

# WOULDN'T IT BE NICE

BY LEWIS SHINER

**W**HAT IF? It's not just science fiction and fantasy that asks this question, it's all of fiction. What if a young student murdered his landlady to prove his moral superiority? What if a woman survived the Civil War and three marriages only to find true love too late?

It's also the question by which we transform ourselves. What if I quit my job and moved to the desert? What if I turned myself loose to create "a teenage symphony to God?"

The Icarus who attempted that teenage symphony in 1966 is now 53. For Brian Wilson it's been thirty years of struggle: with drugs and diet, with people who want to run his life for him, with the intensity of his own feelings.

The good news is that Wilson's life is finally his own again. He is newly married to a woman named Melinda, who is calm and sweet and loving with him. He has a new house in the safety of a gated community high above the city. And he is back in the public eye with two new albums and a movie on the Disney channel.

The film is *I Just Wasn't Made For These Times*, directed by producer-of-the-moment Don Was. The soundtrack is a kind of Best of Brian Wilson, live in the studio with crack session players like Jim Keltner, Benmont Tench, and Waddy Wachtel. This is not only a wonderful album in its own right, it represents a healing of other wounds. It features Wilson's first-ever recording with his two daughters, Carnie and Wendy, late of Wilson Phillips.

The other new album is *Orange Crate Art*, a timeless and beautifully-constructed collection of songs by Van Dyke Parks. Parks was the lyricist of that ill-fated teenage symphony, and with a couple of exceptions (like 1973's "Sail On Sailor") he and Wilson had not worked together since.

On this Sunday afternoon in August, Wilson is facing one more unpleasant struggle, namely a live interview. He is nervously pacing the floor in an aqua polo shirt, white sweat pants, white socks and deck shoes. He is also wearing sunglasses, "to be cool," he says unconvincingly, "not to hide behind."

The house is spacious and light. In the den are a pair of perpendicular white leather couches, arranged so that visitors will be talking into Wilson's good ear, the left one. He's been deaf in the right since childhood, which he attributes to a beating by his father. It's just one of the many ironies of the Brian Wilson story that he's never heard music in stereo.

One wall is filled by a rack-mounted audio system, speakers, and a big screen TV. At the moment the TV is tuned to a baseball game with the volume low.

The subject at hand is *Orange Crate Art*, but that's not what's on Wilson's mind today.

Today Wilson is thinking: "What if I could get back together with the Beach Boys?"

VAN DYKE PARKS first met Brian Wilson thirty years ago. At the time Parks was a session pianist by day—for the Beach Boys, among others—and a folksinger at night. Wilson was taken with Parks's brilliant and impressionistic lyrical style and wanted to work with him on his teenaged symphony—an album first known as *Dumb Angel* and eventually known as *Smile*.

To make an immensely long story short, Parks was caught between Wilson's creativity on the one hand, and on the other Wilson's inability to go ahead without the approval of his band—who also happened to be his family. Parks bowed out, made his acclaimed solo debut, *Song Cycle*, and for nearly thirty years has felt his own pain of wounds unhealed.

THE FAILURE OF *Smile* was a major turning point for Wilson. He became less involved with the Beach Boys' records, more introspective, less able to deal with the increasingly unreasonable demands of the record business. Because Wilson was still seen as a potential source of hit records—and therefore money—there were plenty of people who were more than willing to take charge of his life for him.

Over the years, there have been repeated attempts to pull together the hundreds of hours of tape to make a coherent *Smile* album. For a while the Beach Boys held it out as a carrot every time they changed record companies. Thirty minutes or so of *Smile* music was included in the 1993 *Good Vibrations* boxed set, and Capitol had made yet another empty promise, *The Smile Era*, a 3-CD set that was supposed to be out this summer but in fact never got beyond the drawing boards.

Why has interest in this album stayed alive for thirty years? Maybe because the years have only increased the reputation and appreciation of *Pet Sounds*, *Smile*'s predecessor. With Wilson at the peak of his creativity, collaborating with a visionary like Van Dyke Parks, making music so powerful that he himself was afraid of it (he attempted to destroy the tapes to "Fire" because of the rash of fires that broke out in LA after it was recorded), it's easy to see how legends could get started.

Make no mistake, *Orange Crate Art* is not, and was never intended to be, *Son of Smile*. It is an album that evokes another time, a time when music was something that you brought home and played in your own parlor on the piano or the guitar, not something you sat back and listened to passively. There are no new Brian Wilson songs here, though there is still much for his fans to love, namely his tragic, joyous, weary, and innocent voice, in its full range of expression.

