

Before sunset

A cache of Brian Wilson's 1976 solo demos shed light on a brief window of renewal in what was a rough era for The Beach Boys. By David Fricke.

The Beach Boys

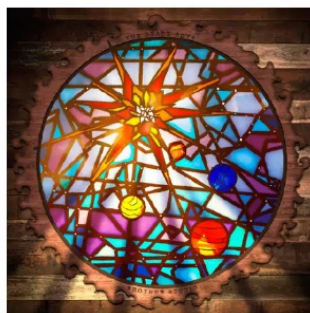


We Gotta Groove: The Brother Studio Years

CAPITOL. CD/DL/LP

FOR A FEW minutes in 1976 – America's bicentennial year and the 15th anniversary of California-sun ambassadors The Beach Boys – the hype was right: Brian Wilson was back. On November 27, the group's resident, troubled genius was the musical guest on Saturday Night Live. And he was solo, his first TV appearance without brothers Dennis and Carl, Mike Love and Al Jardine since a legendary recital of Surf's Up in the 1967 documentary *Inside Pop*. Brian's three SNL songs included an eerie Good Vibrations – alone and skittish at a piano in a faux-sandbox set – and Back Home, a jaunty original from The Beach Boys' latest LP, *15 Big Ones*, with the SNL band even though the former were in town selling out Madison Square Garden.

Brian also performed Love Is A Woman, a new song of simple romantic advice (“Tell her she smells good tonight”) in doo wop piano triplets with a vocal that



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made up for the rough edges and shaky high notes with heartening mid-range force. Five months later, Love Is A Woman was the sentimental finale of 1977's *The Beach Boys Love You*, a hopeful sequel to the sales pitch around Brian's return as producer on *15 Big Ones*, in fact a glass half-full reliant on covers of '50s and '60s oldies. . . . *Love You* was the first Beach Boys album entirely written or co-written by Brian since 1967's *Wild Honey* and effectively his first solo LP. He played most of the instruments, a one-man Wrecking Crew on keyboards and Minimoog bass, and was a committed vocal presence, often the lead. Notably, that was kept secret; the inner sleeve had no credits.

We Gotta Groove, named after a stomping . . . *Love You* outtake, makes up for that with encyclopaedic liner notes and detailed studio annotation – down to the “plinks” and “meows” Brian wrings from his Minimoog in the garage-*Smile* teenage drama *I'll Bet He's Nice* – that affirm Brian's dominant energy on these 73 tracks, mostly from 1976 and '77. Even more than the chart-wilderness years of 1970's *Sunflower*, 1971's *Surf's Up* and 1973's *Holland* – now certified classics – this was a rough era for The Beach Boys: commercially revived by the recent Capitol '60s retrospectives *Endless Summer* and *Spirit Of America* but stuck for a road forward even with Brian at the helm again. . . . *Love You* died at Number 53 in *Billboard* (*15 Big Ones* went Top 10), and Brian's fragile command took another beating when his intended follow-up, *Adult/Child* – a mixed bag of new ballads, playful minimalism and lavishly orchestrated

Tin Pan Alley nuggets – was rejected by the rest of the band, its label Warner Bros, or (most likely) both.

But this set – dedicated to those albums, related sessions and a remarkable cache of Brian's . . . *Love You* solo demos from October, 1976 – has the edge in surprise. The best of . . . *Love You* is the old glory with subtly applied modernism. Brian's single-handed rhythm section and the fluid group-vocal glow in Let Us Go On This Way recall the post-*Smile* comeback stride of *Wild Honey* and *Do It Again* with flashes of early synth-pop in the Minimoog bass zoom.

Harmonies aside, the innocent galactica Solar System is all Brian, his assured vocal in an eccentric texture of tack piano, tubular bells and ARP String machine.

. . . *Love You* would have been even better with some of these outtakes: the hit-single clout in *We Gotta Groove*; the *Beach Boys' Party!* vibe of *Hey There Mama* (with Jan And Dean's Dean Torrence, who was on that '65 LP). *Sherry She Needs Me* was an unreleased sparkler from the recording of 1965's *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)*, resurrected in August 1976 with Brian's near-perfect throwback vocal. And though it's a virtual Xerox of The Righteous Brothers' 45, *You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'* is Brian at his most Phil Spector without any help, a grand hotel of overdubs with chorus vocals that reach for the '64

majesty and damn near get there.

There is no getting around the regressive whimsy and recycled high-school confidential on . . . *Love You* (Mona; the ode to talk-show host Johnny Carson; the mercifully brief *Ding Dang*). Brian was in and out of Eugene Landy's controlling care at the time (he'd be back), and lacked the empathic challenge of former lyric partners like Tony Asher and Van Dyke Parks. But *We Gotta Groove's* subtitle reflects the sanctuary and confidence Brian found at The Beach Boys' Santa Monica studio, which opened in 1974 (see *Back Story*). Earle Mankey – a founding member of Sparks and staff engineer at Brother who worked on most of the sessions in this collection – remembered Brian's daily discipline for . . . *Love You*, turning up in the morning and tracking into the afternoon.

