

WAITING FOR A SMILE

Article
and Interview
by PETER JONES

OUTRÉ
Presents

Lost in Limbo for
40 Years, Brian Wilson's
"Smile" resurfaces as a
Pop Culture Classic!

PIGS FLY. HELL FREEZES over. Beach Boys founder Brian Wilson completes the unreleased *Smile* album.

But contrary to all conventional wisdom, *Smile*, a legend in the annals of unfinished LPs, has already landed in record stores. What's even less likely, the famously stage-panicked Wilson is actually performing *Smile* in its entirety on a world tour. Beach Boys archivist David Leaf has produced *Beautiful Dreamer*, an in-depth documentary (now available on DVD).

Before the concert debut in England this year, Wilson and lyricist Van Dyke Parks returned to a project they had both abandoned 37 years earlier. After wading through hours of the original unreleased tapes, the collaborators finished song fragments, regrouped them into conceptual movements, and wrote

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Brian Wilson
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SMILE

The multi-talented composer-performer Brian Wilson is all smiles now that his most ambitious project is finally realized after nearly four decades.

new material to fill in the gaps.

Wilson then taught the music to his ten-piece band, who recorded *Smile* with him and worked tirelessly to recreate the album's intricate aural textures on stage. The result was unanimous reviews that gushingly hailed the rebirth of a lost masterpiece.

"Groundbreaking complexity and sophistication," wrote Michael Hann of London's *The Guardian*. "[The concert] made it seem like the grandest of American symphonies and Wilson the natural heir to Charles Ives."

"Nothing could prepare us," glowed Joe Muggs of London's *Daily Telegraph*. "The music echoed everything from Phillip Glass to Kurt Weill to Chuck Berry...Leonard Bernstein said Brian Wilson was one of the greatest composers of the 20th century. He was not wrong."

After performing the complex *Smile* in its entirety on stage, mostly on keyboard, Brian straps on a bass for encores like "Surfin' U.S.A." and "Fun, Fun, Fun."

roes and Villains"), modern parables ("Wonderful"), and "Surf's Up," a brilliant, if obscure, magnum opus that cleverly placed the Beach Boys' relationship with the ocean on a metaphorical level.

Smile was also supposed to incorporate recurring musical themes in a complex landscape that hauntingly portrayed the early settlement of North America. Later movements would evoke childhood and celebrate each of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water.

An ambitious project that was not to be—at least not in 1967. Disapproval from Capitol and some of the other

That's evocative praise for an album that was coldly received by Capitol Records in 1967, and left some of Wilson's former band mates confused and angry at the time. The record's completion was also challenged by Wilson's mental illness, insecurity, and drug abuse.

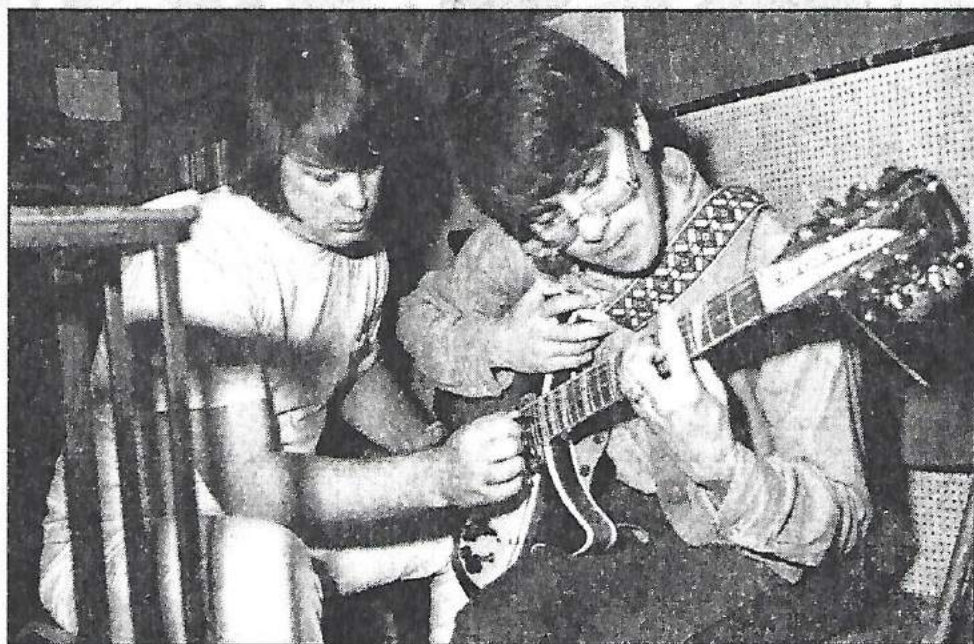
Beach Boys pushed an insecure Wilson to nix *Smile*. Instead, the musical auteur entered a morass of drugs, obesity, and untreated psychosis.