"I HAD NOTHING to do with any of the music at all," Wilson readily admits. "It was all Van Dyke. He did the arrangements first and then I

went in there and did the vocals, with him teaching me.”

Wilson’s need for control in the studio is legendary. There are stories of him working all day to record the Beach Boys’ vocals—their only contributions to the records, since the music was all laid down by hired hands at Wilson’s direction. Then, late at night, Wilson would re-record all of their parts himself after everyone else had left. This new role reversal was not easy.

“It was weird. I felt like I was at the mercy of somebody. It was kind of scary, but I did what I could.”

Even though *Orange Crate Art* is not a rock and roll record, Wilson’s faith in Parks and in the songs helped get him through. “I’ve never heard music that I like any better than that. I’m really amazed. It’s what I call good music. We worked together on it, on and off, for two and a half years, and we finally consummated the thing. It was really a very big experience for me to work with Van Dyke—obviously. He’s great musically.”

Wilson has always been bursting with songs and arrangements, but has also had qualms about his own voice—the one thing Parks wanted from him. “I was paranoid, a little paranoid about it. But I think it’s a good tool. It makes people feel good.”

**I**N MANY WAYS Parks is Wilson’s opposite. He’s small, soft-spoken, very adept with language and comfortable with interviewers. Wilson will sometimes erupt outward with nervous energy, leaping off the couch, throwing his whole body into playing the grand piano in his front room. Parks seems to curl inward, seems almost frail at times.

Both appearances are deceiving. Wilson is tremendously vulnerable, and his favorite adjective is “scary.” Parks, on the other hand, has a quiet inner strength and an unflinching honesty that, like his music, almost seems of another era. When he talks about the songwriter Billy Ed Wheeler, he says he is “bright and beautiful and strong and correct in everything he says and does.” He admires songs which show “humor or affection and propriety and charm.”

He deplores the “loss of privacy” that damaged the relationship between Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, and is proud that “my relationship with Brian has been, I would like to think, very proper.” Even though he’s kept his distance from Wilson over the years, *Orange Crate Art* was “something that was correct to do. My most intensely personal relationship with Brian is visible on this record.”

Parks lives in an older Hollywood neighborhood, and answers the door wearing a bright yellow Hawaiian shirt that sets off his graying hair and mustache. Sitting near his piano, he talks about the genesis of *Orange Crate Art*.

“What motivated me to make these efforts was that I like Brian Wilson. I admire him. We are old enough now that time is obviously precious. It is our only enemy as we go forward. It was time for me to reinvent my relationship with Brian. I found the failure of our collaboration of sorts—when I worked for Brian on *Smile* some thirty years ago—to be a tedious thing.

“It seemed probable that I would be doing my last record for Warner’s when Lenny Waronker announced his departure. I don’t know many other people there, I certainly don’t know the A & R people, and I really thought this

was my last solo bullet. To make it count to me on personal terms, I knew who I would like to be with in pursuing this. Brian had established me in this business by letting me work for him. It was time to show some gratitude. I just put two and two together, and that's how it started."

There were musical reasons as well. "I can't do the things with my voice that I want to write. I don't have a falsetto break. I blew that with cigarettes some thirty years ago. I just want to be able to do what it is that I'm thinking. Brian is the most athletic singer that I know.

"The importance of a vocalist can't be diminished. In the case of *Orange Crate Art*, it really is 'the singer, not the song.' That's why his name is first on the album. There is such pathos in his voice."

And in fact this is the reason that the idea of a collaboration between Parks and Wilson has haunted Brian Wilson fans for so many years. "Brian has done some of his own best lyrics," Parks says, thinking of songs like "Love and Mercy" and "'Til I Die," both of which have wonderful renditions on *I Just Wasn't Made For These Times*. "But I also think that it's good for Brian to have somebody around to be wrong, from time to time. With a collaborator you always have an idiot next to you, saying the wrong thing—that's a service I've provided for Brian."

What Parks has actually provided are lyrics with enough substance to bear up under the weight of the feelings Wilson brings to them. One of the struggles Wilson's fans go through is dealing with the cognitive dissonance of songs like "Don't Worry, Baby"—full of wrenching emotion, but ultimately still a song about auto racing: "She makes me come alive/And makes me want to drive."

Parks's lyrics, on the other hand, are intricate, punning, and full of internal rhymes: "From the vine of a vintage cru/Comes the wine of this rendezvous." Wilson's voice finds the emotion beneath the surface and gives it to the listener unfiltered.

**P**EOPLE CHANGE THEMSELVES by asking "what if," and use role models to help define those changes. Heroes show us things in ourselves that we can nurture and bring to the front.

