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A Brotherly Christmas



by [Gary Pig Gold](#)



Yes indeed, it goes without saying that Brian Wilson and his familial band have enjoyed a career quite unlike any other across the cuckoo annals of show business.

Scoring a local hit in 1961 straight off the mark with their very first little indie single, then soon after placing a sophomore release into no less than the hallowed *Billboard* Hot 100 – and all at a time when the majority of the guys still had to be home in time to attend class the next morning – The Beach Boys, it could be argued, really started their marathon run at the very tip-top, suicidally crash-dove towards oblivion a few short years later, and only *then* slowly but surely began their struggle up the ladder of ever-lasting fame, fortune and, ultimately, all-American glory ...and just finished touring the globe promoting a *new* (!!) hit album, need I remind anyone.

Which just all goes to show, I suppose, that blood surely runs thicker than any critic's ink, what gets around (from town to town) comes around and that, most obviously, Brian Wilson near single-in-handedly created a body of work which can surely withstand the most brutal scourges of both time and fashion.

That's why it's sometimes hard to fathom during the band's gala 50th Anniversary festivities that there was indeed a hole, roughly between 1966 and 1974, down which The Beach Boys truly hit rock 'n' roll bottom and were forced to really, *really* hustle their sunkist butts to keep everyone's musical and financial heads above

water. Bleak, sorry years when this once Beatle-calibre combo were reduced to hauling their act out on the road and into midwestern VFW halls alongside that Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. A pitiful period when their latest brave creations were routinely being scorned in favor of those from The Archies and even Grand Funk Railroad.

This was, in fact, a harrowing era when, as no less a numbers man as Bruce Johnston Himself continues to recall, America's Band could scarcely draw two hundred paying patrons to a series of gala performances within the very heart of New York City.

In a word then? Yikes!

Of course any other band with half its wits intact would've called it quits right about then – or at least ditched the “Surfin' Safari” stagewear for starters. But the Beach Boys were more than just another pop group, weren't they? They were a FAMILY, first and foremost. And rather than remain one-upped by their musical neighbors so to speak, this musical household doggedly set about getting their affairs back in order, persisting along this rugged path for year after endless year ...even when all around seemed hapless, hopeless, and far, far from harmonious. On *any* level.



Actually finding themselves without a homeland recording contract at the dawn of the Seventies, and with their guiding musical light apparently more interested in laying (low) than writing, arranging, singing and/or producing, Carl and Dennis Wilson, Al Jardine, Mike Love and even that Bruce guy had no logical choice but to settle down to some good old-fashioned, decorum-be-damned hard hard work, lest they find themselves forever tossed upon the scrap-heap of Sixteen-Hit Wonderdom. So, first of all, every Boy still awake and mobile began by moving the audio mountain to Mohammed, constructing a working studio directly beneath Brian's Bel Air bedroom (not that that helped motivate their big brother much in the long run; nice try, though). Then they boldly formed their own record company and, crazier still, set about writing and recording a string of albums which form not only the mythical, mystical candy core of the Beach Boys' vast sea of tunes, but in retrospect actually hold much more than their own against such bally-hoo'd, Nix on-vintage contemporaries as the Eagles, Doobies, and even that Buckingham/Nicks-model Big Mac.

Yes, these hallowed yet too-often ignored releases from the Beach Boys' “lost years” on their very own Brother Records imprint are literally jam-packed with dozens upon dozens of gems you probably haven't been able to hear of in years ...not to mention while Capitol enters its second half-century of re-issuing the band's seminal hit Sixties albums. For example, the once mega-maligned *So Tough* album from '72 now sounds like no less than Carl and his Passions tackling *Big Pink* Band by way of Paul Buckmaster! And then there's 1977's *The Beach Boys Love You*, which dared to croon about roller skating, shampoo, and our favorite solar system smack dab in the middle of that Pistol 'n' Ramone-fuelled Summer of Hate.



