

Surf Aces Resurfaced: The Beach Boys and the Greening of the American Counterculture, 1963-1973

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Abstract

The rise of the American counterculture between the early- to mid-1960s and early- to mid-1970s was closely associated with the growth of environmentalism. This article explores how both informed popular music, which during these years became not only a prominent form of entertainment but also a forum for cultural and social criticism. In particular, through contextual and lyrical analyses of recordings by The Beach Boys, the article identifies patterns of change and continuity in the articulation of countercultural, ecological, and related sensibilities. During late 1966 and early 1967, the group's leader Brian Wilson and lyricist Van Dyke Parks collaborated on a collection of songs embodying such progressive thinking, even though the music of The Beach Boys had previously shown no such ambitions. In the short term, their efforts floundered as the risk-averse logic of the commercial music industry prompted group members to resist perceived threats to their established profile. Yet in the long term (and ironically in the name of commercial survival), The Beach Boys began selectively to adopt innovations they had previously shunned. Shorn of its more controversial associations, what had formerly been considered high risk had by 1970 become good business as once-marginal environmentalism gained broader acceptability: thus did 'America's band' articulate the flowering, greening, and fading of the counterculture.

Keywords: popular music, ecology, counterculture, Beach Boys

Resumen

El auge de la contracultura americana entre principios y mediados de las décadas de 1960 y 1970 guarda una estrecha relación con la expansión del movimiento ecologista. Este artículo explora el modo en que ambas corrientes dieron forma a la música popular, un medio de expresión que se convirtió en una destacada forma de entretenimiento y un foro de crítica cultural y social durante el período analizado. Más específicamente, se emplea el análisis contextual y lírico de las grabaciones de los Beach Boys para identificar patrones de cambio y continuidad en los movimientos contracultural y ecologista, y otros afines a ellos. Entre finales de 1966 y principios de 1967, Brian Wilson (el líder del grupo) y el letrista Van Dyke Parks colaboraron en un variado conjunto de canciones que encarnaban tales ideas progresistas, aun cuando la música de los Beach Boys nunca había puesto de manifiesto este tipo de ambiciones hasta entonces. A corto plazo, sus esfuerzos fueron en vano, ya que la lógica conservadora de la industria discográfica comercial instó a los miembros del grupo a resistir ante las amenazas que recibía su perfil. Más a largo plazo (e, irónicamente, en nombre de la supervivencia comercial) los Beach Boys comenzaron a adoptar, de un modo más bien escrupuloso, novedades que antes habían evitado debido a las controvertidas asociaciones que permitían establecer. En 1970, lo que antes se consideraba de alto riesgo se había convertido en un gran negocio debido en buena medida a que el ecologismo, otrora marginal, había ganado en aceptación popular; ello llevó a la "Banda de América" a expresar el florecimiento, la madurez y el desvanecimiento de la contracultura.

Palabras clave: música popular, ecología, contracultura, Beach Boys

The Beach Boys are often thought of as the United States's most successful pop group, at least from the 1960s. Under the creative leadership of chief songwriter Brian Wilson, the group recorded a string of hits that have long since entered the popular music canon, from "Surfin' USA" and "I Get Around" to "California Girls," "Wouldn't It Be Nice," "Do It Again," and many more. In the face of the so-called "British Invasion" of the American pop charts during the mid-1960s, the band—whose long-serving members included Wilson, his two younger brothers Dennis and Carl, their cousin Mike Love and friend Al Jardine—responded successfully to the musical and commercial challenge embodied by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. In 1966 they released two songs that rank regularly at the top of the all-time classic pop charts, "God Only Knows" and "Good Vibrations." Inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, The Beach Boys not only made a specific sub-genre, surf music, their own, they also gave their home state of California key features of its popular profile, including sun, sand, girls and cars. These achievements were recognized by the state in 2005 with the erection of a California Historical Landmark at the site of the Wilson brothers' Hawthorne, Los Angeles home at the time of the group's formation in 1961. Half a century after The Beach Boys' first commercial recordings, a world tour in 2012 by surviving members underlined the enduring appeal of their music and its associations.

One thing The Beach Boys are not usually associated with is ecology. On the contrary, their image is synonymous with a consumerism as environmentally heedless as it is hedonistic. Their early songs, for example, glorified the automobile for enabling surfers to access beaches or hamburger stands. "Driving up and down the same old strip" may have ultimately palled in "I Get Around" (1963), but only as a function of personal irritation or boredom, not traffic congestion or air pollution—and with a car there was always the opportunity to "find a new place where the kids are hip." Similarly, while possession of "the fastest set of wheels in town" might have provoked peer group resentment as much as admiration in "Little Deuce Coupe" (1964), cars remained the *sine qua non* of existence, their shortcomings again subject to appropriate gear changes. In The Beach Boys' early- to mid-1960s recordings, indeed, the automobile—whether sports car or "woody," hot rod or drag racer—became itself both desirable destination and emotive object, as prominent in the band's iconography as the beach life and surfboards it supported. Their fourth album, *Little Deuce Coupe* (1964), dealt almost exclusively with auto-mobility; even its memorial to actor James Dean, "A Young Man is Gone", was lent more than a hint of romance by the circumstances of his premature death (in a high-speed road accident). If Dean's star had burned out, moreover, the car's continued to shine for those who could "get rubber in all four gears," as the album's title song boasted, and the risks identified in Ralph Nader's soon-to-be-published *Unsafe At Any Speed* (1965) remained far beyond the imaginative horizon.

