

RECORDING REVIEWS

Brian Wilson Presents Smile. Our Prayer/Gee, Heroes and Villains, Roll Plymouth Rock, Barnyard, Old Master Painter/You are My Sunshine, Cabin Essence, Wonderful, Song For Children, Child is Father of the Man, Surf's Up, I'm in Great Shape/I Wanna Be Around/Workshop, Vega-Tables, On a Holiday, Wind Chimes, Mrs. O'Leary's Cow, In Blue Hawaii, Good Vibrations. Brian Wilson, vocals and keyboards, with accompanying musicians. Produced and arranged by Brian Wilson. Booklet includes song lyrics and notes by David Leaf. Nonesuch 79846-2, 2004.

Thirty-eight years after its inception in the studio, Brian Wilson's *Smile* was finally released in September 2004. Or was it? Is this Nonesuch disc truly the much-anticipated, ever-delayed Beach Boys album originally scheduled to appear in late 1966 or early 1967? Is it the exceptionally ambitious, rumor-ridden project that was frequently called "the most famous rock album never made"?

In the strict sense, it isn't that album, and it couldn't possibly be. First of all, this new release is not even a Beach Boys album; Brian Wilson's two brothers are dead, and he is no longer working with the other surviving members of the group. Although much material for the *Smile* project was recorded by the Beach Boys in 1966–67, Wilson elected to create all the music anew, with his current touring band, for this 2004 resurrection of the album. It's also an established fact that the original *Smile* was never completed—and never could be. The album was abandoned in 1967 amid acrimony over the project among the Beach Boys themselves, an atmosphere fueled by Wilson's increasing despondency and instability. In effect, *Smile* floundered in the attempt to make it a Beach Boys album; its basic conception was the fruit of a collaboration not between Brian Wilson and his bandmates, but between Wilson and lyric writer Van Dyke Parks, a collaboration with which the other Beach Boys as a group were obviously uncomfortable. What arguably gives the current release of *Smile* its most substantial claim to "authenticity" is the recent reunion of Parks with Wilson to finish the project.¹

Brian Wilson's precipitous decline into years of psychological trouble and severely compromised creativity following the collapse of *Smile* in 1967 is a well-known and much-lamented story. Although his recent recovery and surprisingly impressive return to live performing have provided an unexpected happy turn to the tale, it still may be asked: How could this much older and very different musician even be expected to recall accurately in 2004 his vast original conception for *Smile*, let alone execute it under obviously and drastically altered conditions?

One could argue about these and other issues surrounding *Smile* ad infinitum. The approach to *Smile* is strewn with pitfalls for the critic and—as someone who has known, loved, and written about the available music from the 1966–67 sessions for this album—I cannot help but be aware of this. Against a natural tendency simply to overenthusiasm about the final release of *Smile*, or to celebrate the healing of

¹ For those interested in the history of this album, I recommend the Showtime documentary *Beautiful Dreamer: The Story of "Smile"* (2004), written and directed by David Leaf, and the DVD *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* (2005), directed by David Leaf.

many old wounds that this release must signify for Wilson himself, is balanced an equally natural tendency to carp about the final ordering of the material, about the character of the “new” music on the 2004 album, or that a favorite excerpt from the earlier sessions might have been altered or abandoned. After the years of delay, rumor, and mythologizing, its appearance at last would now seem to leave *Smile* unfortunately ripe for debunking—whether the focus is upon the entire project or just its 2004 realization.

Argument pales, however, before the impressive reality of *Smile* 2004. For Wilson has done as much as could realistically be hoped—and more—with this new release. The re-recordings of the 1966–67 *Smile* material have been undertaken with great sensitivity to the conceptions evident on the original tapes and with remarkable fidelity to the actual sounds on those tapes (as a comparison with the original session material available on the box set *Good Vibrations: Thirty Years of the Beach Boys* will demonstrate).² Above and beyond this, Wilson has built upon, enhanced, and ordered this material to create a unique work whose ambition and achievement surpass even the stuff of many years’ rumors. The *Smile* music is now organized into three “suites”—consisting of six, four, and seven “movements,” respectively (and some of these movements are themselves sequences of short individual songs). The “suites” are significantly integrated on an individual basis and are also strikingly linked to one another by virtue of shared musical and lyrical ideas. If I were to characterize the phenomenon of *Smile* 2004 in all its aspects, from the fact that it is here at all to the scope of its success, one word that comes to mind—in all of its possible meanings—is “fabulous.”

I agree with David Leaf, who writes in concluding his concise and incisive notes for the album’s accompanying booklet that “the best thing we can do is listen to this music without the burden of history.” Even on its own terms, however, *Smile* is so unusual that finding means to describe it to those encountering the album afresh is a challenging task. Fortunately, there is one song on the album that will be familiar to almost everyone possessing just a casual acquaintance with American popular music: “Good Vibrations,” which appears here as *Smile*’s grand finale, and which I will use as a point of reference in discussing the other selections. (It was in fact the release of “Good Vibrations” as a single in late 1966, and the extraordinary popular success of this innovative song, that helped provoke such anticipation for *Smile*.)