Chronologically speaking then, the initial Brother albums *Sunflower* and *Surf's Up* remain among the most universally cherished records on the planet, and both contain their fair share of Brian Wilson treasures for the ages – “This Whole World” and “Til I Die” most particularly – which rank easily amongst the very best Our Hero has yet to offer us all. Meaning, they’re some of the greatest musical works ever created by man or beast.

The two junior Wilsons blossom forth on these albums as well (“Long Promised Road” and “Feel Flows” prove Carl learned his lessons well whilst attending all those *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE* sessions; Dennis, conversely – as always – forged his own musical identity within *Sunflower* somewhere between the cock-rockin’ “Got To Know The Woman” and the sweetly rhapsodic “Forever,” John Stamos be *forever* damned). Meanwhile, that then-new 16-track technology the Boys toiled upon under Brian’s bed allowed the band to layer on those heavenly, heavenly harmonies as never before. Or, in truth, since. “Cool, Cool Water,” to mention just one, contains chorale cascades which will continue to astound the ear today, four decades (and countless attempts at recreation) since they were first meticulously piled onto tape.

Suffice to say, the music The Beach Boys made in the very early Seventies remains amongst their very, *very* best. No listener out there, discriminating or otherwise, should let these sounds slip on through unheard a single minute longer beneath the retail din of yet another Yule-timed Greatest Hits collection or twelve.

Despite the odd (in more ways than one) moment thereafter however – and again, I cite such B. Wilson concoctions as *Holland’s* notorious Fairy Tale “Mt. Vernon And Fairway” plus the above-mentioned proto-punk *Love You* album – the band’s post-1972 output is, well, spotted indeed. Still, works of total wonder are to be found even on such universally poo-pooed efforts as *15 Big Ones* (just listen to the slap-happy vocal counterpoint which ends “It’s O.K.”), *Keepin’ The Summer Alive* (with its BTO-on-the-beach title track co-written by none other than Randy Bachman) and even the lowly *MIU Album* (...awrite awrite, so I for one believe “Hey Little Tomboy” to be a hunka hunka fluff of near Jonathan Richman pedigree).

Nevertheless, with a band as diverse and musically all-encompassing as The Beach Boys, one just has to take the good with the not-quite-so-good; after all, these characters have always been, if nothing else, totally fearless in the way they conduct themselves both inside *and* outside of the recording studio. Besides, one must also remember that this music was being created and released back in the glorious days when rock ‘n’ roll bands were not only allowed to be adventurous, but could even get such fits of fancy released and often

promoted to the public at large (...um, expecting a Fairy Tale to magically appear upon the next Maroon 5 album? Don't hold my breath!)

Proving once again that still waters do indeed run so, so deep, The Beach Boys' Brother Years sonically document a band – and a family – in quite desperate creative and emotional upheaval, yet producing some of its best if least-known work despite (or is it because?) of such all-around adversities.

So, as the song still goes, Listen, listen, listen...not only to the newly-re-available *Surfin' USA*, *Surfer Girl*, *Little Deuce Coupe*, *Shut Down Volume 2*, *All Summer Long*, *Beach Boys Today!*, *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)*, *Smiley Smile* (NOT to be confused with you-know-what), *Pet Sounds* (yes, Again) and almighty *Beach Boys Party!* albums, but to the 2012-vintage *Sunflower* and *Surf's Up* as well. And stay tuned, absolutely, over the next few months for refurbished *Carl and the Passions: So Tough*, *Holland*, *The Beach Boys In Concert*, *15 Big Ones*, the even bigger *Beach Boys Love You*, and maybe even those *MIU*, *Light*, and *Keepin' the Summer Alive* albums as well. We shall, of course, draw the line at *The Beach Boys 1985*, *Still Cruisin'*, *Summer in Paradise* [sic!] and *Stars and Stripes* efforts; trust me on that one.

And, to add some visuals to your Christmas day, most recommended as well is MVD/Sexy Intellectual's documentary expertly chronicling the Brother years, [Brian Wilson: Songwriter, 1969-1982](#), the follow-up to their acclaimed [Songwriter 1962-1969](#) film.

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