that afflicted the Beach Boys during this period, ending with the band’s release of their *Smiley Smile* LP in September 1967. I argue that while the fundamental creative and commercial aims of the Beach Boys’ studio and touring work may have conflicted at times, they remained mutually dependent factors in the band’s success. That Brian was the leader of the band’s creative vision does not erase the musical contributions of his collaborators. The Beach Boys’ history has been heavily distorted by the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth, a concept I will interrogate throughout this chapter. In promoting their *Pet Sounds* album and *SMiLE* project in 1966 and 1967, the Beach Boys launched a publicity campaign lauding Brian’s compositional mastery in the studio. While it built considerable popular momentum for the band’s new creative direction, this interpretation of the band’s labor discounted the contributions of all of its members to its success. The myth, fed by critics and fans, flourished following the collapse of *SMiLE*. This was part of a greater cultural trend that emerged in the wake of the Beatles and Bob Dylan that sought to justify rock music’s artistic qualities and popularity.<sup>145</sup> The narrative also enabled fans to overlook the signs

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<sup>143</sup> “Gold and Platinum...” *Bellagio 10452*, accessed April 21, 2021, <http://www.bellagio10452.com/Riaa.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 187-188.

<sup>145</sup> Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 232-237.

of Brian’s mental illness and instability by absolving him from responsibility in the destruction of *SMiLE*. Drawing upon the discursive imagining of “rock as art,” the myth distorts the band’s narrative by treating creativity and commercialism as mutually exclusive aspects of the record-making process.<sup>146</sup> It overshadows the consumerist clout of the band’s earlier releases and neglects the commercial qualities of *Pet Sounds* and the scrapped *SMiLE*. Brian was a genius for his ability to churn out hits, a role defined by his ability to wed musical creativity to consumerist appeal. However, this more accurate conception of Brian’s genius is dismissed in favor of a flawed narrative that fails to understand the Beach Boys for what they really were: a musical group of immense popular appeal that divided its labor and took an artistic turn for the sake of *maintaining* that appeal. Most of them, other than Mike, saw no fundamental conflict of commerce and art. Examining this 1965-1967 period of the Beach Boys’ career teaches us a crucial lesson of its countercultural *zeitgeist*: the music that served as its soundtrack was innately tied to sales-driven commercialism, in spite of its penchant for creativity and individualism.

The literature on the Beach Boys at this time is complicated by the “genius” contentions that this chapter dispels. Originating out of the Beach Boys’ very own 1966-1967 publicity campaign, following upon the collapse of *SMiLE* the idea that Brian was a genius spread, cultivated by rock critics, fans, and historians. Music journalist Jules Siegel, in an influential October 1967 *Cheetah* magazine article, “Goodbye Surfing, Hello God,” continued this narrative where the band’s advertising push left off. He centered his profile of the band on Brian and defined him thus: “Brian Wilson was not merely a Genius—which is to say a steady commercial success—but rather, like Bob Dylan and John Lennon, a GENIUS—which is to say a steady

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<sup>146</sup> See Keir Knightly, “Summer of ‘64” for a discussion of this misconception that considers it as a conceptional question of “rock versus pop” and “Brian versus Mike.”

commercial success and hip besides.”<sup>147</sup> Primary articles published from 1966 to 1967 with headlines ranging from “Brian, Pop Genius!” to “Brian — Loved or Loathed Genius” helped inspire the myth, but ultimately, retrospective takes on the band’s tenure did the most to distort its history.<sup>148</sup> David Leaf’s 1978 *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*, for instance, fully committed to the myth’s distortions, contending that the band’s success hinged solely on Brian and that his collapse was the fault of pressures put on him by the rest of the band.<sup>149</sup> Journalist Billy Altman, reviewing Brian’s self-titled 1988 solo album, *Brian Wilson*, for the music magazine *Spin* went so far as to liken the man to Greek myth: “here was a writer, arranger, and producer who grew beyond himself too quickly... that in retrospect, who could not understand and accept his fall from the heavens? Brian Wilson is rock ‘n’ roll’s Icarus.”<sup>150</sup> These narratives began as a means to market the band, but became entangled in the greater mid-sixties intellectual discourse of “rock as art” – a trend the Beach Boys would both shape and be shaped by.

Recent histories also explicitly center Brian in the band’s historical narrative, paying mere lip service to the direct contributions of the rest of the band.<sup>151</sup> Despite Jules Siegel’s union of talent and commercial instinct in defining genius, subsequent texts underplayed the importance of consumerism to the development of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*. They also understate

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<sup>147</sup> Jules Siegel, “Goodbye Surfing, Hello God! The Religious Conversion of Brian Wilson,” *Cheetah*, October 1967, <https://magazine.atavist.com/goodbye-surfing-hello-god>.

<sup>148</sup> Alan Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets?,” *Melody Maker*, November 12, 1966, <https://keepinthesummeralive.tumblr.com/image/95112119825>,” Tracy Thomas, “Beach Boy a Day: Brian — Loved or Loathed Genius,” *New Musical Express*, January 28, 1967, <https://www.rockedbackpages.com/Library/Article/beach-boy-a-day-brian--loved-or-loathed-genius>.

<sup>149</sup> Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*. Leaf continued to promote this idea for decades, serving as Brian’s documentarian and gaining acceptance into the Wilsons’ inner circle, where he helped encourage the return to *SMiLE* in 2004 and beyond.

<sup>150</sup> Billy Altman, “Brian Wilson,” *Spin*, October 1988, [https://books.google.com/books?id=ozV\\_Wa\\_c470C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=ozV_Wa_c470C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>151</sup> Carlin’s *Catch A Wave* may be somewhat excused for being written explicitly as a Brian Wilson biography alongside Lambert, *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*. Curnutt, *Brian Wilson* thoroughly dissects the “Brian Wilson is a genius myth” but by virtue of its subject matter does not substantially address the rest of the band. See also Lambert, ed., *Good Vibrations*, which overtly emphasizes Brian despite the band also being its purported focus. Jim Fusilli, *Pet Sounds* (New York: Continuum, 2005) faces similar issues.



the synergetic roles played not only by the rest of the band, but also by those of Brian’s collaborators: Tony Asher, Van Dyke Parks, and the Los Angeles studio musicians known as the “Wrecking Crew.” I seek to decenter Brian from the history of the band while still recognizing his vital creative and musical leadership. In writing this chapter, I work towards a more nuanced understanding of the Beach Boys that lays bare music journalism’s distortive tendency to privilege the brilliance of individuals over the collectives and institutions that produce and distribute culture. While retrospect may privilege frameworks of myth and memory, it also hones the historian’s ability to untangle complex truths and conflicting narratives of past events.

### **Historical Background: The Beach Boys Break Up**

By the December of 1964, when Brian suffered his episode on the flight, the Beach Boys had thoroughly exhausted themselves. Over the course of the year, according to Beach Boys “diarist” Keith Badman, they had played ninety-eight live shows, made at least fifteen television and radio appearances, and had recorded through thirty studio sessions, the last of which would result in their first 1965 album, *The Beach Boys Today*.<sup>152</sup> While such numbers were not especially high for a mid-sixties act, it must be noted that traveling across three continents fatigued the Beach Boys. Leading the band, composing their music, and performing live, Brian cracked under the pressure, forever changing the band’s relationships and working models. Together, as brothers and friends, the Beach Boys decided in January 1965 that Brian would stop touring and confine himself to the studio, where he would compose the band’s new hit singles

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<sup>152</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 46-79; The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*, Capitol Records T 2354, July 5, 1965, liner notes. It should be noted that the listed engagements only represent what Badman has recorded; the Beach Boys likely made many more appearances.

and albums. Mike, Carl, Dennis, and Al would continue touring as the band always had.<sup>153</sup> The show had to go on.

As put by Brian in 1965, “I told them I foresee a beautiful future for the Beach Boys group but the only way we could achieve it was if they did their job and I did mine. They would have to get a replacement for me... I didn’t say ‘they.’ I said ‘we’ because it isn’t they and me, it’s ‘us.’”<sup>154</sup> The rest of the band concurred. “I wasn’t angry... I understood – we all did, I think,” Mike recounts. “We continued touring without him with the expectation that he would continue writing music. The Beach Boys were effectively two entities: one group, led by Brian, created and performed the music; the other group, led by me, performed and promoted it on the road.”<sup>155</sup> Carl, ever the professional, was the one to calm the rest of the band down and affirm his belief in their decision.<sup>156</sup> To replace Brian on tour, the band picked up Glen Campbell, whom they knew as part of the Wrecking Crew, and they soldiered on. Following Glen’s brief stint in the band, he would be more permanently replaced by songwriter and record producer Bruce Johnston, who would become a key contributor to the group’s output.

This new division of labor was a response to the band’s intense production and touring schedule. Brian had staged a job action, and the Beach Boys collectively decided to divide their musical efforts in order to keep up with the runaway train that their success had become. The more their records sold, the harder Capitol Records pressured the band to continue generating product and profit.<sup>157</sup> The band’s split best allowed them to keep up with this ravenous demand

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<sup>153</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 107.

<sup>154</sup> Nolan, “The Beach Boys: A California Saga.” Nolan’s article does not explicitly note the year of this quote. However, given that it was produced from the notes of journalist Earl Leaf, who compiled it as part of his record of the band’s 1964 tour in Europe, it is highly likely that Brian said this in early 1965.

<sup>155</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 108.

<sup>156</sup> Nolan, “The Beach Boys: A California Saga.”

<sup>157</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 51-53; Curnutt, “Brian Comes Alive,” 11.

for new material. Touring was essential to the success of any musical act’s livelihood, as it preserved the momentum of old hits, allowed for the promotion of new ones, and was highly profitable. The fact that most touring revenues went straight to the band only heightened its importance. Carl and Mike, leading the band’s touring act, backed by Dennis, Al, and Bruce, took on this responsibility. They gave Brian the creative breathing room he needed to compose and record the band’s next big records and singles.

This creative breathing room was sorely needed, as what appealed in the American rock market changed drastically with the advent of the British Invasion in 1964 and 1965. In these years, musical and aesthetic tastes began to change within the rock ‘n’ roll market as the genre transformed into “rock.” As put by music critic Robert Christgau, “the simplest way to put it is ‘rock’ is rock & roll made conscious of itself as an art form. That’s a very, very important development that occurs simultaneously with the Beatles, with Dylan and the Stones in the picture... Rock & roll has the idea of fun built into it; rock does not.”<sup>158</sup> Artists and critics alike embraced this transition as a deliberate reaction against all those who had dismissed rock ‘n’ roll as facile and cheap in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>159</sup> The Beach Boys were crucial pioneers in this transition, as Brian’s mid-sixties studio productions, especially *Pet Sounds*, embodied this new angle of “rock as art.” However, this need to adhere to artistic demand placed new pressures on the group. The Beach Boys had to work to redefine themselves and their brand along these creative lines and put in the productive effort needed to both tour and produce new material.

For a time, this arrangement succeeded beyond all expectations, constituting the Beach Boys’ commercial and creative zenith. Abandoning their old surf and hot rod themes in keeping

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<sup>158</sup> Michelangelo Matos, “Interview: Music Journalist Robert Christgau,” *Red Bull Music Academy*, March 24, 2015, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/03/robert-christgau-interview>.

<sup>159</sup> Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 234-237.

with rock’s artistic turn, the band crafted records that leaned further into the style of the Wall of Sound and dealt with more complex emotional themes than their previous works. *The Beach Boys Today*, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*, *Beach Boys’ Party*, and *Pet Sounds* were all composed, recorded, promoted, toured, and sold in the short span of two years. Competing against the Beatles, the Beach Boys released many of their greatest works to commercial and critical acclaim. “Help Me Rhonda,” “California Girls,” “Barbara Ann,” “Sloop John B,” “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” “God Only Knows,” “Good Vibrations:” this musical output is what led the Beach Boys to best the Liverpoolian Fab Four as “Best Vocal Group” in a reader’s poll published by the British *New Musical Express* (NME) magazine at the end of 1966.<sup>160</sup> Brian netted fourth in its “World Music Personality” poll, having received the confidence of 3,028 of NME’s readers, edged out by John Lennon by 487 votes and ahead of Bob Dylan by 1,037.<sup>161</sup> In December 1966, the Beach Boys confidently stood at the top of the rock market.

Yet in 1967, the Beach Boys realized that they were victims of their own success. *Pet Sounds*, released the year prior, was a labor of love on the band’s part, a work that represented the most ambitious of Brian’s studio visions. It performed well critically and commercially, but not as well as the band’s earlier successes. For the Beach Boys, an album that hit number ten on the *Billboard* Hot 100 was a failure. Eager to recoup on their losses, the Beach Boys released “Good Vibrations” as a single on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1966 and dove into a new album project, *SMiLE*. It was to be a patchwork album in the most literal sense. Like “Good Vibrations,” the architecture of its songs represented a departure: the tunes were recorded in short segments to be arranged into a whole like a jigsaw puzzle. Newly-hired publicist Derek Taylor (formerly with

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<sup>160</sup> “NME Poll Sensation: The Beach Boys Beat Beatles,” *New Musical Express*, December 3, 1966. All of the hits mentioned here, sans “God Only Knows,” which peaked at thirty-nine, all charted within the *Billboard* top ten. “Help Me Rhonda” and “Good Vibrations” were the band’s second and third number one hits, respectively.

<sup>161</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 105-106.

the Beatles) vociferously hyped up the album, portraying Brian as a musical “genius” in order to garner enthusiasm for the new release.

This put a great deal of pressure on the band. Brian’s esoteric plans for the album and his worsening mental illness led to clashes with the rest of the Beach Boys, who began to lose faith in *SMiLE* as Brian subjected them to endless, unproductive recording sessions. They were also themselves insulted that their contributions to the band had been ignored in Derek Taylor and Capitol Records’ new publicity campaign. One article published in the British music magazine *Melody Maker* went so far as to relegate them to the role of “Brian’s puppets,” complete with a caricature of the band that imagined them as feckless marionettes.<sup>162</sup> This trend put too much pressure on the group, and the *SMiLE* project gradually disintegrated before a full halt in May 1967, when Brian scrapped the project despite the group’s overall compliance with his creative vision.<sup>163</sup> Failing to keep up with the productive demands of their record label, the band fell into disarray, no doubt compounded by the Beatles’ release of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in June 1967. The Beach Boys’ carefully cultivated “hip” credentials developed by their new artistic turn were badly damaged after they cancelled their headlining performance at the Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967. The band’s reasoning remains uncertain, but it is likely that having failed to release *SMiLE*, the Beach Boys were simply left without experimental music to perform that they presumed would have appealed to the venue’s countercultural crowd.<sup>164</sup> The September 1967 release of *Smiley Smile* proved a second-rate replacement for fans hyped up on promises of *SMiLE*.<sup>165</sup> To put it as Carl did, it was “a bunt instead of a grand slam.”<sup>166</sup> As

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<sup>162</sup> Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets.”

<sup>163</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 187-188.

<sup>164</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 122-123, 154.

<sup>165</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 121-125. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and John Leland, *Hip: The History*

Brian’s mental health worsened, the rest of the band was overshadowed by the record-buying public’s expectations of unreachable, unreleased music genius.<sup>167</sup> Despite their own musical talents, Mike, Carl, Al, Dennis, and Bruce would from then on be dogged by Brian’s shadow, a legacy that would prevent them from ever again reaching the band’s mid-sixties success.

