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Wouldn't it have been nice?

Last week, Brian Wilson performed the Beach Boys' unreleased album "Smile" for the first time. How did the 1966 concept LP become the stuff of myth, anyway?

BY JESSE JARNOW

Had it been completed in 1966 as planned, "Smile," the Beach Boys' legendary unreleased album, would have begun with a song called "Prayer": a minute and a half of wordlessly angelic brotherly harmony, pure and rising. The band's leader, Brian Wilson, called "Smile" his "teenage symphony to God," and despite the mess that his abandoned masterpiece became, there's no mistaking "Prayer." The song is an invocation. It must be the beginning, or it must not be at all.

According to "Look! Listen! Vibrate! Smile!" -- Dominic Priore's exhaustive sourcebook of clippings and "Smile" arcana -- Wilson began tracking "Prayer" several days after beginning the "Smile" sessions in earnest in October 1966. Most of that summer had been devoted to the 18 studio dates that yielded the Beach Boys' classic "Good Vibrations," Wilson's triumphant so-called pocket symphony, which -- in turn -- had followed the "Pet Sounds" LP, the ethereally tender response to the Beatles' "Rubber Soul" that he had crafted in early 1966.

All in all, 1966 was a busy year for Wilson. By the end of it, however, "Prayer" wasn't finished. It wouldn't be until November 1968, when it was completed for a different Beach Boys album, "20/20." And though Wilson promised Capitol Records that "Smile" would be ready for release on Jan. 1, 1967 -- **cover art was prepared** and the label began a promotional campaign -- it wasn't finished by the end of that year, either. Nor, for that matter, by the end of that decade, the three that followed, or even the century.

Eventually, the "Smile" reels leaked, and over the years a network of Beach Boys geeks have traded reconstructed versions of the LP like Deadheads exchanging live tapes. Those fan versions, along with the many promises of "Smile's" true completion -- it was a stipulation of the band's contract with Reprise Records in the early '70s, and tracks were unearthed for a possible touch-up in the late '80s -- make it difficult to know what tense to describe the album in. The past ("Smile" contained several ambitious song-suites co-written with lyricist Van Dyke Parks...) is too etched in stone for an album never finished; the present ("Smile" is rock's first concept album, pre-dating "Sgt. Pepper"...) too inaccurate. It is a poetic irony of grammar, then, that the only appropriate voice is the future perfect.

But now, "Smile" is taking a big step toward the present tense. Last Friday, in London, Wilson performed the album for the first time in front of a live audience. He will repeat the performance in a tour through Europe over the next few months and, in the fall, the United States. Wilson and the 18-piece band that backed him received a five-minute standing ovation after their London performance, but they are playing against history. Wilson's voice is no longer what it once was, and the brotherly harmonies literally do not exist anymore. His brothers are dead (Dennis, via a drunken drowning in 1983; Carl, from cancer, in 1998) and Wilson is estranged from the other two founding Beach Boys (cousin Mike Love amid a snarl of songwriting legalities, and former neighborhood friend Alan Jardine in a lawsuit over remarks made in Wilson's ghostwritten 1991 autobiography -- "Wouldn't It Be Nice?" -- produced under the watch of Wilson's then-Svengali psychiatrist Eugene Landy).

Then again, except for their vocals, the Beach Boys barely played on "Smile," anyway. The later-named Wrecking Crew, a conglomeration of Hollywood's best session musicians, including drummer Hal Blaine and bassist Carol

Kaye, performed the music. Mike Love was especially opposed to the project, deriding Wilson's "drug music" at every turn, urging Brian to stick with the successful girls 'n' cars formula. The wound of their leader's seemingly abandoning them at their peak still festers -- leaving the Beach Boys family in a deep decades-long feud of love, money, death and sex -- and will make difficult any stand-alone release of the original sessions.

Internal band strife is only one explanation for why "Smile" never got made. Wilson's struggles with addiction (to drugs, to food), the Beach Boys lawsuit against Capitol Records for back royalties, and their attempt to start their own label and install a studio in Brian's mansion also played a role. Somewhere, "Smile" got lost. That somewhere was probably inside the song "Heroes and Villains."

"Heroes and Villains," most likely, would have followed "Prayer." Though it was eventually issued in shortened form as a follow-up single to "Good Vibrations," the song began as something grander. Some versions of the story have it taking up 18 minutes and filling the projected LP's entire first side. In every possible way, it was symbolic of the album's successes and failures.

"Heroes and Villains" was one of several song umbrellas conceived by Wilson and Parks. Structurally, it was a surreal comic opera, with intertwining musical and lyrical themes that drew on American history and popular melody. Realistically, it was a collection of song fragments with repeating motifs, such as "Bicycle Rider," whose "Bicycle rider see, see what you've done / To the church of the American Indian" chorus evoked Manifest Destiny and the blues number "C.C. Rider" in one trippy breath. As he did with "Good Vibrations," Wilson wrote "Heroes and Villains" in sections, planning to assemble them later. He never did.

