

Music 262: Rock Music, History and Social Analysis, Beach Boys

[Music Playing on Piano]

[Brian Ward]: So we have this group from America that comes out of surf rock and they also borrow from some jazz vocal traditions and they really are America's answer to The Beatles. Because they came around at the same time The Beatles hit the market. Both of these groups are symbiotic. They have this sympathetic relationship. They feed off of each other and they compete with each other, The Beatles and The Beach Boys. The result of that is all this great music. Let's talk about The Beach Boys for a minute. It's really a family affair. We have these brothers: Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson. They have their cousin, Mike Love and their neighbor Alan Jardine who plays drums. Their songs are about the beach, paradise, cars, hot rods, California girls. So there's this theme of California in all of their music and this lifestyle and that's where they're from.

Their music is a combination of this jazz group called The Four Freshmen. It was a jazz vocal group that sang in really close four part harmony. Brian Wilson just loved this group and he patterned The Beach Boys' vocal harmonies after this jazz group called The Four Freshmen. Another big part of their music is this surf style that was around them as they were developing as a band. So they adopted this surf style of rock n' roll, of guitar driven instrumental rock. So you combine these two things, these beautiful four part harmonies with the surf rock and you get The Beach Boys. A very unique combination. Now Brian Wilson had this falsetto voice that he sang on all the ballads. It was really beautiful. Mike Love has that nasally voice that you hear with The Beach Boys and he uses that on more of the up tempo numbers like Surfin' Safari. The rockers featured Love on lead with a tight vocal backup usually.

Now the genius of the group is of course Brian Wilson. He's a real quiet genius. He really didn't like touring. He just wanted to be in the studio all the time creating great music. That's how he was driven. In fact during one of the tours, he left the tour early on and said I can't handle being in a different place every night. He just wanted to be home. He was a real introvert. When he was home, he was at his best. He could create music and work in a studio all day. That's where he really excelled.

They were very much influenced, especially Brian, by Phil Spector and his wall of sound. They used that technique in their own recordings. For example, Be My Baby by The Ronettes (Phil Spector produced) really influenced Don't Worry Baby by The Beach Boys. Like I said, Brian Wilson was very introverted; he could be moody and withdrawn. He didn't like performing live. He seems, if you watch him performing live, he looks very awkward on stage. That's the way he feels about it. He was a musical genius and he used a very sophisticated harmonic structure and combined it with rock music in a very unique way.

Brian's master project that he worked on for a long time was this album called Pet Sounds. Pet Sounds came out in 1966. The Beatles had just recorded this album called Rubber Soul. Rubber

Soul was a big hit and a very influential album. Brian Wilson was just fueled by that. He wanted to beat The Beatles. He knew that they couldn't be as popular as The Beatles, but what he wanted to do was create music that was better than The Beatles. He really admired the quality of music that The Beatles had produced. So he wanted to better that. He wanted to do better musically than The Beatles and he used a lot of musical ideas to do that. He used a lot of great orchestration. He used great use of dynamics, harmonies, all these techniques that a great composer uses. That's what Brian Wilson did to compete with The Beatles. Nowadays, Pet Sounds is a critically acclaimed album. It's considered to be a rock n' roll masterpiece. Back when it was first released, it was a dud. The public wasn't buying it. It was just too complex for the time. It didn't have enough great surf songs on it that the public had become accustomed to. The songs on Pet Sounds are very unique. They are introspective in their sound. He uses a lot of unusual instruments. He uses the koto from Japan. An instrument called a bass harmonica, a very large harmonica. Unusual percussion instruments in the style and the vein of Phil Spector. This album, Pet Sounds became a major influence on The Beatles. The Beatles were inspired from Pet Sounds to make their album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. There's a great song on there, Wouldn't It Be Nice. Wouldn't It Be Nice is a really good example of this later style of The Beach Boys. This song kind of shows, along with all of these songs, Wilson's real obsession with himself and isolation and really self-conscious image that he had. All of these songs really reflect that.

So after the perceived failure, immediately after Pet Sounds, Brian Wilson went back in the studio for a year (closer to a year) and worked on one song, this song was called Good Vibrations. Now Good Vibrations was Wilson's answer to this poor performance commercially of the album Pet Sounds. Now this single took him six months to record in the studio. It's kind of one of the first psychedelic tunes of the time. It's got weird stuff happening in the background. There are some tempo changes in the song. This became the group's biggest hit. This was Brian Wilson's finest hour probably as a producer.