### A “Two Beach Boys Theory?” The Beach Boys on Tour

To compete with the Beatles and remain at the top of the charts, Brian found that he had to stop touring almost entirely in order to keep up with the creative innovations that fueled the mid-sixties’ emerging brand of rock consumerism. However, his studio sessions did not pay for themselves. The Beach Boys’ touring act, supported by the rest of the band, was necessary to maintain its commercial and cultural relevance. This is a fact that largely goes unaddressed in the broader literature, which focuses upon Brian’s emerging creative visions at the expense of the band’s wildly successful touring act.

Despite the Beach Boys’ division of labor during this period, it is folly to support what Kirk Curnutt describes as the “two Beach Boys theory,” the notion that the band was simplistically separated between Brian’s creativity and the rest of the band’s commercial interests.<sup>168</sup> In dividing up their responsibilities, the Beach Boys sought to maintain the cultural weight they held, which would in turn sustain their bottom line. Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and later

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(New York: HarperCollins, 2004) for detailed discussions on the intersections between commercialism and the counterculture of the 1960s.

<sup>166</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 200.

<sup>167</sup> Praises of Brian made at the expense of the band had begun as early as 1966 due to the implications of Derek Taylor’s publicity campaign (see Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets”), but the band’s post-1967 history (Chapter 3) speaks most to this trend. The most notable examples of it include the band’s 1969 contract with Warner/Reprise stipulating that Brian had to contribute songs to each new LP released under the label and Brian’s short return as the band’s leader in the studio for 1977’s *The Beach Boys Love You*.

<sup>168</sup> Curnutt, *Brian Wilson*, 1.

Bruce were likely more concerned with their financials than Brian was, as Brian had a greater income than the other Beach Boys from his composing and production royalties. However, Brian was not devoid of commercial interests; like so many others in the music business, he measured his creative success by how well the Beach Boys’ records charted.<sup>169</sup> When he decided to record *Pet Sounds*, inspired by the December 1965 release of the Beatles’ *Rubber Soul*, he declared to his wife Marilyn that the upcoming LP would be “the greatest rock album ever made.”<sup>170</sup> Likewise, he invested his creative stock just as wholeheartedly into *SMiLE* in late 1966, imagining it to be “a teenage symphony to God,” such was the ambition of the project.<sup>171</sup> Charts and sales would legitimize Brian’s artistic visions. If what the Beach Boys created sold, he reasoned, it was good. In this respect, Brian’s aims were shared by Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and Bruce. The wisdom of pop music as a whole equated commercial success with artistic success, and in this sense every Beach Boy contributed to the band’s ascendancy. Just as touring and studio production went hand in hand, art and commercialism were inherently intertwined.

The Beach Boys’ 1964 success carried into 1965 and showed no sign of stopping. A *Cash Box* article published in May 1965 announced that the band, having at this point only existed for less than three years, had sold over ten million records. The band’s latest LP, *The Beach Boys Today*, alongside the single “Help Me Rhonda,” were both rising in the charts.<sup>172</sup> The album, divided into an A-side of densely orchestrated danceable rockers and a B-side of introspective ballads, peaked at a respectable four on the *Billboard* Hot 100. “Help Me Rhonda” became the group’s second number one hit. The article goes on to emphasize the strength of the band’s live

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<sup>169</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 78 recounts an episode in which *Pet Sounds* collaborator Tony Asher was dogged by calls from the Beach Boys’ record label, lawyers, and agents, all of whom were trying to reach Brian. One executive is said to have cried, “we’re just trying to send him some money!”

<sup>170</sup> Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*, 76.

<sup>171</sup> Siegel, “Goodbye Surfing, Hello God.”

<sup>172</sup> “Beach Boys’ Reach 10 Million Disk Sales,” *Cash Box*, May 8, 1965, [https://archive.org/details/cashbox26unse\\_33/page/6/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/cashbox26unse_33/page/6/mode/2up).

performances, their success mutual to the Beach Boys’ recorded output: “close to a million dollars was earned last year in the less than 80 concerts performed but the projected figure will go even higher this year since their average gross is now better than \$15,000 a concert.”<sup>173</sup> The band’s fortunes would only improve from there.

Brian’s departure from touring did not dramatically impact the band’s onstage sound. Recalling his substitution for Brian, Glen Campbell recalls, “I had been doing their sessions, so I could easily fill in. The only problem was I didn’t know the words to the songs. They’d be singing [‘The Little Old Lady from Pasadena’] and I would sing something else... But the screams were so loud from the girls, you’d walk on-stage and you couldn’t hear a thing anyway.”<sup>174</sup> Bruce Johnston originally joined the band in April 1965 to cover Brian’s falsetto, then became a full member in May. “[The Beach Boys] wanted someone yesterday,” he recounts. “I said, ‘look Mike, I can’t find anyone, so I’ll come. I don’t play bass, I don’t play piano, but I suppose I could sing all the high parts if you show me what to do.’”<sup>175</sup> From then on, he became a permanent member of the touring band. Mike Love and Carl Wilson doubled down on their own leadership roles in Brian’s absence. As put by Crowley, “together, Carl and Mike provided the team that kept the Beach Boys popular, then solvent, with Carl handling the [touring] musical direction and Mike connecting with the audiences.”<sup>176</sup>

Mike, the Beach Boys’ most natural performer, cultivated a lively, fun stage presence for the band. Unlike Brian, he loved being a live entertainer, keeping old fans loyal to the Beach Boys brand and inviting new ones into the fold. As he recalled in 2016, “for me, [touring] was never a hardship. I much preferred being onstage over being in a studio, which I thought was

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<sup>173</sup> “Beach Boys’ Reach 10 Million Disk Sales.”

<sup>174</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 79.

<sup>175</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 89.

<sup>176</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 68.



cramped and claustrophobic. I also liked being the front man and seeing the response of the audience. That part of the job never gets old. How could it?”<sup>177</sup> Band fanzine *The Beach Boys Scene* in August 1966 noted that Mike, “within the vast embrace of his personal magnetism, whips [the band] into potent ferment on stage.”<sup>178</sup> Throughout the band’s career, however, Mike did much more than simply perform. In his 2016 memoir, he recounts his involvement with the touring band’s financial operations: “I became more interested in touring strategy. It was something that fascinated me. How do we maximize our time on the road? What’s the best itinerary to reach the most fans in the fewest number of days?”<sup>179</sup> Mike was commercially-minded, as the “two Beach Boys theory” emphasizes, but such an interest was far from mutually exclusive from the band’s creative direction.

Carl sustained the musical professionalism of the band. As the band’s foremost instrumentalist, in Brian’s absence he ensured the band could offer their increasingly complex music on stage at the highest quality. From the outset he had provided the band with the surf rock sound that first marked them musically as “Beach Boys.” Now, in this era of the band’s history, he faithfully reproduced the band’s new, complex releases on stage. Chris Farmer, a musician who toured with the Beach Boys in the eighties and nineties recalled that “Carl would start a song, as he always did – he was the one who counted them off – and he would keep that beat and pocket right where he wanted it. All eyes were on Carl Wilson because you knew he was listening to everybody.”<sup>180</sup> Carl usually played lead guitar, occasionally soloing, and the guitar driven rhythm of the band’s hits was his trademark. Farmer’s recollection holds true for the band’s stage work in the mid-sixties as well. In *The Beach Boys’ Lost Concert*, filmed at a

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<sup>177</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 99.

<sup>178</sup> “The Beach Boys,” *The Beach Boys Scene*, August 1966.

<sup>179</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 97.

<sup>180</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 146.

show on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1964, Carl can be seen counting off songs instead of Brian, the band’s leader, or Dennis, its drummer (drummers typically set the rhythm for songs). Visibly signaling the start to “Long Tall Texan” for Dennis and masterfully ripping the Chuck Berry-style riff that opens “Fun, Fun, Fun,” he betrays a level of confidence shocking for someone so young.<sup>181</sup> As the band’s most junior member, he was only eighteen at this time, and scarcely a year older in 1965, when he and Mike took full leadership of the band’s touring act. Carl was “the Rock of Gibraltar of the group,” in Brian’s words. “He would say, ‘come on guys, let’s quit clowning around and get to work.’”<sup>182</sup> Given his own propensity to stay out of the spotlight, Carl’s importance to the band’s touring act is often overlooked. He was both its musical director and its foremost instrumentalist, keeping the touring band’s sound consistent with the growing demands of Brian’s musical experimentation.<sup>183</sup>

Touring in support of new material saw the band translate studio-level professionalism into live settings. The Beach Boys’ set lists seamlessly blended their new hits into their pre-1965 canon. The recently released live album *Graduation Day 1966*, taken from two late October performances at the University of Michigan, demonstrates this. Its tracks include numbers from *Today*, *Summer Days*, *Pet Sounds*, and *SMiLE* (still yet to be cancelled) paired with their surf rock hits and covers, extending back to the band’s first inspiration, the Four Freshmen.<sup>184</sup> These shows would represent the Beach Boys’ first ever live performances of “Good Vibrations,” a song that was originally recorded in piecemeal sections by experienced studio musicians. “Carl, how ‘bout it?” Mike remarked on stage. “We’re going to do our newest record. We’ve done

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<sup>181</sup> The Beach Boys, *The Beach Boys: The Lost Concert*, performed March 14, 1964 (Los Angeles: Image Entertainment, 1999), DVD, 22 minutes.

<sup>182</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 78.

<sup>183</sup> Tom Smucker, *Why the Beach Boys Matter* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 114-116.

<sup>184</sup> The Beach Boys, *Graduation Day 1966*, Capitol Records, rel. December 9, 2016, accessed November 23, 2020, Spotify.

this... one time before in front of people. It’s a bit hard on the nerves.” Despite the performance’s sparse instrumentation, the band’s harmonies rang true, and they were awarded with thunderous applause by the song’s end.<sup>185</sup> The fact that the touring band was able to recreate Brian’s studio visions to such an effect stands as evidence of their professionalism and musical talent.

While Brian did make occasional appearances on stage during this period, it was still Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and Bruce who carried the shows. Most historical narratives imagine Brian’s relationship with his bandmates to have greatly worsened from 1965-1967 on account of this touring and studio divide, which they often misconceive as a commercial versus creative divide.<sup>186</sup> However, upon watching Brian’s few live showings in this period he is shown to generally be at ease with the rest of the band. One 1965 performance of “Help Me Rhonda,” for instance, begins with some jovial onstage chatter between Al and Brian, and a television performance of “California Girls” for NBC’s *Jack Benny Hour* the same year featured his enthusiastic participation in a comedic skit with the rest of the band.<sup>187</sup> Brian can also be heard on the *Graduation Day 1966* live album, though for most of its runtime he sat on the sidelines, supervising the band’s performances of “Good Vibrations.” “Hey Brian, stick your head out at least,” said Mike. “Come on, Brian, Brian!” another Beach Boy exclaimed, cheering him on. “He writes all these rotten songs, you know?” Mike jested as another band member chimed in, “and produces and arranges them!” Applauded on by the audience, Brian is cajoled into performing

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<sup>185</sup> The Beach Boys, “Good Vibrations – Live at the University of Michigan/1966/Show 1,” *Graduation Day 1966*.

<sup>186</sup> See Keir Kneightly, “Summer of ‘64” for a discussion of this misconception that considers it as a theoretical question of “rock versus pop” and “Brian versus Mike.”

<sup>187</sup> John1948OnceC2, “The Beach Boys - Help Me Rhonda,” YouTube Video, uploaded December 24, 2010, accessed November 24, 2020, [https://youtu.be/4Te\\_ICF69Aw](https://youtu.be/4Te_ICF69Aw); Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 102; Daniel Allen, “The Beach Boys- California Girls (1965),” YouTube Video, uploaded July 31, 2013, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://youtu.be/7oRb9-mypxg>.

“Johnny B. Goode” with the rest of the band to a standing ovation.<sup>188</sup> That such displays of comradery took place demonstrates that the Beach Boys’ interpersonal relationships remained cordial despite the strains of show business. They would only sour following the demise of *SMiLE* in 1967, a decision accepted at Brian’s request.

As Brian struggled to compose and record new product, the rest of the Beach Boys found that touring had its own travails. From 1965 to 1967, the band’s touring act was constantly on the move, only taking short breaks to catch their breath or record new material. Traveling across the US, Europe, and Japan, the touring Beach Boys performed 256 live shows from the start of 1965 to the September of 1967.<sup>189</sup> While a fewer number of shows than 1964, the fatigue of traveling across continents cannot be discounted, and as Brian was a taskmaster in the studio, brief pauses from the road offered little rest. This palpable exhaustion manifested in the band’s liner notes for their 1965 *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* album. “[The band] had an unbelievable hassle trying to finish the songs, especially after a three-week tour,” admitted Brian.<sup>190</sup> Mike bemoaned his fatigue: “like with every tour we do we meet more kids, go more places, have more parties, and do more things, and lose more sleep than anybody could call normal.” He continued:

We’ve been to Canada, Europe, Australia and Hawaii (my favorite place) as well as almost the entire United States. We’ve played to hundreds of thousands of people and loved it. There’s only one complaint I have – there’s never enough time in any one city to really enjoy it – or maybe worse, it’s very seldom we ever have time to talk with and be with someone you know you would like.<sup>191</sup>

Al’s liner notes are so alarming that they are worth quoting in full:

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<sup>188</sup> The Beach Boys, “Johnny B. Goode – Live at the University of Michigan/1966/Show 2,” *Graduation Day 1966*; Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 153.

<sup>189</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 80-200.

<sup>190</sup> The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*.

<sup>191</sup> The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*.

You know, recording sessions are a lot of fun. A lot of fun, that is, unless you’ve just come in off the road from a three week tour of ten states into the arms of our leader Brian. He sets up camp for us in Studio B and we have at it. Now I’m not saying it’s hard work or anything, but it is... Well, my muscles don’t feel too sore at the end of the day but if you look close at any one of the guys you’ll see the strain of our work. Don’t expect to see an immaculate Carl or Dennis but look for someone who seems to need a first-aid kit.<sup>192</sup>

Carl, for his part, wasted no space on himself but merely excused his older brother’s lack of appearances: “my brother Brian hasn’t been on all the trips because he’s been under terrific pressure at times to write, arrange and organize all the songs for our albums and singles, about 60 a year.”<sup>193</sup> Carl was Brian’s enabler and facilitator even in print. To the touring band’s credit, it too was crucial to supporting the sound and product of Brian’s studio efforts, a fact that remains largely unrecognized in the histories and memories of the band.

### **Crafting Pocket Symphonies: The Beach Boys in the Studio**

As praiseworthy as Brian’s studio productions during this period were, most accounts of the band neglect the importance of the other Beach Boys and Brian’s collaborators to the creation of their new lucrative, artistic sound. As the Beach Boys’ touring act traveled across the globe, it still took breaks to contribute to the vinyl records pressed from the band’s studio recordings. All six Beach Boys collectively built their new artistic direction, playing alongside session musicians hired by Brian and recreating their characteristic vocal blends. Brian’s collaborators during this period, the Wrecking Crew, *Pet Sounds* co-lyricist Tony Asher, and

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<sup>192</sup> The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*.