“Good Vibrations” has become such a recognizable icon of American pop that it might prove a strain to realize how utterly unprecedented and remarkable a creation it was—and is.³ In terms of the mainstream rock styles of the 1960s (and later), virtually everything about “Good Vibrations” is exceptional: instrumentation, harmonic progressions, vocal textures, and above all form. These same observations

² The Beach Boys, *Good Vibrations: Thirty Years of the Beach Boys*, Capitol C2 0777 7 81294 2 4 (5 CDs), 1993.

³ The version of “Good Vibrations” heard on *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* differs from the well-known 1966 single, but not sufficiently to affect the character and formal shape of the song as described here. The “new” lyrics and the expansion of the concluding sections do not in fact represent twenty-first century revisions, but restore material originally recorded during the 1966 sessions for “Good Vibrations” (as documented on the *Good Vibrations* box set). Whether Wilson had it in mind from the outset to present differing “single” and “album” versions of the song will probably remain unknown.

apply to *Smile* as a whole, and they raise an important point. Asking whether *Smile* is “the greatest rock album never made” (or now, perhaps, ever made) is asking the wrong question entirely, for *Smile* has very little to do with rock. The famous chorus of “Good Vibrations” (“I’m pickin’ up good vibrations . . .”) is as close as *Smile* ever gets to rock music, and it’s not all that close. Using “Good Vibrations” to represent a “typical” 1960s rock song would make about as much sense as using Charles Ives’s “The Fourth of July” to demonstrate “typical” American orchestral music of the 1910s! On the other hand, “The Fourth of July” is an exemplary piece to illustrate the compositional approach of the unique Mr. Ives, and “Good Vibrations” in turn is a fine example of the musical practices that inform Mr. Wilson’s unique *Smile*. Over the course of the album, these practices include the employment of an extraordinary range of instrumental and vocal sounds (from those of guitars, keyboards, and texted sung lines to those of tannerin, whistles, vocalise, “nonsense” syllables, and “animal” noises); the use of a wide-ranging, diatonically based pitch language that embraces traditionally consonant and more dissonant structures, along with both conventional and unconventional voice leading and voicings of chords, and the freedom to obscure and to shift the sense of tonality frequently (even within single songs); and, above all, an open-ended approach to form.

This open-ended approach to form can be illustrated by “Good Vibrations” itself. The song starts out with a clear verse-chorus structure, but after two presentations of this basic unit the song strikes out in new directions, never returning to its original key or point of departure. Instead we hear elaborations, variations, and development of the chorus material, interrupted by some completely new music linked to the rest mainly by virtue of its text (“Gotta keep those lovin’ good vibrations a-happenin’ with her”). This organizational strategy—of starting a song with a traditional verse-chorus pattern and then opening out in a non-linear, unanticipated way—is directly employed for two other large-scale selections on the album, “Cabin Essence” and “Surf’s Up.” What is much more significant, however, is the way in which the general concept of open-ended form infuses the album as a whole and allows it to function as a whole. Wilson avoids gestures of traditional closure (in terms of both pitch organization and sectional shape) throughout *Smile*; as a result, individual songs do not end in the conventional sense, and merge into others by means of transitions or direct elisions. Furthermore, material initially heard in a particular song may recur (in a literal, varied, or developed fashion) later in another, as if the first song never actually finished, but was merely interrupted temporarily by new material. These techniques yield multiple sources of large-scale unity and help make *Smile* a “work” in the full sense of that term.

Arguably, the only remotely conventional aspect of “Good Vibrations” is its lyrics, which treat of romantic attraction. But these lyrics, unlike those for all the other major songs on *Smile*, were not written by Van Dyke Parks. I have avoided so far discussing Parks’s lyrics—not at all to suggest that they are an unimportant element of *Smile*, but rather because understanding Wilson’s musical goals and innovations is an essential prerequisite to appreciating the appropriateness of the lyrics Parks provided for him.

Just as Wilson cultivates open-ended song forms in *Smile*, Parks basically eschews linear narrative and sometimes even literal sense, favoring evocation over

traditional, confined meaning. All this might have led to ponderous pretension, musically and lyrically, but what consistently redeems *Smile* from being torpedoed by its own ambitions is the pure, ingenuous fascination with sound shared by both Parks and Wilson. No matter how complex its formal conception might be, Wilson's music always respects the listener's hunger for engaging sounds; analogously, no matter how elusive their meaning, Parks's lyrics always sound intriguing and sing effectively. Indeed, the ultimate meaning of lyrics like these, the concluding lines from "Heroes and Villains," may lie in the sheer delight they evince in playing with sound: "I been in this town so long, so long to the city / I'm fit with the stuff to ride in the rough—and Sonny, down snuff, I'm alright by the Heroes and Villains." Wilson's setting of these lines creates melodic phrasing that enhances their effects of alliteration, assonance, and rhyme. And when, in "Surf's Up," Wilson sets Parks's "Columnated ruins domino!" to an astounding line that steps up "columnated" to reach a soaring falsetto climax and descent on "domino," it is difficult not to be struck by such a remarkable mating of word and tune, of sound and sense.