The Beach Boys are not readily associated with the American counterculture either. The style of their early hits meant that by the time the underground was reaching its creative cultural and social zenith they were being perceived as obsolete by a significant number of alternative movers-and-shakers. Writing in the new "hippie bible"

Rolling Stone in December 1967, for example, editor Jann Wenner dismissed the group as disappointing live and their music as shallow; chief songwriter Brian Wilson was, in Wenner's view, both over-rated by credulous publicists and pre-occupied with futile attempts to match The Beatles (Priore, *Look!* 127-128). Though they had initially been invited to perform and Wilson's name had been included in the list of festival board members, The Beach Boys' decision not to appear at the showcase Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967 bolstered a broader sense among the burgeoning counterculture that their time had now passed. Their music was catchy but disposable; they came from plastic land, Los Angeles, not hippie central, San Francisco. Still garbed in matching striped shirts redolent of pre-packaged family entertainment, moreover, they embodied a way of life perceived as conventional, even reactionary. Jimi Hendrix summed up such understandings of the band in a line from a song on his band's debut album *Are You Experienced?* that same year: "to you I wish to put an end / and you'll never hear surf music again."

Hendrix, as it happens, overstated the case. It is true that The Beach Boys never again enjoyed their early commercial success. After 1967 their occasional pop chart hits—such as the appropriately-titled "Do It Again" (1968) and "Kokomo" (1988)—appealed mainly to nostalgic sensibilities. In later years, too, the group would become publicly associated with Republican President Ronald Reagan and his Vice President George H.W. Bush, no friends of the counterculture or environmentalism. But this was scarcely the whole story. Fashionable dismissals notwithstanding, away from the pop charts The Beach Boys during the latter half of the 1960s began exploring new aesthetics and considering a public image more in tune with countercultural concerns, particularly the environment. Not all at once and not without internal conflict, by the early 1970s the band would have covered many overlapping bases—from romantic primitivist to pastoral and mystical, from conservationist to deep ecological—in what was a growing preoccupation with the natural world.

Both the shifting stances and the internal conflict were significant. What follows argues that during their first decade and more The Beach Boys' engagements with environmentalism and the counterculture were informed by and threw light on a broader pattern in the relationship between the American music industry and some of its key social and cultural contexts. During the mid-1960s one faction within and around the group, speaking via Brian Wilson, articulated an environmentalist faith then in the ascendant amongst a growing and influential minority of their fans and the broader popular music market. Another faction, comprising the majority of the group, were less confident or interested in challenging the authority, knowledge and objectives of their major record label or the preferences of their mass market, for both of whom new departures constituted an unnecessary, potentially hazardous, exercise. Only towards the end of the decade, as green issues began to gain a broader and more sympathetic hearing amongst audiences, were the perceived risks deemed sufficiently acceptable and the potential benefits sufficiently vital to prompt Wilson's group to express more explicitly an ecological commitment.

By this time Brian Wilson was himself coming to embody, involuntarily, some of the costs of countercultural excess *and* consumerist self-indulgence, a combination leaving him as damaged and endangered as the environment whose fragility he had begun to highlight. In his absence, however, the other Beach Boys would start to incorporate what they now recognized as green *credentials*. Brian Wilson and Van Dyke Parks's innovations on *Smile* would ultimately enjoy widespread recognition as an artwork that was as socially and culturally prescient as it was musically and lyrically inventive. The Beach Boys, for the most part in their original leader's absence, would go on to establish the celebration of the natural world as one part of their profile, much as environmental concerns have become a plank within the broader American public platform. With and without Brian Wilson, therefore, the group would come to serve as an implausible yet illuminating index of commercial popular cultural dealings with both ecology and the counterculture, as their differing tides ebbed and flowed.

I

Despite its romantic, consumerist, and sub-cultural preoccupations, The Beach Boys' music from the outset also referred to physical landscapes, evoking the beaches, palm trees, sunshine, and surf that were to become integral to the group's iconography. Album artwork and publicity shots customarily invoked the natural environment: witness the covers of *Surfin' Safari* (1963), *All Summer Long* (1964), and *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* (1965). Lyrically, meanwhile, early songs also referenced nature, topography, and climate. Yet in all these representations the environment was primarily a backdrop, assumed or projected as part of an anthropocentric vision in which humanity (or, more precisely, teenagers) surfed, danced, drove, and dated. In "Surfer Moon" (1963), for example, earth's satellite "brings the tide in" and thereby "brings us waves each day." In "The Warmth of the Sun" (1964), the title is primarily a metaphor for its protagonist's love, which "won't ever die." In "California Girls" (1965), meanwhile, if "the west coast has the sunshine" this simply meant "the girls all get so tanned."

The natural world might harbor broken hearts, even damaged carburetors, but was itself presumed inexhaustible. In these songs, it followed, the presence of contemporary manifestations of what Leo Marx in 1964 dubbed *The Machine in the Garden* appeared as untroubled as their industrial predecessors had done in George Inness's painting "Lackawanna Valley" (1855) over a century earlier (Marx 220-221; Kasson 176-177). Brian Wilson's songs serenaded cars en route to the beach and then draped them in palm leaves; they helped sell a million high-tech polyurethane fiber glass surf boards while celebrating the internal combustion engines responsible for producing almost 80 per cent of smog-producing pollutants in early-1960s Los Angeles. Yet the ironies, in an environmental sense, lay as far out of range as the hazards about to be documented in Nader's study of auto-mobility and its discontents (Bookchin 82).