For many, Brian Wilson is a hero because he has the strength to maintain his innocence when so many people, for so many years, have tried to steal it from him, because he is willing, time and again, to offer his raw emotions to a world where feelings are out of fashion.

Watching Wilson offer up his feelings to be stepped on is a difficult experience. It offers some insight into why so many, over the years, might have tried to move in and protect him. It is especially difficult to watch when it's the Beach Boys, who have been at the center of so many past injuries—lawsuits, appointed caretakers, even the death of *Smile* itself—who are hurting him again today.

"I think Phil Spector's music is very current," Wilson says, out of nowhere. "The boys and I went out there on a limb for him, went out there and spread his rock and roll message. And the guys got so into that enthusiasm it took

them on a thirty-five year orbit around the world. And those guys never once complained. It was rough on them, all that time they spent on the road.”

When asked what he’s working on now, he says, “I’ve been trying to write some songs that are right for my group.”

That group is not producer Andy Paley, and the musicians with whom Wilson has been recording again, in the spontaneous, pick-up-the-phone-and-book-a-studio manner he used so often in the sixties. No, he’s talking about the Beach Boys.

“We think,” Wilson says. “We don’t know. The guys won’t respond. We put out little feelers, ‘How would you like to get together and have a listening party?’ and then they all called up and canceled.

“The thing with the boys is, they’re great, professional singers. It kind of hurts to feel like I’m going to lose them, or that they’re not gonna take my trip. Hurts my feelings a little bit.”

It’s disturbing to think that Wilson, who is capable of solo work on the level of “Love and Mercy” would attempt to write another “Kokomo.” There are so many possibilities available to him right now, including writing music for Parks’s lyrics, a true collaboration. Parks has also offered to produce an album of Wilson singing standards—they recorded an acappella version of “Rhapsody in Blue” and a version of “Our Love is Here to Stay” which didn’t make the final cut for *Orange Crate Art*. David Leaf, Wilson’s friend and biographer, has talked about one day working with Wilson to arrange some of the *Smile* music for a symphonic performance—a genuinely brilliant idea.

For Brian Wilson that freedom seems the most frightening thing of all.

Wilson is dismissive of the idea of another solo album. “I did one with Van Dyke. That’s a solo album.”

As for one with songs that he’s written on it, “No,” he says, with a short laugh. “Not really.” Words come easily enough for Wilson, sometimes great rushes of them, but it’s easy to see in his face that they’re not getting at what he wants to express. Only his songs are able to do that. “It’s not so hard to do an album with Van Dyke, say. But where does that put my head, you know? I was frightened of the idea of doing all standards. If you get into that, it would be...” He lets out a weight-of-the-world sigh. “You’d have to make a decision. You’ve got to make a decision whether you’re going to go into it, or you’re not going to go into it, you know what I mean? I believe I have made that decision, and it...that decision took a lot out of me.”

And suddenly it’s clear what Wilson means. It *is* scary. You make a decision to make a revolutionary, unheard-of record like *Smile*, and suddenly your group doesn’t want to sing it, your record company doesn’t want you to take the time you need to finish it, and even the musicians in the studio are telling you, “You’re crazy, Brian. You’re out of your mind.”

You make a decision to work with the Beach Boys again. (“Was it Mozart they had to invent the piano for?” David Leaf says after the interview. “Brian Wilson invented an instrument called the Beach Boys, and now he wants to play that instrument again.”) The band’s popularity is sagging, they need you as they’ve always needed you. But when you reach out to them they turn away.

Being a singer is much less scary. It's a way back in. "Orange crate art was a place to start," begins the opening track of the new album. "Orange crate art was a world apart."

**P**ARKS REMEMBERS the gradual way that Wilson became emotionally involved in the album. One line in "Sail Away" nearly provoked a crisis, when it was time for Wilson to sing "We'll raise a toast to what's left of my memory."

"I was thinking of me when I wrote that," Parks says. "Memory to me is always such an incredible thing. Perhaps the principal purpose of DNA. I think this is a natural function of evolved life on earth: to discover the reason for the big bang, what happened, where's my wallet, who am I with—memory's big, put it in the piece. When Brian sang that line, I remember thinking, 'Uh oh. I shouldn't have said that.' But you know something? He saw it right away. And we decided not to let it be uncomfortable for either of us. I think it's because I decided not to take it out.

"There were some other things. He couldn't stand the politics, the third world I mentioned in that piece. There were lyrics he didn't like, and he played his power of veto with the ease that a veteran like him is allowed to. As he got more interested in veto, my feelings got less hurt, because I realized that he was starting to get possessive about the project.