In its place came *Smiley Smile*, a rushed, half-baked album that ill-advisedly lifted the *Smile* title and incorporated its most commercial cuts, "Good Vibrations" and "Heroes and Villains." Some of the other *Smile* material would pop up on later Beach Boys records, but never in the expansive context envisioned by Wilson and Parks. Not until now, anyway. ⇒

The *Smile* legend begins in 1966. It was during this infamous creative period that Wilson put a sizable sand box underneath his living room piano and held business meetings in his swimming pool, fully clothed, because he feared his abusive father had bugged his house.

After completing *Pet Sounds* that year, Wilson pledged his next record would outshine its acclaimed predecessor. If *Pet Sounds*, by turns joyous and heartbreaking, was Wilson's personal statement on love and disillusionment, *Smile* would use a far broader canvass for his portraits of American history, youth, and nature.

"His truly spiritual power allows for such an array of attitudes in his work," says Parks of Wilson. "Whether 'serio' or comic, his every truth seems confirming." To that end, Parks, a producer and artist in his own right, was brought in as Wilson's lyrical translator. As partners, they created Old West vignettes ("He-



Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks (his collaborator on the lyrics) in the studio during the original 1967 *Smile* sessions. (Photo by Jasper Dailey, © copyright David Leaf Productions.)

Retired from the band he founded in 1961, Wilson has re-worked *Smile* as a solo CD, a very unlikely event, as over the years he had largely dismissed the project as "inappropriate music," becoming visibly uncomfortable when even asked about it.

Smile looks poised to impress America as much as it did England. The album has already garnered a rare five-star review in *Rolling Stone*, and some say this may be the CD that finally gets Wilson his long overdue first Grammy.

The 62-year-old ex-Beach Boy, often called the Orson Welles of rock, recently spoke with *Outré* about the reincarnation of a legendary album.

OUTRÉ: If I had told you 20 or even ten years ago that in the year 2004 you're going to finish the *Smile* album and you're going to play it in its entirety on tour, what would you have told me?

WILSON: I would have said I can't believe it. I would never have dreamed that we would have done it.

OUTRÉ: At one point, you were very standoffish about *Smile* and even called it "inappropriate music." What changed your mind?

WILSON: My wife and my managers got together with me about eight months ago for lunch. They said, "Brian, we think the world is finally ready for *Smile*." They thought the world had caught up with it. So I said, "Okay, I agree with you. I'm gonna teach it to my band. We're gonna



Brian with fellow Beach Boys, Dennis Wilson (his late younger brother) and Al Jardine, during the Pet Sounds sessions in 1966. Carl Wilson and Bruce Johnston were the only BBs who thought *Smile* should be the follow-up.

take it to London." So we took it to London, England after we learned it and we played it, and we got standing ovations six nights in a row.

OUTRÉ: Did it bring up a lot of old emotional baggage to go through those *Smile* tapes again?

WILSON: It reminded us of some of the bad drugs we had taken then, but otherwise, the music itself carries the mood.

OUTRÉ: I always had the sense that you associated *Smile* with personal problems you were having at the time. Is that why you avoided the project for so many years?

WILSON: Yeah, but we did it anyway. We overcame those odds.

OUTRÉ: "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow" is a piece of music that really spooked you for a while. Was it hard to approach that composition again?

WILSON: Yeah, that was the hardest part of the whole album, doing that "Fire" segment. [In 1967] we tried to create the mood of a terrifying fire, and it really kind of messed with my head.

OUTRÉ: I know you felt the music had actually caused some fires in Los Angeles. Did you consider not using it for the new album?

WILSON: I thought about it, but then I was convinced. I was outnumbered by Van Dyke Parks, and [bandleader] Darian Sahanaja said, "No, no, no, we gotta do it. Because it's part of the 'Elements.'"

OUTRÉ: What surprised you the most when you heard these songs for the first time in all these years?

WILSON: It surprised me mostly that we could have actually done that, that

we could have started a project that heavy. It surprised me to hear it for the first time again in 38 years.

OUTRÉ: Was there any music that you'd forgotten about?

WILSON: Yeah, there was stuff I'd forgotten about. "Roll Plymouth Rock."

OUTRÉ: That was originally titled "Do You Like Worms."