By 1966, however, Wilson had begun to extend his band's horizons. It would be difficult to argue that the group suddenly abandoned a proven musical formula in favour of risk-taking: their leader's songwriting, arrangements, and recordings had been

innovative from the outset. Indeed, some roots of change in Wilson's cultural and social perspectives went back to the surfing sub-culture that had initially inspired The Beach Boys (even though drummer Dennis Wilson was the only group member to surf). Amidst the preoccupations of young mid-1960s southern California surfers, for example, Tom Wolfe was reporting a mixture of reverence and awe in the face of an unknowable Pacific Ocean: a sensibility that over the next decade would help underwrite a synthesis of surfing lifestyles, hippie idealism, and nascent environmentalism. In part for this very reason, surf would remain prominent in Brian Wilson's expressive vocabulary (Wolfe, *Electric* 34; Wolfe, *Pump* 320-322; Chidester and Priore 229-237).

Yet by 1966 the leading Beach Boy's creativity was extending well beyond—or bringing more to—the beach. Alongside the musical challenge of The Beatles, one new inspiration derived from Wilson's recent interest in the burgeoning Los Angeles underground: during this period a number of its adepts and proselytes would introduce him to cultural criticism, psychology, alternative religions, and literature, none of which had marked his previous songwriting. Another, related inspiration came from Wilson's introduction to marijuana in late 1964 and LSD in early 1965, his interest in such drugs having been stimulated by the prospects of gaining spiritual enlightenment and expanding his musical horizons (ironically, given his later experiences, physical and psychological benefits were also anticipated) (Carter 61-62). If such developments prepared the ground for new creative departures, however, nature itself—in the shape of a visit to Big Sur in northern California during the late spring of 1966—probably catalyzed Wilson's growing sensitivity towards the environment (Priore, *Smile* 78-79). Henceforth, the natural world would no longer serve solely as an assumed backdrop to teenage activities and preoccupations; gradually and sporadically, it would become a subject and a symbol, an inspiration and a cause for concern.

Expressions of this shift were varied. Beyond the songwriting realm, one of Wilson's environmental gestures involved his promotion of healthy living. On the one hand, during the summer of 1966 he started to advocate physical exercise. While not a new departure for this former high school athlete and baseball player, installing a sauna, tumbling mats and other gym equipment in his Beverly Hills home did signify a renewed commitment (the life of a professional musician scarcely facilitated a healthy lifestyle, even if it called for stamina) (Gaines 194-95; Carlin 102-103, 110). On the other hand, Wilson's growing countercultural associations brought him into contact with West Coast "nature boys" and vegetarians such as Eden Ahbez, who linked the turn-of-the-century European *lebensreform* movement with its American descendant. Inspired, too, by the radio programs of Mojave Desert health food faddist Curtis Howe Springer, The Beach Boys' leader told *Teen Set* magazine in the late autumn of 1966 that he wanted "people to turn on to vegetables. Good, natural food. Organic food." He also began to talk of growing organically-cultivated produce in his Beverly Hills garden (three years later he would briefly run his own West Hollywood health food store, the Radiant Radish) (Priore, *Look!* 57; Kennedy 166-181; Toop 133-141; Carter 65; Priore, *Smile* 110).

In the studio, meanwhile, Wilson displayed his new sensitivity towards environmental influences on personal health by recording an impassioned monologue

on the dangers of smog. The speech was meandering in form and anecdotal in tone (“I opened up my bathroom window today and I almost choked to death!”), but it did refer to automobiles and industry as major sources of air pollution in Los Angeles. Just as the “health food albums” the head Beach Boy occasionally spoke of recording at this time came to nothing, so his thoughts on smog were never likely to find their way onto vinyl—certainly not by way of Capitol Records. Yet even if they ignored his prior celebrations of auto-mobility and came a decade after the city’s Air Pollution Foundation had first “identified the automobile as the co-equal, if not exclusive, cause of smog alongside industrial pollution,” Wilson’s remarks did at least recognize that the garden could not accommodate machines *ad infinitum* (Starr 261).

Beginning in 1966 his musical compositions also registered this changing sensibility. Instrumental to this development was the recruitment of a new lyricist, Van Dyke Parks, to succeed Tony Asher, with whom Wilson had written most of The Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* (1966) album. One of a growing number of people linking the popular musical and countercultural realms in Los Angeles, Parks brought to this collaboration a classical music education, multi-instrumental skills, and experience both on the folk revival circuit and as a studio musician. He also had long-standing interests in social justice and environmentalism, the latter fostered by his reading of works such as conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947) and ecologist Loren Eiseley’s *The Immense Journey* (1957). Having already served as a volunteer with leading Los Angeles activist Ellen Stern Harris’ Council for Planning and Conservation, after the January 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill Parks would do the same for the city’s Regional Water Quality Control Board (Parks n.p.; Harris n.p.).

Parks’s environmentalism may have had no influence in recommending him to Wilson, who was initially drawn to his facility with words. Yet their collaboration was emblematic of the diverse threads that tied environmental concerns to the counterculture and the new left (the more overtly political, historically-attuned, protest-oriented wing of the 1960s movement). This was particularly so in Los Angeles, where the city’s concentration of popular cultural industries and its history of anti-communist politics tended to drive political and cultural radicals together under the latter’s banner (McBride 111-113). Wilson and Parks’s subsequent compositions would articulate a quasi-Transcendental, romantic faith in nature’s benevolence, a primitivist sense of its mystic, sacramental properties, and a critical desire, born of historical and first-hand experience, not only to experience and venerate but also to defend and preserve the environment.