Lewis Shiner, in his novel "Glimpses," about a time-traveling stereo repairman who can conjure the great lost rock albums by visiting their sessions, posits that Wilson had a moment of true inspiration with "Smile" and simply lingered too long in capturing it.

"Glimpses" is an exhilarating read, and absorbing oneself in books like Priore's and Shiner's is a good way to begin to understand what the album might have been. From there, a true "Smile" fanatic intent on unearthing the possibilities of the past might -- in one obsessive burst -- pour through the accumulated bootlegs, listen with Wilson and Parks' concepts in mind, match melodies to ideas like an archaeologist reassembling a crumbled pediment, feed the remains into the computer, and chop and paste for hours, naming the different sections based on lyrics and scenes ("In the cantina...") and jury-rigged classifications ("American pastoral"), until "Smile" eased its way back into existence.

"It was getting to me psychologically," said Mark Spano, an audio engineer who put together his own "Smile." "I started to feel very frustrated. And if I was getting down, I could only imagine what Brian must have felt." Spano called on all his expertise to make his version of "Smile." "Pitch correction, time compression, whatever it took, I had to do it, just to see if it could be done."

Listening to the "Smile" sessions is a revelation. It's startling to suddenly realize that one can actually *hear* Wilson at work in stunning stereo fidelity, the music warbling like a time machine in reentry as the reel-to-reel flutters on and off at the end of each segment. The sections flit by, melodic idea after melodic idea -- cinematic fantasias, folk songs, barbershop vocal arrangements -- Main Street USA rendering itself in vivid psychedelic color. "Smile" is the album you'd want with you while doing serious drugs at Disneyland. But who would want to do that? Nonetheless, "Smile" makes the prospect alluring.

Paul Williams, who -- as a teenager -- founded the pre-Rolling Stone rock magazine **Crawdaddy** and visited Wilson in Los Angeles over Christmas 1966, explains the genesis of the "Smile" myth, which he helped perpetuate in his

magazine and his book "How Deep Is the Ocean?": "I think that the basic enthusiasm of people like [writer] Richard Goldstein and me and others who heard parts of 'Smile' when it was being recorded [was over] the beauty of individual small pieces, movements, of music that Brian had executed in parts in the studio. [They were] breath-taking and inspiring."

Williams, who went nearly 20 years between his initial encounter with "Smile" and his next hearing of the tapes, says he is "happy with ... fragments that were not attempts to actually be an album sequence, though I totally empathize with and respect fans [who compile their own versions of the album]. It's part of the game, like Mr. Potato Head: Here are the pieces, now make your own 'Smile.' It's partly as though everybody's given a few of the elements and then they're told, 'This was intended to be something great,' and they naturally project what it could be based on their enthusiasm for what they've heard."

They likely also project their notions of what a great album should be, fitting (and forcing) the "Smile" tracks over ideas of album flow that didn't yet exist in 1966: what should be positioned where and how. If somebody thinks a great album should segue from track to track, with a quiet song at the end of Side 1, then -- by golly -- his "Smile" will segue from track to track with a quiet song at the end of Side 1 (probably "Wonderful").

With file-trading protocols like **BitTorrent** making it easier to distribute new editions of "Smile" en masse, and technologies like Apple's **GarageBand** making it easier to recombine them, one can easily imagine one's own "Smile" being sent out into the world and finding its way back. It gives literal meaning to the fairly hokey quote Wilson added to the back cover of "Smiley Smile," the half-assed album the Beach Boys put out instead of "Smile" in 1967 ("a bunt instead of a grand slam," admitted Carl Wilson): "The Smile That You Send Out Returns to You." "Smile," then, is a reflection of what makes listeners happy, which is what Wilson intended to begin with.

But Wilson, who has in recent years been playing with the '60s pop revivalists **the Wondermints**, has been reluctant to perform material from "Smile" himself. "He said it reminded him of a bad time and just didn't want touch it," says Wondermints multi-instrumentalist Probyn Gregory. "Finally, we started sneaking a few of the songs into the set, easing them in."

Then, last fall, Gregory says, "Van Dyke Parks and Brian got together and finished up some of the fragments and added some things. They put some melodies to unfinished tracks, and words to some things that hadn't had words put on them. And it all sounds like it's a part of the piece, part of the period."

Gregory is reserved about the prospects of making a definitive "Smile" record. "I was against the recording of 'Pet Sounds Live!' for the same reason," he asserts. "No one will ever sound like the Beach Boys. We're trying to be as faithful as possible, but please don't compare us vocally to the Beach Boys, or to the Wrecking Crew, or to the sound of those microphones, or anything [Brian] did down at Western Recorders back in the old days."

