



*Surf's Up?*

*An in-depth look at*

*The Beach Boys*

Compiled by Colin Hart

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The Beach Boys circa 1965



# SURFIN' USA (The Early Years)

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A CORNIER NAME FOR a band than The Beach Boys? The connotations that come with this moniker are quite unfair. Yet for those not familiar with later masterpieces such as *Pet Sounds*, this early “fun in the sun” stereotype is what stands out — straight-edge, clean-cut dorks who implore us to “*be true to your school.*” For a rock band to christen themselves as Boys begs the question of whether or not they are to be taken seriously as artists in the first place. Of course, this is the wrong way to look at The Beach Boys’ legacy, but there’s some truth to all stereotypes, right?

The 1988 chart-topper “Kokomo” doesn’t help their legacy bid, either, but more on that later.

In the early phase of their career, the Boys stuck close to their roots. They were a close-knit family of SoCal surfers who didn’t really surf; a group of good-looking, starry-eyed kids hoping to make it big. Their debut LP, 1962’s *Surfin’ Safari*, was a minor commercial success, but their inexperience showed. As obsessive a songsmith as leader Brian Wilson was, he couldn’t hide the fact that his fellow bandmates were, on average, only 19 years old. Looking back on simplistic tunes like “Ten Little Indians” and the regrettable “Chug-A-Lug” (opening lyric: “*Here a mug/There a mug/Everybody chug-a-lug*”), it’s hard to believe that these fellas would soon change modern music forever.

After all, surf culture was a passing fad — anyone remember Frankie Avalon in *Beach Party*? — but The Beach Boys were able to cash in while the getting was good. A string of hit singles propelled them to instant stardom, and their West Coast authenticity ensured that they were the most popular band in America.

They sang about what they knew — you’d be hard-pressed to find a pre-1965 Beach Boys song that wasn’t about hot rods or bikinis, or some combination of both (“Car Crazy Cutie,” for example).

Yet it would be wrong to say that all surf rock is juvenile. The instrumental variety — Dick Dale, The Ventures, The Shadows — was able to surpass the sub-genre’s niche limitations. Those arpeggiated guitars were mondo influential, my dude(s). Likewise, Brian Wilson’s songwriting prowess was getting stronger by the day, beginning to incorporate complex arrangements and visionary techniques. Melancholic



ballads like “Surfer Girl” and “In My Room” were early signs of things to come, an entire layer of subtlety bubbling just below the surface.

Brian had unparalleled pop instincts, but he also had the perfect tools to work with: the peerless voices of his fellow Beach Boys. The quintet had been honing their harmonies ever since they were pre-adolescents listening to The Four Freshman. The hard work paid off — even when they were at their schmaltziest, The Beach Boys still had a penchant for making irresistible tunes, thanks to their unprecedented vocal talent.

For example, “Don’t Worry Baby,” the spiritual heir to The Ronettes’ “Be My Baby,” may just be the greatest song ever written about drag racing. In fact, it may just be the greatest song ever written about anything.

A combination of surf culture backlash, oldies FM and Mike Love have all contributed to The Beach Boys’ designation as corny, syrupy, corn-syrupy pretty-boys. *Pet Sounds* is one in a million. The rest is noise. Comparisons to The Beatles don’t even make sense, say the uninitiated.

But don’t fall into this line of thinking. Don’t let the name Beach Boys scare you off — after all, David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* is A+ material, even though it has the worst movie title of all time.

How’s that line from *Romeo and Juliet* go? “Sloop John B” by any other name would still sound just as fucking sweet? Something like that. There is so much more to The Beach Boys than “Fun, Fun, Fun” and “Surfin’ USA.” Even *Pet Sounds* doesn’t tell the whole story.

I’ll go ahead and say it: very few bands are quite as *cool* as The Beach Boys. And, besides, The Beatles is a pretty dumb name too when you think about it.



## I Just Wasn't Made For These Times

THE BEST KIND OF GENIUSES, or at least the most interesting, are of the troubled variety. Think of Ernest Hemingway or Vincent Van Gogh or Kurt Cobain — great artists whose posthumous reputations have become larger than life.

When you consider their strenuous circumstances, their work becomes comparable — *Nevermind* is *The Sun Also Rises* for Generation X, and *Starry Night* is *In Utero* for post-impressionists, give or take.

