

The first flower child?
Eden Ahbez awaits the
answer, late '40s





MOTHER NATURE'S SON

UNTIL NOW EDEN AHBEZ WAS KNOWN, IF AT ALL, FOR THE 1948 HIT SINGLE 'NATURE BOY' – ARGUABLY THE FIRST FLOWER-POWER ANTHEM – AND '60'S *EDEN'S ISLAND*, WHICH SOME CONSIDER THE FIRST PSYCHEDELIC CONCEPT ALBUM. BESIDES THESE TWO LANDMARK PIECES, MUCH OF HIS LIFE AND OEUVRE IS MIRED IN HEARSAY AND MYTH. BRIAN CHIDESTER, PRODUCER OF *WILD BOY: THE LOST SONGS OF EDEN AHBEZ*, SHEDS SOME LIGHT



Wellness pioneer Paul C Bragg, Edén and Edén's manager, Jack Patton in 1959

It's often true that those ahead of their time are often acknowledged more in cult circles than by the mainstream masses. Edén Ahbez certainly fits that description. His work may presage Pink Floyd, the psychedelic Beach Boys and Beatles and The Grateful Dead, but it is nowhere close to holding the same share of public imagination as *Sgt Pepper* or *Pet Sounds* (even if Ahbez's 'Nature Boy' was covered by myriad beatniks and hippies, including John Coltrane, Grace Slick and Alex Chilton). The fact of Ahbez's obscurity points to a deeper disconnect, one that is psychological as well as cultural.

Ahbez became a US media sensation in 1948, when Nat 'King' Cole took his song, 'Nature Boy' to the top of the charts for eight weeks. Everyone was intrigued by a bearded, longhaired "proto-beatnik" living under the Hollywood sign. Newspapers, in the midst of 'Nature Boy's' 16-week chart run, scrambled to piece together a bio on this strange prophet-like character who did the unthinkable: scored a #1 hit on his first attempt. The songwriter told them he was from Brooklyn and was 34 years old; they soon figured out he was 40 and grew up mostly in Kansas. At first he denied it, but was forced to admit the deception when his adopted cousin Myrtle showed reporters a high school picture that matched his mug on the 'Nature Boy' sheet music (minus the beard and facial creases).

Hard facts about his transformation into the bearded radical of '40s LA culture are few and scattered. He was born George Alexander Aberle in 1908, in the Brownsville district of Brooklyn,

to a German father and a Scottish mother. At nine, the parents dropped George and his twin sister off at The Hebrew Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn, and for the rest of his life he self-identified as Jewish of origin. In '17, the twins were shipped to Lawrence, Kansas, as part of an orphan train that took abandoned East Coast kids to be raised by Midwest foster parents. George took the surname of his new parents, the McGrews. Later a newspaper tracked down Mrs McGrew, who regaled of a teenage George running away from home, sleeping outdoors by the lake, and being of a generally odd if deeply spiritual temperament. According to his own statements Ahbez spent the better part of The Great Depression walking, hitchhiking, and hopping freight trains.

By '43, he had changed his name officially to Edén Ahbe. When the "z" was added is not exactly clear. (It's still Edén Ahbe on two sheet music booklets published in '46.) When 'Nature Boy' was released as the hit Nat 'King' Cole version the composer is dubbed "eden

ahbez," all lowercase, with the insistence that only God and Nature be worthy of capitalisation. Ironically, in nearly every handwritten copyright submission after '48, he spells his own name entirely in uppercase. The "z" may have been added so that his surname was the beginning and ending, A-Z.

In the ensuing years, Ahbez would change his moniker on record releases to a variety of variations, including Edén Abez, Ahbe Casabe and Edén Abba. As his past grows more remote, the details are harder to pin down. He told friends things like, "I am a being of heaven and earth, of thunder and lightning, of rain and wind, of the galaxies."