II

The main result of Wilson and Parks’s collaboration during 1966 and 1967, an album to be entitled *Smile* (1967), may be read as a musical expression of many of the counterculture’s ecological tropes. Living up to the commonplace association between idealism, “hippies” and “flower-children,” *Smile* not only finds in the natural world a realm of Edenic, pre-lapsarian innocence, it also appeals more specifically to

Wordsworth's sense of the redemptive promise embodied in the child's "natural piety" and "primal sympathy" with God's creation—the latter here taking the forms of rural arcadia and rolling surf (Curnutt 43-46). In "Wonderful," for example, we find a golden-locked, "young and loving" girl who "belongs" in and "knows how to gather the forest." In "Surf's Up," the ocean bears "the young ... aboard a tidal wave," their "children's song" promising salvation to a fallen, "broken man" if only he would hear "the word" and join their "spring."

Congruent with readings that identify countercultural sensibilities with mystical or otherwise altered states of mind are songs that ascribe to nature magical qualities eluding rational understanding, or that sense life's quintessence in universal waves of benign consciousness. Thus as a "warm breeze" makes "the little bells tinkle" in "Wind Chimes," so the distracted protagonist notices "a tear roll ... off my cheek," at once unprovoked and inexplicable. Beyond understanding in "Good Vibrations," too, lies something intangible: a "sensation ... working on my brain" capable of "giving me excitations" and transporting the subject "I don't know where." In keeping with affinities between the counterculture, disdain for materialism and resistance to competitive individualism, meanwhile, are songs like "Roll Plymouth Rock" that identify with groups perceived to uphold similar values, beliefs and practices, such as Native American tribes and Mexican American and Polynesian communities.

Yet while *Smile* articulates these and other familiar countercultural investments in the natural world and those held to embody it, the recording also expresses sensibilities associated with the new left. Songs like "Roll Plymouth Rock" and "Heroes and Villains" not only honour minorities assumed to be environmentally-friendly they also, *sotto voce*, record their suffering in the face of advanced industrial society, allude to the machinery of repression, and challenge those responsible for it. Thus the references to armed assaults on native homelands (the "rain of bullets" that "brought ... down" a non-white "innocent"), to the railroading of immigrant labour (a "grand coolie, working on the railroad"), to rough-riding neo-colonialism (a western "social structure steamed upon Hawaii"), and to the paving-over of paradise by "ribbon[s] of concrete" and "the iron horse." Thus, too, the repeated accusatory refrain, at once social, cultural and environmental: "just see what you've done / done to the church of the American Indian!"

Moreover, Wilson and Parks's compositions also temper the unqualified faith in a benevolent nature characteristic of some countercultural visions with a caution reminiscent of Melville's challenge in *Moby-Dick* (1851) to Transcendentalism. In *Smile*, the elements may nourish mankind and enable the earth to bear fruit (in "I'm in Great Shape," for example, "fresh clean air around my head" quickens body and spirit, while in "Cabinessence" there flourish "windblown ... waves of wheat for your embracing"). Yet air currents also entail risks. In "On a Holiday" they drive a piratical raiding party's ship towards Hawaii; in "Cabinessence" they carry aloft the crow that—in an allusion to Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (1855)—threatens the natives' crop; in "Wind Chimes" they distract man's attention from domestic responsibilities; in "Mrs O'Leary's Cow" they whip up the fires that bring physical destruction and psychological torment. If the

forces of nature when harnessed can bring security, so too can they yield havoc, where the elements may inspire, they may also bite back.

The resultant fault lines between *Smile's* environmental and countercultural plate boundaries describe those points at which faith rubs up against experience, myths are tested against history, and vision and reason fold into one another. These lines also run deeply through two of the album's central archetypes: the yeoman farmer and the youthful surfer. One may be inherited and the other imagined; both, however, invoke forms of Adamic innocence through contact with the universal waves—now of wheat, now of surf—that in *Smile* constitute the very essence, or undercurrent, of being. The natural world, that is, serves as a touchstone for both the national imaginary and historical practice.

That *Smile* rehearses these concerns is fully in keeping with dynamics in contemporary environmental thought. Thus in 1967 both Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* and Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" identified divisions between the movement's utilitarian, conservationist leanings and its non-anthropocentric, "deep ecological" tendencies (Sessions 105-106, 113-15; Coates 38-41; Nash 251-57). At this very time, the self-reliant, Jeffersonian yeoman farmer in *Smile* articulates a harmonious pastoral vision in which human labour harnesses the natural world to man's needs. In "Cabinessence," in particular, we find the homestead's welcoming "lamp and fire mellow" promising security, community and fertility: this "home on the range" (with its "meadow filled with grain") constitutes a latter-day version of the pragmatic stewardship of national resources as pioneered by Gifford Pinchot at the US Bureau of Forestry. *Smile's* self-assured, youthful surfer enacts a similarly concordant tableau—yet one in which the untamed elements themselves (the "tidal wave" in "Surf's Up"; a "waterfall" in "In Blue Hawaii"), rather than man alone, provide cohesion and recovery—an image in keeping with the ideals of holistic, radical environmentalists, such as Aldo Leopold, who traced their lineage back to John Muir and Henry David Thoreau.

