

Why is 'Pet Sounds' Among the Best Albums Ever Made?

—Transcription—

Like anything truly great – from a painting to a sculpture to mathematical equation to a medical breakthrough – it's a combination of factors. That's easy to say but impossible to prove...impossible, because somewhere in that combination, in that mix, is magic...the real kind.

Let's begin with a bit of history.



Pet Sounds is the eleventh studio album by the Beach Boys Released May 16, 1966 on Capitol Records. The critics - It was initially met with a lukewarm critical and commercial response in the United States, peaking at number 10 on *Billboard* Top LPs chart, lower than the band's preceding albums. In the United Kingdom, the album was favorably received by critics and peaked at number 2 in the UK Top 40 Albums Chart, remaining in the top ten for six months.

Promoted there as "the most progressive pop album ever", *Pet Sounds* attracted recognition for its ambitious production, sophisticated music, and personal lyrics. It is considered to be among the most influential albums in music history.

Okay, 1966. If we want to get even some vague idea of how *Pet Sounds*, we better put it in context.

Very shortly before Brian Wilson began formally recording *Pet Sounds*, the Beatles released *Rubber Soul*, which ushered in the era of album-centric rock by announcing that LPs could be more than "just" a few singles, a few covers and some filler tracks; but by and large, *Rubber Soul*, even in its relative conceptual and musical complexity, adheres fairly strictly to the idea that the four Beatles could stand in front of you and play the thing fairly faithfully.

PT, for a pop music album, is ridiculously sophisticated. It blew away even the most jaded studio musicians.

Alright, some more context. What had the Beach Boys been doing just prior to PT?

By the way, please keep in mind that Brian was about 25 years old when he wrote and produced one of the greatest records in pop history...25....Okay, the other aspect – or 'factor' as I mentioned at the top - we have to talk about is Brian Wilson's mental state. Prior to PT – in fact, during PT – he'd done a lot of drugs – and the one drug that Brian couldn't handle was acid, LSD. It destroyed him. And he's never really recovered.

In April 1965, after consuming a full dose of LSD, Wilson had what he considered to be "a very religious experience" and claimed to have seen God. A week after his first LSD trip, he began suffering

from auditory hallucinations and for the remainder of the year experienced considerable paranoia. In addition to worsening his mental state. He believed that LSD influenced the writing of *Pet Sounds* because it "brought out some of the insecurities in me, which I think went into the music." Wilson also attributed his greater sense of creative freedom to his use of marijuana.

While at a recording studio in Los Angeles in 1965, Wilson met Tony Asher, a 26-year-old lyricist and copywriter working in jingles for an advertising agency. The two exchanged ideas for songs, and soon after, Wilson heard of Asher's writing abilities from mutual friend Loren Schwartz. In December, Wilson contacted Asher about a possible lyric collaboration, wanting to do something "completely different" with someone he had never written with before. Asher accepted the offer.

So – we have the songwriter and the lyricist in place. What happens next?

Brian described *Pet Sounds* as an "interpretation" of Phil Spector's Wall of Sound production technique. He stated: "If you take the *Pet Sounds* album as a collection of art pieces, each designed to stand alone, yet which belong together, you'll see what I was aiming at. ... It wasn't really a *song* concept album, or *lyrically* a concept album; it was really a *production* concept album."

For *Pet Sounds*, Brian desired to make "a complete statement", similar to what he believed the Beatles had done with their newest album *Rubber Soul*, released in December 1965. The version of the album that he heard was the alternate US edition that was configured by Capitol to have a cohesive folk rock sound. Wilson was impressed that the album appeared to lack filler tracks, a feature that was mostly unheard of at a time when 45 rpm singles were considered more noteworthy than full-length LPs. Many albums up until the mid-1960s lacked a cohesive artistic goal and were largely used to sell singles at a higher price point. Wilson found that *Rubber Soul* subverted this by having a wholly consistent thread of music. Inspired, he rushed to his wife and proclaimed, "Marilyn, I'm gonna make the greatest album! The greatest rock album ever made!"

Okay, I'm not going to list off the songs on PT. That's not the point of this podcast. You can find that stuff online if you want. The area I'm trying to get at is 'how the hell did this happen?'

Let's talk about the instruments he used – and remember, this is a 1966 pop rock album: Many of the instruments were alien to rock music, including glockenspiel, ukulele, accordion, Electro-heremin, bongos, harpsichord, violin, viola, cello, trombone, Coca-Cola bottles, and other odd sounds such as bicycle bells.

The number of unique instruments for each track average to about a dozen...a dozen!... Electric and acoustic basses were frequently doubled, as was typical for the era's pop music, and played with a plectrum. Drums were not arranged in a traditional manner of keeping time, but instead, to provide "rhythmic texture and color". Two tracks are instrumentals: "Let's Go Away for Awhile" and "Pet Sounds". They were originally recorded as backing tracks for existing songs, but by the time the album neared completion, Wilson decided that the tracks worked better without vocals. (James Bond).

Arranger Paul Mertens, who collaborated with Wilson on live performances of the album, believed that although there are string sections on *Pet Sounds*, "what's special about that is not that Brian was trying to introduce classical music into rock & roll. Rather, he was trying to get classical musicians to play like rock musicians. He's using these things to make music in the way that he understood, rather than trying

to appropriate the orchestra." Wilson tended to write vertically, in block chords, rather than in the horizontal manner of classical composition.

Okay, what's the overall feeling of PT. Here's a quote from the great Jimmy Webb.

So- we can see all the pieces in motion. We've answer the self-imposed question – Why is 'Pet Sounds' Among the Best Albums Ever Made? The vectors crossed just for a few months in the history of the planet and would never cross again. They were sprinkled with cosmic pixie dust. Money didn't make it. Promotion didn't make it. The critics didn't make it. And the Beach Boys really didn't make it. In the end, it was put together in the mind of a troubled, 25 year-old Southern California young man, likely a genius.

PT is the saddest, upbeat album you will ever hear... And that's part of its mystery – and part of its attraction. There's a seductive quality to it. It's optimistic, romantic, cautious and nostalgic. A very odd combination.

For those of you unfamiliar with PT, I hope that I at least sparked enough interested for you to take a listen. For others who recognize the album for what it is – hang in there, you're part of the cosmic gang.

I'm Ian Clarke for the Ferris Wheel Classic Rock Show. Stay bad.