In one of his best-loved songs, 'Full Moon' – from the *Edén's Island* LP of '60 – he refers to himself as "poor, alone, and happy". Elsewhere he celebrates his vagabond existence in lesser-known titles such as 'Run-away Boy', 'The Nature Boy Story', and 'The Path / Old Ahb', and admonishes simplicity and anti-materialism in songs like 'Wine, Women





Eden shows Nat 'King' Cole around 'Nature Boy', 1948

INTO THE WILD

BRIAN CHIDESTER GUIDES US THROUGH NEW RARITIES COMPILATION, *WILD BOY*



“AHBEZ BECAME A US MEDIA SENSATION IN 1948, WHEN NAT ‘KING’ COLE TOOK HIS SONG, ‘NATURE BOY’ TO THE TOP OF THE CHARTS. EVERYONE WAS INTRIGUED BY A BEARDED, LONG-HAIRED ‘PROTO-BEATNIK’ LIVING UNDER THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN”



And Gold’ and ‘The Song Of The Fool’. Yet his greatest theme by far is love, and he wrestles with it in ways that seem sometimes out of character for the composer of the immortal line: “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.”

Ahbez began recording ‘Nature Boy’ again far later in ’80 – this time without the words “and be loved in return” at its ending. One friend recalls Ahbez saying that “to love in return” is too much of a deal, “and there’s no deal in love”. Elsewhere, his songs about the love of his life, Anna, took a dark turn in the mid to late ’50s. A ’58 tune, for example, titled ‘Song Of The Stranger’, sees Ahbez reprise the basic ‘Nature Boy’ set-up, wherein the traveling narrator passes an obscure vagabond on the road of life. Instead of imparting a

second great nugget of wisdom, however, the stranger this time begs a single, lonesome request: “If she comes your way / Tell her you saw me / And tell her I love her”. An unrecorded ’59 sheet music – for a song titled ‘The Saddest Boy In The World’ – laments: “My girl is gone / I can’t go on”. In another rock novelty number titled ‘The Lock’ – Ahbez’s attempt at a dance craze, *a la* ‘The Twist’ – he closes by imploring listeners, “If you find your future wife / Lock her up for life!” November ’62 saw Ahbez copyright ‘You Can’t Run Away’ and ‘I Want The Right’, two painfully confessional compositions that may point to a temporary breakup with Anna. The latter insists, “I want the ro, ra, re, ro right / To see my baby every no, na, ne, no night”.

Ahbez’s relatives do not mention a split. Whatever the case, Eden was together with Anna when she died in ’63, and he continued to commemorate her in song until his own death, aged 86, on March 4th ’95.

In 1963 Ahbez recorded a song titled ‘Overcomers’ with a young singer named John Harris. Then the song disappeared. For 50 years. At the recording session, Ahbez split ‘Overcomers’ into two parts: the first – re-titled ‘Monterey’ – featuring lyrics that commemorated the nascent Monterey Jazz Festival; the second became ‘Overcomers Of The World’, with Harris’ booming baritone voice sounding eerily like the LA rock band, The Doors. They wouldn’t form until ’65, by which time Harris and Ahbez had each gone their separate ways. In 2011 the acetate turned up.

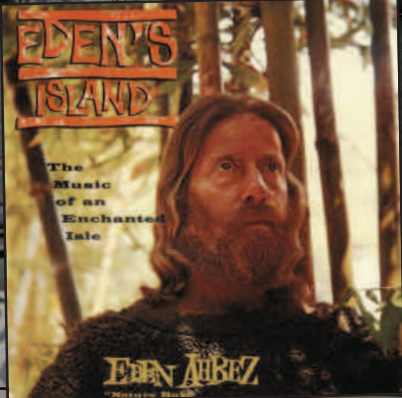
The seemingly miraculous survival of John Harris’ acetate is a common story where Ahbez is concerned. Four songs on *Wild Boy*, for instance, all came from the same box of junk rescued at a garage sale in Redding, California, where the late Bob Bertram lived until his passing in the ’90s. Bertram was an early benefactor of the artistic Ahbez, having paid for a four-song session in ’51 that included arranger Harry Gellar’s orchestral backing to Ahbez’s own singing on the tunes ‘India’, ‘Child Of Nature’, ‘Love Ye’ and ‘The Planet Song’.