<sup>193</sup> The Beach Boys, *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*.

*SMiLE* co-collaborator Van Dyke Parks, also played important roles in refining Brian’s artistic aims into tangible product.<sup>194</sup>

Perhaps the best person to explain the rest of the band’s importance in the recording studio is Brian himself. In 1965, he details the band’s dynamic in the studio:

When I sit down at the piano to play a new song, the others can visualize the whole arrangement right away. We take the melody apart and work it out phrase by phrase. If they don’t like my approach, they suggest another. If Carl doesn’t dig my idea, I’ll change it immediately because Carl has exquisite musical taste. I trust it completely.<sup>195</sup>

While Brian’s creative decisions tended to win out against the rest of the band’s suggestions, the fact that such discussions even took place proves that the Beach Boys were not the “Brian Wilson Band” but a collective made up of three brothers, a cousin, and two friends. Jim Lockhart, one of the band’s sound engineers, details the mutual trust that the Beach Boys had for one another, and how that dynamic played out in recording: “Carl was receptive, but he was learning, he was learning but Brian already had it. Dennis was cooperative, he played what Brian requested him to play, sang what Brian requested him to sing – his part. So did Mike and Alan.”<sup>196</sup> He continues, emphasizing that the group’s musical decisions were made *as a band*. Brian was certainly the most dominant among them in determining the final releases of the music, but the band’s sound was nevertheless a collaborative effort:

[Brian] was producer, writer, arranger at the time. He told the group how things should be. Very little discussion. Sometimes there was discussion about why he wanted to do this, that, or the other, and sometimes they would change to what they wanted rather than what they wanted, but most of the time they came back to what he wanted because when

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<sup>194</sup> Alison Beard, “Life’s Work: An Interview with Brian Wilson,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/12/brian-wilson?fbclid=IwAR0XkI4xIwnEBXwCsz5zqkwIOUAVQLtquT02iAvBdzJ8VGSgtO-02VmgLy4#>.

<sup>195</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 22.

<sup>196</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 52.

they heard their way and his way, why it made just as much difference as light and darkness.<sup>197</sup>

It is easy to consider such recollections and dismiss the rest of the group’s role in the record-making process. However, though Brian would become increasingly dominant in the studio, especially during the recordings of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*, he was still a member of a collective effort. The Beach Boys’ musical output was determined by them *as a group*. It bears remembering that none of the many other recordings Brian produced, including the singles by girl group the Honeyes and his own 1966 single, “Caroline, No,” never came close to the popularity of the Beach Boys’ releases.<sup>198</sup> In fact, this latter endeavor, anticipated as a great hit and promoted enthusiastically by the rest of the band, peaked at a disappointing thirty-two on the *Billboard* charts.<sup>199</sup> Brian needed his band just as much as they needed him.

When Brian did need the band, they were there for him. When they contested his decisions, it was out of concern for the group as a whole, as they had ample evidence that their concert audiences expressed fundamentally different tastes than the countercultural aficionados Brian sought to appeal to with *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*. Even then, Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and Bruce contributed their voices and instruments to Brian’s compositions, and in Mike’s case, co-wrote a few of them. Brian’s influence is most noticeable when considering the Beach Boys’ albums, but the band’s singles indicate Mike’s importance to their history. Out of the twenty-two singles released by the band between 1965 and the release of *Smiley Smile* in 1967, Mike co-wrote and sang eight of them, the most notable the psychedelic “Good Vibrations,” which he wrote alone. Carl’s instrumentation, too, was key to completing the band’s visions. Responding

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<sup>197</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 53.

<sup>198</sup> Len Comaratta, “Dusting ‘Em Off: The Honeyes – The ‘60s Singles,” *Consequence of Sound*, November 5, 2011, <https://consequenceofsound.net/2011/11/dusting-em-off-the-honeyes-the-60s-singles/>.

<sup>199</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 121.

to the pointed question, “Are the five touring Beach Boys merely sound puppets of recording genius Brian Wilson?” in 1966, he replied:

No, we are not just Brian’s puppets. Brian plays the major creative role in the production of our music, but everyone in the group contributes something to the finished product. It’s not like an orchestra translating the wishes of the conductor. We all have a part to play in the production of the records.<sup>200</sup>

He reaffirms the importance of the weight the entire band pulls in the studio:

We work hard to produce the end product of a high standard. It takes us a long time. If other people can do it in a short time, that’s fine. But a lot of people aren’t doing this. They aren’t prepared to go into a studio and work. And it shows. You can tell from their albums which artists are really working on their records.<sup>201</sup>

Carl speaks with the authority of Brian’s musical deputy in the studio, as the professionalism he demonstrated live translated well to the rigors of recording.<sup>202</sup> Thus, assertions such as David Leaf’s that hold that “[Brian] wrote the hits and made the records, and the group sang them and toured and were rich... all thanks to Brian Wilson” misconstrue the spirit of the band’s collaboration.<sup>203</sup>

Even *Pet Sounds* and the failed *SMiLE* – those works critics have considered as the most influenced by Brian – reveal a collective contribution throughout. Much like Duke Ellington, who composed for his orchestra, Brian really only could work in the context of the Beach Boys. Brian arranged and produced with their musicianship in mind, as he told *Melody Maker* in 1966: “I write and think in terms of what the Beach Boys can do. Not what they would find easy to do, but what I know they are capable of doing which isn’t always the same thing.”<sup>204</sup> Unfortunately

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<sup>200</sup> Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets.”

<sup>201</sup> Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets.”

<sup>202</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 88-89, 103-109.

<sup>203</sup> Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*, 106.

<sup>204</sup> Don Traynor, “Brian, Pop Genius!”, *Melody Maker*, May 21, 1966.



for the group, this sense of collaboration was not recognized by the emerging myth of Brian’s “genius” promoted by their publicity campaign. In January 1967, Tracy Thomas of the *New Musical Express* questioned if Brian is a “loathed or loved genius,” and concluded:

Singlehandedly, for all practical purposes, [Brian] has made the Beach Boys the top group in the world. ‘Singlehanded’ because Brian takes each song from the first inspiration through to the record sleeve, with only occasional advice and certainly complete co-operation from the others, but without substantial collaboration.<sup>205</sup>

Thomas’ piece framed Brian as the band’s sole benefactor, failing to mention the importance of the band’s touring to the upkeep of its creative momentum. Dismissing the rest of the band’s studio work as mere “occasional advice” and “complete co-operation,” she neglected the Beach Boys’ collaborative spirit in favor of propping up a falsehood originally intended to drive up record sales.

Such assertions undermined the real work the Beach Boys *did* contribute to the recording process. Though much of this collaborative process took place in the studio and was not fully documented, the band’s vocal and instrumental contributions can be heard on their records. Mike, Carl, Dennis, Al, and Bruce crucially provided Brian’s compositions with vocals, the defining characteristic of the Beach Boys’ sound. If *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE* truly were the solo efforts they are often imagined to be, it would be difficult to understand why Brian gave Carl the lead on “God Only Knows” and Mike the prominent chorus on “Good Vibrations.” Contrary to popular belief, the rest of the band also contributed their instrumentation to the new albums, playing alongside the studio musicians of Wrecking Crew – they were not replaced by them. Kent Crowley has pointed out that the documentation of the band’s studio sessions was often incomplete, noting the presence of unionized session players while failing the record the

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<sup>205</sup> Thomas, “Beach Boy a Day: Brian — Loved or Loathed Genius.”

attendance of the Beach Boys themselves. Carl’s guitar in particular shines through the musically dense tracks of the scrapped *SMiLE*.<sup>206</sup> Though dominant mythological narratives may have written over the Beach Boys’ contributions on paper, one only needs to listen to the vinyl record to recognize how key they all were to their band’s success.

### **The Commerciality of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE***

Histories that laud Brian’s indomitable genius and reduce the rest of the Beach Boys to their leader’s ungrateful puppets fail to pass muster when the sheer effort they exerted towards their records in this period is considered. It is true that the band was skeptical of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*, but such hesitation can be understood when their old hits tended to be the songs best received on tour.<sup>207</sup> As *Pet Sounds* lyricist Tony Asher recounted in 1996, “The group was less than enthusiastic about the material. They, along with many others, were hoping and expecting more of what had been hits for them all along. I don’t think that’s so unreasonable.”<sup>208</sup>

Nevertheless, they accommodated Brian’s creative visions and put the band’s full efforts behind them. Even fifty years following the release of *Pet Sounds* in 1966, Al’s exhaustion with Brian’s recording process was palpable: “there’s another song on there [*Pet Sounds*] that was kind of a toughie. Oh God... ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice...’ Months and months of re-recording.”<sup>209</sup> Whenever Brian called upon his fellow band members to aid him in fulfilling his artistic visions, they complied, in spite of their doubts of the new material.

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<sup>206</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 100-101, 164.

<sup>207</sup> See Charles L. Granata, *Wouldn’t It Be Nice: Brian and the Making of the Beach Boys’ Pet Sounds* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016) and Luis Sanchez, *Smile* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) for the foremost book-length academic treatments of the two projects.

<sup>208</sup> Mike Wheeler, “Tony Asher Interview,” *Cabin Essence: Web Page for Brian Wilson*, April 4, 1996, accessed November 23, 2020, <http://surfermoon.com/interviews/asher.html>.

<sup>209</sup> The Beach Boys, “Brian Wilson & Al Jardine - Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” YouTube video, uploaded June 10, 2016, accessed November 23, 2020, [https://youtu.be/G\\_tWGUBFs4](https://youtu.be/G_tWGUBFs4).

Even after *Pet Sounds*’ chart disappointments, the Beach Boys worked vigorously on *SMiLE*, a project that consumed an overwhelming eighty-five recording sessions of work before its cancellation.<sup>210</sup> Even then, the album was far from completion. Towards its end, the Beach Boys’ relationship with Brian did worsen with his inability to complete the album, but during its recording process they remained professionals. Mike famously was not taken by Brian’s new creative direction, speaking his thoughts on *SMiLE* in the band’s authorized biography: “I never objected to musical progressions... the only thing I ever objected to was lyrics – I think lyrics should be used to communicate... When I heard a lyric that made no sense to me... it didn’t sit right for me. I had a difference of opinion from those who did.”<sup>211</sup> However, despite such objections, the band pushed forward, trusting in their leader’s musical vision. A rehearsal tape included in the archival 2011 box set *The Smile Sessions* features the band working out the album’s intro, “Our Prayer.” “Brian, direct,” says one Beach Boy. The group erupts into crystal clear harmonies, pausing occasionally to clarify notes. When Brian asks Mike to alter his approach, he continues without questioning Brian’s judgement.<sup>212</sup> He sings his part. Even as Brian’s mental health worsened – he subjected his bandmates to recording sessions where they crawled on all fours while making barn animal noises – they persisted in working towards the album.<sup>213</sup> *SMiLE*’s cancellation, when it came down to it, was Brian’s decision.<sup>214</sup> Its failure was far from the fault of his brothers and friends for not supporting his creativity.

The imagined commercialism versus creativity divide that overshadows Beach Boys history is disproven by the productive roles played by *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE* collaborators,

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<sup>210</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 187.

<sup>211</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 61.

<sup>212</sup> The Beach Boys, “Our Prayer – Dialog/2011 Smile Version,” *The Smile Sessions*, Capitol Records T 2580, October 31, 2011, accessed April 20, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>213</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 115.

<sup>214</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 122-123.

specifically picked to assist Brian in producing music that would both impress critics *and* appeal to the record-buying public. Historians and fans alike wax poetic of *Pet Sounds*’ artistic, underground quality while failing to recognize that Tony Asher, Brian’s co-lyricist on the album, was a man who made a living writing advertising jingles.<sup>215</sup> Asher, interviewed in 1996, emphasized how concerned he and Brian were over making a record that would sell: “I may have said at some time or another that I was concerned about the personal nature of ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice.’ If so, I was less concerned with revealing anything about either Brian or myself and perhaps more concerned about the commercial potentials of such a personal song.”<sup>216</sup> Van Dyke Parks, an avant-garde musician and lyricist, was brought onto the *SMiLE* project by Brian to prompt the Beach Boys to take on new creative directions.<sup>217</sup> Parks was not a rock ‘n’ roll artist, but Brian selected him as his collaborator for his talent at crafting abstract lyrics. Though lyrics like “columnated ruins domino” and “over and over the crow cries uncover the cornfield” might have baffled most contemporary listeners had the album been released, they were written with the intent of staying on top of the rock *zeitgeist* of their times.<sup>218</sup> In fact, the former lyric, part of a song satirically titled “Surf’s Up,” featured in a critically acclaimed 1967 CBS documentary, “Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution,” narrated by the classical composer Leonard Bernstein.<sup>219</sup> The film highlighted the “artistry” of rock music as framed through the highbrow values of classical music. The fact that *SMiLE* ultimately fell through and became the stuff of rock legend

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<sup>215</sup> The blurb of Fusilli, *Pet Sounds* memorably describes the album as “Brian Wilson’s pitch-perfect cry of despair.”

<sup>216</sup> Wheeler, “Tony Asher Interview”

<sup>217</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 91-93.

<sup>218</sup> The Beach Boys, “Surf’s Up,” track 12 on *The Smile Sessions*; “The Beach Boys, “Cabin Essence,” track 8 on *The Smile Sessions*.

<sup>219</sup> David Oppenheim, dir., *Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution*, aired April 25, 1967 on CBS, <https://youtu.be/afU76JJcquI>; Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 182.

obscures the fact that for all the album’s experimentation, it was originally envisioned as a massive commercial hit.<sup>220</sup>

It was the consumerist publicity surrounding *SMiLE* that would initially create the “Brian Wilson is a genius” narrative that would come to overshadow the band for the rest of the days. The band’s publicist Derek Taylor did much to promote this myth, originally employing that rhetoric as a marketing gimmick designed to sell the Beach Boys’ records. In one piece, published in 1966 or 1967, he writes:

This is Brian Wilson. He is a Beach Boy. Some say he is more. Some say he is a Beach Boy and a genius. This twenty-three-year-old powerhouse not only sings with the famous group, he writes the words and music then arranges, engineers, and produces the disc... He has often been called “genius,” and it’s a burden.<sup>221</sup>

Taylor’s portrayal overplayed Brian’s centrality to the band, with unforeseen and lasting consequences. The rock press piled on with an abundance of articles written or promoted by Taylor, emphasizing Brian’s “pop genius” or alternatively, diminishing the rest of the Beach Boys for their imagined inferiority to their leader.<sup>222</sup> Even Capitol Records, largely to blame for *Pet Sounds*’ underperformance due to its failure to market the album properly, came around to Taylor’s vision. It accepted cover art for *SMiLE* recommended by Brian and printed over 500,000 album sleeves in anticipation of massive sales.<sup>223</sup> However, when *SMiLE* fell through, the genius myth was taken up by disappointed fans and journalists who came to view Brian as the sole factor in the band’s success. Such sentiments remain tangible today, contested in the Beach Boys’ contemporary careers and in the memories of their audiences. We ought not to

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<sup>220</sup> For *SMiLE* as an unreleased project whose meaning has shifted over the decades, see Larry Starr, “A Listener’s Smile” in *Good Vibrations*, ed. Lambert, 242-262.