Even though Brian Wilson and filmmaker Orson Welles didn't off themselves like the aforementioned trio, their misunderstood career paths bear more than a few similarities. Even their physical characteristics are uncanny — from strapping young lads to obese manic depressives as the years went on. Just look at ol' Orson up in the top right.

With *Pet Sounds*, Wilson was credited with changing rock. With *Citizen Kane*, Welles reinvented movies. For both respective mediums, it was a modernist revolution — the equivalent of Picasso's first cubist paintings, or the first stream-of-consciousness poetry, a completely new way of looking at things.

The comparisons fall apart a little when you consider that *Citizen Kane* was Welles' debut feature. Wilson had been working up to *Pet Sounds* for a while — even though the Beach

Boys had been in existence for only five years, *Pet Sounds* was already their eleventh studio album. On the other hand, Welles had never tried his hand at a motion picture before — a sudden stroke of inspiration for the former radio host.

Perhaps a comparison to *Sgt. Pepper's* is more apt for *Citizen Kane* — both are the “official,” de facto number ones. It's a safe pick that no one will argue over, like saying the *Mona Lisa* is the greatest painting ever. Everyone seems to agree, but who actually believes?

The events that happened to Wilson and Welles after *Pet Sounds* and *Citizen Kane* respectively are where the comparisons make more sense. Both had to follow up bona fide masterpieces, and — thanks to a variety of contributing factors — both succumbed to the intense pressure.

In 1942, Welles directed *The Magnificent Ambersons*, a midwestern family drama set at the turn of the century. Without the creative freedom he enjoyed on *Citizen Kane*, Welles was essentially shackled by the studio. Over an hour of footage was removed from the original cut, and a happy ending was tacked on to pander to audiences. Although the film still holds up today on its own terms, it is not what Welles envisioned. The results ruined his confidence, and his career.

The same is true of Brian

Wilson and *Smile*, an album which was supposed to do for pop music what the forward pass did for football. That was the intention, at least.

Instead, the project fell apart. Mike Love played a key role in the demise, but so did everything else — psychedelic drugs, record company scrutiny, pressure from the surrounding music scene and, most of all, Brian's own indecisive paranoia. He was a glass house and everyone was throwing stones, or so it appeared. The LP that resulted, the minimal and spare *Smiley Smile*, put an end to Wilson's artistic appeal, alienating fans, critics and his own bandmates.

For the rest of their respective careers, Wilson and Welles could never recapture their old glories. Yet retrospective reappraisal has been far kinder to their work than contemporary critics. There are several hidden gems in the catalogues of each that have been severely overlooked and underrated.

Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *Chimes At Midnight* (1965) were dismissed upon release but have since grown in stature. Much like The Beach Boys' *Friends* or *Wild Honey*.

While Welles isn't necessarily my favorite director — I find his films to be a bit cold — the similarities to Wilson are undeniable. But that begs the question: where does “Kokomo” fit in all this?

# A SIT-DOWN WITH JEFF MIERS

Jeff Miers has been the music critic at The Buffalo News since 2002. I recently met up with him downtown to discuss my favorite topic. You can probably guess.

Some background info: Miers probably has the most enviable job in town, at least from my perspective. He gets to write about music, which is as good as it sounds. Of course, there's a little more that goes into it (I think), but still. Very enviable indeed — free concert tickets, promo copies, creative freedom when it comes to articles. The works.

My father actually used to work at The Buffalo News. As an electrician. He did the wiring, the fixtures and lighting over a decade ago. Best site he ever worked at, he said.

The first time I ever stepped inside the headquarters was when I went to talk with Miers. Cool place. A journalism junkie could get high off the paper aroma and sound of incessant typing. The Frey Electric guys used to get high in the van outside.

Likewise, I could catch a buzz just talking about The Beach Boys. So could Miers, probably.

It's evident from his writing that he knows his stuff. And it was evident from talking with him that he can back it up. The conversation began where any relating to The Beach Boys would: with Brian Wilson.

"He's one of the geniuses of 20th century music," said Miers. "Changed pop. I mean he changed The Beatles, who changed everything too. Obviously *Pet Sounds* is so genius and so game changing, but even before that, the pop hits — the early ones — he was cranking them out. Those are solid tunes, too, the melodies, the harmonies. There's like a beautiful innocence about it. It's like pop music that isn't embarrassing. There's complexity, there's depth.

"Even when he's writing love lyrics, there's something in the way he delivers them — happy and sad at the same time. He's special."