In ’52, Bertram signed a contract with Ahbez to record the latter’s four-part ‘Nature Boy Suite’, using young Italian crooner Russ Arno as vocalist. Whether this ever happened is not known. The full ‘Nature Boy Suite’ would, however, get recorded a few years later – in an album-length cycle by jazz singer Herb Jeffries, under the title *The Singing Prophet*. (The label – Olympic Records – folded before *The Singing Prophet* was officially released; vinyl copies are extremely scarce.)

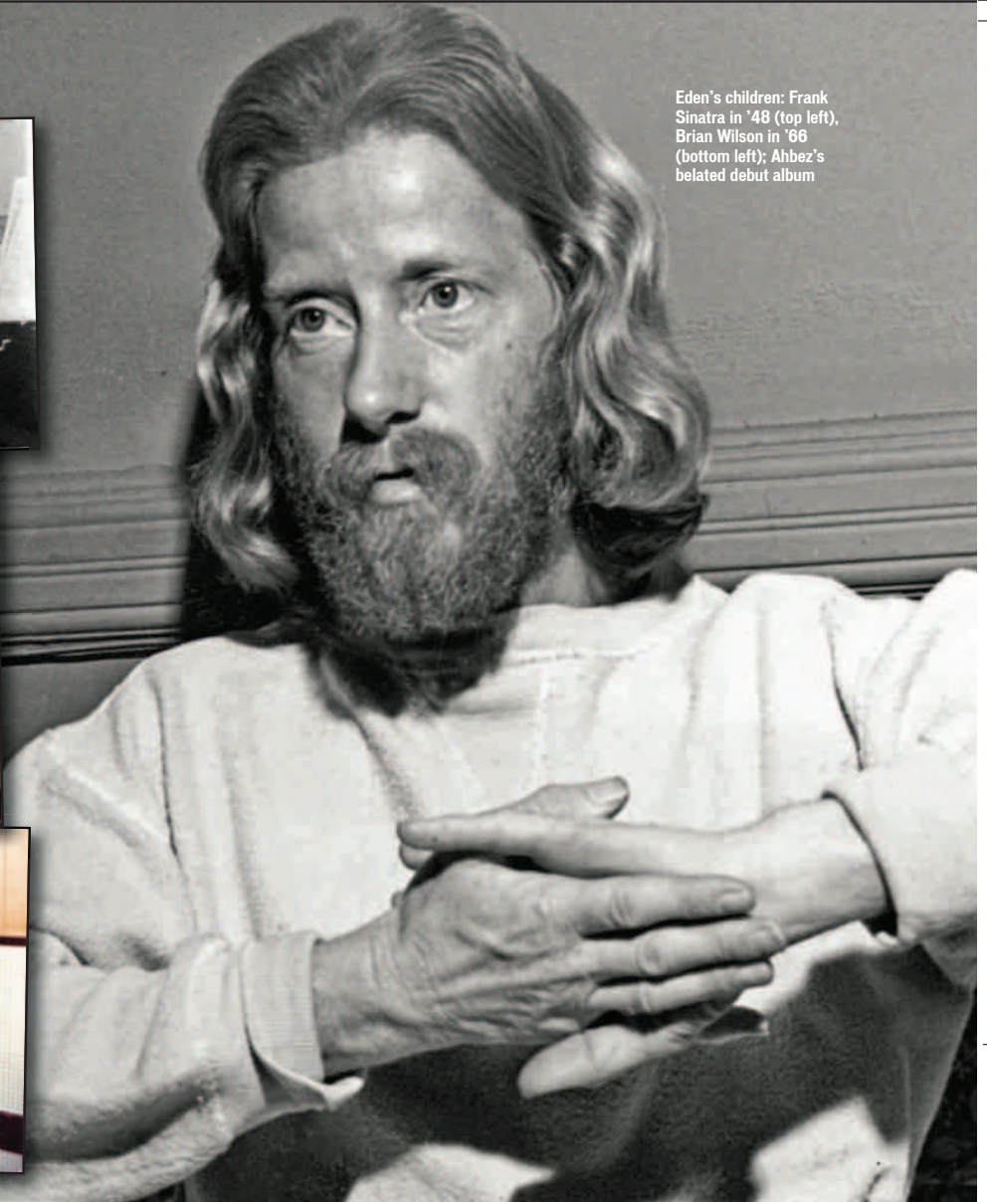
A final point of interest, in terms of the Bertram stash, is the demo recording of Ahbez’s ‘Anna Was Mine’. The song was copyrighted on October 26, ’64, a little over a year after its namesake died of bone cancer at the age of 44. Ahbez had commemorated wife Anna in a dozen or more compositions, beginning in ’52 with ‘The Song Of Eden And Anna’. There is a ’65 recording of ‘Anna Was Mine’ that features full orchestration and remains one of the moodiest of all Ahbez instrumentals.