"What was happening in the process was that it was creating someone that doesn't exist, a single character that we developed. We were trying to conjure up a personality that would govern this record from top to bottom.

"This is a person who's lived a while. It does look like time has become a consideration in these lyrics, that this is not from the perspective of someone who is too young either to disappoint or have been disappointed. He's a person who's old enough to have done both."

**E**VERYTHING ABOUT THE ALBUM has this sort of reflexivity and layered meaning, some of it intentional, some of it evolved. It started with a single song, "Orange Crate Art." And although he is likely to "sweat bullets" over his lyrics, it's the melody that comes first for Parks.

"I don't make up melodies. Melodies occur to me. They come from somewhere else. The melodies that I hear come to me while I'm cooking, thinking about nothing but what's on the stove."

"Orange Crate Art" started with just a melody line. "I got the piece down, it's a lovely little piece, I decided to slap some lyrics on it, just for fun, because I like to write songs for fun. It's a diversion. And in the process—although I wouldn't intend this, ever—it reveals something about myself. It helps me...maintain an elasticity. I amass these songs, and about once every five years I put them on a record."

Because Parks makes a living "with very low-profile musical endeavors"—film music, hired-gun producing and arranging—it gives him the freedom to make idiosyncratic personal records at his own pace. "I had the permission to record an album, but I had no idea of what I was going to do, I never do. So I made up this song, I went into this studio, I sang it, and then I realized that I

would rather have some background vocals. It felt fraternal in a way. I thought, who do I know that I could get to do this? So I thought, well, Brian Wilson. Because I think of Brian often.”

The finished tape sat on then Warner’s president Lenny Waronker’s desk for three or four weeks before he listened to it. Then “Lenny called me and said, ‘This is fantastic. Do some more.’”

By that time a concept for the album had begun to take shape. “I decided when I was working on the lyrics to ‘Orange Crate Art’ to put the name of a woman in place, just to bring the song a little closer to the vest, and so I went to Ramona.” To a native Californian, the name Ramona carries considerable freight. It refers to both an 1884 novel by Helen Hunt Jackson and the play adapted from it, which Parks summarizes as the story of “a land-grant scion of Spanish nobility falling in love with an Indian girl. It gets this oleo of Roman Catholic cultural collision with this aboriginal reality in old California. It’s a beautiful play—I saw it once when I was a kid.

“Once I got Ramona in place, naturally I had to figure out where I was going to go. My first thought was Pomona. But as I was working through the song, this new lyric, I thought, ‘No, I’m going to Sonoma.’ For no reason other than instinct. It’s always a superior governor, rather than logic. Instinct is what leads a lyric on its way. Once I turned to Sonoma, I found the wine in the lyric, and I went from the wine to the grapes, and the wrath of the grapes which gave me a reflection on the Battle Hymn...does this make any sense at all? What I think songwriting is about is a condensate of impressions on an area of experience. I had been to Sonoma, and I knew some people who lost their love, and so I thought, ‘This is good, love lost is good.’

“I just involuntarily landed on Ramona as a name which would express a romantic probability in California. I thought Ramona would mean absolutely nothing to anybody else. But suppose a careless observer of this song heard that reference. It would give this song great function, because it would propel that person into other superior thoughts. I’m always paying attention, I’m always trying to put something to bring a gift into the record. So that the work I do that’s immediately evident might invite another listening and present another finding.”

Placing that first song in Northern California planted a seed which was nurtured by another coincidence: Lenny Waronker, to whom Parks was reporting, was a fan of the orange crate labels that Parks was singing about, had a collection of the original paintings, had even used one for Warner Brothers label art in the 70s. But Waronker thought orange crate art for the album cover was too obvious. In Parks’s words, “why hit the tack with a ball-peen hammer? Be subtle. Be subtle. Use the plain-air.”

The plain-air style of landscape painting is associated with impressionism and concerned with the effects of light and atmosphere that can only be captured by working out-of-doors. The California school of plain-air includes Alfred Mitchell, one of whose paintings became the front cover art for the album.

Through books like *O, California* (Vincent, Starr, and Mills, Chronicle Books) and *Second Nature* (Petersen, Prestel Books), Parks immersed himself in

the plein-air style. “I’m not an artist, but I love art, I really do. It means a lot to me. When I saw this stuff I thought, ‘This is a sumptuous feast.’”

Some songs, like “Palm Tree and Moon,” emerged from the book itself. “I just looked at this guy [in one of Mitchell’s paintings] and I got an idea about ‘This is so far from China.’ Like being somewhere strange, exotic. And this was exotic to him. This Chinese fishing village in 1880 in Monterey.”