And it's true. Brian had unprecedented pathos and poignancy even when he was singing about surfer girls or sodapop. When he was onto weighty themes like unrequited love or the meaning of life, it could move you to tears.

"On the other side of the coin, you've got Mike Love," said Miers. "He just seems like a douche."

When Miers caught the *Pet Sounds* reunion tour a couple years back, Love was onstage pointing to women in the crowd as if he wasn't 75 years old. You ain't sexy, bro. Go meditate or something.

But, as Miers mentioned, *Pet Sounds* isn't the whole story. The 1970s — specifically *Sunflower* and *Surf's Up* — saw a brief Beach Boys resurgence.

And, of course, the immediate post-*Pet Sounds* era was fascinating in its own right.

"In fact," said Miers of his college days, "in Fredonia we had a house, a blue house on Central Avenue right across from the main entrance, where *Smiley Smile* was a big favorite. Crankin' that stuff. I still love it."

As a music critic, Miers sees the experimental *Smile* leftover not as lazy (how it was originally perceived back in '67), but as boundary pushing. Ahead of its time.

"It's like Mozart's *Requiem*. He never finished it, but so what? That was a nice next move for [Brian]. Note to self: don't take tons of acid. Especially if you're already emotionally unstable. What a shame."

The conversation, as conversations are wont to do, soon strayed from The Beach Boys and digressed into a wide-ranging musical discussion — Genesis, Steely Dan, Cyndi Lauper, Pet Shop Boys, Pavement, Miles Davis, Steve Reich, Car Seat Headrest, Claude Debussy, Kendrick Lamar, Radiohead, and many others too long to list here. But only a select few can hold a candle to The Beach Boys.

I left The Buffalo News blasting *Wild Honey* with the windows down, getting a taste of that country air.



# Heroes and Villains

The reason The Beach Boys' wimpy, fun-in-the-sun stereotype exists is because of a vile little fella named Mike Love. The Wilson bros' first cousin stands near the top of Music History's Biggest Assholes (a couple levels higher than Axl Rose but just a cut below Antonio Salieri). He's an antagonist who has been at it for nearly sixty years. Only a few musicians command such disrespect. It's quite impressive, actually.

Among his career accomplishments are an endless series of litigations over copyright disputes with Brian Wilson, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction speech in which he called Mick Jagger a "chickenshit" and a spineless power-play that saw him fire Wilson, Al Jardine and David Marks from the band in 2012.

His close-minded conservatism goes without saying, both musically and politically.

The Mike Love mythos as we know it began circa 1966 with "Don't fuck with the formula," an infamous statement (which he has since denied) made regarding The Beach Boys' change in musical direction. Love was the only band member to express reservations about *Pet Sounds*, preferring not to stray from the original surf-rock blueprint. He wanted the group to remain in Little Deuce Coupe mode, believing they could stand to make more money. He was probably right, but it was a cowardly move to make.

I can almost see him now, cross-armed in the studio with that smug look on his face, scoffing at the organ-and-violin combo featured on "Don't Talk (Put Your Head On My Shoulder)." He leans over to Bruce Johnston - "What the fuck ever happened to 'Ten Little Indians,' huh? Now that was music..."

It takes a special brand of douchebag to hate on the greatest album of all time. It takes an even rarer breed to go about and sabotage the planned follow-up. But Love was truly one of a kind.

In 1967, he quarreled with lyricist Van Dyke Parks over the cryptic nature of "Cabinessence," which essentially caused the entire *Smile* project to collapse over internal conflict. There were a variety of other contributing factors—such as LSD is not a good anti-depressant—but the damage to Brian's wounded psyche was already done. Even though Love did have a point about the lyrics, you should never fuck with greatness. Especially tortured-genius greatness.

By questioning the words instead of just singing them, Mike Love singlehandedly changed the

entire course of modern music.

It's hard to separate Love's behind-the-scenes antics from his on-the-record persona. Most everything he does comes across as lame. His nasal voice — in which he obnoxiously pronounces every letter in every word — is more grating than the cheesy lines he so clearly enunciates.

He's at his best when hidden by the harmonies, but he sang lead on so many of The Beach Boys' songs that he is impossible to ignore completely.

Despite the bad rap, he was responsible for some good things too. For example, it's hard to ignore Love's contributions to ... *\*thinking\** ... "Meant For You" and "All I Wanna Do."