The album also contains a number of other Ahbez compositions, recorded by big-name artists of the ’50s and ’60s, including Nat ‘King’ Cole (‘Land Of Love’), Eartha Kitt (‘Hey Jacques’), The Ray Anthony Orchestra (‘Palm Springs’) and Arthur Lyman (covering the exotica classic, ‘Eden’s Island’). I placed the songs next to so much otherwise unreleased music so they could be heard in the context of Ahbez, not simply lost in the mix of famous artists and their outsized catalogues.





Eden's children: Frank Sinatra in '48 (top left), Brian Wilson in '66 (bottom left); Ahbez's belated debut album



Ahbez' last collaborator was an engineer named Joe Romersa. From his home in Woodland Hills (above LA, Romersa housed over 400 session tapes of Ahbez's work – both archival recordings Ahbez gave Romersa to store, as well as the last tracks they made together). The wizened writer grew increasingly paranoid as the years rolled by. By the end, he thought bodily harm would come to him if his final works were leaked. Earlier he'd lost an autobiography when a fire claimed the cabin he slept in at an Ashram above LA. A friend said carelessness was to blame.

By the time Romersa met Ahbez, in '87, the elder nature boy was living in a white Ecoline van, with mountains of session tapes and scattered sheets of paper in the back, where he also kept a bed to sleep in. When Romersa offered to help, Ahbez stored his material at the young engineer's house, though he insisted the older tapes were not of value, and not to be heard. (He even asked Romersa to destroy the reel to one song – 'Surfer John' – despite the fact that it had already been released as a single in '64.) According to Romersa, Ahbez also cancelled numerous sessions due to bad energy and often rented studio time just to sit and talk with his younger friend. If a better example of loneliness exists, I haven't seen it.

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Ahbez saw the world differently than those in '48 who were all too happy to consume the latest designer kitchen sets, or buy new sleek modern automobiles, and whose trust in “the American way” was unquestioned. To put it mildly, Ahbez and his song could in no way stop America from the path it would go on. When the next generation picked up on and ran with his ideals of free love, pacifism and anti-consumerism, it was more attuned to the way music might affect positive change. Yet even then it proved too late. The Vietnam War was well underway by the time of Monterey Pop and Woodstock, and would claim more

than a million lives before ending.

The hippies came and went, but the original California longhair truly outlasted them. He lived his final years out in the California desert, where he worked on a book and unreleased album, both titled *The Scriptures Of The Golden Age*. He was dismayed at where he saw things heading; his cynicism toward institutions and religion captured in sharp couplets like “The gods of the earth are many / But the god of the sky is one, if any”. Yet to see his disenchantment as an offshoot of a corrupt world is to miss how he saw the world as corrupt because he was already





CHILDREN OF THE EVOLUTION

EDEN AHBEZ WAS ONE OF A NUMBER OF PRE-EMINENT WAYWARD SOULS WHOSE IDEALS, OUTLOOK AND QUITE OFTEN APPEARANCE PAVED THE WAY FOR THE HIPPIE REVOLUTION OF THE MID-60S

GYPHY BOOTS

Born Robert Bootzin in San Francisco in 1914, the man who would eventually become known as Gypsy Boots was a pioneer of healthy living and yoga, becoming a "Nature Boy" in Palm Springs in the '30s before setting up The Health Hut in Hollywood, one of the world's first health food shops. He can be seen on YouTube in an episode of the Groucho Marx game show, *You Bet Your Life*, from 1955, showing off the vitality with which he'd become famous in LA.