Others, like “Movies Is Magic,” got a change of locale. “I wrote it about a legend in my wife’s family about how Elvis Presley, before he became famous, was interested in her sister, who was a debutante.” The song was originally set in Memphis, but as the Northern California theme took hold, Parks had a momentary crisis. When he saw a plein-air painting showing the meeting of the Sacramento and the Piedmont, he found a Northern California Delta to match that of the Mississippi. A line about “magnolias can be seen from her door” became “Sacramento river rat a rappin’ on her door.”

Almost imperceptibly the album became about “an idealized Californian state of mind, just within the outer reaches of accessibility.”

**P**AUL WILLIAMS, editor of *Crawdaddy!* and himself a highly vocal Brian Wilson fan, has speculated that there is a process we go through when we listen to music. The first thing we’re aware of is the vocal performance, next the instrumental track, and only then do we notice the lyrics.

From that standpoint, *Orange Crate Art* is a beautifully thought-out piece of work. Wilson’s vocal performance is unique, highly personal, instantly arresting. It alone is reason to go back for another listen, at which point the melodies will have already begun to ingratiate themselves into your mind. Few songs in the last thirty years have been so instantly memorable.

It’s hard to find a contemporary reference for this kind of songwriting. Maybe some of Randy Newman’s more extended meditations, maybe “Rio Grande” from the 1988 Brian Wilson album. The more obvious comparisons are to the songwriters that are Parks’s own heroes: Hoagy Carmichael (“just killer”), Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin.

Another songwriter whom Parks admires is Michael Hazlewood, who supplied lyrics for two of the album’s songs, and the entirety of a third, “This Town Goes Down at Sunset.” “I liked it because of its totally uncomplicated nature. It did something shamelessly ordinary, and it was the ordinary nature of that piece that I wanted to draw the album to an irreducible minimum, that I thought was a great way to end it.”

Although “This Town” is the last vocal on the album, the last piece of music is actually a George Gershwin piece, “Lullaby,” orchestrated by Parks to provide “a winding down, not an exclamation.”

“**I** WOULD RATHER be interested than interesting,” Parks says. “And that’s been easy. For example, I feel much more at ease now with this record than with any record I’ve ever done. I know this album isn’t *Pet Sounds*, but I don’t think it has to be. It does sound like it’s been somewhere.”

And then, at the very end of the interview, he says, “It was good, wasn’t it? It was a good record. I’m sorry that I’ve left it.”

AS HIS OWN interview winds down, Wilson plays a tape of some of his new songs. He slumps back on the couch and closes his eyes to listen. Melinda has come to sit beside him, and in the space of ten minutes or so, the Wilson family pets all converge on him. There follows a perfectly realized moment in which a human, a cat, a bird, and a dog are all peacefully coexisting, all of them trying to get at least one part of themselves in physical contact with Brian Wilson.

On the tape are the songs Wilson has written with Andy Paley, who helped produce his 1988 solo album. Some of them (“Chain Reaction of Love”) are rather slight, reminiscent of *Sweet Insanity*, the second solo album rejected by Sire Records. “Slightly American Music” recalls the Beach Boys’ “Do It Again,” a nostalgic, self-referential rocker that could, indeed, be a hit. But the most emotional piece—and Melinda’s favorite—is a ballad called “Getting In Over My Head,” a gorgeously simple Brian Wilson song, straight from his heart.

Eventually, though, Wilson tires of the tape, and jumps to his feet. “Really want to hear something good?” he says. “Come upstairs with me to my jukebox.” There, as in the *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* days, is a jukebox full of Phil Spector 45s. Wilson’s face lights up as he plays, for what must be the millionth time, “Be My Baby” by the Ronettes.

A few insights, almost inevitably, present themselves.

For one thing, no amount of “what ifs” can prepare you for reality. Wilson could never have foreseen the consequences of attempting *Smile*, or of its failure. Seeing the stiff and frightened Brian Wilson who’s been on TV from time to time is no preparation for sitting in this sunny California room listening to Phil Spector and the Chipmunks, while Wilson sits relaxed and laughing with Melinda on the couch.

For another, there is a distinct feeling that none of these people in Wilson’s life came here by accident. Like the Richard Dreyfuss character in *Close Encounters*, each of them—David Leaf, Melinda, Andy Paley, Van Dyke Parks—was called. Wilson’s music spoke to them as it has spoken to so many of us, changed us, made us able to see that change in each other, to recognize each other as much more than strangers.

What if Wilson could hang on to some peace in this troubled world, and still continue to make music as good as *Orange Crate Art*? Wouldn’t it be nice, indeed?