I guess he deserves at least a little credit. Mike Love has come to embrace his role as the bad guy and, for better or worse, there is no Beach Boys without him. But he wasn't the only villain. He'll be the first to tell you that Murry Wilson, Brian's father and band manager until 1964, was a bigger asshole anyways.



*On the right:  
Mike Love in  
1966.*



*In the center:  
Mike Love in  
1971. Notice the  
hats in both.*



## Wild Honey (1967)

As rock and roll myths would have you believe, *Pet Sounds* is such a masterpiece that it caused Paul McCartney — driving at the time of his first listen — to pull over to the side of the road to fully process what he had just heard. The sudden shock motivated The Beatles to create *Sgt. Pepper's*, widely regarded as the greatest rock album ever made.

I am of the belief that *Pet Sounds* is not only the greatest rock album ever made, but also the greatest music ever created. Say what you will, but what more can possibly be said about it? The Beach Boys are my favorite band, but *Pet Sounds* is not the album I listen to most. There's a difference between "best" and "favorite," after all. Here's a new rock 'n' roll myth:

It takes eight *Wild Honey's* to get from Buffalo to Cleveland. I know this because I, er, had the album on repeat for the entire road trip (there were no passengers, don't worry). I just couldn't get enough.

But why *Wild Honey*? It's no *Pet Sounds*, sure, but it is unlike any album I've ever heard — absolutely impossible to grow tired of. It's my go-to record when I can't make up my mind on what to listen to. I can always count on *Wild Honey*.

Conventional wisdom would have you believe that post-*Pet Sounds* Beach Boys music is a mess — a creative collapse of epic proportions. Brian Wilson went crazy and group leadership was ceded to his less talented siblings. The following records were as inconsequential as Bruce Johnston.

But that's just the conventional wisdom. Upon closer examination, The Beach Boys held their position as one of the most interesting and admirable bands of the late-'60s, if not the most underrated. The appreciation requires little patience — *Wild Honey* is only 28-minutes long with not a single second wasted.

When considering The Beach

Boys' post-*Pet Sounds* career, critical attention tends to focus on the occasional *Smile* remnants that resurface. And while I agree that songs like "Cabinessence" and "Surf's Up" transcend the albums which they appear on, it is important to ignore the shadow of *Smile* when evaluating their overall worth.

Which is why I continually return to *Wild Honey*. There are very few, if any, traces of *Smile's* influence, and so the recording comes across as natural and unburdened. The Beach Boys were free to revel in easygoing R&B while their contemporaries headed further into maximalist psychedelia.

But it is R&B that comes with a twist. The lo-fi production values of *Smiley Smile* carry over, as do the minimal arrangements. This stripped-down approach allows us to see the skeletal framework of Brian's unique songwriting style — the beauty is captured in the chord progressions, which subtly shift and never cease, pounding out incessantly on a warm, albeit slightly out-of-tune, honky-tonk piano.

It all makes for a very addictive listen. The songs — two-and-a-half-minute quick-hitters — roll past us at a rapid clip. Though they are short, they never feel like fragments, even if the majority end with a fade-out.

The main reason I can listen to *Wild Honey* over and over is the mood that it conveys — pure and total happiness. Even the joke a-cappella closer ("*Eat a lot/Sleep a lot/Brush 'em like crazy*") is a perfect summation of the record's charms. The opening title track flips a whirring Theremin and atonal organ solo into a delightful romp. Phrases like "out of sight" and "dog-gone" (and "dog-gone out of sight") are sung with pure and total conviction, and therefore evade corniness. When the group invites us to "*get a breath*

The Beach Boys, 1967



of that country air,” we know it is all they ask. *Wild Honey* concerns itself with simple pleasures — undeniably relatable.

The vocal harmonies, always a marvel, are uncharacteristically limited. Production is credited to the entire group, but the songs often feature a single lead. Carl Wilson, who sings on four of the album’s 11 songs, delivers a star-making turn. “Darlin,” the energetic centerpiece, seems to point toward a new era for the band.

Even though the majority of songs are credited to Wilson/Love, Brian is still the prime architect. But

instead of concerning himself with major, coming-of-age themes, he is after carnal desires — “*I’d love just once to see you in the nude.*”

The material may not be as complex — no long-metre verses like in “Don’t Worry Baby” or “Heroes and Villains” — but that doesn’t make it any less impressive. Only a few of the songs (including the lazily melodic “Let the Wind Blow”) progress to the middle eight, but all end somewhat unresolved.