Whether in *Smile's* mid-western rural heartlands or on its far-western coastal fringes, these archetypes were no more stable than the waves they rode and embraced or the environmental fault lines they straddled. The yeoman farmer's pastoral always balanced precariously between untamed frontier and urban industrial constraint; the forester's timber reserve remained subject to the contrasting demands of wilderness preservation and of resource utilization. Deep ecology was in part a recognition of this fact, even though Aldo Leopold subscribed to the kinds of frontier exceptionalist ideas articulated by his sometime neighbour, Frederick Jackson Turner (Nash 145-47, 188-89; Coates 37-38). But if by the mid-1960s such inherited mythology was coming up hard against experience, *Smile's* projected mythology was scarcely immune from the same challenge. Not only does surf, however wild, always collapse; when the surfer is not imagined alone but becomes part of a large surfing community parked woody-to-woody along the coast, and where the ocean is polluted by oil spills and the waves' good vibrations are dampened by industrial effluent, what then?

As a musical composition rather than an environmental reform proposal, *Smile* itself could scarcely be expected to provide answers. Wilson and Parks's blend of countercultural sensibility, ecological sensitivity, and social criticism does nevertheless enable it to identify issues and perspectives. Beckoning beyond anthropocentrism, it invokes a holistic identification with and reverence towards the natural world. It also ascribes a degree of agency to animals—and not only for mankind's benefit: one cow, un-coincidentally tethered, triggers the Great Chicago Fire; another (“wholly holy”) is subsequently invited to “lay before” its fellow creatures, thereby re-enacting as part of a larger rebirth ceremony Quaker artist Edward Hicks's original vision in *Peaceable Kingdom* (1826) of Isaiah's biblical prophecy. Yet just as Hicks's concern remained the redemption of the human soul and his work repeated the prophet's insistence that “a little child shall lead them,” so in *Smile* it is still mankind's responsibility to “pick up the pieces” of its broken covenant and to reconstruct the Promised Land.

Nor is the point made solely via the repeated injunction “just see what you've done!” Thus if a story by Wilson entitled “Vibrations—Brian Wilson Style” is any guide, *Smile's* comic celebration of healthy eating, “Vega-Tables,” is also a thinly veiled psychedelic allegory of the need for radical change in human consciousness. Published in radio station KRLA's *Beat* magazine a month after the song's composition in late 1966, this brief tale of an *Alice in Wonderland*-like picnic portrays its protagonist as “choking with ill-health” and alienated from “the beauty of nature” until eating a “carrot” affords him “some very out-of-sight vision, of a very out-of-sight world” (Priore, *Look!* 68; Priore, *Smile* 109; Badman 162; Carter 63-64). “Vega-Tables” will lead, ultimately, towards discovery of the good vibrations that constitute all being, the multiple waves across which colonists and natives, farmers and bankers, humans and animals, had once clashed now assumed into a universal wave of pure benevolence.

III

Though not its sole concern, *Smile* articulates a range of environmental issues and perspectives, addressing intersections of ecological and countercultural belief in particular. Its trajectory measures inherited myth against historical experience, expresses utopian potentials as new myth, and imagines salvation via a crisis of faith leading to symbolic rebirth. Yet the recording ultimately purchases its ambitious scope at the cost of a more detailed resolution, and as its diverse, particular waves become assumed into one archetypal, universal wave so the limits of the vision become evident, however brilliant the musical and lyrical expression. From a deep ecological perspective, for example, *Smile's* designs are as anthropocentric as those of The Beach Boys' earliest songs: where automobiles had once extended human mobility, now “vegetables” promise to expand human consciousness. Even when such expansion enables the transcendence of self, if man, his works, and the natural world become thereby mere expressions of undifferentiated being, then carrot and carburetor, growing cycle and fuel cycle, appear parts of the same universal wave—and what, then, has the ecologist (or the natural world) to fear? The oil derricks on Huntington Beach, the beer can on the

highway, the highway itself, all are subsumed within the psychedelic vision. Environmental sensitivities are certainly latent in this optic; it is, however, difficult (and perhaps unrealistic) to discern a green *politics* towards the end of the recording.

Of course, *Smile* was abandoned some way short of an ending. But not only was such criticism therefore moot for decades, it was also largely irrelevant to the original work's non-completion. As many accounts have reported, a blend of personal, musical, commercial, legal, and other conflicts within and beyond The Beach Boys' immediate circle led to Van Dyke Parks's departure from the work-in-progress, Brian Wilson's gradual abandonment of his leadership role, and the shelving of work on *Smile* during the spring of 1967 (the work would only be completed, re-recorded and released as *Brian Wilson Presents Smile* in 2004) (Priore, *Smile* 96-119; Williams 37-65; Carlin 100-23). In retrospect, particularly to those who long championed the unreleased music, the abandonment of *Smile* not only devastated Wilson and did nothing for The Beach Boys' musical creativity, it also precluded the subsequent growth of a more progressive American popular music. Yet even as other band members moved to separate Wilson from his countercultural friends and to direct The Beach Boys' musical energies away from what they considered the more inaccessible, less obviously commercial aspects of *Smile*, so the influence of the latter endured.