<sup>221</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 109.

<sup>222</sup> Trainor, “Brian, Pop Genius;” Walsh, “Brian Wilson’s Puppets.”

<sup>223</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 109.

forget the importance of Brian’s collaborators to his creative visions, nor the parts the rest of the Beach Boys played in creating his experimental sounds. To do so, as the mythology surrounding Brian has, is to discredit all the Beach Boys did and reduce Brian to caricature.

Intriguingly enough, one Capitol Records-published magazine hints at a new marketing direction of the band that was doomed by the collapse of *SMiLE* – one that privileged the entire band as mature artists.<sup>224</sup> The magazine lacks a publishing date, but was almost certainly printed in 1966 or 1967.<sup>225</sup> Just as Capitol had branded the Beach Boys in the early sixties on the image of summer fun, based on the magazine’s portrayal of the band it appears that their marketing was to take a more artistic turn. Gone were the clean-cut striped-shirts; the Beach Boys of 1966 and 1967 were *serious* musicians. A profile piece on Brian depicts him at the piano, contemplative and focused.<sup>226</sup> Dennis’ pictures him solemnly looking out into the distance.<sup>227</sup> Mike’s centerfold places him in a bathtub reading the latest issue of *Playboy*.<sup>228</sup> These were not the carefree boys of *The Teen Set*, but serious young artists. “For as the leaping, lilting, bounding boundless harmonious development of Beach Boys music has proved,” the magazine’s introduction read, “the Boys are now blended together in a very fine sophisticated unit capable not only of sophisticated records, but also of tremendous stage technique.”<sup>229</sup> The Beach Boys of the mid-sixties were *confident, sophisticated, hip*. A new band for a new age of rock. Unfortunately, with the collapse of *SMiLE*, this was not to last.

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<sup>224</sup> *The Beach Boys*, Capitol Records, 1966-1967, magazine, author’s collection.

<sup>225</sup> The magazine advertised *Pet Sounds*, but made no mention of *SMiLE*. Given this, it was likely published in mid-to late 1966 or early 1967.

<sup>226</sup> See Figure 5.

<sup>227</sup> See Figure 6.

<sup>228</sup> See Figure 7.

<sup>229</sup> *The Beach Boys*, Capitol Records.

## Conclusion

Brian had this to say in 1964: “I don’t think there’ll ever be a dull moment in my career... I don’t want to be static, I must keep functioning... No, I’m not a genius, I’m just a hardworking guy.”<sup>230</sup> Even as he was heading toward his breakdown, he still thought of himself as just another laborer in the music business. From 1965 to 1967, the Beach Boys collectively performed and produced in novel musical directions. From the danceable hits of *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* to the emotional ballads of *Pet Sounds*, their efforts brought them to new heights of success; the crushing weight of popular demand, intensified by the myth of Brian’s talent, brought the band to its knees. Overwork and impossible expectations, not flaws of talent or character, felled the Beach Boys.

In rethinking the Beach Boys’ history, we must not allow the sixties’ penchant for mythology to blind us to the fact that its music industry was deeply exploitative and demanding. It forced a number one band to completely reconfigure its productive arrangements under duress to keep up with its commercial and contractual demands. That the Beach Boys were even able to take on this challenge for a number of years is nothing short of remarkable. In doing so, they produced art that for a time both appealed to the masses and the countercultural scene. However, this achievement would plant the seeds for their post-*SMiLE* decline in 1968 and beyond.

Left without experimental music to perform as headliners of the hip Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, the Beach Boys cancelled their appearance, losing credentials as innovators. *Smiley Smile*, the band’s attempt to salvage what remained of *SMiLE*, performed poorly, failing

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<sup>230</sup> Nolan, “A California Saga.” While Nolan does not explicitly date this quote, he mentions it was said during the Beach Boys’ first European tour, which took place in 1964.

to crack the *Billboard* Top 40.<sup>231</sup> In the years and months following 1967, Brian increasingly retreated from the band as his mental illness worsened. His mythological genius remained but the real sense of genius he held as hitmaker vanished. Brian continued to occasionally contribute music to the band and help them produce new records, but would ultimately abdicate his leadership of the band following the release of *Friends* in 1968.<sup>232</sup> Left to fend for themselves, the Beach Boys would remain vigilant and produce professional, polished work, but the disappointment of *SMiLE* and the myth of Brian loomed over them forever. Though the Beach Boys would remain musically active up until the 1990s, they never again achieved the heights of their mid-sixties popularity.

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<sup>231</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 124.

<sup>232</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 195.



### **Chapter 3: “You Need a Mess of Help to Stand Alone:” The Creative Transformations of Carl and the Passions and America’s Band (1967-1998)**

Album Chronology: *Smiley Smile* (1967), *Wild Honey* (1968), *Friends* (1968), *20/20* (1969), *Sunflower* (1970), *Surf’s Up* (1971), *Carl and the Passions – “So Tough”* (1972), *Holland* (1973), *The Beach Boys in Concert* (1973), *Endless Summer* (1974), *15 Big Ones* (1976), *The Beach Boys Love You* (1977), *MIU Album* (1978), *L.A. (Light Album)* (1979), *Keeping the Summer Alive* (1980), *The Beach Boys* (1985), *Still Cruisin’* (1989), *Summer in Paradise* (1992), *Stars and Stripes Vol. 1* (1996)

Following the collapse of *SMiLE* and the lackluster release of *Smiley Smile*, the Beach Boys were at a disconnect from the rock scene they had once dominated. The mixed reception of *Smiley Smile*, combined with the band’s no-show at the countercultural Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, left the Beach Boys without the hip credentials and brand cohesion needed to thrive in a music industry dominated by the kind of artistic rock Brian was now unable or unwilling to produce. As Brian retreated into his mental illness and abdicated from his musical leadership entirely upon the release of *Friends* in 1968, the Beach Boys struggled to reclaim their former success.<sup>233</sup> While Brian would continue to occasionally produce and contribute a few tracks to each new album, Carl became the group’s *de facto* leader. As the band’s peacemaker, Carl kept the Beach Boys together, balancing out disagreements that arose within the group while also leading it into new genres and aesthetic directions.<sup>234</sup>

During this post-1967 era, the Beach Boys struggled to regain their former popularity, plagued by bad press and a consistent lack of brand cohesion. As Carl, Dennis, Mike, Al, and

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<sup>233</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 188; Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 195.

<sup>234</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 199, 203-204.

occasionally Brian splintered over creative and commercial tensions, the Beach Boys were unable to agree on how they would market themselves. The cutting-edge imagery, sounds, and branding they had pioneered in the early sixties had run their course, and without Brian’s full investment the Beach Boys were unable to create another *Pet Sounds* or *SMiLE*. It is telling that the band’s popularity picked back up in the early seventies and late seventies and early eighties; these were moments where the Beach Boys projected clear senses of branding that fit well into the respective left- and right-wing *zeitgeists* of their times.

In the early seventies, led by Carl and a new manager, Jack Rieley, the band embraced a left-leaning aesthetic rooted in popular discontent – an appealing concept for an era racked with political and cultural discord.<sup>235</sup> Many other musical acts of the time did the same. As noted by Bradford Martin, the seventies saw singers and songwriters craft music that engaged in politics and social issues “in ways that sought to reconcile authentic self-expression, creative autonomy, and commercial ambitions with larger communitarian and global concerns.”<sup>236</sup> As popular music diversified in the wake of the fading counterculture and New Left of the 1960s, critics, consumers, and record labels sought out acts with a sense of raw, personal authenticity that would imbue their music with creativity.<sup>237</sup> The Beach Boys’ *Surf’s Up* album, released in 1971, fit these new trends precisely. Confronting its listeners with dark themes and socially-conscious lyrics, the album set the Beach Boys in a new artistic direction and marked a resurgence for the

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<sup>235</sup> Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

<sup>236</sup> Bradford Martin, “Cultural Politics and the Singers / Songwriters of the 1970s” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 133.

<sup>237</sup> Martin, “Cultural Politics,” 132-133.

band.<sup>238</sup> Reworking elements of the failed *SMiLE* project in its title track, “Surf’s Up,” the LP linked the band’s new music to its old.

As the band entered the late seventies and early eighties, Mike seized control of the Beach Boys. At a meeting on September 17, 1977, Mike acquired Brian’s corporate vote, allowing him and Al to outvote Carl and Dennis on any given group decision. As head of the band, Mike transformed it into “America’s Band,” a politically conservative nostalgia act.<sup>239</sup> Eschewing continuous artistic innovation to instead focus on endlessly replaying older music, Mike settled for an arrangement that kept the band consistently marketable and free from creative pressures.<sup>240</sup> Affiliating themselves with Ronald Reagan and his Republican Party by performing at their rallies and allying themselves with them in the press, the Beach Boys deepened their brand cohesion. As Reagan sold himself to the American masses on promises of a return to an imagined postwar past, the Beach Boys provided him with a soundtrack.<sup>241</sup> This arrangement also appealed to new, younger audiences. Unaffected by rock’s late sixties “artistic” turn, they were exposed to the Beach Boys through their early seventies resurgence; they could enjoy the band’s earlier hits unaffected by the rock press’ late sixties blacklisting of the band.<sup>242</sup>

For all its faults, this post-1967 era of Beach Boys history cannot be divorced from the rest of the band’s tenure, as it was instrumental to shaping the band’s image, memory, and popularity as they exist today. Revisiting this often-forgotten period of Beach Boys history helps us better understand the political and cultural contours of the seventies and eighties and gives us a sense of how artists adapt to shifting cultural mindsets. Unfortunately for Carl, who possessed

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<sup>238</sup> David Hepworth, *Never a Dull Moment: 1971, The Year that Rock Exploded* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2016), 227-229.

<sup>239</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 371.

<sup>240</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 230.

<sup>241</sup> Kolehmainen, “Reaganized Rock,” 1-18.

<sup>242</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 192-194.

the thankless task of leading the band through the late sixties and early seventies, his Beach Boys (which I refer to here as “Carl and the Passions,” though it should be noted that the band never adopted the name) remains largely forgotten today, its memory overwritten by “America’s Band.” “America’s Band” also must be recognized as the deliberately constructed nostalgia act it was, rather than a return to the status quo of the band’s early years. For all of the acclaim the Beach Boys receive for their early hits, *Pet Sounds*, and *SMiLE* outtakes, it is important to remember that the band’s post-1967 tenure kept these memories alive, albeit at a cost – a mummified version of its own history it fabricated of the band’s pre-1967 years.

Given the literature’s focus on the Beach Boys’ tenure in the early to mid-sixties, this period has gone neglected in the historical record. Brian-centered narratives do not pay the early 1970s much heed, as Brian was an auxiliary Beach Boy post-1967. It is telling that Peter Ames Carlin’s *Catch A Wave*, one of the most comprehensive histories of the band, imagines this period as Brian’s “fall” in its tale of the his “rise, fall, and redemption.”<sup>243</sup> Even the foremost academic treatment of the Beach Boys, *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, fails to offer a single paper dedicated to the band’s later career.<sup>244</sup> The Beach Boys themselves also contributed to this historiographical dearth as they restyled themselves as an oldies act, privileging their old hits over their new, less commercially-successful music. Aside from breakout hits like “Darlin’” (1967), “Do It Again” (1968), and “Sail On, Sailor” (1973), this era of music goes underrepresented even within the band’s perception of itself.<sup>245</sup> Mike’s personal history privileges the band’s early hits, while Brian’s focuses on the mid-sixties development of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*. Carl and Dennis, the foremost

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<sup>243</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*.

<sup>244</sup> Philip Lambert, ed., *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

<sup>245</sup> The Beach Boys, *Live – The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tour*.

actors in the band’s resurgence, passed away in 1998 and 1983, respectively. Due to their untimely deaths, they have had remarkably little influence on how the Beach Boys’ history is remembered today.

Such interpretations of the band’s past overlook the challenges the Beach Boys had to overcome in order to regain their commercial success; for instance, how they learned to produce records following Brian’s abdication of leadership and how they reinvented themselves in new creative directions. The most notable instance of this, the Beach Boys’ turn to “America’s Band,” is often denigrated as a selling-out, a sacrifice of creativity for the sake of commercial relevance.<sup>246</sup> Part of my argument here is that this pivot was not a regression, but a reinvention, a tilt not back to the sixties, but a tilt towards a new trend of conservative nostalgia. Existing literature on the band fails to capture this nuance even when it does cover this period of Beach Boys history. My intention here is to write it back into the historical narrative to better understand how the band and its times are remembered today.

### **The Beach Boys Without Brian: Finding a New Direction (1967-1969)**

Spurred by the rise of the rock auteur, beginning in the mid-sixties the American music industry became oriented around the album as both a commercial and creative concept. Rock albums were no longer collections of filler, but cohesive products with songs often meant to work together as a whole.<sup>247</sup> Ironically, the Beach Boys had been central players in this shift in their release of *Pet Sounds* and development of *SMiLE*, but without Brian (still the band’s leader until 1968, but unwilling to produce music to his old standards), for a time they were left without

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<sup>246</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 249-251.

<sup>247</sup> Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 232-237.

an artistic authority to head their recordings.<sup>248</sup> Now unable to navigate the cultural currents of experimental pop and rock, from 1967-1969 the Beach Boys struggled to redefine themselves. Having lost their acute ability to tap into cultural and musical trends post-1967, the Beach Boys suffered for want of brand cohesion as they drifted from one unsuccessful aesthetic to another. This lack of a unified identity sent the Beach Boys deeper and deeper into commercial and cultural obscurity, a trend that would only be reversed in the early seventies when the band reformed around a distinct aesthetic and sound.

The Beach Boys’ late sixties decline manifested itself in its poorly-selling records, which lacked concrete music identities. Each album starkly differed from the last, preventing the band from coalescing around a cohesive brand. To make matters worse, the band’s new music departed from the polished Wall of Sound Beach Boys fans had grown accustomed to. When Brian abdicated his leadership of the band, none of the other Beach Boys had substantial production experience, and it showed. If albums like *Pet Sounds* were defined by their dense orchestrations, the band’s late sixties albums were the exact opposite: lo-fi and minimalist.<sup>249</sup> First came *Smiley Smile* in September 1967, a poorly-received substitute for *SMiLE*. *Wild Honey*, the band’s quick take on an R&B and soul record, followed in December. *Friends*, a chilled-out lo-fi LP, appeared in 1968. As the sales records show, such jarring aesthetic and sonic shifts were not received well by the rock market. All three LPs were commercial disappointments: *Smiley Smile* peaked at 41, *Wild Honey* at 24, and *Friends* at a depressingly-low 126 on the *Billboard* charts. The band’s singles performed better (“Heroes and Villains,” originally written for *SMiLE*, at 12 and “Darlin’” at 19, for instance), but the music industry was no longer a

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<sup>248</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 195.

<sup>249</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 52-57.

singles game. For the first few years after Brian’s virtual departure, the band was left without the sense of creative purpose it had had in the mid-sixties.