Wilson's employment of innovative, even radical techniques in *Smile* is counter-balanced to some degree by his occasional quotation of brief passages from more conventional songs by other composers; tribute of sorts is thus paid to the traditions of rhythm and blues ("Gee"), Tin Pan Alley ("Old Master Painter" and "I Wanna Be Around"), and country music ("You Are My Sunshine," heard in a startling melodic and harmonic transformation). Of course, the unexpected use of such quotations in an album of this nature is itself arguably innovative, even radical. Be that as it may, what might be called this "historical" aspect of *Smile* is also reflected in several ways in Parks's lyrics. American history is evoked throughout "Roll Plymouth Rock," in the scenes of the Old West in "Heroes and Villains," and with the prairie and railroad imagery in "Cabin Essence." Parks also quotes the lyrics of other songs in passing—offering hints to which Wilson's music sometimes remains oblivious ("there shall be peace in the valley" in "Heroes and Villains"), sometimes responds obliquely ("home on the range" in "Cabin Essence"), and sometimes responds literally ("Are you sleeping? Brother John?" in "Surf's Up"). The "historical" theme is emphasized in the *Smile* booklet by the typography used for the lyrics and by the pictures accompanying them, which recall early American-style readers.

Smile is a rare kind of achievement: a truly avant-garde work employing materials based in accessible vernacular styles. While the remarkable talent and innovative vision that inform the album would seem undeniable, I can understand those listeners who might find it only a strange mélange, a celebration of quirky idiosyncrasy. Certainly not everything on the album works equally well. There is the occasional throwaway transition, like the downward vocal slide that links "Roll Plymouth Rock" to "Barnyard," and the latter selection demonstrates that *Smile* occasionally can be just plain silly (although, given the album's title, the leavening of the serious with the frivolous might well be an integral part of the game plan). Nevertheless, there is scarcely a moment on this extraordinary album that isn't aurally beguiling. This is due in no small part to the great skill and dedication of the eighteen-member band assisting Wilson; these musicians' contributions in bringing his complex conception to life cannot be overpraised. The splendid recorded sound does full justice to everyone involved.

In lieu of any further attempt to describe Brian Wilson's unique work, I simply urge anyone intrigued by what I've written here to go listen to it. There are few album-length musical experiences that provide as much, or as consistent, sonic variety and delight as *Smile*. To conclude by quoting one of Van Dyke Parks's memorable puns, *Smile* is, in every sense of the word(s), "one, one, wonderful."

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McNally's Row of Flats: Irish American Songs of Old New York by Harrigan and Braham. By Mick Moloney. McNally's Row of Flats. Are you There Moriarity. The Regular Army-O. Patrick's Day Parade. Danny by my Side. Get Up Jack John Sit Down. Dad's Dinner Pail. Never Take the Horseshoe From the Door. I Never Drink Behind the Bar. The Babies on Our Block. The Mulligan Guard. Old Boss Barry. Such an Education Has My Mary Ann. Maggie Murphy's Home. Compass 4426, 2006.

In his latest CD, Mick Moloney, a Limerick-born folklorist, record producer, and performer, has issued one of the most important collections of historic American popular music since the rediscovery of Scott Joplin over thirty years ago. Reaching back over a century to New York City's early musical theater, Moloney and his fellow musicians have resurrected fourteen of the best songs of Edward Harrigan and David Braham. Moloney clearly has affection and respect for this material.

Edward (Ned) Harrigan (1845–1911) was born on "Cork Row" in the Corlear's Hook section of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The Harrigans, like many of their neighbors, traced their roots back to Ireland. Along with other creative members of his generation, including Samuel Clemens and the James Boys (William and Henry), he managed to avoid the Civil War and settled in San Francisco in 1866. Having picked up a love of music and singing from his mother, Harrigan began performing at the Bella Union, one of the city's early vaudeville houses. He eventually worked his way east to Chicago, where in 1871 he teamed up with Tony Hart (a.k.a. Anthony J. Cannon, 1855–1901). Moving on to New York City, Harrigan and Hart quickly established themselves as the city's most successful entertainment team.

Whereas the art of Tony Hart lay in performing (he was particularly successful in so-called wench roles), Harrigan had a gift for writing. "The Mulligan Guard" (1873), one of his vaudeville sketches about an Irish immigrant family in the Five Points section of Lower Manhattan, became very popular. By 1879, the sketch had evolved into a full-fledged musical play, the first of the "Mulligan Guard" series, which stretched into the 1880s. Most of Harrigan's thirty-six plays (and many of his eighty vaudeville sketches) featured original songs, making Harrigan and composer David Braham pioneers of the American musical. As a lyricist, Harrigan was fortunate to find a talented musician in Braham (1838–1905), who became the