

A Brief History of *Smile*



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It isn't hard to make the case that no other unreleased album has captured the public imagination as much as The Beach Boys' *Smile*. Recorded in 1966-67, the album promised to be an expansion of the ideas displayed on the incredibly popular "Good Vibrations" single. The reasons surrounding the eventual shelving of the album are the stuff of legend and as varied as the sounds contained therein. Adding to the confusion are the (willfully?) incorrect explanations made by the album's chief creator, Beach Boy Brian Wilson, who once even claimed he had burned the master tapes.

But the tapes do in fact exist, and fans will finally be treated to them in their entirety this fall when Capitol releases *The Smile Sessions*. If this sounds familiar, that may be due to the fact that Wilson "finished" and re-recorded the entire album in 2004, using none of the original recordings, musicians, or Beach Boys. The release was seen as a personal triumph for Wilson, who had famously suffered mental health issues for years following the *Smile* era. However, many felt that, despite the excellent musicianship throughout, something was missing from the new version, particularly the fact that its lead vocalist was now in his 60s rather than his 20s.

In spite of the unfinished nature of some of the original tracks, what becomes clear is that these are extraordinary recordings made at the creative peak of their author. Working with lyricist and kindred spirit Van Dyke Parks, Wilson sought to make a new kind of spiritual music, what he called a "teenage symphony to God." On the heels of his attempt to produce "the greatest rock 'n' roll album ever made" with the achingly

melancholic and yearning *Pet Sounds*, Wilson wanted to do something more playful and push his already rapidly expanding musical limits.

The "modular" approach to record production pioneered by Wilson with "Good Vibrations" saw him focusing in the studio on particular sounds and feels rather than traditional performances of songs. The basic song would be mostly written at the outset of recording, but Wilson would then experiment extensively with different permutations and layers of sounds that would ultimately form the finished track using tape editing.



Wilson in the studio, 1966

Wilson was by now aware of the different equipment, acoustic properties, and echo chambers available at each of the four Los Angeles recording studios he used, and insisted on using each of them in order for these unique sonic characteristics to be deployed as he saw fit. This is why Wilson is known as one of the first songwriters to use the recording studio as a musical instrument and also why "Good Vibrations" took an unprecedented nine months to finish. The prospect of taking this approach to an entire album, combined with Brian's own perfectionism and impulsive -- dare I say indulgent -- nature, are part of why the album was never finished. Another key reason is that there was objection to the new material from within the band itself, mostly from increasingly marginalized singer and sometime lyricist Mike Love, who told Wilson not to "fuck with the formula," referred to Parks' lyrics as "acid alliteration," and intimidated the wordsmith away from the project, eventually leaving Wilson without a collaborator.



Smile vocal session

Other factors contributing to the demise of *Smile* were Wilson's own escalating drug use and paranoia, lengthy lawsuits with Capitol Records, and the formation of The Beach Boys' own record label and film production company. It seems that there was simply too much on Brian's plate. It probably didn't help matters that he had his entire house redecorated for inspiration, opened a health food store, emptied his swimming pool for use as an echo chamber, and canceled expensive recording sessions due to "bad vibes."

One misleadingly notorious anecdote, however, is the oft-repeated story of the "Fire" music, also known as "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow," which is typically used to illustrate the deteriorating state of Brian's mental health. In order to get the musicians in the mood, Wilson passed out plastic fire helmets, wore one himself, and even burned a small fire in a bucket. Van Dyke Parks himself has called this behavior "regressive," but in the annals of rock 'n' roll history, it is a relatively benign occurrence. The playback of this incredibly powerful piece of music left the session musicians stunned. Later, upon learning that several fires had broken out in the neighborhood of the recording studio, Wilson became convinced that his music was to blame. Listening to the original recording, this does not necessarily seem to be such a far-fetched idea. Wilson sought to channel the power of the elements and the voice of God in his music, and perhaps his human psyche was not strong enough to withstand it.

With Parks leaving the project, Wilson's work on the album largely ceased, save for "Heroes and Villains," the much-anticipated follow-up single to "Good Vibrations." This time around, however, Wilson's obsessive tinkering did not yield pop gold. After months

of editing and release delays, the version of the song finally submitted in July 1967 lacked many key elements on display in earlier edits, notably the “cantina” sequence. The original concept was to use both sides of the 45 for the lengthy composition, a then-radical idea that was ultimately abandoned, only to be picked up a few years later, with great success, by Don McLean with “American Pie.”