Beyond having to worry about creating music and learning how to produce records, the Beach Boys were hampered by disputes with Capitol and the lasting cultural consequences of their failure to produce *SMiLE*. The band also confronted financial problems that put pressure on them when they needed to focus on their creative endeavors. Such issues began as early as February 1967, when the Beach Boys filed a lawsuit against Capitol Records seeking unpaid royalties totaling \$225,000.<sup>250</sup> While that lawsuit was dropped as the band’s position weakened with the collapse of *SMiLE*, the Beach Boys issued another in 1969 as they departed their contract with Capitol, calling for over \$2 million in unpaid royalties, production credits, and damages from general mismanagement.<sup>251</sup> Such actions did not endear the Beach Boys to their record label, still in charge of releasing and promoting their product as these entanglements played out.

Misguided business decisions also distracted the Beach Boys from crafting a winning brand. Following their first lawsuit in 1967 the Beach Boys launched their own record label: Brother Records, envisioned as an ambitious project through which they could exert greater control over their music, sign their own acts, and make business investments.<sup>252</sup> At a press conference on April 12, 1969, they announced boldly that they “hope[d] to create the furthest

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<sup>250</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 178.

<sup>251</sup> “Beach Boys Sever Ties With Capitol; On Own,” *Billboard*, April 12, 1969, [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_ySgEAAAAMBAJ/page/n1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_ySgEAAAAMBAJ/page/n1/mode/2up). This *Billboard* article also mentions the Beach Boys’ other business investments: their ownership of a real estate syndicate and cardiovascular clinic in Jacksonville, Florida via their company Financial Concepts, Inc.

<sup>252</sup> Gaines, *Heroes and Villains*, 164-165. Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 242.

reaching music company ever established.”<sup>253</sup> Mike in particular enthusiastically supported the company’s formation. In April 1968 he told *Melody Maker* of his idealistic vision for the future of the pop business:

We could put together the power of the Beach Boys and Beatles to form companies with sound, beautiful principles... we shall be able to establish record companies and music publishers that would be examples of how much better things can be. We’ve got to beat the Establishment at their own game by being astute in business, and remembering – it’s a worn out phrase but it still works – give and take.<sup>254</sup>

Such sentiments might have rung true if the Beach Boys were in a better financial position to express them. However, given their post-1967 decline they lacked the momentum to make their new label a success. Brother Records ended up as little more than a holding company for the Beach Boys’ releases – an expensive sink of effort and capital much needed elsewhere.<sup>255</sup>

Goaded by the collapse of *SMiLE* and the band’s failure to perform at Monterey, the rock press viciously set themselves upon the Beach Boys. An influential February 1967 article penned by *Rolling Stone* co-founder Jann Wenner on the state of rock music began the press’ ruination of the band’s reputation. It disparaged the band’s live act and questioned Brian’s pop “genius,” concluding that “the Beach Boys are just one prominent example of a group that has gotten hung up in trying to catch up to the Beatles. It is a pointless pursuit.”<sup>256</sup> Even across the Atlantic where the Beach Boys’ records continued to sell, the band’s future remained uncertain. “Boring – That’s the Beach Boys!” exclaimed Penny Valentine, writing for the British *Disc and Music*

<sup>253</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 242. Brother Records also included a “conglomerate of business enterprises including recording company, travel agency, business management operation, personal management company, and concert production firm.”

<sup>254</sup> Chris Welch, “The Beach Boys: A Brave New World – Through Pop,” *Melody Maker*, April 6, 1968, <https://www.rockbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-a-brave-new-world--through-pop>.

<sup>255</sup> The Brother Records label released only one non-Beach Boys album, *The Flame*, in 1970. In the late 1970s the label’s recording studio, “Brother Studios,” was sold off quietly and renamed “Crimson Sound.” Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 243-244; “The Flame,” AllMusic, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/the-flame-mw0000404758>. “Studio Track,” *Billboard*, April 28, 1979; “Biography,” *Hank Cicalo’s Music*, accessed April 6, 2021, <http://start.hankcicalo.com/services>.

<sup>256</sup> Jann Wenner, “Rock and Roll Music,” *Rolling Stone*, December 14, 1967.



*Echo* in 1968.<sup>257</sup> Such articles were published as the band’s record sales faltered – they likely influenced this trend as they reported on it, fulfilling their own grim predictions of the band’s future. This trend persisted in spite of warmer reviews received by the Beach Boys’ post-*Smiley Smile* LPs. “Surprisingly, *Wild Honey* works well,” wrote Gene Sculatti in *Jazz & Pop* magazine in 1968. “It isn’t the least bit pretentious, it’s honest, and convincing.”<sup>258</sup> *Billboard*, in its review of *Friends* concluded that “with their proven salability, the [Beach Boys] should score high on the charts with this, their latest album.”<sup>259</sup> However, this approval failed to revive the band’s reputation. Even these positive reviews were too little, too late for the band’s spiraling popularity. The title of Sculatti’s article betrayed how badly the Beach Boys’ cultural clout had suffered: “Villains and Heroes: In Defense of the Beach Boys.”<sup>260</sup>

The band’s once-solid touring act also deteriorated in the late sixties as the Beach Boys’ performances began to slip in quality, likely due to how shaken the band was by its poor record sales.<sup>261</sup> 1968 was a particularly miserable year for the Beach Boys’ live act. Its first disaster was the April 4<sup>th</sup> assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. A thirty-three-show tour of the South was cancelled as riots and curfews erupted across the nation.<sup>262</sup> Mike conceived of a second tour, a seventeen-show performance pairing the Beach Boys with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian guru who served as the band’s spiritual mentor. Shows were split between Beach Boys music and dull lectures on the virtues of Transcendental Meditation, a style of silent-mantra meditation. The combination was an odd one that left audiences baffled, and garnered a

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<sup>257</sup> Penny Valentine, “Boring – That’s the Beach Boys!,” *Disc and Music Echo*, May 11, 1968; Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 220.

<sup>258</sup> Gene Sculatti, “Villains and Heroes: In Defense of the Beach Boys,” *Jazz & Pop*, September 1968, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/villains-and-heroes-in-defense-of-the-beach-boys>.

<sup>259</sup> Arthur Schmidt, “Friends,” *Billboard*, June 22, 1968, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/friends-183023/>.

<sup>260</sup> Sculatti, “Villains and Heroes.”

<sup>261</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 136-137; Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 218-219.

<sup>262</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 215. The Beach Boys only played three shows out of the planned thirty-three.

mixed reception. While a review of one such show in the *New York Magazine* praised the band as “happy and full of love” and noted that “the group was really good and the kids knew it,” a review of another show in *The Washington Post* condemned it: “the songs they did, about 11 in all, sounded mediocre at the best when heard through the din of an under-rehearsed and over-modulated back-up orchestra... one could only think of the Beatles’ decision to stop touring and admire them anew.”<sup>263</sup> This second tour, attended poorly and cancelled when the Maharishi left it after only seven performances, became another blow to the Beach Boys’ bank accounts. Together, the two scrapped tours cost the band around 500,000 dollars.<sup>264</sup>

The Beach Boys were also plagued by a simple lack of creative direction. As they traded in their iconic striped shirts for bright white suits, they found that their new aesthetic lacked cultural appeal. A review of a 1968 performance at New York’s Fillmore East derided their new getup: “they came on stage decked out in matching ice-cream colored suits... since Fillmore habitues like their groups grungy, raw, and au courant, the Good Humor hallucination on the stage couldn’t help but bring out the sadistic side of the audience.”<sup>265</sup> Even Capitol Records no longer seemed to know how to market the band. Desperate for sales, in April 1967 it released the single “Then I Kissed Her,” a song dating back to the band’s 1965 *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* album.<sup>266</sup> In August 1968, Capitol published *Stack-o-Tracks*, a puzzling LP comprised of popular Beach Boys songs stripped of their vocals. Listeners were encouraged to sing along to the instrumental-tracks, karaoke-style. Such an LP might have found middling success in 1964, 1965, or 1966, but this was 1968, a year when even the Beach Boys’ new *Friends* album failed

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<sup>263</sup> Loraine Alterman, “The Maharishi, The Beach Boys and the Heathens,” *New York Magazine*, March 6, 1968, <https://www.rockbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-maharishi-the-beach-boys-and-the-heathens>; Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 219.

<sup>264</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 220.

<sup>265</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 58. See **Figure 8**.

<sup>266</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 382.

to crack the *Billboard* Hot 100. *Stack-o-Tracks* would be the first Beach Boys album to fail to chart in the US or UK.<sup>267</sup>

In light of these debacles, the Beach Boys’ discontent with their contract with Capitol led them to seek out a new deal that would permit them greater control over their finances and creations.<sup>268</sup> Brian was of no help; in a press conference held at his home on May 27, 1969, he detailed the Beach Boys’ sorry financial situation: “the Beach Boys’ empire is crumbling and we’re in deep financial trouble... We spent a lot of corporation money on Brother Records... I’ve always said be honest with the fans and I don’t see why I should lie and say everything is rosy when it’s not.”<sup>269</sup> It is not clear why Brian said this. Perhaps he was having trouble coping with the fact that he no longer led the band. Regardless of how Brian meant the news to come across, it sabotaged the band’s future and nearly led to its collapse. The revelation killed a lucrative deal the band was on the cusp of signing with German label Deutsche Grammophon. Following this, all of their other offers dried up.<sup>270</sup>

Adding insult to injury, Murry Wilson, Brian, Dennis, and Carl’s father and the Beach Boys’ former manager, sold the copyrights to nearly all of the songs Brian had written in his career for a paltry \$700,000 to Irving-Almo, the publishing division of A&M Records. Though he had been dismissed as the band’s manager back in 1964, Murry had retained control over its publishing company, Sea of Tunes.<sup>271</sup> The group, especially Brian, was devastated by the sale, but it soon seemed that a better decade lay ahead of them in the 1970s. After a dry spell, the

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<sup>267</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 225.

<sup>268</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 258.

<sup>269</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 243-244.

<sup>270</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 252.

<sup>271</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 145. Though Murry and Brian shared ownership of the company at its inception, Murry managed to act as Sea of Tunes’ sole controller. The facts of Murry’s sale of the catalog remain disputed, but it is likely that he may have tricked or persuaded Brian into signing away his share.

Beach Boys managed to sign a deal with Warner/Reprise Records and determined to continue their pursuit of their former success. Keen to capitalize on Brian’s creative reputation, the contract required Brian contribute music to each album: the band accepted, and resigned itself to ensuring that its former leader would continue to create music.<sup>272</sup> Though the travails of this late sixties period appear to confirm the “two Beach Boys theory” when considered in isolation, the Beach Boys would soon prove they could find success without Brian’s guidance. In the early seventies, a new, more confident band would emerge, defined by Carl’s leadership. They may have been “The Beach Boys” in name, but, as they asserted in the title of a new studio album in 1972, they were “Carl and the Passions” in spirit.

### **Carl and the Passions (1970-1973)**

Emboldened by their new record deal, the Beach Boys entered the seventies a more confident and competent band. Having learned to produce music without Brian, each Beach Boy offered greater contributions to the band’s records than ever before. *Sunflower* (1970) *Surf’s Up* (1971), *Carl and the Passions – “So Tough”* (1972), and *Holland* (1973) were better commercially and critically received than their late sixties LPs for the simple fact that they were produced by a band that understood its marketing goals. With Carl’s leadership and the guidance of a new manager, Jack Rieley, following *Sunflower* the Beach Boys adopted a more contemporary creative vision. They shifted the focus of their songwriting to sociopolitical themes and altered their image, shedding their clean-cut white suits in favor of gnarly beards. The Beach Boys also adapted their live act, embracing their new music and its political consciousness. They even added new members to their ranks, the Black South African musicians

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<sup>272</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 257-258.

Blondie Chaplin and Ricky Fataar. Finally possessing a distinct, marketable brand, the band recovered from its late-sixties slump and underwent a creative renaissance.

*Sunflower* marked the beginning of this turn. Though the LP peaked at a sorry 151 on the *Billboard* charts, critics welcomed it as the band’s best work since *Pet Sounds* and began to reconsider their negative perception of the band.<sup>273</sup> *Rolling Stone*, having tarnished the band’s reputation in 1967, now backtracked on its position. “*Sunflower* is without doubt the best Beach Boys album in recent memory, a stylistically coherent tour de force,” wrote *Rolling Stone* critic Jim Miller in October 1970.<sup>274</sup> This *tour de force* was also unmistakably a group effort: as put by Carl, “*Sunflower* is the truest group effort we’d ever had. Each of us was deeply involved in the creation of almost all the cuts.”<sup>275</sup> Dennis in particular came into his own as a songwriter on *Sunflower*, writing four of the album’s twelve tracks: three rockers and a sentimental ballad, “Forever.” The LP may not have sold well, but in its demonstration of the Beach Boys’ newfound musicianship and production skill, it was an important transitional work for the band.

Having survived the late sixties, the Beach Boys were ready to tackle the issue of their reputation in the early seventies. Saved from bankruptcy by a lucrative record deal with Warner/Reprise, they were no longer distracted from their music by financial matters. The band had also gained considerable musical expertise: it could now produce music on Brian’s level, allowing it to focus its full attention on its branding. Key to these developments was journalist and DJ Jack Rieley. Just prior to *Sunflower*’s release in August 1970, he approached the band and insisted that as its manager, he could update its image to appeal to a wider audience. Mike

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<sup>273</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 275.

<sup>274</sup> Jim Miller, “Sunflower,” *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 1970, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/sunflower-114921/>.

<sup>275</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 275.

and Bruce, enthusiastic at his proposal, recruited him to the position.<sup>276</sup> “The Beach Boys were too disorganized and fragmented to master the publicity and marketing part of the business, so Rieley came on board and began the makeover,” Mike recounted in 2016. “We ditched the matching uniforms, Carl and Al grew beards, and we began a promotional campaign that said, ‘It’s okay to listen to the Beach Boys.’ Another said: ‘the Beach Boys – They’ve changed more than you have!’”<sup>277</sup> This campaign manifested in the form of print advertisements, live appearances, and radio broadcasts heralding the Beach Boys’ new image.<sup>278</sup>

The Beach Boys’ new creative tilt came full circle when they made a surprise appearance at a Grateful Dead concert at New York’s Fillmore East on April 27, 1971. “All the Beach Boys fears melted away, as the audience accepted them wholeheartedly,” wrote Toby Mamis for *Action World* magazine. “They got a five minute standing ovation. No shit. And, you know something, the last time the Beach Boys played the Fillmore East, in October 1968, only a few hundred people showed up.”<sup>279</sup> The Beach Boys were cool again! Decked out in their new garb, they rocked the house: even wholesome Al now sported a shirt of the Viet Cong flag.<sup>280</sup> Embracing aesthetic themes of sociopolitical discord, the Beach Boys had deftly repackaged themselves in a manner that fit the tumultuous 1970s. Mamis concluded his review of the show with a hip endorsement of the band: “I loved it, the bands loved it, the Fillmore staff loved it, the

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<sup>276</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 277; “The Life of Rieley,” *Record Collector*, September 6, 2013, <https://recordcollectormag.com/articles/the-life-of-rieley>. Rieley has stated it was primarily Brian who suggested he manage the band; however, considering Badman’s impeccable primary source record I am more inclined to believe his assertion that Mike and Bruce were the primary advocates for Rieley’s management of the band.