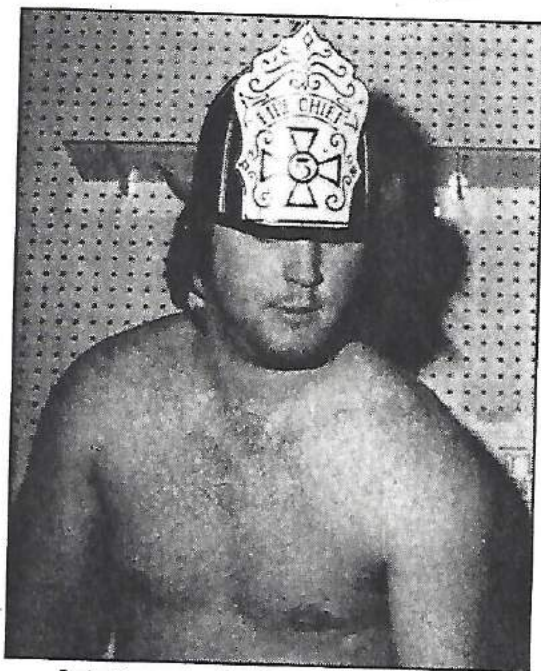
WILSON: Yeah, we changed it. Worms sounded kind of mushy.

OUTRÉ: It's a haunting song. For something like that, did you have to put yourself back in the frame of mind you had in your 20s?

WILSON: No, I absolutely had a different attitude this time around. I was much more positive, and I had much more faith in myself and



Brian Wilson, very early in the Beach Boys' career (c. 1964), hard at work on another hit.



During the sessions for "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow", Brian freaked out and made everyone in the studio wear fireman's helmets. (Photo by Jasper Dailey, copyright David Leaf Productions.)

my ability at music. So Van Dyke and I created a really great, right album.

OUTRÉ: There were a lot of pretty eccentric things you were doing during the original *Smile* sessions, like putting a sandbox under your piano and burning wood in the studio for the "Fire" tapes. Carol Kaye remembers your paying union scale for her, Hal Blaine, and other top session players to hammer on nails, presumably for the "Workshop" sessions. (See Kaye and Blaine interviews in *FILMFAXplus* #101.)

WILSON: Yeah, we had quite a time of it. I think it was the drugs, and I was just young and happy, you know, young and humorous.

OUTRÉ: You and Van Dyke have also written some brand new material for *Smile 2004*.

WILSON: The third movement [contains some new music]. Then we touched up the first two movements. It's a three-movement rock opera.



On the *Smile* tour, Wilson opens with a full hour of songs spanning his entire career, including a 20-minute "unplugged" set.

OUTRÉ: It surprised me that you went back and restored your *Pet Sounds* collaborator Tony Asher's original lyrics to "Good Vibrations."

WILSON: I wanted to change them. I wanted to try something new because I've been singing Mike Love's lyrics on the verses for about 35 years now. Tony Asher's lyrics are very good. They're very creative.

OUTRÉ: Was Tony surprised?

WILSON: I haven't talked to him about it. (laughs)

OUTRÉ: It's also great to hear the original "In the cantina..." section of "Heroes and Villains." The song is a real Old West comedy opera now.

WILSON: A 1-2-3, 1-2-3 waltz kind of thing.

OUTRÉ: And the new version of "Wonderful" with the harpsichords—such a different arrangement than the original Beach Boys recording that was released in 1967.

WILSON: My musicians are far superior to the Beach Boys musicians. I just believe in my band. I think my band is the greatest band I've ever known.

OUTRÉ: Why, ultimately, was *Smile* not released in 1967? There were rumors that you didn't have the support of the other Beach Boys, Mike Love famously telling you not to "f**k with the formula."

WILSON: [Capitol] didn't like what we were doing, and Mike [Love] and Dennis [Wilson] didn't like what we were doing either. So Van Dyke and I junked it because we got all messed up on drugs and we realized we were too far ahead of our time.

OUTRÉ: Is it true that you wrote some of the material for 1977's *The Beach Boys Love You* during the *Smile* period?

WILSON: No, that is not correct. *The Beach Boys Love You* is my very favorite album.

OUTRÉ: Why did you release *Smile* so soon after your last solo record, *Gettin' In Over My Head*?

WILSON: We wanted each one to stimulate sales for the other. *Gettin' In Over My Head* will stimulate sales for *Smile*, and *Smile* will stimulate sales for *Gettin' In Over My Head*.

OUTRÉ: When you think of *Smile* now, after revisiting it again after all these years, what comes to mind?

WILSON: Americana.

OUTRÉ: Some people are saying you may get your long-awaited Grammy for *Smile*. What do you think?

WILSON: If I get it, I'll be real proud, and if I don't, it won't hurt me too much. Ω

For more on Brian Wilson and The Beach Boys, see interviews with session musicians Carol Kaye and Hal Blaine in *FILMFAXplus* #101.



Wilson's current ten-piece touring band includes vocalist Taylor Mills, multi-instrumentalist Steve Foskett (once a member of the BBs' touring band), and the entire line-up of the alt-pop group, The Wondermints.