And that is the magic of *Wild Honey* — it shouldn’t work, but it does. The music is driven primarily by piano, organ and electric bass,

while the vocals, which are usually so poignant and serene, occasionally strain and become unintelligible, matching the joyously carefree attitude.

I am particularly drawn in by the deceptively simple chord progression of “Aren’t You Glad,” the piano plunking out the time like a clock in Brill Building before the chorus erupts into a brassy crescendo. The tiny inflection that makes all the difference — “*I’ve got a heart that just won’t stop beating for you,*” followed by the perfectly-timed, percussive heartbeat.

The shortened length of the album does not work against *Wild Honey* at all. In fact, it helps you to understand the album more intimately. I’ve memorized every sound. Could I be overrating it? Sure. Critical reaction has ranged all over the board, from Robert Christgau’s rare A+ (“It’s method is whimsy, candor, and carefully modulated amateurishness, all of which comes through as humor”) to Pitchfork Media’s 3.5 out of 10 (“...it barely deserves a paragraph”).

Yet the majority can probably agree that *Wild Honey* is an undeniably happy record. Isn’t that all you need?

## And then there’s “KOKOMO” ...

I’m not a masochist, but in order to write this article I forced myself to listen to “Kokomo” on a repetitive loop. Luckily for all involved, I decided to keep it short.

“Kokomo,” a song that we’re all familiar with whether we know it or not, is awesomely bad. It peaked at number one upon release in 1988, The Beach Boys’ first U.S. chart-topper since “Good Vibrations,” but don’t call it a comeback. Instead, call it for what it is: the perfect song to get hit by a bus to. Even “Ding Dang” is better.

The entire chorus is embarrassingly lame. Has there ever been a worse

than “*Aruba, Jamaica/Ooh, I wanna take ya?*” I never realized there were so many alliterative Caribbean vacation spots that don’t really rhyme. But at least they’re kinda fun to say. Go ahead, try it — “*Bermuda, Bahama...*”

Mike Love takes lead (of course), singing the annoying verses with a saccharine clarity that makes the 47-year-old sound 17 again, though the subject matter is more geared toward 67-year-old retirees. Why hasn’t this song been used in a Viagra commercial yet?

The only Beach Boy who didn’t

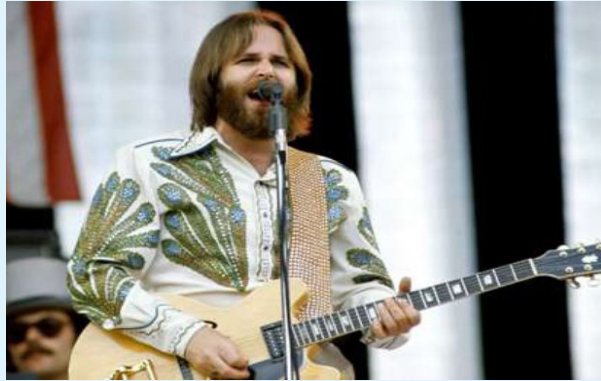
record on the final mix was Brian. Even though he was practically brainwashed by his psychotherapist, Dr. Eugene Landy, at the time, Brian still had enough sense to stay far away from crap like “Kokomo.”

The faux-tropical background is quite sickening — I actually puked a little — consisting of steel drums, accordion and even a saxophone solo. It’s an unholy concoction that even Jimmy Buffett wouldn’t touch. Don’t even get me started on the maracas.

If “Kokomo” describes a fictional place, it’s probably just as bad, if not worse, as Dante’s Inferno. If it’s real, then I’ll be damned before I ever go there.



# Carl's Big Chance



BRIAN'S MENTAL BREAKDOWNS (plural) left The Beach Boys in a state of flux. After the collapse of *Smile*, the band was left without a paddle — no leader and no clear sense of direction. Brian was there, but he wasn't really all there, if you know what I mean. When your resident genius is spending most of his time in a homemade sandbox, then your band is left with only two options: fold up or step up.

Enter Carl Wilson, the youngest brother of Brian and Dennis. Inspired by Chuck Berry, his guitar playing had been a key ingredient in the early surf rock days. And next to Brian, he was the most talented member of the group. Case in point: when The Wrecking Crew — highly-skilled L.A. session musicians brought in by Brian to lay down the complex backing tracks — came to town, Carl was the only Beach Boy to play alongside them.