In a narrow sense this may be read as evidence of the group's overwhelming reliance on Brian Wilson as songwriter, arranger, and producer: even as other band members took the helm, so they showed how much they had learned from – and still depended on – him. Yet in broader terms the fact that The Beach Boys would over the next few years continue to raid the shelved *Smile* tapes for material was also emblematic of the extent to which the latter had encapsulated so many of the era's challenges: social, cultural, environmental, and more. *Smile* was in this sense not only an unfinished album but also an index of some of the nation's unfinished business: if the group wished to enjoy once more the “relevance” they had lost in the eyes of some youth culture arbiters, and to regain the success they had once experienced, it could not simply be written off. Just as environmentalism absorbed some countercultural energies when the latter began to dissipate during the late 1960s and early 1970s, so The Beach Boys found that *Smile's* greener roots and branches would not so readily wither or break—even with Parks no longer on board and Wilson now in the back seat. As social, cultural and popular musical contexts changed, indeed, so the group came to recognize that heading “back to the beach” would oblige the former surf music aces to undergo a degree of cultural—more precisely, ecological—resurfacing.

IV

In the half-decade and more following the abandonment of *Smile*, environmental tropes retained a prominence in The Beach Boys' music. Indeed virtually all of the band's albums from *Wild Honey* (1967) to *Holland* (1973) included tracks devoted wholly or in part to the natural world. Occasionally these songs do relegate nature to the supporting role it had once customarily played: in “Time to Get Alone,” Brian Wilson's only new solo

composition on *20/20* (1969), the “pine-scented air” and a “valley so deep and wide” are no more than backdrops to a romantic excursion. More often, though, they take up themes sounded in Wilson and Parks’s collaboration. Of these the romantic primitivist strain—embracing nature as a sacred, mysterious realm and those associated with it as untainted and of a higher order—hovers around Wilson’s haunting Hawaiian soundscape “Diamond Head” on *Friends* (1968) and long-term group bass player Bruce Johnston’s idyllic Californian instrumental “The Nearest Faraway Place” on *20/20*. It is also given voice in Al Jardine’s setting of poet, environmentalist and “inhumanist” philosopher Robinson Jeffers’ “The Beaks of Eagles” (1936) on *Holland*: here “the ... beautiful and lonely cry” of “the mother-eagle” transcends mere human “progress and corruption,” as if to remind man, “the unstable animal,” that his underlying “needs and nature” are as unchanging as hers: a “word [that] will let you soar with your soul.”

Most frequently, however, environmentally-friendly post-*Smile* Beach Boys music built on the theme of its abandoned sketches “Barnyard” and “I’m in Great Shape,” both of which celebrated the elements and their ability to refresh and inspire. Examples include the Wilson co-writes “Country Air” (“breathe the beauty of it everywhere”) on *Wild Honey* and “Wake the World” on *Friends*: “got my face in the running water / making my life so much brighter.” They also include much of Mike Love and Al Jardine’s “California Saga” trilogy on *Holland*: “Big Sur,” populated by “mother deer with their newborn fawns” under “crimson sunsets and golden dawns” (“that’s where I belong”); and “California,” where “the air’s so clear it’ll just take your mind away.” The perspective in such songs may remain anthropocentric (the agency ascribed to a bird in “At My Window,” the Wilson/Jardine co-write on *Sunflower* [1970], is more redolent of Walt Disney than of Aldo Leopold). Still, it has moved further than the protagonist in “Little Deuce Coupe.” Here, the natural world isn’t taken for granted, nor does it serve exclusively as romantic context or metaphor, as psychedelic symbol, or spiritual analogue: it is also appreciated in its own right.

Paradoxically, such inspirational treatments encouraged and were fostered by fears for the natural world; anxieties also foreshadowed in *Smile*’s cautionary allusions to industrial over-development. And just as the countercultural celebration of nature was emblematic of a desire to escape then-embattled urban settings (many musicians literally retreating to rural locations), so forebodings about pollution and despoliation were also informed by current circumstances, social, political and material. Thus if *Smile*’s ecological sensibilities probably owed something to high-profile campaigns in 1966 and 1967 to prevent dam construction on the Grand Canyon, then the large-scale oil spill off the San Diego coast in 1969 surely helped draw The Beach Boys collectively towards environmentalism (Nash 229-234). Where *Sunflower* had closed with the celebration of “Cool, Cool Water,” the group’s next album, *Surf’s Up* (1971), opened with Mike Love and Al Jardine’s self-explanatory “Don’t Go Near the Water.”

The latter song may have been noteworthy for its essential theme more than its lyrical quality (“toothpaste and soap will make our oceans a bubble bath,” one verse cautions, “so let’s avoid an ecological aftermath”). Elsewhere on the album, though, the anxieties it expressed were sufficient to qualify the enduring anthropocentrism its title

betrayed. Co-written by Brian Wilson and Al Jardine, “A Day in the Life of a Tree” was perhaps as close as The Beach Boys would get to a biocentric sensibility. It is not just that the song’s lyrics take up Wilson’s *Smile*-era monologue about smog to portray the natural world on the verge of pollution-induced extinction, or that they purport to be the tree’s own words (“trees like me weren’t meant to live / if all this earth can give is pollution and slow death”). As striking are the song’s arrangement, pace and vocal quality. Whereas in “Don’t Go Near the Water” harmonic resolutions and rising key changes ensured (in David Ingram’s words) that “environmental collapse” had “seldom [...] sounded as sweet,” the overall effect of “A Day in the Life of a Tree” is at once gothic and funereal, with the vocal lending a sense of fragility against the grieving lamentations of the pipe organ. The addition of bird song only heightens the sense of loss (Ingram 137). Here, perhaps, was a deeper (albeit histrionic) recognition of the damage The Beach Boys had inadvertently contributed to over the previous decade via their popular celebrations of juvenile self-indulgence, auto-mobility, consumerist life-styles, and instant satisfaction.

