

Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience
by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

I heard the word.

Wonderful thing!

A children's song—have you listened as they play?

Their song is love and the children know the way.

from "Surf's Up" on *Smile*

Lyrics; Van Dyke Parks, Music Brian Wilson

Thirty eight years after it's conception, the *Smile* project came to fruition for this listener at The Royal Festival Hall. Brian Wilson, of Beach Boys fame, assembled a band of musicians and recreated - live on stage- the album that has been the holy grail of bootleggers since 1967. Acetates of individual numbers existed and were teasingly played to journalists. Brian Wilson was featured playing a piano version of "Surf's Up" on a CBS News Special titled "Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution" hosted by Leonard Bernstein. Versions of the songs appeared on other albums, in stand-alone versions. David Leaf, author of the notes on *Smile* reminds our more junior members that 1966 means that "the current Beatles album is *Revolver*, Lyndon B. Johnson is President of the United States, Robert F. Kennedy is a Senator, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is fighting for civil rights, and Mickey Mantle is still playing baseball for the New York Yankees."

Smile is the project that moved Brian Wilson away from the three chord goodies of the early Beach Boys hits, deeper into the world of his musical imagination. We follow his journey through the musical influences of his America; The Four Freshmen, Gershwin, "You Are My Sunshine", "I Wanna Be Around"; and the contemporary techniques of *musique concrète*, "found" music and the opportunities for group live performance in a multitrack recording studio. He codified a style called "modular music" where the songs appear in sections - often dynamically arranged - beyond the normal pattern of verse, chorus and middle eight. Sections from songs are used thematically, often appearing "dropped in" in a new context.

The lyrics? Well, it was the 1960s. Van Dyke Parks' poems are just as image based as any other poets. The vocabulary of the 60s sits side by side with classic representations of loss and beauty. It is the arrangement of the songs and lyrics that moves the entire project into a new dimension. With our 1966 hats on, we are used to hearing pop songs as stand-alone entities. A new idea - the concept album - will appear, famously, from the Beatles in 1967 with *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Now we can see that at the same time Brian Wilson was pushing the same boundaries, asking the same questions.

If you get a chance, take the time to listen to *Smile* from end to end. It is a three movement suite, covering the themes of America and American music. Some familiar songs will appear in new arrangements and with new lyrics. We start with the jazz vocal inspired - "Our Prayer/Gee" and journey through "Heroes and Villains", "Surf's Up", "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow", when the *a cappella* "Our Prayer" returns briefly before the coda - "Good Vibrations". There are thematic connections, harmonic progressions through the movements. The aforementioned "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow" is a mixture of Carl Stalling comic-book danger music meets Penedeck meets Led Zepplin meets John Cage. Some wacky moments, some truly breathtaking moments. Instrumental combinations and harmonies that could only stem from someone who 'heard' a new sound. Now we all can share his his vision and *Smile*.