The beginning of Carl's ascent within the group was his lead vocal on "God Only Knows," the *Pet Sounds* centerpiece. His voice,

similar to Brian's though not as wholesome, was perfectly suited for the subject matter — able to convey fervent devotion and a mix of doubt simultaneously.

Could you imagine if Mike Love had sung "God Only Knows?" His inflections would have made it godless. On the other hand, can you imagine if Brian had sung it? We would all be true believers. Two extremes, which is why Carl was the ideal choice. It's a love song, first and foremost, with the spirituality coming second. (A love song that begins "I may not always love you," I might add)

Upon Brian's behest, Carl grew into a larger role starting with *Wild Honey*. The carefree vibe of that record allowed him to let loose vocally. "Darlin'" is perhaps his greatest performance — "More soul than I ever had," indeed.

The 1969 cover of The Ronettes' "I Can Hear Music" was Carl's first taste as lead dog. But it wasn't until 1971's *Surf's Up* that Carl truly came into his own. Despite the

legendary cult status of the title track, the album is carried by Carl's "Long Promised Road" and "Feel Flows." More often than not, The Beach Boys were out of step with 1970s musical trends, yet Carl's guidance throughout *Surf's Up* proved they were still ahead of their time. For one brief moment, the ghosts of *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* weren't haunting their every move.

The next two LPs — *Carl and the Passions* and *Holland*— marked the end of the Carl Wilson era. Substance abuse, the brief reemergence of Brian, and two dudes named Ricky Fataar and Blondie Chaplin returned front-man Carl to the backseat. But it wasn't all for nothing.

In popular culture, The Beach Boys are synonymous with Brian Wilson. The fact that Carl was able to carve out a memorable role is impressive to say the least. The fact that he didn't stoop to Mike Love's level is impressive enough.









DONNY KUTZBACH IS CO-OWNER AND concert promoter for the Town Ballroom, a popular venue in downtown Buffalo. He's also another Beach Boys aficionado.

I met Kutzbach downtown at Public Espresso, a trendy, hipster coffee shop on Washington Street. Never been there before. Nice place, I must admit. Once again, the topic of discussion was going to be The Beach Boys.

To prep myself, I listened to *Pet Sounds* on the drive over. I'd made it to "Caroline No" when I turned the stereo off to focus on finding a parking spot. A couple blocks away wasn't the worst, but if I were able to parallel park I would've been able to nab a spot right outside.

Inside the café, Kutzbach, an avid record collector from a young age, told me of how he was first introduced to The Beach Boys.

"I can trace it back," he said. "I was born in the mid-'70s. One of the first 45s I ever had was handed down to me. I got it when I was really young, and it was "Wouldn't It Be Nice" and "God Only Knows." If ever there was a more perfect 45 than that—it's a double A-side! Both of the songs have so much emotion and so much going on. It's a perfect single. That was really how I got started."

For me, it was a little different. I had been aware of The Beach Boys from listening to WHTT, the oldies station, but didn't take them seriously until I heard *Pet Sounds*, introduced to me by my dad when I was about 15. I had also been aware, through Rolling Stone magazine, that *Pet Sounds* was one of the most acclaimed albums ever, but I still associated the Beach Boys with a stigma of corniness.

"I'd be caught dead saying I liked The Beach Boys back in high school," reflected Kutzbach. "That was when 'Kokomo' came out, and I was mostly listening to punk rock and hip-hop. But then in college, I started buying more records and got really interested in the

whole mythology of Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys. I started reading all these books and, at the dawn of the internet, getting involved in all these message boards.

"It was so easy for me to get into the minutiae of it," he continued. "With *Smile*, there's a lot there, but there are so many missing pieces. It's like a Rosetta Stone. I became obsessed with it and its continued since then."

When I first listened to *Pet Sounds* at age 15, I can recall that I wasn't completely blown away until track number four, "Don't Talk (Put Your Head On My Shoulder)." The slow, dirge-like organ and the affecting vocals to match convinced me that this was indeed something special. Likewise, the two instrumental tracks—"Let's Go Away For A While" and the title track—also helped to end my notion of Beach Boys as novelty items. These guys were the real deal.

But for years, *Pet Sounds* was the only Beach Boys record I listened to. I was under the impression that it couldn't get any better than this, so why bother?