<sup>277</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 232-233.

<sup>278</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 232-235.

<sup>279</sup> Toby Mamis, “Jam: Grateful Dead & Beach Boys: Fillmore East, New York NY,” *Action World*, June 1971, <https://www.rockedbackpages.com/Library/Article/jam-grateful-dead--beach-boys-fillmore-east-new-york-ny>. *Action World* magazine is best known by its later name, *Good Times*.

<sup>280</sup> Mamis, “Jam: Grateful Dead & Beach Boys.”

audience loved it, and Bob Dylan leaned over, in the middle of their performance, and said to the Beach Boys manager, ‘You know, they’re fucking good, man.’”<sup>281</sup>

Carl’s leadership of the band during this period is one of the most overlooked aspects of the Beach Boys’ history, owing both to the literature’s focus on Brian and Carl’s tendency to stay out of the spotlight. Following Brian’s departure, he became the band’s *de facto* leader and following Rieley’s establishment as manager, its official leader. Carl headed the band’s studio sessions and ensured their live act performed well, just as he had in the mid-sixties. Though, like the rest of the band, he was intent on making money with his art, he felt a mandate to produce music of quality, as detailed here in a 1971 interview with *Rolling Stone*:

I’m really glad the way things have turned out... The most important thing was that we had a chance to sort of cool out and develop, you know? That was necessary for the group to really carry on and do anything. ‘Cause you could make hits all week long, but it just wouldn’t mean shit. As far as making good music, you need time, I mean some of us do.<sup>282</sup>

Carl recognized that with Brian’s departure, every band member had to contribute quality product to each Beach Boys release. Beginning in the late sixties, every new LP featured songs written and performed by every member of the band. Carl’s leadership was also crucial to keeping band tensions in check, as keeping the Beach Boys centered around one cohesive brand was crucial to their resurgence.<sup>283</sup> Unfailingly supportive of his bandmates, he was eager to share their music with the world: “I’ve been writing a lot of songs lately. Dennis is writing a lot of beautiful music, and Brian’s writing some beautiful songs. Everybody’s writing. I don’t know exactly what’s gonna happen yet. I just know there’s gonna be a lot of music.”<sup>284</sup> The rest of the

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<sup>281</sup> Mamis, “Jam: Grateful Dead & Beach Boys.”

<sup>282</sup> Nolan, “The Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

<sup>283</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 199, 203-204

<sup>284</sup> Nolan, “The Beach Boys: A California Saga, Part II.”

Beach Boys certainly admired and appreciated such sentiments – their 1972 album *Carl and the Passions* – “*So Tough*” was named in honor of their new leader.<sup>285</sup>

Jack Rieley played a role not unlike that of a quality control specialist, ensuring that the band’s creative vision remained consistent. He managed their new, contemporary image and encouraged them to play more of their new music instead of their old hits, as emphasized in an interview he gave in 2013:

I told them: no more striped shirts, no more 25-minute hits sets. They could include the hits but there’s the extraordinary texture to the music that came around Pet Sounds and after that, which had to be a major part of their shows. I remember Carl asking, “What do you picture us wearing?” And I said, “Whatever you’re wearing that day, go on stage wearing that.”<sup>286</sup>

In addition to managing the band’s image, Rieley directly involved himself in the songwriting process. He cowrote eight songs during his tenure with the band, and even contributed vocals in the studio on occasion.<sup>287</sup> Rieley’s creative suggestions were backed by an understanding of the Beach Boys’ new audiences. Asked about the social commentary of *Surf’s Up* (1971) in 2013, he replied, “it was not part of a master plan. I was and still am a great believer in the sovereignty of plants and animals, and even a tree... We never had any ‘What are we gonna write about?’ meeting [*sic*]. Never once did anything like that ever occur.”<sup>288</sup> Carl’s steady leadership kept the band together, and Rieley kept it in tune with the *zeitgeist* of the early 1970s.

The Beach Boys’ new creative direction was laid bare in their release of *Surf’s Up* in 1971. The LP represented a new kind of Beach Boys album, wedding the band’s stellar musicianship to Rieley’s vision of the band. Its title was a stroke of marketing brilliance: it

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<sup>285</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 223.

<sup>286</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”

<sup>287</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”

<sup>288</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”



played with the public’s memory of the band’s past, subverting the sunny imagery of surf rock by providing the consumer with a dingy, depressing album sleeve that contained equally grim music.<sup>289</sup> *Surf’s Up*’s commercial appeal was strengthened by its inclusion of its title track, a song originally intended for *SMiLE*. The critical and commercial success the album enjoyed derived from how it refashioned the Beach Boys’ aesthetic, deeply contrasting itself from the band’s early sixties image.<sup>290</sup> Mike had started his career singing lead on the innocent “Surfin’ USA:” now he sang of racial strife and the Kent State Massacre in “Student Demonstration Time.” Al darkened his folksy sensibilities, lamenting the ravages of pollution in “Don’t Go Near the Water.” Brian’s propensity for ballads took on a sadder tone as he penned “A Day in the Life of a Tree,” a dreary tale of a doomed tree. The album’s darker tone and focus upon socially-conscious topics established the new aesthetic the Beach Boys would define themselves by. The band was rewarded for this new creative direction: *Surf’s Up* peaked at 29 on the *Billboard* charts, the band’s highest-selling album since 1967. The Beach Boys, or rather, “Carl and the Passions,” were back.

This transition was not without its growing pains. In order to accommodate their new artistic vision, the Beach Boys had to keep producing and touring new music – with or without the satisfaction of all of its members. Bruce Johnston, ever since he had joined the band back in 1966, had embraced the saccharine in his musical leanings. His most famous Beach Boys song, “Disney Girls (1957),” preached romantic nostalgia in the middle of *Surf’s Up*, an album defined by despair. Ironically, in 1972, a mere two years after he had advocated for Jack Rieley to become the band’s manager, Rieley himself requested Bruce leave the group at the behest of the

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<sup>289</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surf’s Up*, Brother/Reprise RS 6453, rel. August 30, 1971, vinyl record. **See Figure 9.**

<sup>290</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 168-169; Larry Starr, “A Listener’s Smile,” in *Good Vibrations: Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys in Critical Perspective*, ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 251-258.

Wilsons.<sup>291</sup> Though Bruce had worked with the band since *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* back in 1965, he no longer “fit in with the layered wonder the Beach Boys were becoming,” according to Rieley.<sup>292</sup> The details regarding Bruce’s departure remain opaque, but a 1973 *Creem* article hints at why he was sacked: “[the] reasons for [Bruce’s] departure remain sketchy but it is believed to have something to do with divergent life-styles and the extent of the role Johnston had carved out for himself within the band.”<sup>293</sup>

Brian, too, was cast aside under Carl’s leadership. As his mental illness worsened, his ability to produce music dissolved alongside the confidence the rest of the band held him. For instance, the *SMiLE* outtake “Surf’s Up,” the centerpiece of its namesake album, was included in the LP against Brian’s wishes. Outvoted by his bandmates, Brian was forced aside as Carl completed the unfinished song.<sup>294</sup> When the band recorded the single “Sail On Sailor,” another past project of his, he refused to attend its studio sessions.<sup>295</sup> While the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth understates the talents of the rest of the band, it does strike a chord in how it emphasizes their exploitation of Brian, a point stressed in David Leaf’s *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*.<sup>296</sup> As the Beach Boys were contractually obligated by their deal with Warner/Reprise to publish songs written by Brian, he was repeatedly pressured to supply product for a band he wanted no part in.<sup>297</sup> The recording of *Holland* in 1972 was particularly egregious, as Brian was flown over the Atlantic to record the album with the rest of the band in the Netherlands. Even when he did produce music he was invested in, there was no guarantee the

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<sup>291</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”

<sup>292</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”

<sup>293</sup> “Bruce Johnston Leaves Beach Boys,” *Creem*, July 1, 1972.

<sup>294</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 162-164. The 1971 recording of “Surf’s Up” differs from the 2011 version included in *The Smile Sessions*, as the latter only uses archival tracks from the mid-sixties and thus contains different vocals and instrumentation.

<sup>295</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 165.

<sup>296</sup> Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*.

<sup>297</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 150.

rest of the band would accept it, as it had to conform to the band’s new image. While recording *Holland*, a grand spark of inspiration came to him, just as it had with *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*: “Mount Vernon and Fairway (A Fairy Tale).” It failed to make it onto the album; just as Brian had been sidelined within the band, his new project was relegated to a bonus EP.<sup>298</sup>

As Bruce and Brian were relegated to peripheral roles in the band, Carl brought new Beach Boys into the fold. In keeping with the group’s tilt towards social consciousness and R&B, he recruited suitable artists to fill the spots they had left behind: Blondie Chaplin and Ricky Fataar, Black South African musicians. They would only stay with the band for around three years, contributing tracks to *Carl and the Passions* and *Holland*, but over their short tenures they helped redefine the band’s image and sound. As put by Blondie in a 2013 interview, “we [Blondie and Ricky] were just very, very good session men that people happened to like. I guess you can call us Beach Boys, but we thought we were kind of brought in to give the band a harder and funkier edge.”<sup>299</sup> The group had always based itself in African American music, but the inclusion of actual Black musicians within its ranks imbued its records with a more soulful vibe. One only needs to listen to Blondie’s lead vocal on the celebrated “Sail On Sailor,” the Fataar-Chaplin compositions “We Got Love” and “Funky Pretty,” and the *Carl and the Passions* – “*So Tough*” LP to gain a sense of Blondie and Ricky’s brief but deep impact on the Beach Boys’ sound.

By the end of the early 1970s, the Beach Boys had restored their creative reputation, a trend recognized by the influential rock presses of the US and the UK. “1971 saw a return of the Beach Boys to concerts and a new audience ready to accept them,” wrote John Ingham in the

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<sup>298</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 182.

<sup>299</sup> Andy Greene, “Ex-Beach Boy Blondie Chaplin Reunites With Brian Wilson After 40 Years,” *Rolling Stone*, October 14, 2013, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/ex-beach-boy-blondie-chaplin-reunites-with-brian-wilson-after-40-years-87036/>.

*New Musical Express*. “Surprisingly, a lot of them were 15 and 16, and were just as rabid about the Boys as they were about Black Sabbath.”<sup>300</sup> The band also embraced its new political bent, as detailed by Tom Smucker in *Creem* in 1972: “[the Beach Boys are] actually profound and committed and hip, they’ve got long hair, they jammed with the Dead, they played at Mayday...”<sup>301</sup> Such sentiments went beyond rock journalism, even extending out to the underground newspaper *Ann Arbor Sun*. “The Beach Boys are freaks now, with really long hair and bushy beards, singing at anti-war rallies for free,” it noted approvingly of the band’s May Day showing. “That’s just another indication of how widespread the change in this generation has reached – the Beach Boys were super straight who sang about surfing and picking up girls and that whole scene.”<sup>302</sup> The band, just as in its early days and psychedelic era, had once again successfully tapped into America’s cultural *zeitgeist*.

*The Beach Boys in Concert*, a live LP released in late 1973, showcased the height of the Beach Boys’ early seventies transformation. A double album comprised of old and new hits recorded from concert tours in 1972 and 1973, the record outsold *Surf’s Up*, *Carl and the Passions*, and *Holland*, netting the group a “Gold” certification from the RIAA and peaking at 25 on *Billboard* – the band’s highest mark since 1967’s *Wild Honey*.<sup>303</sup> Upon listening to the album, one is treated to a sound that is distinctively “Carl and the Passions.” Its tracks lean into a more rocking sound and R&B influence, as evidenced by “Marcella,” “We Got Love,” and “Funky Pretty.” The inclusion of Carl’s “The Trader” hints at the band’s political leanings: its lyrics

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<sup>300</sup> John Ingham, “The Beach Boys #2: The Exiles Return,” *New Musical Express*, March 31, 1973, <https://www.rockedbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-2-the-exiles-return>.

<sup>301</sup> Tom Smucker, “The Critics Kept A Knockin’ But the Stars Kept a Rockin’ And The Choppin’ Didn’t Get So Far,” *Creem*, July 1, 1972, <https://prayforsurfblog.blogspot.com/2019/05/archives-tom-smuckers-1972-creem.html>.

<sup>302</sup> David Fenton, “May Day in Washington,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, May 7, 1971, <https://aadl.org/node/193141>.

<sup>303</sup> The Beach Boys, *The Beach Boys in Concert*, Brother/Reprise 2RS 6484, rel. November 19, 1973, vinyl record.

explicitly critique colonialism.<sup>304</sup> On *The Beach Boys in Concert*, even the old hits sound new. “Surfin’ USA” and “Fun, Fun, Fun” open with their characteristic Chuck Berry riffs, but are accentuated by guitar screeches. The Beach Boys had successfully adapted to cultural change.<sup>305</sup> With the advent of new leadership, new marketing, and a new sound, even the old stuff sounded fresh again.

*Endless Summer* changed everything. Released in June 1974 by Capitol Records, it was a compilation of old Beach Boys hits in the style of their old lyrical themes of “surf, cars, and girls.” Ever since the band had left the label, Capitol had continued to profit off of the Beach Boys’ master recordings, releasing “best of” albums out of their old catalog. However, *Endless Summer* came out just when the Beach Boys had reclaimed a strong following. Since the Beach Boys were hip again, record-buyers had no reason to treat their old material as taboo, and the band’s old hits began to appeal to new, younger Beach Boys fans. George Lucas’ 1973 film *American Graffiti*, featuring “Surfin’ Safari” and “All Summer Long” on its soundtrack, was released to commercial and critical acclaim. Then came *Endless Summer*, a smash hit by any standard. It shot to the top of the *Billboard* charts, staying at the number-one spot for 156 weeks.<sup>306</sup> The “Beach Boys” were back, and “Carl and the Passions” were on their way out.

### America’s Band (1974-1998)

This later period in the Beach Boys’ career, from 1974 (the release of *Endless Summer*) to 1998 (Carl Wilson’s death) largely defined the band as it exists and is remembered today.

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<sup>304</sup> “The Life of Rieley.”

<sup>305</sup> The Beach Boys, *The Beach Boys in Concert*.

<sup>306</sup> “Chart History: The Beach Boys,” *Billboard*, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/music/the-beach-boys/chart-history/TLP/song/317444>.

Following the success of *Endless Summer*, the band gradually, painfully embraced a politically conservative, nostalgic aesthetic – “America’s Band” – that rose to commercial, if not critical prominence in the evolving conservatism in the age of Reagan. As the band split apart over creative and personal differences, it became a live act that focused upon performing early and mid-sixties hits at the expense of releasing new material. It is this image of the band, of “Mike Love’s Beach Boys,” that is now contrasted with “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth of the mid-1960s. They define the history and memory of the Beach Boys through distortive half-truths; it is only through interrogating both that we gain a clear vision of the band’s history.

Following the release of *Holland* in 1973 the Beach Boys were once again in disarray due to creative and personal disputes within the band. “I pulled away from the Beach Boys’ organization because of terribly complex, complicated and horribly distasteful situations involving their business and financial management,” admitted a departing Jack Rieley.”<sup>307</sup> Blondie and Ricky, following in Rieley’s footsteps, would themselves leave the band in 1973 and 1974. The band’s core also drifted apart for reasons divorced from their music: Brian, Dennis, and Carl increasingly indulged themselves in drug and alcohol abuse, a tendency that alienated Mike and Al, who avowed such substances in favor of transcendental meditation.<sup>308</sup> This inner divide amongst the band would define the band’s transformation as Mike and Al exercised greater creative control over the group.