This progressive greening of The Beach Boys can be read in another way, however: not as a belated admission of youthful excess or the virtuous cultivation of a latent eco-consciousness, but as a re-branding exercise for a group struggling to regain the popular credibility or commercial success it had enjoyed until 1966. The lyrics to “A Day in the Life of a Tree,” for example, had been written by Jack Rieley, a self-promoting Los Angeles disc jockey who Brian Wilson had met in his Radiant Radish health food store in early 1970 and who after an interview with band members that summer proposed new initiatives to strengthen their increasingly fragile finances. Addressing their modest chart performances and fading tour income, Rieley argued that The Beach Boys could “increase [their] record sales and popularity” (Doe 38). To do so they should craft a profile capable of regaining the audience that since their non-appearance at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 had dismissed them as passé. The profile he had in mind would be more ecological and political, based on new songs (such as “Don’t Go Near the Water”) and appearances at anti-war benefits and hippie-friendly festivals. Installed initially as Director of Public Relations, after the lackluster commercial showing of the *Sunflower* album later in 1970 Rieley found himself invited to manage the band and even to help out with songwriting. Conscious rebranding came no more easily now, however, than did the creative changes Wilson and Parks had brought to the group’s musical identity in 1966 and 1967. According to some accounts, none of The Beach Boys—Brian Wilson included—wanted to sing the lead on a song as gloomy as “A Day in the Life of a Tree,” which is why the vocal was provided by Rieley himself (Badman 273-77, 289; Gaines 288-300; Carlin 155-60).

The song was not the only one in The Beach Boys’ repertoire at this time to move into deep ecological territory. Placed directly after “A Day in the Life of a Tree” on *Surf’s Up*, “Til I Die” is for many critics Brian Wilson’s own last great composition. In “Til I Die,” however, nature is not the innocent victim of man’s reckless behavior, nor is it a source of physical or spiritual redemption. It is, rather, as heedless of humanity, as indifferent to his fate, as man had long been of nature. Responding, in effect, to John

Muir's question a century and more earlier ("why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?"), lead vocalist Wilson feels no more significant, and no more in control of his fate, than "a cork on the ocean," "a leaf on a windy day" or "a rock in a landslide." Here, even more so than on the preceding song or Al Jardine's later *Holland* setting of Robinson Jeffers's poem "The Beaks of Eagles," the group intimates both lyrically and musically a sense of man's place in the natural world in line with Aldo Leopold's non-anthropocentric reading of eco-systems (Nash 194).

Yet whether "'Til I Die" fully embodies Leopold's "ecological conscience" or lives up to his belief that human beings were "only fellow-voyageurs with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution" is less clear (Nash 192, 195-96). The song adopts a first person singular perspective and addresses the singer's own fate; while he recognizes his own insignificance within nature's immensity, his resultant feelings of powerlessness ("I lost my way ... pretty soon I'll be blown away") tend to restrict any broader sense of community or responsibility. As important, while Wilson in the song may surrender to a personal oblivion as imminent as it is unavoidable, beyond its reaches his fellow Beach Boys were much less willing to see their leader, family member, friend, and—in terms of their own commercial survival—most precious natural resource collapse, drown or be otherwise lost. In "A Day in the Life of a Tree," indeed, it may have been less the environment than Brian Wilson that was endangered: for by the early 1970s The Beach Boys' all-round one-man eco-system appeared, like the song's once vital tree, to be on the verge of extinction (Carlin 160-61).

It seems mildly ironic that, health rhetoric notwithstanding, Wilson throughout the *Smile* era retained his staple diet of burgers and fries, and avoided exercise as much as he did vegetables. Yet the deeper, more damaging irony—that his decline, if not drug-related, may have been triggered by the abandonment of his work with Van Dyke Parks in the face of his fellow Beach Boys' resistance to it—was probably lost on the group. Decades later, when Wilson and Parks completed *Brian Wilson Presents Smile*, its protagonist was portrayed as an archetypal yeoman farmer, in turn marginalized, over-ridden and driven close to annihilation. Crises of secular history and spiritual faith then led to his miraculous rebirth in the figure of a mythic young surfer. Yet whereas Wilson and Parks's unfinished venture furnished an agenda for The Beach Boys' environmental concerns over the next few years, in this very personal sense real life recovery would take a good deal longer.

V

Over a ten-year period beginning in the early- to mid-1960s the American counterculture grew, flourished, and then (like the new left to which it was linked) slowly fragmented. Environmentalism, meanwhile, followed a less volatile trajectory, sharing a number of their roots and concerns but able for a variety of reasons to transcend the circumstances that undermined both wings of the "movement." Building their career within the popular music industry during this period, The Beach Boys also experienced growth, success and retrenchment. In the process they registered many of

the fluctuating affinities and tensions between culture, society, politics, and commerce that characterized these years of often-intense conflict over lifestyles, attitudes and public policy. Within their closest circles, differing understandings of popular music—as art and social critique, as entertainment, commodity and therapy—were tested, in some cases at great personal and professional cost. During this decade, The Beach Boys’ musical treatments of the natural world were necessarily marked by such differences. At first it was often enjoyed, at times abused, but usually taken for granted. Subsequently, the environment was invested with magical or spiritual qualities, read as personal or psychological metaphor, and celebrated, defended or surrendered to as perceived circumstances—creative interests, cultural contexts, public discourses, commercial necessities—changed.