It wasn't until college that I gradually became more and more obsessed with their music. *Wild Honey* became a favorite. *Friends* and *Surf's Up*, too. And with that a better understanding of the oldies, from "Surfer Girl" to "All Summer Long."

It wasn't long before I held their 1977 album, *The Beach Boys Love You*, in equally high regard. And it won't be too long before I seek out their entire family history.

"Another thing that's really interesting and fascinating about The Beach Boys is their story," Kutzbach told me. "It's really like a microcosm of the 20th century. The band, the family, the whole thing. It's a very Steinbeck thing, like *The Grapes of Wrath*. [The Wilsons] came from the Midwest during the Dust Bowl, and then they move out to California to live the California Dream. The tragedy of a lot of it, and

the family dynamics, so much American Gothic shit. You can't make it up."

Similar to American Scene painter, Grant Wood, Brian Wilson made intimate portraits that carried universal values. *Pet Sounds* is complex, but far from cryptic—an album that is relatable to anyone with two ears and a heart.

Most musicians tend to have two ears and heart, and so most have been influenced by The Beach Boys in some way.

"You can draw that line," said Kutzbach, "from The Beach Boys to Big Star to R.E.M. to Wilco and so many others leaving in the wake. Animal Collective. 15 years ago, it seemed like every indie band was under this Beach Boys spell. But if you have harmonies and good melodic sense, you're influenced by The Beach Boys whether you know it or not."

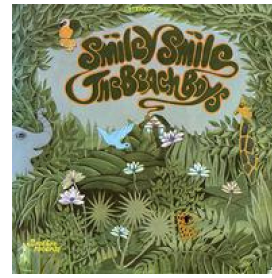
I was glad that he brought up Animal Collective, one of my favorite bands, an experimental, neo-psychedelic, sometimes-quartet from Baltimore, Maryland. Though Animal Collective is one of the most unique musical acts of the 2000s, there's no denying that The Beach Boys have had a huge influence upon their work.

And it's true what Kutzbach said, that anybody who employs harmonies and more, indie or otherwise.

Older artists, too. The Flaming Lips. Mercury Rev. XTC. Even (especially) the Ramones. And, of course, The Beatles.

I could talk for hours about The Beach Boys, and music in general, but so too with sports. I met with Kutzbach on the afternoon of the NFL Draft. After he bashed my Cleveland Browns, I realized my parking meter was about to run out.





## ALBUM REVIEWS

### *Surfin' Safari* (1962)

“Let’s go surfin’ now/Everybody’s learnin’ how” more or less describes the content of The Beach Boys’ debut. They’re still learnin’ the tricks of the trade, and they’re still very much “boys” at this point. A good novelty album—nostalgia for nostalgia’s sake. Or, 1962 for 1962’s sake.

Grade: B

### *Surfin’ U.S.A.* (1963)

This may be The Beach Boys’ surf-iest LP, at least in terms of musicality. Five of the 12 songs are instrumentals highlighting the guitar playing of Carl Wilson, who strikes a chord somewhere between Chuck Berry and Dick Dale.

Grade: B+

### *Surfer Girl* (1963)

‘50s-style R&B chord progressions have taken hold of Brian Wilson’s mind, and it’s just what The Beach Boys needed. In between the generic surfer songs are advanced, melancholic numbers like “In My Room,” “Your Summer Dream” and the title track. There’s also an instrumental called “Boogie Woodie,” which is as amusing as it sounds.

Grade: B+

### *Little Deuce Coupe* (1963)

Their third LP of 1963 finds The Boys taking a step backwards. They’ve subtly transitioned from surf songs to car songs, which really aren’t all that different. The most notable tune is an a cappella tribute to James Dean. Other than that, nothing you haven’t heard before.

Grade: B-

### *Shut Down Volume 2* (1964)

If it wasn’t for “Don’t Worry Baby” (and, to a lesser extent, “The Warmth of the Sun” and “Keep an Eye on Summer”), then Shut Down Vol. 2 might be The Boys’ worst LP of the decade. Luckily, “Don’t Worry Baby” is one of the greatest songs of all time.

Grade: B

### *All Summer Long* (1964)

A glorious goodbye to surf rock, All Summer Long represents the pinnacle of early Beach Boys. From the xylophones and piccolos of the title track, to the lush vocal harmonies of “Girls on the Beach,” Brian Wilson was priming his bandmates for bigger and better things.