To the extent that battles can ever really rage between dorks lovingly obsessed with music recorded nearly 40 years ago, the battle over "Smile" does so. In addition to threads on discussion boards like the **Smile Shop**, Jeff Turrentine **weighed in on Slate**: "No band of touring musicians and singers, even one as talented as the group that backed up Wilson in 2000, will come close to capturing the magic that these kids from the ticky-tacky suburbs of Los Angeles were able to achieve in the studio [then]. To return to this now-mythic collection of songs is to gild the rarest, wildest lily in pop music. 'Smile' is dead; long live 'Smile.'"

Paul Williams disagrees. "If you are not imprisoned by your own or other people's expectations, [the old material] is just a jumping-off place for creative work," he says. "Brian is, on the face of it, completely free of any of the pressure

that could have been on him over the years regarding 'Smile,' because -- just as for any other artist -- when he's doing something as a live show, he's free to do with it whatever comes to him and whatever works for the show right now. Of course, in doing that, he also gets to discover what the music is for him right now, and that directs him towards the freedom to [possibly] make a record out of it."

"Smile" and its story appeal to fans for many reasons. It is drama spread over nearly 40 years. The stakes are high: Somebody tried to achieve something momentous and didn't. One fears "Smile" because he fears failing at his own life's work. But that fear exists only for the same reason that "Smile" attracts him to begin with: Everything about it reeks of potential energy. One fantasizes of getting to the brink of achievement, but one is equally terrified of collapsing there, suddenly unable to do what had once been second nature. If people project notions of what a great album should be, then Brian Wilson becomes the avatar for it, one's own fortunes lashed to his journey. It's difficult not to root for him.

If "Smile" were to be released tomorrow, it would likely be a blip on the cultural radar. "Frankly," Paul Williams says, "I'm not sure what impact 'Sgt. Pepper' would have if it were released today, just because contexts change. 'Smile' was a project that was sincerely and earnestly the next step in a body of work. It was specifically the next step in a sequence that we'd heard as 'Pet Sounds' and 'Good Vibrations.' I think that it's inevitable that there will be a lot of good music in 'Smile' in whatever form it takes. Obviously, that doesn't guarantee sales, but I think it's just natural that it will be listened to respectfully by a lot of different people, most significantly musicians."

Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan owns an edition on colored vinyl. "Man, it's *everything*," raves Will Cullen Hart, founding member of the Wilson-devotee collective **the Elephant 6 Recording Company** and current leader of **the Circulatory System**. "Conceptually, the musical stuff [is amazing], the idea of the sections, each of them being a colorful world within itself. [Wilson's] stuff could be so cinematic and then he could just drop down to a toy piano going *plink, plink, plink* and then, when you least expect it, it can just fly back into a million gorgeous vocals. Of course, you've got Van Dyke Parks' lyrics..."

Williams observes, "It's ironic that we're talking about the [first] great album that never was at a time that the very form of the pop album is itself falling on hard times." While this is certainly true, the return of the single has also brought the return of the producer, with musicians such as Timbaland and the Neptunes entering the spotlight. Wilson is a precursor to them just as much as to today's indie rockers, working so successfully as he did (for a time) within the California scene's studio system, employing every modern tool at his disposal.

Ultimately, "Smile" is a patriotic album. The Beach Boys were a patriotic band. But "Smile" oozes with a different kind of patriotism, calling on American nostalgia the same way the Beatles employed music hall on "Sgt. Pepper." Despite celebrating an America that was great then and is, goshdarnit, great now, it points a ring-bejeweled finger toward a blissfully ethereal future with Uncle Sam as spirit guide. Profoundly uncynical, if "Smile" were to be released now with the attention it would have received in 1966, it might be deeply relevant as an album to rally behind for malcontent liberals accused of being America-haters for their beliefs.

Had it been completed in 1966 as planned, "Smile," the Beach Boys' legendary unreleased album, would have ended with a song titled "Surf's Up." It still might -- preferably one that weds Brian's 1966 transcendent solo vocal to backing tracks and an ending finished by Carl in 1971. The song crests gorgeously before swooping down to a lone Brian: "Surf's up, mmmhmmhmmhmm, aboard a tidal wave...", "all the longing in the world -- of an individual, of a member of a family, of an American -- somehow evident in that middle "hmm." And then the Beach Boys are singing, all of them, absorbing Brian's lead in a levee-breaking swirl of harmony. If the opening to "Surfin' USA" posited the United States as a coast-to-coast ocean, then the ending to "Surf's Up" -- and "Smile" -- posits the wave that will

make it so and pulls us out to sea with it.

-- Jesse Jarnow