Given these inner-band divisions and the success of *Endless Summer*, the Beach Boys found that emphasizing their old hits represented a path of least resistance. Songs like “Surfin’ Safari,” “Surfin’ USA,” and “California Girls” were consistent crowd-pleasers. The band’s transition from “Carl and the Passions” to “America’s Band” was a strategic one: it did not have

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<sup>307</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 331.

<sup>308</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 218-219.

to stress over creating new art when it could make equal, if not more money repackaging old music. Starting in the mid-seventies, the Beach Boys transitioned from being an album-focused band to a purely live act, spurred on by their success following *Endless Summer*. A new manager, James William Guercio, encouraged the band to go back to their roots; the Beach Boys’ live act steadily transitioned from shows of new releases followed by oldies encores to performances dominated by pre-1967 music.<sup>309</sup> A joint tour held with the rock band Chicago, appropriately named “Beachago,” was a financial wake-up call for the band.<sup>310</sup> Outperforming a concurrent tour by the Rolling Stones, it generated over \$7.5 million in revenue and was seen by over 700,000 people, rendering the Beach Boys as lucrative as they had been during their mid-sixties peak.<sup>311</sup> Selling out had never been so profitable.

Contrary to the narrative of the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth, it was Brian himself who secured this shift from “Carl and the Passions” to “America’s Band.” In 1975 his wife Marilyn hired psychotherapist Eugene Landy to treat his mental illness. Landy’s methods, while dubious and unethical (his approach has been described as “round-the-clock therapy”), temporarily succeeded in getting Brian to produce music.<sup>312</sup> Following the success of *Endless Summer*, the Beach Boys sought to exploit their newfound limelight, and called on Brian to produce a new album for the group. Brian’s return to the Beach Boys became the focus of a new publicity campaign: “Brian’s Back!” Brian and the rest of the band were featured in countless

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<sup>309</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 194.

<sup>310</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 347.

<sup>311</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 347; Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 250.

<sup>312</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 200-202; A disturbing contemporary account of Brian’s therapy from Brian himself can be found in David Rensin, “A Conversation With Brian Wilson,” *Oui*, December 1976, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/a-conversation-with-brian-wilson>.

news articles, television appearances, and radio spots.<sup>313</sup> Now that the Beach Boys were hip again, having their resident genius back would only strengthen their commercial standing. Mike and Carl, conscious of Brian’s marketability, recorded “Brian’s Back,” a promotional track.<sup>314</sup> *Rolling Stone*, having shifted decisively in the band’s favor, proclaimed “The Healing of Brother Brian.”<sup>315</sup> The band even appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in a comedic skit in which Brian goes surfing with comedians John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd.<sup>316</sup> It was in this context David Leaf would publish *The Beach Boys and the California Myth* in 1978, a key text of the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth.<sup>317</sup> “There was only one problem,” as Mike recalled in his 2016 memoir. “Brian wasn’t back.”<sup>318</sup>

“[The Beach Boys] really had mixed feelings about [Brian’s comeback] because they knew it would frustrate their own designs for the new music,” recalled Stephen Love, Mike’s brother and Beach Boys manager. “But they probably liked it economically, because they knew it was going to get them a bigger record deal.”<sup>319</sup> Love’s words rang true: in Brian’s interviews from the mid-seventies, he sounds less like the virtuoso of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE* celebrated by rock myth and more like that narrative’s commercial-centered conception of Mike Love. “Yeah, [the Beach Boys] depend on me a lot, come to think of it,” told Brian to *Oui* magazine in 1976. “They couldn’t function without me – they’d flounder. Their stage show is down pat, but they

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<sup>313</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 202, 205-208; Love and Hirsch, *Good Vibrations*, 255-256; Intriguingly enough, “Rock ‘n’ Roll News,” *Creem*, August 1, 1976 captioned one of its pictures of the Beach Boys stating that Brian is a “new member” of the band.

<sup>314</sup> The Beach Boys, “Brian’s Back,” track 24 on *The Endless Harmony Soundtrack*, Capitol Records 72434-96391-2-6, August 11, 1998, accessed April 9, 2021, Spotify.

<sup>315</sup> David Felton, “The Healing of Brother Brian,” *Rolling Stone*, November 4, 1976, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-beach-boys-the-healing-of-brother-brian-190679/>.

<sup>316</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 210.

<sup>317</sup> Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth*.

<sup>318</sup> Love and Hirsch, *Catch a Wave*, 256.

<sup>319</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 207.



need me in the studio.”<sup>320</sup> This may have been true in the late sixties, but Carl, Dennis, Mike and Al knew how to produce successful records by 1976.

Brian even went so far as to diminish the Beach Boys’ early-seventies creative turn, telling *Creem* in 1976 that “[The Beach Boys] were denying that whole [early to mid-sixties] success period. They were going through a rebellious period, and they were actually denying the songs that made them famous...”<sup>321</sup> This is not the Brian of the “genius” narrative, but rather a real, human Brian still bitter at his loss of the band’s leadership. He continues: “they got very arty... but any artist should know that you carry along that which made you famous when you do your show.”<sup>322</sup> The next album, to be produced by Brian, sharply turned away from the new image that Carl had spent years cultivating. It would be an oldies album, the antithesis of the socially-conscious aesthetic of “Carl and the Passions.” Brian himself recognized the emptiness of the enterprise. “Sometimes I really feel like a commodity in a stock market,” he admitted.<sup>323</sup>

If the Beach Boys’ late sixties albums represented good music weighed down by image problems, *15 Big Ones* was the exact opposite. The band’s brand in 1976 was stellar; the music was not up to par, receiving mixed reviews. “What the little deuce coupe is goin’ on round here?” asked the *New Musical Express*.<sup>324</sup> “It all adds up to a compulsive, tentative album that almost sounds unfinished,” wrote Jim Miller of *Rolling Stone*.<sup>325</sup> Emblematic of the band’s creative shift, *15 Big Ones* veered away from the image of “Carl and the Passions” to embrace the nostalgic sensibilities of what would become “America’s Band.” Despite this drastic change,

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<sup>320</sup> Rensin, “A Conversation with Brian Wilson.”

<sup>321</sup> Richard Cromelin, “Brian Wilson: Surf’s Up!,” *Creem*, October 1976, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/brian-wilson-surfs-up>.

<sup>322</sup> Cromelin, “Brian Wilson: Surf’s Up!”

<sup>323</sup> Rensin, “A Conversation with Brian Wilson.”

<sup>324</sup> Max Bell, “The Beach Boys: *15 Big Ones* (Reprise),” *New Musical Express*, July 3, 1976, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-i15-big-onesi-reprise>.

<sup>325</sup> Jim Miller, “15 Big Ones,” *Rolling Stone*, August 12, 1976.

the “Brian’s Back” campaign carried the LP. The album peaked at eight on the *Billboard* charts, and its singles “Rock and Roll Music” and “It’s OK” charted at five and twenty-nine on the *Billboard* charts. The album’s reception might have been mixed, but it sold on the strength of Brian’s name and the Beach Boys brand.

The Beach Boys may have wanted Brian back, but they did not expect him to override the new musical arrangement they had created. The band had agreed to grant Brian full creative control over the production of *15 Big Ones*, but quickly regretted their decision. Carl, having led the band in Brian’s absence, resented having his leadership so abruptly sidelined by his older brother’s return.<sup>326</sup> “It was a great mistake to put Brian in full control,” Dennis admitted. “He was always the absolute producer, but little did he know that in his absence, people grew up, people became as sensitive as the next guy. Why do I relinquish my rights as an artist?”<sup>327</sup> Unfortunately for Carl and Dennis, this was to become the Beach Boys’ new status quo.

In September 1977, in the wake of a great falling-out between Carl and Dennis against Mike and Al, Mike acquired Brian’s corporate vote, allowing him and Al to outvote Carl and Dennis on any and all band decisions.<sup>328</sup> The reign of “Carl and the Passions” was effectively over, as Carl and Dennis could not steer the band back to its early seventies arrangement.<sup>329</sup> While the Wilson brothers would remain in the band, their creative ambitions lay in other projects. Dennis’ *Pacific Ocean Blue*, released in 1977, was received warmly and outsold the Beach Boys’ contemporary efforts, though it only reached ninety-seven on the *Billboard*

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<sup>326</sup> Janet Maslin and Janet Huck, “Brian’s Back,” *Newsweek*, July 19, 1976, <https://troun.tripod.com/newsweek.html>.

<sup>327</sup> Maslin and Huck, “Brian’s Back.”

<sup>328</sup> Badman, *The Beach Boys: The Definitive Diary*, 371.

<sup>329</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 219.

charts.<sup>330</sup> The album’s positive reception demonstrated that Dennis was an astute producer, lyricist, and musician in his own right. The sound of Carl’s *Carl Wilson* (1981) and *Youngblood* (1983) was evocative of *Carl and the Passions* and *Holland*, channeling a more rocking, R&B feel than the Beach Boys’ contemporaneous efforts.<sup>331</sup> Such creative differences affirm the fact that satisfied bands do not break up into solo careers. The post-1976 Beach Boys were a band splintered, its remnants carried by Mike and Al.<sup>332</sup>

Following *15 Big Ones*, the Beach Boys would not put out another Top 40 album until 2012’s *That’s Why God Made the Radio*. The band’s touring act, while consistently popular, betrayed the band’s fraught relations. By 1977, the situation was so tense that Carl and Dennis traveled in separate limousines and airplanes from Mike and Al.<sup>333</sup> This discord worked its way into the band’s new records; with the exception of *The Beach Boys Love You* (Brian headed the LP’s production then retreated from the band again after its release) the rest of the band’s post-1976 albums lacked artistic unity – they sold badly and were received poorly. Bruce’s return to the band in 1978 made little difference. The Beach Boys’ late seventies, eighties, and nineties albums remain footnotes to their history, as they were confused, unsuccessful products pushed out by a band in disarray. “Since 1973, the Beach Boys have been two very different bands,” wrote Geoffrey Himes for *Musician*. “The concert band is a well-oiled, hugely successful

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<sup>330</sup> Wesley Strick, “Dennis Wilson: *Pacific Ocean Blue* (Caribou),” *Creem*, November 1977, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/dennis-wilson-pacific-ocean-blue-caribou>; Mitchell Cohen, “Dennis Wilson: *Pacific Ocean Blue* (Caribou),” *Phonograph Record*, August 1977, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/dennis-wilson-pacific-ocean-blue-caribou>.

<sup>331</sup> Crowley, *Long Promised Road*, 251-253.

<sup>332</sup> John Swenson, “Beach Boys: no more fun, fun, fun,” *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1977, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-not-all-fun-fun-fun>.

<sup>333</sup> Carlin, *Catch A Wave*, 219.

nostalgia industry. The studio band puts out quirkily baroque records that no one but its fiercely devoted cult ever notices.”<sup>334</sup>

Perhaps the only unifying feature of this post-1976 era of Beach Boys history was the band’s rebranding as “America’s Band,” a marketing turn that saw the band embrace nostalgia. Mike had grown to like the band’s transition to oldies, and directed it towards his own right-wing political leanings. A 1981 article in the *Baltimore Sun* emphasized Mike’s dominance over the band, noting how its great touring capacity “strengthens the hand of those in the band – Mike Love and Al Jardine – who want to milk the nostalgia for lucrative returns. It weakens the hand of Carl and Dennis Wilson who advocate a more creative direction.”<sup>335</sup> Under Mike’s direction, the same band that had been left-wing in the early seventies performed for the presidential campaign of Republican George H.W. Bush in the early eighties.<sup>336</sup> Today, Mike’s conservative political views have been derided by Brian, Al, and Beach Boys fans at large for his open support of Donald Trump.<sup>337</sup> However, back in the early 1980s this repositioning of the band was a savvy move, as acknowledged by Beach Boys historian Peter Ames Carlin – “the Beach Boys of the early 1980s provided a perfect sound track for the Reagan era.”<sup>338</sup> Just as the spirit of their times shifted from hip leftism to conservative nostalgia, the Beach Boys went right along with it.

It was over a Fourth of July celebration controversy that the Beach Boys would be most strikingly defined as “America’s Band.” In 1981, the Beach Boys had headlined a free rock

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<sup>334</sup> Geoffrey Himes, “The Beach Boys’ Schizophrenia,” *Musician*, April 1981, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-beach-boys-schizophrenia>.

<sup>335</sup> Geoffrey Himes, “Carl Wilson to Beach Boys: Let’s play ‘80s music,” *Baltimore Sun*, 17 July 1981, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/carl-wilson-to-beach-boys-lets-play-80s-music>.

<sup>336</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 234.

<sup>337</sup> Chris Willman, “Brian Wilson Disavows Trump’s Beach Boys Benefit in California,” *Variety*, October 18, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/brian-wilson-al-jardine-trump-benefit-beach-boys-disavow-california-mike-love-1234808907/>.

<sup>338</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 234.

concert on the National Mall in Washington D.C. and had planned to perform there once again in 1983. However, they were blocked by President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, a right-wing culture warrior who imagined “liberals” and “Americans” as mutually exclusive entities.<sup>339</sup> Watt denounced the band when he proclaimed that certain musical acts “attracted the wrong element... We’re not going to encourage drug abuse and alcoholism as we have in years past.”<sup>340</sup> Watt likened all of rock ‘n’ roll to “drugs” and had likely imagined the Beach Boys as their early left-wing 1970s aesthetic. This statement may have been true of the band then (and perhaps of Brian, Dennis, and Carl in this period), but it was a gross misjudgment of Mike Love’s Beach Boys.

Mike authored a rebuttal to Watt’s ban, claiming a respectability for rock that fit the new image of “America’s Band.” As noted by Pekka Kolehmainen in his article “Reaganized Rock,” Mike’s op-ed claimed rock ‘n’ roll as quintessentially American music.<sup>341</sup> “Our group [is] the American representation of rock and roll,” asserted Mike. “Some people who think of rock ‘n’ roll think of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones... But remember, rock ‘n’ roll started in America, not Britain.”<sup>342</sup> In separate statements, Mike and Bruce defined the Beach Boys’ affiliation with patriotism, Americana, and respectability more explicitly. “Our concerts are very wholesome, from the little children to the middle-aged people like us,” said Bruce. This “family-friendly” framing of the Beach Boys deliberately played into the conservative “family values” embraced by the Republican Party in the 1980s.<sup>343</sup> Mike also reframed the band’s early hits as unmistakably *patriotic*: “we just want to go on singing about good vibrations and fun, fun, fun.

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<sup>339</sup> Kolehmainen, “Reaganized Rock,” 1.

<sup>340</sup> “Surf’s Down! Watt Gives Beach Boys Good Vibrations,” *Radio & Records*, December 23, 1988.

<sup>341</sup> Kolehmainen, “Reaganized Rock,” 8-9.

<sup>342</sup> Mike Love, “Mike Love on Rock ‘n’ Roll: It’s Meant to Unite,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 1983.