Grade: A-

### *The Beach Boys’ Christmas Album* (1964)

A novelty album that holds up surprisingly well. Little Saint Nick—that’s my Santa Claus.

Grade: B



*The Beach Boys Today!* (1965)

Similar to the way *Bringing It All Back Home* led to *Highway 61 Revisited*, or how *Help* brought about *Rubber Soul*, *The Beach Boys Today!* directly points the way toward *Pet Sounds*. Brian fully incorporated Phil Spector's Wall of Sound production techniques for the pop-oriented Side A, and then doubled down with some of his most personal subject matter to close the album. The juxtaposition of moods—and the consistency of the instrumentation—makes this one of the group's finest (half) hours.

Grade: A

*Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)* (1965)

Contractual obligations required the Boys to produce one last California-themed party record. Although Brian used the opportunity to refine his songwriting techniques, the end results are a bit uneven. Consider it a practice session in preparation for the big game.

Grade: B+

*Pet Sounds* (1966)

What more can possibly be said about the greatest album of all time? That it's more emotionally resonant than anything released before or since? That Brian Wilson's voice achieves the perfect synthesis of sadness and sincerity? That the number two greatest album of all time (talkin' bout *The Velvet Underground & Nico*) doesn't even come close? That an A+ isn't nearly enough?

Grade: A+

*Smiley Smile* (1967)

The greatest album that never was, *Smile*, collapsed under its own weight. What remains is *Smiley Smile*, an experimental rock therapy session. The Beach Boys went avant-garde—the maximalist Wall of Sound reduced to lo-fi minimalism. "Good Vibrations" aside, this is one helluva trip for open-minded listeners with too much time on their hands.

Grade: A

*Wild Honey* (1967)

Maybe even more left-field than *Smiley Smile*, *Wild Honey* found The Beach Boys experimenting with soul music. Who else had the balls to cover a Stevie Wonder tune back in 1967? This was a return-to-the-roots record before the concept was popularized by The Beatles, Bob Dylan and The Band. The whole affair is recorded in a minimal lo-fi manner, which is all part of the quirk and charm. In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find a more charming record.

Grade: A+

*Friends* (1968)

A return to psychedelia, but the band is so burnt out at this point that the definition of psychedelia is skewed. The music is as welcoming as the title suggests, though I'm not sure if the title is meant to be ironic. Maybe just wishful thinking.

Grade: A-





*20/20* (1969)

Another weird one, though not in a good *Smiley Smile*/*Wild Honey* type of way. Dennis Wilson collaborates with Charlie Manson, the ghost of Brian delivers some *Smile* excerpts and everyone else is busy doing nothing. This is an interesting record, though not terribly effective. It's worth noting, however, that "Time To Get Alone" is the most played song in my library, according to iTunes.

Grade: B

*Sunflower* (1970)

A little light for my tastes, but a return-to-form nonetheless. Contains Mike Love's finest moment—a proto-shoegazing Wall of Sound masterpiece called "All I Wanna Do."

Grade: A-

*Surf's Up* (1971)

In which Carl becomes a star. Even though the title track—a famed *Smile* holdover—has reached legendary cult status, it is the neo-psychedelic ambience of "Long Promised Road" and "Feel Flows" that truly make this a classic.

Grade: A

*Carl and the Passions – "So Tough"* (1972)

Wimpier name – Carl and the Passions or The Beach Boys? Not even pedal steel guitar can save this one.

Grade: C

*Holland* (1973)

*Sunflower*, but blander. Though "Sail On Sailor" is a great tune.

Grade: C+

*15 Big Ones* (1976)

15 big shits. Cloggers.

Grade: C-

*The Beach Boys Love You* (1977)

Brian Wilson's "comeback." Probably The Beach Boys' strangest and most uncharacteristic album overall, but also their most underrated. Every song utilizes dated analog synthesizers, but—similar to *Wild Honey*—this strange aesthetic only adds to the idiosyncratic charm. The lyrics, though childlike, are painfully honest. The music, though clunky, is among the most pure Brian Wilson has ever written.

Grade: A

*All albums afterwards*

Stay away.

Grade: Nothing better than C-

*That's Why God Made The Radio* (2012)

A comeback of sorts. Auto-Tune certainly helps when you're a Beach Boy pushing 70. This is a pleasant record, to say the least, and just about all we could expect from a latter-day once-great band.

Grade: B+