Notwithstanding their enduring public image (which in its association with surf, cars and romance was scarcely countercultural or in any critical sense ecological), The Beach Boys do not warrant attention because of their refusal to develop another image more in tune with both. Their interest lies, rather, in the extent to which during their first decade and more they registered and responded to shifts in some of the era’s popular cultural, social, and commercial tectonic plates. Particularly insofar as he developed a creative partnership with Van Dyke Parks in 1966 and 1967, Brian Wilson showed himself sensitive to the concerns of the burgeoning “movement” (at least its countercultural wing), environmentalism included. Other members of his group, more attuned to the risk-averse instincts of the music industry, proved resistant to the kinds of innovation the two men pursued on *Smile*, and were less insistent than Wilson and Parks that this new music could be artistically innovative, socially relevant, and commercially successful. Towards the end of 1966 the enormous success of the “Good Vibrations” single appeared to validate new musical departures. However, conflict within the group allied to a variety of other problems—not least with the group’s label, Capitol Records—terminated work on the proposed *Smile* album during the spring of 1967. Yet in spite of Parks’s departure and of Wilson’s withdrawal from his previously dominant role within The Beach Boys, *Smile* was not simply “lost.” Rather, it came to provide an unacknowledged agenda for the group over the next few years. Not only would it furnish musical materials to be retrieved and adapted for future albums; the project would also offer a storehouse of themes, not least environmental, to be drawn on—ironically—to salvage the group’s image and commercial standing.

Whether or not related to *Smile*, public acknowledgment that the outcome some Beach Boys may privately have feared by early 1967 was indeed upon them came two years later: in May 1969 Brian Wilson himself told a press conference that the group was “in deep financial trouble” and close to bankruptcy. Its members’ endorsement of Jack Rieley’s reading of the problem and his proposals for a solution following his August 1970 appointment as manager not only threw light on the extent to which the cultural, social, and commercial tectonic plates had shifted in the interim (Badman 243, 277). It also signified a tacit recognition (typical of marketplace assessments of things its agents deem avant-garde) that in composing *Smile* Wilson and Parks had not so much been *wrong* as *premature*. Where they had believed that the pursuit of musical excellence

would itself bring commercial success, moreover, Rieley's proposals in effect accepted that the sheer *obligation* to secure such success might make some of their ideas, even some of their songs, useful. Even before his arrival The Beach Boys had begun to move in this direction, both reworking *Smile*-era materials and revising their stage routines. Thereafter they not only joined bills and sought out venues associated with countercultural audiences but also took up aspects of what Rieley considered a more contemporary agenda (Carlin 155-58; Gaines 288-300).

It was here that environmentalism had a role to play. Some of The Beach Boys had long-standing ecological leanings. Rhythm guitarist Al Jardine, for example, recalled the "unforgettable experience" of discovering "the beauty of the California environment" after his family's relocation there from Ohio in the early 1950s; he later became an environmental campaigner (Beard 23). This was not *exclusively*, therefore, an exercise in opportunism. Yet such established sympathies scarcely weakened Rieley's arguments; they simply gave group members further reason to act upon them. Nor was this all: the Santa Barbara oil spill in early 1969 had been followed by a succession of other similar high-visibility incidents that within a year would help put the environment on *Newsweek's* cover. The popularity of Earth Day in April 1970, "the largest demonstration of the sixties era," involving some twenty million people, underlined the growing appeal of so-called "green power" (as *The New York Times* wrote of Earth Day: "like Mother's Day, no man in public office could be against it") (Anderson 346-49).

In this context, environmentalism was likely to appeal to an audience that included but was not restricted to countercultural, social reform, and anti-war circles. Yet insofar as they implied endorsements of beliefs and practices considered liable to alienate key opinion-formers, record labels and potential fans, certain irrational, overly-mystical, seemingly-chimerical engagements with the environment might be played down. Unobjectionable celebrations of nature coupled with de-politicized laments about environmental damage were to be preferred. 'A Day in the Life of a Tree' would reference acid rain, therefore, rather than acid visions. In the short term, addressing the immediate cash-flow problem, the strategy was a success—at least, ironically, until the group elected in early 1972 to make an expensive relocation to supposedly bucolic Holland, partly in keeping with the eco-friendly agenda their new manager had drafted for them (Badman 304; Gaines 308-17).

The Beach Boys' engagements with environmentalism and the counterculture from the early-1960s to the early-1970s were at first non-existent, then expansive but strained, thereafter strategic and selective. They may be read as emblematic of the ways in which the highly market-sensitive American popular music industry came to terms with social and cultural movements whose motives were not primarily economic. As the folds and tears in its musical and personal fabric demonstrated, the group was positioned across a network of commercial, social, and cultural fault lines that were particularly stressed during these years. Though damaged by the experiences, The Beach Boys' leader Brian Wilson would ultimately make enough of a recovery (essentially away from the group) to complete work on his collaboration with Van Dyke

Parks almost forty years after its early abandonment—to universal acclaim and best-seller status.

His group, meanwhile, would follow another trajectory. Within a few years of their recovery from the immediate financial crisis of 1969-70, with the counterculture dissolving, the anti-war movement deprived of its target, and environmentalism becoming more main-stream, The Beach Boys would release their chart-topping, double-platinum, most commercially successful album ever, *Endless Summer* (1974), a greatest hits compilation highlighting their original blend of cars, surf and romance with scarcely a trace of environmentalist sensibility. This record laid the basis for an enduring career as a widely-popular, highly-profitable (and intermittently green), nostalgia-oriented touring act (Carlin 192-194; Gaines 327-328). For The Beach Boys, as for Brian Wilson, the surf aces, resurfaced, had resurfaced again.

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