



Brian Wilson (Icons of Pop)

Kirk Curnutt

Sheffield & Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2011.

ISBN 978-1-84553-663-3 (PB)

RRP: £14.99 (GPB)

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The aim of Equinox's Icons of Pop Music series is to offer undergraduates and the general reader "a critical profile of a key figure or group in Twentieth-century pop music" (eds. Halstead and Laing). Like Praeger's singer-songwriter series, Equinox's focus is on the critical interpretation of each artist's creative output, but unlike Praeger's chronological approach, Equinox's focus is thematic. This is represented in the latest in the series, Kirk Curnutt's well-researched study of The Beach Boys' songwriter and producer Brian Wilson. By way of introduction, Curnutt offers an historical overview exploring the reasons behind Wilson's moniker of 'troubled genius' (see 1-5, 11), as well as his personal response as a young Beach Boys fan, contemporary responses including that of the Beatles and an overview of published literature such as Jules Siegel's "template-setting essay" (12) of 1966 'Goodbye Surfing, Hello God!'. The final chapter, "I'm the Pied Piper': The Peculiar Appeal of Brian Wilson", addresses the issue of Wilson's 'narrative iconicity' post the abandoned *Smile* project (1966-67) including the rise of 'indie' groups "evoking the sound of *Smile*" (137). In many ways both framing chapters summarise much of what has already been written by other writers such as Leaf (1978), Priore (2005), and Fusilli (2005).

The main contribution of Curnutt's study lies in his two central chapters: Chapter One, "'I Hear the Sound of a Gentle Word': Lyrical Themes and Gestures", explores Brian Wilson's lyrics in terms of the role of collaborators – from his cousin Mike Love to 'alternative' songwriter Van Dyke Parks – and the central themes of Wilson's songs specifically "melancholy and introspection, conceit of childlike wisdom, the depiction of women, and Americana/nostalgia" (20). Arguably Curnutt's greatest contribution here lies in his analysis of Brian Wilson's use of words – Curnutt, is, after all, an academic author of studies on the American writers Ernest Hemmingway and Scott Fitzgerald. Countering the assessment of pop song lyrics as 'unappreciated poetry' (27) by Dai Griffith (2003), Curnutt instead praises Wilson's ability to use simplistic, sometime even embarrassing rhymes to recreate "the awe once engendered by a childhood enthusiasm"

noting “what sends critics into paroxysms of disapproval is the guileless sensibility it projects” (28).

The second chapter “‘A Composition for Your Lonely Soul’: Musical and Sonic Motifs” examines musical issues from Brian’s trademark Beach Boys harmonies, the ‘whiteness’ of Brian’s sound, his unique adaptation of Phil Spector’s ‘Wall of Sound’, and his unique bass guitar lines, which, according to Pete Townshend, helped define the electric bass sound of seventies rock (see *The Who* 1999). Particularly insightful is Curnutt’s appraisal of Brian Wilson’s singing voice, specifically the gender implications of his falsetto. Discussing observations on the use of falsetto in the pop song by Melnick (1997), Lehman (2003) and Frith (1996), Curnutt concludes: “Brian’s audience cherishes ‘sensitivity, vulnerability, even prettiness’ precisely *because* it expresses ‘unmanly’ emotions, the palpable fragility of ‘Surfer Girl’ or ‘Let Him Run Wild’ can be liberating as their delivery unburdened by cultural obligation to demonstrate masculinity” (68-69). A significant fact considering, as Curnutt later observes, “surf rock is often depicted in pop-music histories as one of the few totems of (white) male virility in this otherwise ‘feminized’ era” (141). At the same time Curnutt acknowledges the “disembodied voice in wordless passages” such as the “spacey psychedelic ‘na-na-na-na-na’ of ‘Good Vibrations’” are moments of transcendence “that seem not to express a persona at all but to hail from the heavens” (75); moments perhaps indicative of pop’s higher aspirations at this time as represented by The Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper* (1967) and Wilson’s own aborted *Smile*.

Curnutt had originally planned to write his book about The Beach Boys and their music in 1978 when, at the age of 13, he put an advertisement (reproduced in the current book in the preface) in the fanzine “Beach Boys Freaks United Newsletter” asking fellow fans to contribute photos and record sleeves. The superlative way he interweaves his meaningful analyses with the thoughts of Brian Wilson authorities from White (1994) to Lambert (2007), as well as comments by other scholars and pop-music journalists including Siegel (1988), Cohn (2001), Marsh (1999), and Williams (1997), reflects the time and thought that has gone into this study of Brian Wilson’s pop songs, or should one say, naïve twentieth century ‘art-songs’. This book is much recommended as an introduction to the work of Brian Wilson, a true icon of pop.

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