

I just wasn't made for these times

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22 October 2003

I'm taking a break from bitching about economists today to actually speak positively of somebody. Namely, Brian Wilson, head of the Beach Boys.

In today's episode, I'll repeat Brian's oft-repeated story, since its fable-like qualities are very applicable to us here in the modern day.

So: born and raised in Hawthorne, CA, which is somewhere near LAX. Played the guitar a lot, listened to the radio a lot, sang with his brothers a lot. Thus began the Beach Boys's teen pop group phase, which you're familiar with: Surfin' USA, California Girls, Help Me Rhonda, I Get Around. The lyrics were basically empty, but they sounded good, and they all included four part harmonies which, like all great art, seems effortless but is really hard to compose and execute.

After the first album, Brian was given a lot of leeway in production. I.e., he got to decide how stuff was recorded, who played the instruments, how things were mixed, and so on—stuff you don't think about but which matters a lot in the final product. For example, Brian Wilson was both deaf in one ear and a control freak. Bothered by how you could move your speakers around in the room and get a different sound, he mixed everything down to monaural, guaranteeing that it'll sound the same everywhere. Compare with The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper*, which you'll barely recognize when you hear it at that coffee shop with only one speaker.

This went on for a while, and Brian got more and more into the production side while the other Beach Boys went out and toured Asia. Brian got good, culminating with *Pet Sounds*, which used all of his abilities as a writer and producer and vocal arranger. Here's Paul McCartney, bassist for a competing band, on the album: “[it] blew me out of the water. ... no one is educated musically until they've heard that album.” (full interview).

So *Pet Sounds* sold lots of copies and got wide acclaim, and if you don't have a copy, Paul says you're uneducated. Wilson also liked the work, described it as writing “teenage symphonies to God”. He followed *Pet Sounds* up with that short masterpiece, *Good Vibrations*. Yeah, the oldies staple. The one from the Sunkist commercial. That dumb little song cost \$50,000 (in 1966 dollars, or \$284,000 in 2003 dollars), and Brian produced 90 hours of tape which he eventually mixed down to the final three minute and 37 second version of the song which has been so painfully overplayed.

So your next homework assignment is to go listen to that darn song again. It's unfortunately weighed down with a lot of baggage—thanks a lot, Sunkist—but there are a lot of things which stand out which probably don't come to mind when you play the song in your head. First, there's the theramin, which, just by itself, would have made the song innovative. Then notice the entirely un-pop percussion, with an arhythmic drum adding color to the main beat, which is being played on a *cello*. The song vaguely follows a verse-chorus thing, but not quite: like the usual post-adolescent symphony, it includes a number of movements which are thematically related, but which basically stand up on their own as musical pieces.

None of these were pop song features, although there's nothing surprising about them when we hear them in a pop song now. This track defined modern music, and it took five months and everything Brian (age 24) had to put it together.

Now, part of how it went about defining modern music is through its influence on that other band, the Beatles. While getting over their Pet Sounds-induced reverie, they put out *Revolver* [*Pet Sounds*: May 1966; *Revolver*: August 1966, so it was mostly done before *Pet Sounds* came out], famous for being their first truly experimental work. As the story goes, Brian and the Beatles were now in head-to-head competition on equal footing. Brian was working on his next album, *Smile*, while the Beatles were working on *Sgt Pepper*. It was a close competition: if you've heard the stuff from *Smile*, most of which he finished (ask me nicely and I'll get you a copy), it's pretty great stuff, which maintains his symphonic standards.

Then Brian broke down. About two weeks before the Beatles put out their album, Brian just cancelled *Smile*. He needed to put out his album first, he was the perfectionist who recorded 90 hours of tape for *Good Vibrations*, and the two were clearly not compatible. So he gave up. He got depressed, gained lots of weight, and put out some frankly crappy songs (“doughy lumps, stomach pumps, enemas too/ That's what you get when you eat that way.”).

And that's how we got to today's situation: we in the public have relegated the Beach Boys to cute boy band status, and their closest competitors have led a blessed life ever since.

So, dear reader, there is the story of the rise and fall of Brian Wilson, as told by me. You get to draw your own moral for today.