<sup>343</sup> Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 367-398.

We sing about patriotic themes, like ‘Surfin’ USA.’”<sup>344</sup> It seemed as if Mike had deliberately forgotten that “Good Vibrations” was a hallmark of psychedelic rock. Performed and imagined by “America’s Band,” the trippy tune was nothing more than family-friendly fun.

The Beach Boys, as it turned out, were beloved by Watt’s superiors. “[The Beach Boys] are my friends and I like their music,” proclaimed Vice President George H.W. Bush in defense of the band. Ronald and Nancy Reagan offered a personal apology to the Beach Boys and an offer to visit the White House.<sup>345</sup> Securely aligned with America’s conservative establishment, the Beach Boys fully embraced the title of “America’s Band.” This arrangement remains today, validated by the band’s touring profits and the production of a chart-topping hit, “Kokomo.” As the arrangement of “America’s Band” triumphed, the old order of “Carl and the Passions” faded. Dennis drowned in a boating “accident” in 1983, then following Carl’s death from cancer in 1998, Mike gained exclusive license to tour as “The Beach Boys.”<sup>346</sup> This arrangement remains today: ever since the eighties, the band has been an oldies act, inexorably focused upon a nostalgic, imagined past.

## Conclusion

While it remains peripheral to most Beach Boys histories, “Carl and the Passions” is the link between the divides of the “two Beach Boys theory.” Following Brian’s fall and preceding Mike’s rise, it was Carl’s leadership and the band’s collaboration that kept the Beach Boys commercially and culturally relevant. Unfortunately, owing to Brian’s historical prominence and

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<sup>344</sup> “Beach Boys Make Light of Temporary Ban,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1983.

<sup>345</sup> Carlin, *Catch a Wave*, 245-246.

<sup>346</sup> Dennis’ death is generally thought to have been the result of an alcohol-induced blackout. However, I believe that, given his substance abuse, marital troubles, and undiagnosed mental illness, that he may have taken his own life.

Mike’s erasure of the band’s post-1967 catalog, this crucial period remains forgotten amongst both Brian devotees and “America’s Band” fans. The band’s turn to a new wave of pop innovation and left-wing politics secured its survival and allowed it to be remembered as it is today. Ironically, *Endless Summer* had derived its success from the commercial and cultural momentum generated by Carl’s leadership of the band that in turn, made “America’s Band” possible.

In turn, the Beach Boys’ continued existence as “America’s Band” kept the Beach Boys name alive, has continued to supply touring revenue and royalties to the band’s surviving members, and paradoxically supported Brian’s resurgence. Starting from his debut solo album *Brian Wilson*, released in 1988, Brian successfully has crafted a solo career for himself, even complete *SMiLE* as the LP *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* with his old collaborator Van Dyke Parks in 2004. In 2012, Capitol released *The Smile Sessions*, a box set that included a reconstructed *SMiLE* from the band’s 1967 session tapes based on Brian’s completion of the album. When considering this achievement, combined with the record-buying public’s newfound appreciation of *Pet Sounds* upon its CD releases in the 1990s, it is no wonder the “Brian Wilson is a genius” myth remains so powerful within Beach Boys discourse.<sup>347</sup>

We would do well to remember the Beach Boys’ post-1967 years in considering the band’s history and American cultural history as a whole. While the Beach Boys might not have dominated the music industry in the seventies, eighties, and nineties as they had in the sixties, the period still weighs heavily in the band’s remembrance. Forced to adapt to shifts in their cultural *zeitgeists*, the Beach Boys reclaimed their success twice over. In doing so, they kept memories of their band alive, helped define the popular cultures of their day, and created competing strands of

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<sup>347</sup> Granata, *Wouldn’t It Be Nice: Brian and the Making of the Beach Boys’ Pet Sounds*, 212-218.

myth that remain key to the American imagination. What cultural principles should the United States value? The uncritical consumerism of the band’s early years? The psychedelia and counterculture of *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE*? The leftism of “Carl and the Passions” or the nostalgic, conservative worldviews of “America’s Band?” These questions remain just as unanswered today as they were in the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties.



### Conclusion: “Summer’s Gone”

“Bands are relationships, and relationships change over time,” recalled Brian in 2016. “The Beach Boys were a family—three brothers, a cousin, and a friend—which gave us a cohesiveness. But I think the key to our success was respecting one another’s ideas and opinions... each guy had his own part to sing.”<sup>348</sup> It was this arrangement that led the Beach Boys to triumph in the sixties, weather through the seventies, and redefine themselves in the eighties. In a way that quite no other band has, the Beach Boys have remained an active presence within the American pop cultural *zeitgeist* for nearly half a century. Even into the twenty-first century, the band remains full of surprises. In 2004, Brian finally completed *SMiLE*, an album thought to be forever lost to time, to great critical and commercial acclaim.<sup>349</sup> Indeed, as Mike and Bruce’s iteration of the band persists and keeps its memory alive, there still is no telling when the story of the Beach Boys will end. Brian and Al, too, continue to tour and make music. Perhaps we will get a sixtieth anniversary celebration after all, and “Summer’s Gone,” the final track of 2012’s *That’s Why God Made the Radio* will no longer serve as the definitive end to the band’s musical history.

Whether they were the Pendletones, “Carl and the Passions,” “America’s Band,” or their classic lineup, the Beach Boys have lasted as a cultural institution for their ability to endlessly adapt to the fickle tastes of the American consumer. That the band’s history is so divided by memory and myth is a testament to this fact. Beneath the simplistic trappings of the “two Beach Boys theory” lies a deeply compelling story of artistry, consumerism, labor, popular culture, and memory that continues on today. It is this story I have sought to highlight in this thesis, and it is an important one, for it speaks to the import of American cultural history. The Beach Boys’ long,

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<sup>348</sup> Beard, “A Life’s Work: An Interview with Brian Wilson.”

<sup>349</sup> Brian Wilson, *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, September 28, 2004, Nonesuch Records 79846-2, compact disk.

unfinished story teaches us how a group of blue-collar guys curated what Americans listened to, thought, and enjoyed for nearly half a century. The Beach Boys defined American *zeitgeists* just as much as they were defined by them. Their endless summer may one day come to an end, but the band’s history will live on in the hearts and minds of all those who consume, craft, and critique American popular culture.

## Appendix

**Figure 1: The Beach Boys pose in Pendletons<sup>350</sup>**



**Figure 2: *Surfin' Safari* LP<sup>351</sup>**



<sup>350</sup> Murphy, *Becoming the Beach Boys*, 62.

<sup>351</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surfin' Safari*.

Figure 3: *Shut Down Volume 2* LP<sup>352</sup>



Figure 4: The Beach Boys performing in their characteristic striped shirts<sup>353</sup>



<sup>352</sup> The Beach Boys, *Shut Down Volume 2*.

<sup>353</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 21.



Figure 5: Brian’s Centerfold<sup>354</sup>

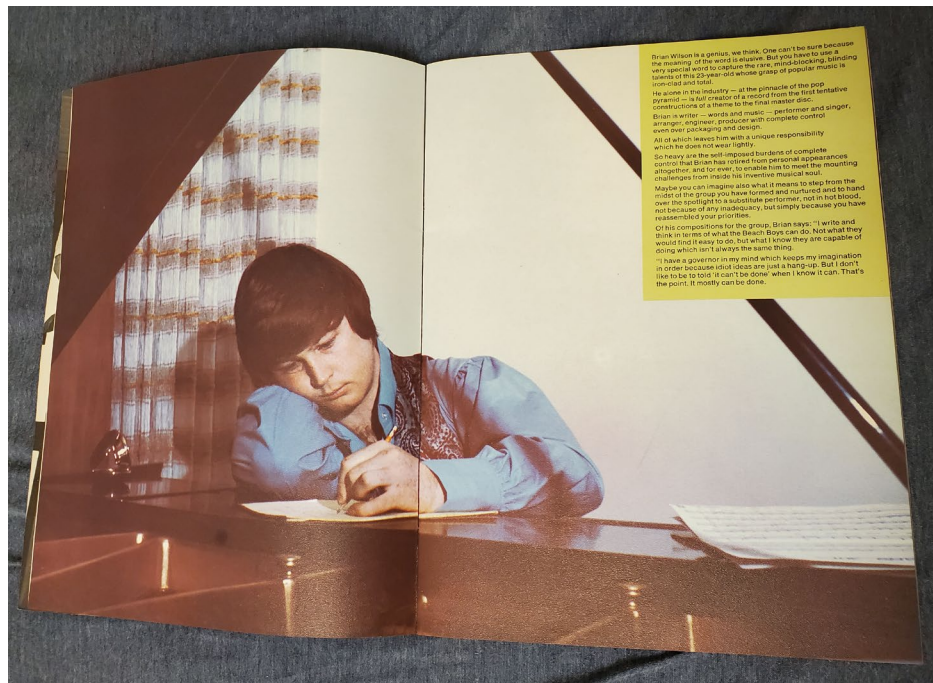
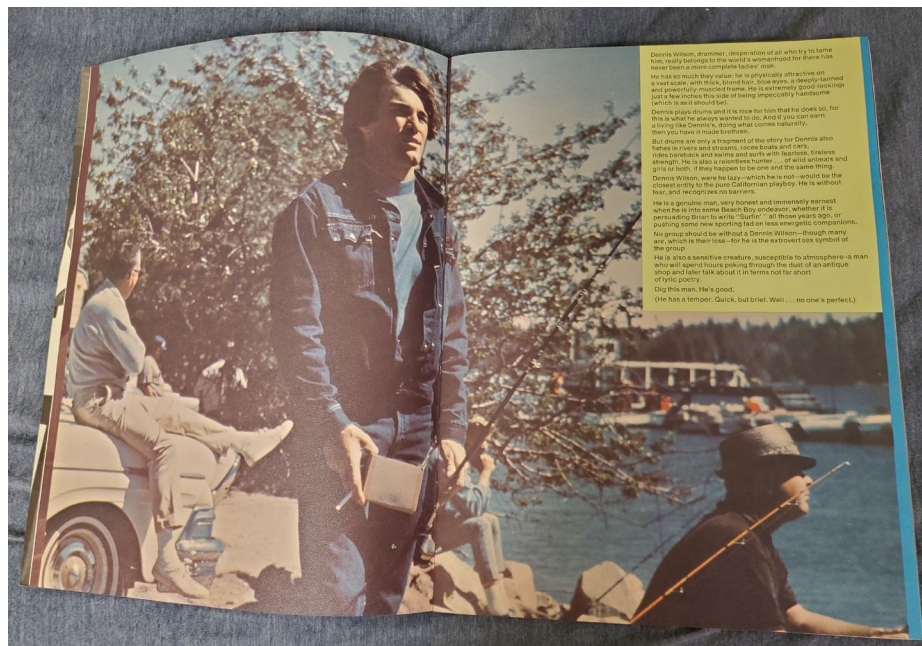


Figure 6: Dennis’ Centerfold<sup>355</sup>



<sup>354</sup> *The Beach Boys*, author's collection.

<sup>355</sup> *The Beach Boys*, author's collection.

Figure 7: Mike’s Centerfold<sup>356</sup>

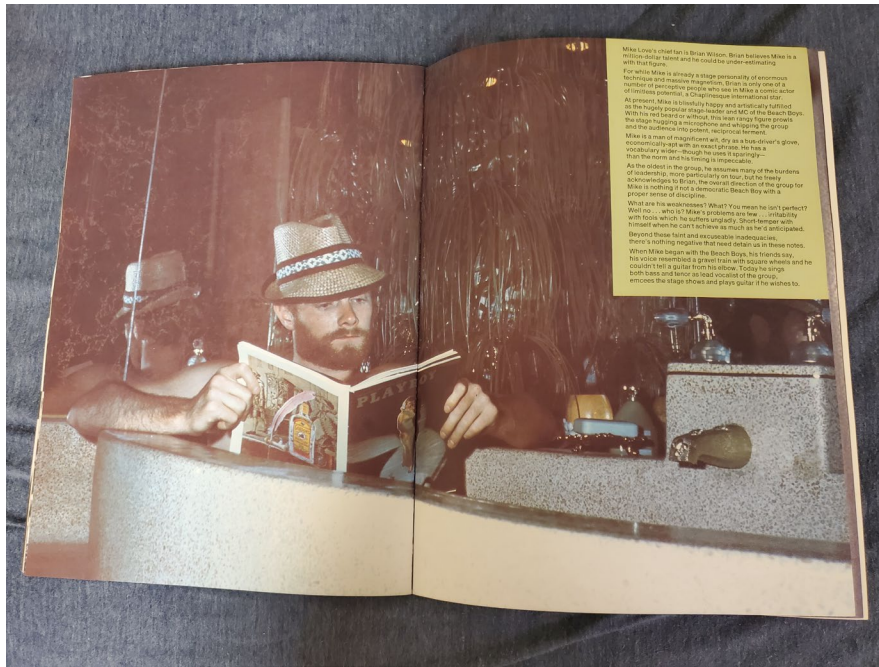


Figure 8: The Beach Boys performing in their matching ice cream-colored suits<sup>357</sup>

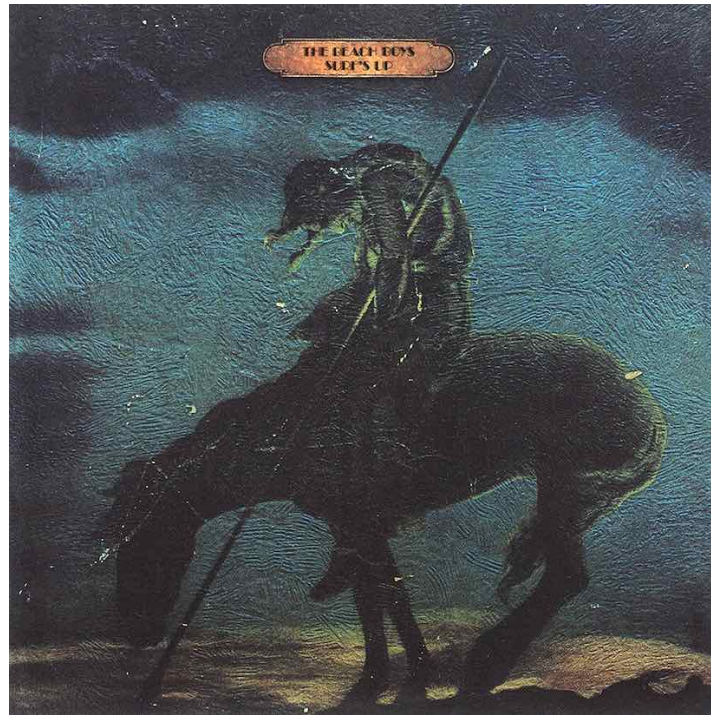


<sup>356</sup> *The Beach Boys*, author’s collection.

<sup>357</sup> Preiss, *The Beach Boys*, 59.



**Figure 9: *Surf’s Up* LP<sup>358</sup>**



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<sup>358</sup> The Beach Boys, *Surf's Up*.

## A Note on Sources

This thesis makes use of lyrics and filmed performances. As cited in this thesis, I believe they fall under the protection of Fair Use. Other than Fair Use, I make no claims regarding their use.

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