As Wilson struggled to finish his magnum opus, The Beatles released an album called *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which blew minds and was hailed as a masterpiece upon its arrival. Wilson was a big fan and friendly rival of The Beatles, with *Pet Sounds* famously having sought to outdo *Rubber Soul* in terms of consistent songwriting quality throughout the album. The admiration was mutual, for *Sgt. Pepper* was inspired by *Pet Sounds*, as Paul McCartney would recount on numerous occasions and can be plainly heard on multiple tracks. What is seldom discussed is that The Beatles were privy to *Smile* material as it was being created without Wilson's knowledge or consent. Learning this only exacerbated his growing paranoia. Derek Taylor, publicity agent for the Beatles, began working for the Beach Boys in 1966. It is he who created the "Brian Wilson is a genius" PR campaign, and he who leaked tapes of the *Smile* music to The Beatles as they worked on *Sgt. Pepper*.



The belief of many *Smile* devotees is that had all of these circumstances somehow played out differently, Wilson could have finished the album as he envisioned it and put it out before *Sgt. Pepper*, thereby winning the "space race" to psychedelic rock nirvana and securing his reputation as a serious artist. This could have changed the course of not only The Beach Boys' career, but of popular music as well. Still appearing publicly in spiffy candy striped uniforms, the group canceled their scheduled appearance at the

Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, where, by contrast, Jimi Hendrix set his guitar on fire and The Who destroyed their instruments after a frenetic set. Their absence was prophetic: despite later attempts, The Beach Boys would not transcend their teenybopper origins and reside with the mind-bending rock royalty now coming of age.



The Beach Boys, late 60s

However, the music and the legend refused to go away. In the wake of *Smile*'s shelving, The Beach Boys quickly assembled at their new Brother Records studio in Brian's house to record *Smiley Smile*. Tellingly, the album's production credit goes to The Beach Boys rather than Brian, and it was they who played the sparse instruments, as opposed to Brian's team of ace session players (later to be known as The Wrecking Crew). Though completely lacking the epic grandeur of *Smile*, *Smiley Smile* is not without its charms. As Carl Wilson astutely said, it was "a bunt instead of a grand slam." The album allegedly had a very soothing effect on acid casualties at a Texas mental hospital in its day. Here's what is has from *Smile*:

- The truncated single version of "Heroes and Villains"
- Stripped-down, re-recorded versions of "Vegetables," "Wind Chimes," and "Wonderful." (The original versions of these would turn up on the *Good Vibrations* box set in 1993, along with other *Smile* tracks.)
- Traces of the first part of "Fire" in "Fall Breaks and Back to Winter (W. Woodpecker Symphony)"

-The chords and melody of “He Gives Speeches” (which itself probably wouldn’t have made it onto *Smile*, but is excellent nonetheless) are used for “She’s Goin’ Bald,” albeit with new lyrics and a “comedy break” that may serve as a glimpse into the proposed companion comedy album Brian wanted to include with *Smile* at one point. For further insight into Brian’s comedy excursions, check out “George Fell Into His French Horn” or the “Vegetables” promo on the bootlegs.

Smile would continue to haunt the group for the rest of its career. After the success of "Kokomo" in 1988, Mike Love, having finally topped the charts without Brian's help, could be found complaining in print about the public's fascination with what he called "a whole album of Brian's madness." Rumors of the album's release would crop up now and then, and there was even a penalty clause in their 1970s contract with Warner Bros. Records should they not deliver the album by a certain date, but the years went on and it didn’t happen. A few more choice cuts found their way onto later albums, with varying degrees of additions and “finishing touches” that hard core fans would debate the authenticity of. They could be found here:

-*20/20* (1969): “Our Prayer”: originally known simply as “Prayer,” and intended as the intro to *Smile*. “Cabinessence”: the three movements of this song had their own names on the tape boxes, which caused some to question whether or not they belonged together until it was discovered that this was Wilson’s original intent. It’s great fun to hear Mike Love sing the poetic mantra at the end of the song knowing that he objected to it so much. Extra backing vocals were added to both tracks.

-*Sunflower* (1970): “Cool, Cool Water”: this partial re-recording features the water chant and other elements from the “water” music, aka “Love to Say Dada,” aka “In Blue Hawaii” (circa 2004).

-*Surf’s Up* (1971): “Surf’s Up”: This is the song that would not fade from people’s memories, though it took a long time to see the light of day. Brian had performed it solo on national television and recorded a similar studio version. A version with full instrumentation remained unfinished until this point, when Carl re-did the lead vocal and the group added “by-gones by-gones.” The “second movement” of the song is the same as Brian’s original, but then the ending goes into “Child Is Father of the Man,” which was not on the original recording, though Brian allegedly came out of bed to tell them to make the transition. The final lyric ends the album beautifully:

*“A children’s song
Have you listened as they play?
Their song is love
And the children know the way.”*