

“Pet Sounds”—The Beach Boys (1966)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Tom Smucker (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



The Beach Boys

Released in May of 1966, “Pet Sounds” was initially understood by some as a new pop music paradigm, for others as a rock betrayal, for a few as a source of personal solace. In the USA, it was also a financial disappointment, a potentially career collapsing abandonment of the Beach Boys surf, car, and summer songs.

Across the Atlantic in the UK, the album received a crucially different debut. Keith Moon of The Who helped Bruce Johnston of the Beach Boys set up a publicized pre-release “Pet Sounds” enthusiastic listen in London for John Lennon and Paul McCartney. With that recognition established, the LP and the Beach Boys continued their overseas ascent in esteem and popularity while dropping out of favor, if not out of sight, in the United States.

As had been his practice previously in the studio, Brian Wilson worked out the instrumental tracks with the cream of LA studio musicians, the so-called “Wrecking Crew,” while the rest of the group was on tour, returning to add their complex yet heartfelt vocal harmonies on the top. In “Pet Sounds,” these tracks were packed with found sounds, countermelodies, and an unpredictable variety of instrumentation that gave each cut a distinctive signature while still part of a coherent whole. Brian was composing using the modern mid-1960s recording studio as his instrument. It was this example that inspired George Martin and the Beatles to expand their exploration of the studio with their own sensibility for “Sgt. Pepper.”

Meticulously recording in layers, and then mixing it quickly, maybe to meet a deadline, maybe to hold onto the emotional spontaneity, Brian and the Beach Boys fashioned “Pet Sounds” pop with accessible, often plain spoken lyrics and a musical, even spiritual, depth that included three songs that would become live concert staples: “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” “God Only Knows,” and “Sloop John B.”

At times, Brian's mid-song wanderings into idiosyncratic chord and key changes and melodic dynamics could sound conflicted with the sentiment of the lyrics. These complexities could pull you back for repeated re-examinations. Or...be heard as an off-putting murky density. Yet over the years, this depth or density would enhance "Pet Sounds" rehabilitation as a pop music milestone and source of back catalogue revenue. Originally released in mono, new layers were clarified when it was remixed in stereo. And then came the release in CD box sets of "Pet Sounds" session tapes and separated instrumental and acapella tracks that continued into the era of online streaming, making the album, whole and dissected, a fit for both the vinyl and digital epochs, a financial and critical success long after its original release.

If you were so inclined, you could take all this as a young genius with the money and the time and the expertise and the sincerity and the ensemble to create a subjective personal expression utilizing musical ideas from Berry, Beethoven, Bach, Bacharach, Gershwin, Doo-Wop, Phil Spector, Tiki lounge music, sound effects, and hymns. Understood, it seems, this way in the UK, as an ambitious extension of the California sound, it was often dismissed at home in the US, instead, as a stew too corny to be true to the evolving canons of rock elitism and too vulgar to fit into the boundaries of high art.

Gone were the references to the idealized or real lives of Southern California teens, and in their place, an introspective but musically expansive album that traveled from the opening anticipation of "Wouldn't It Be Nice" to the isolation, if not despair, of the closing "Caroline No," part of one story line that traces through the album about romance, dependency, and heartache. But there's another thread about dislocation and disconnection, and another about the pure pleasure of recorded sound, all of it at odds with both the rock macho and utopian California boosterism ascendant in the mid-1960s.

Maybe this helps explain the peculiar corporate history of "Pet Sounds" in the United States. Capitol Records was the home label here for both the Beatles and the Beach Boys. In fact, the version of "Rubber Soul" we heard stateside was rejiggered by Capitol from the British EMI original to sound more like consistent folk rock, and was released without any singles, signifying that the album should be listened to and purchased whole. "Pet Sounds" qualified for similar treatment as the response to "Rubber Soul" Brian meant it to be. But it was treated by Capitol Records as a failed follow up to "All Summer Long or Beach Boys Party," and then sabotaged by a quickly assembled and released "Best of The Beach Boys" anthology of earlier cuts that shot up the charts and drove "Pet Sounds" down and then off them.

In those days, the Beatles were supposed to be the witty lovable foreigners who reassured us by borrowing our culture, improving it, and sending it back to us. The Beach Boys were understood as recording some slow, sad songs, but essentially projecting an upbeat image of white middle class American suburbia. The assassination of President Kennedy, questions about the war in Viet Nam, racial turmoil, and the rise of the counterculture introduced an undercurrent of anxiety into early 1960s optimism. Did a musical breakthrough in 1966 that expressed a very American mode of dislocation and loss of innocence mirror the times too closely for the Capitol sales staff?

In the early 1970s, the Beach Boys left Capitol Records to regain their hip American credentials at hip-at-the-time Warner Brothers Records and regain their touring prominence in North America as a tight live band, usually minus Brian, that combined songs from their entire career, including “Pet Sounds.” The group eventually returned with their 1970s recordings to Capitol Records, allowing for career spanning anthologies and reissues, including “Pet Sounds” and “Pet Sounds Sessions.” Then, after years as an apparently dysfunctional recluse, Brian Wilson himself returned to touring and recording, frequently performing “Pet Sounds” in its entirety, live, up to the present.

Now the album stands as the affluent, confident, brilliant, sentimental, insecure, vulnerable American response to “Rubber Soul” that inspired “Sgt. Pepper.” Viewed from the torrent of Beach Boys hit singles and albums that preceded, it can be understood as a culmination of everything Brian had learned about composing in the studio. Viewed from their creative, unpredictable, sometimes misunderstood recordings that followed, it can be understood as an opening towards a more fluid pop perspective. Situated in the middle of one rock group’s history and the middle of the decade that defined the baby boomers, “Pet Sounds” remains important to those of us who care about the complete career arc of all the Beach Boys, and those who care about the art of recorded music, or the social history of the 1960s, as all that has been interpreted and re-interpreted through the last five decades.

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