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AFTER 37 YEARS, BRIAN WILSON FINDS A REASON TO 'SMILE'

BY STEVE UHLER

It's been called the "Greatest Album Never Released," the "Holy Grail of Rock 'n' Roll" and the "Most Bootlegged Album of All Time."

It's Brian Wilson's "Smile," and after 37 years of lying in limbo, it's finally complete.

In a rare public appearance, Wilson and his band will be performing it at the Backyard on Sunday.

The tale of "Smile" is nearly as legendary as the music itself. In 1967, 24-year-old Brian Wilson was riding a wave of commercial success and critical adulation. As leader of the Beach Boys, he'd written and produced a string of hits that celebrated a mythical California so powerful that it persists to this day.

Only months before, he had released "Pet Sounds," one of the most influential rock albums ever recorded. For his next project, Brian wanted to create a healing and humorous "teenage symphony to God," and christened it "Smile."

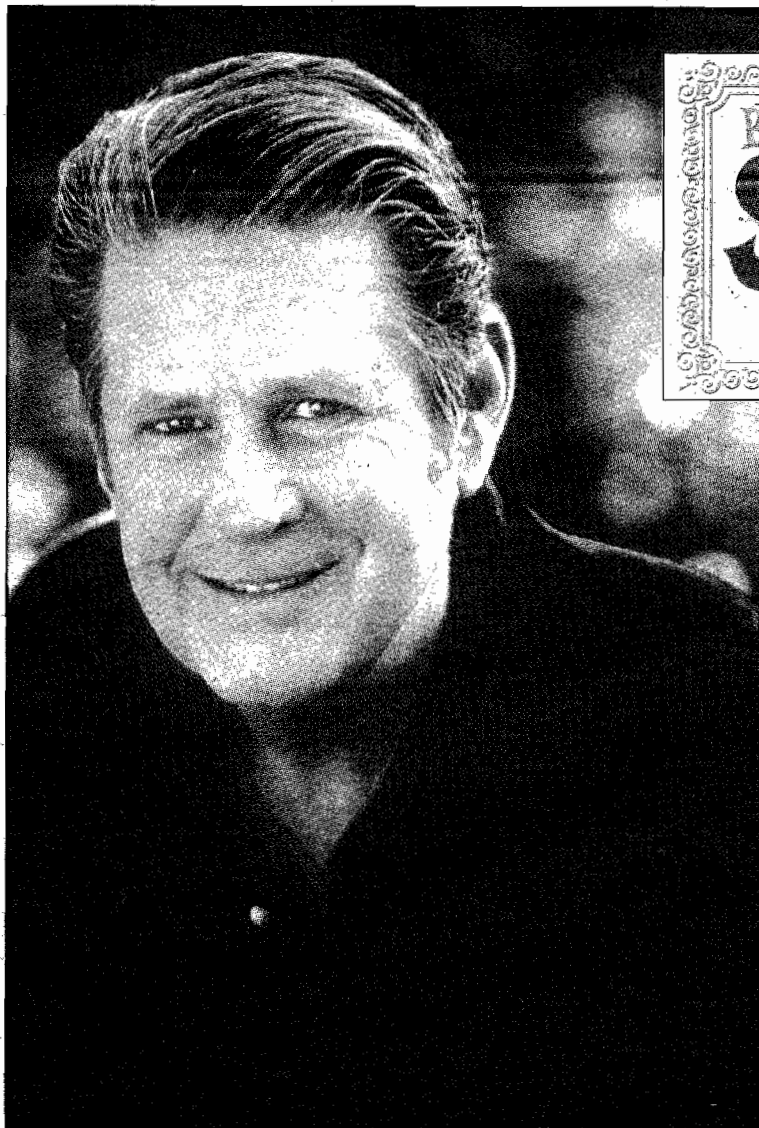
Collaborating with lyricist Van Dyke Parks, Brian ensconced himself in the studio for months.

Word from insiders who had heard the working tapes was that "Smile" was like nothing they'd ever heard before — a dizzyingly impressionistic kaleidoscope of "modular music," a sublime and surreal fusion of pop, classical, Dixieland, English Music Hall, choral chant and rock.

It was as far removed from the Beach Boys as Stravinsky was from the Monkees.

Then something happened. The Beatles released "Sgt. Pepper" to critical hosannas, and Brian suddenly lost his momentum. His fellow Beach Boys hated the new album, urging him to return to the old sun-and-surf formula. Capitol Records was pressuring him to hand over the tapes. Three weeks before "Smile" was due to hit the streets, Brian Wilson suffered a nervous breakdown — the victim of too much pressure, too many drugs, too many expectations.

Depressed, Brian went to bed. For three years. When he finally got up, he



Neal Preston

The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson wrote music for 'Smile' in 1967, but his bandmates hated it. Wilson says it was 'way ahead of our time.'

didn't want to talk about "Smile."

"There's two reasons why we junked it," Wilson recently recalled, sounding fit and focused by phone. "The first reason was we were on bad drugs. LSD, marijuana and amphetamines, and it goofed our heads up. Then we got so far into the music that we finally said, 'Oh, my God, we're way ahead of our time here.' We felt we were too avant garde and advanced for people."

So "Smile" was left unfinished, consigned to the vaults of pop mythology. Brian began a long, tortuous journey back to mental and physical health — a destination many thought he would never reach. And the ghost of "Smile" dogged him every step of the way.

"My wife and my managers and I had a lunch meeting one day about eight months ago," he says, "and they said, 'Brian, we think the world's finally ready for "Smile." Why don't you try to relearn it and we'll premiere it in London?' I immediately responded to it; I thought it was a brilliant idea.

"So Van Dyke and I got together for

about a month and a half. We worked every day to get the missing third movement created, and touch up the first two movements melodically and lyrically. Then we rehearsed it and took it to London to perform. We got a standing ovation six nights in a row!" Brian's still-boyish voice sounds incredulous; he's a man who says "Gosh!" a lot and actually means it.

After the success of the London concerts, Wilson decided to finally face down his demons and record "Smile." "It was quite the emotional experience when we started out," he admits. "I did feel the pressure . . . a lot of pressure to get it right on, you know? But then I got used to it, and we started on the project. We were so in love with the album that learning it was easy. The musicians are far superior to the musicians we used in 1967. Far superior musicians, and far superior singers."

Brian's current band includes members of the Wondermints, a Los Angeles-based pop group. Were there times during the sessions when Brian thought about the Beach Boys? "No," he answers softly. "Both my brothers died, so I don't think about the Beach Boys anymore."

Is he happy with "Smile"?

"Very happy. It's right on the dime, you know? Far superior to 'Pet Sounds.' 'Pet Sounds' is an emotional experience. 'Smile' is more of a lively, happy, jovial experience. There's a lot of humor in it."

Fans who showed up for his Austin performance of "Pet Sounds" in 2000 arrived with some trepidation — could he still perform? — and departed walking on air (yes, he could). How does Brian feel about his return?

"I'm a little nervous," he confesses in his guileless way of conversation. "But I'm getting a little more accustomed to performing on stage. But I'll never get over the fear of the half hour before the show. I still go through a lot of stage fright. More than my fair share of it."

Brian Wilson performs 'Smile' at the Backyard on Sunday.