R D LAING

Scottish psychiatrist R D Laing became a darling of the counterculture with his provocative works challenging traditional orthodoxies concerning mental health, even recording an album of poetry called *Life Before Death*. Yet his outsider thinking began long before The Summer Of Love, via his ground-breaking work at The Tavistock Institute and his seminal 1960 book, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study In Sanity And Madness*, which opened up the mysteries of the inner mind to a generation getting ready to tune in and drop out.

HERBERT MARCUSE

The reluctant "Father Of The New



Left", this German-Jewish member of The Frankfurt School Of Critical Theory fled to the USA in the '30s. His 1955 book, *Eros And Civilization*, explored Marxist and Freudian ideas to propose a non repressive society and became a popular touchstone in the development of notions of sexual and cultural liberation in the '60s.

VITO PAULEKAS

Reform school kid, convicted armed robber and former merchant marine, Vito Paulekas was already pushing 50 when he and his young wife Szou started selling proto-hippie gear to the kids of Hollywood in the early '60s. Variousy described as a guru, huckster, brilliant self-promoter and dangerous charlatan, he nonetheless drew everyone from The Byrds to Frank Zappa into his free-thinking, libertine orbit.

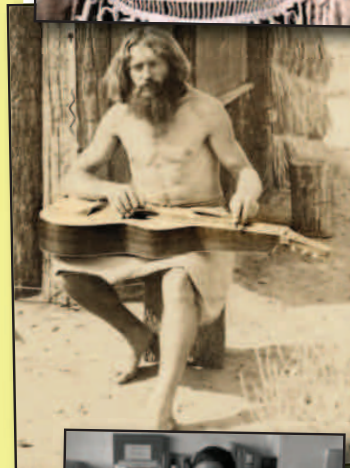
WILLIAM PESTER

Known as "The Hermit Of Palm Springs", the German-born Pester was a strong link between the fervent rebels of the 19th century and the flower children of the '60s. He lived among native Americans, grew his hair and beard out, and pioneered the nature boy lifestyle immortalised in Eden Ahbez's 'Nature Boy'.

ALAN WATTS

Born in 1915 in the London borough of Bromley, Alan Watts developed an early interest in Buddhism, married an American and moved to California in '51. There, he wrote books about Zen, lectured, made TV shows and experimented with LSD. He also made peculiar proto-psych LPs and blazed a trail for much of what was to follow in The Bay Area and beyond.

Contributors: Hugh Dellar, Greg Healey, Thomas Patterson



Proto-hippies. Top to bottom: Gypsy Boots, Laing and Marcuse's influential '60s works, Vito, Pester and Watts

disenchanted.

Towards the end, Ahbez talked to friends about his belief in modern science and how it would continue to lead the way (as it had for much of the 20th century). He also thought the poets were society's true voices of reason. He saw himself as a poet. And a prophet. That meant the heavy lifting of introspection and edification. It didn't mean spending time on the computer, or watching TV. If he were alive today there is little doubt that he'd abstain from Facebook and Twitter too.

Instead Eden Ahbez spent his days in the desert, thinking. Thinking and reading. Occasionally he came to town, bought some studio time and recorded his thoughts in music. They are what he left us. ■

Brian Chidester is a regular contributor to the American Prospect, LA Weekly and The Village Voice. He is also the author of *Pop Surf Culture: Music, Design, Film & Fashion From The Bohemian Surf Era* (Santa Monica Press).



Wild Boy: The Lost Songs Of Eden Ahbez is out now on Bear Family. Eden's Island has just been reissued on vinyl by Captain High