Brian maintained that enthusiasm for *Adult/Child*, commissioning orchestrations from Dick Reynolds (a veteran of The Beach Boys' 1964 *Christmas Album*) yet hedging that bet with a miscellany of covers and . . . *Love You*-style vehicles for Carl (the pop-gospel charmer *Everybody's Got To Live*) and Dennis (*It's Trying To Say*, actually about baseball). The lack of direction was enough to doom the project. But there are moments of genius, in excelsis. *It's Over Now* is a humbled goodbye in *Pet Sounds* grandeur with a prophetic guest vocal by Brian's wife Marilyn (they would soon divorce). And while Brian wrote *Still I Dream Of It* for Frank Sinatra (he never responded), the composer owns it amidst the strings and in the intimate '76 demo that closes this set, damaged but unbowed in a winding, plaintive melody that suggests *Surfer Girl* headed for Pink Floyd's *The Great Gig In The Sky*.

What makes this combined reckoning of Brian's last, fully-engaged studio albums for The Beach Boys, with all of their peaks and flaws, such an enlightening, unexpected pleasure is the chance to hear the earnest dedication and breadth of inspiration in this brief window of renewal, long obscured by false promo and Brian's ongoing trials. The liner notes point out that *The Beach Boys Love You* was originally titled *Brian Loves You* – which was much closer to the truth.



BACK STORY: IN MY ROOM

● Located less than 10 blocks from the beach in Santa Monica, Brother Studios was The Beach Boys' first commercial recording facility after six years of working in Brian's Bel Air home, then airlifting that gear to the Netherlands for *Holland*. Brother hosted its first session in January 1974: vocal overdubs for Elton John's *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* (Brian and Carl chimed in). Other outside clients included Kim Fowley charges *The Runaways*, Terry Reid (1978's *Rogue Waves*) and the solo Dennis Wilson (1977's *Pacific Ocean Blue*; the abandoned *Bambu*). In 1978, The Beach Boys got out of the studio business, and Brother became *Crimson Sound*. One of its first sessions: Mink DeVille's 1980 torch-song gem *Le Chat Bleu*.

FILTER REISSUES



Groove merchant:
Al Jardine (centre) hadn't
"contemplated the brilliance
of ...Love You" before.

"Mike likes big, bold projects."

Al Jardine speaks to Chris Catchpole.

You told MOJO after Brian passed away that you were rehearsing songs from ...Love You, 15 Big Ones and Adult/Child with Brian's band.

"We've been playing ...Love You and 15 Big Ones and the deep cuts from those. *Adult/Child*, we've not really touched, but some of my favourite Brian songs are on that album."

Has revisiting those records revealed any surprises?

"...Love You was such a personal thing for Brian and his brothers. Carl produced it, and Dennis was there to sing some of the songs. What surprised me was the complexities and the beauty of the LP. It's some of Brian's greatest stuff. Just the way he was able to formulate a very simple melody but with creative chord changes that, to be honest with you, I didn't appreciate at the time. I liked the in-your-face stuff like *Roller Skating Child* and *Honkin' Down The Highway*. Darian [Sahanaja], our musical director, pointed out to me the other material that I had more or less put aside and then moved on to the next project. I had not contemplated the brilliance of ...Love You, let's put it that way."

15 Big Ones came with the 'Brian's Back' PR campaign. Would it be fair to say that was only partially true?

"That was a Mike Love concept. Mike likes big, bold projects, and 'Brian's Back', phonetically, it has energy, right? Unfortunately, it wasn't true. It put a lot of pressure on Brian I think, so the easiest thing to do was covers. We were able to have some fun recreating the music that we enjoyed growing up. That was a good thing for Brian. It allowed us all to work together again and have some fun."

When it came to ...Love You, however, Brian really was back. Writing, arranging and recording everything almost single-handedly.

"Yeah. It was cathartic for him. The whole ...Love You project was wonderful for Brian. And for Carl and Dennis. It was so nice to see them working together."

Dennis recorded Pacific Ocean Blue at Brother Studios around that time. Did it provide a sanctuary for Brian and the band?

"Absolutely. It became Dennis's home. We were barely able to get in there to get anything done for The Beach Boys!"

...Love You got some good reviews at the time; how did you find the wider reaction to it?

"I don't think we played any of the material from ...Love You on the road. What happened was Capitol released [compilation LPs] *Endless Summer* and *Spirit Of America*, and that completely became the focus of the touring, so the promotion for ...Love You went out the window."

Did it feel odd playing songs from 10 years previously while simultaneously trying something different in the studio?

"It became two different things. There was a touring group and the recording group. Brian wasn't touring with us, so we would go out as usual and continue to do the catalogue – which, by the way, is pretty amazing – then we'd come home and work with Brian."

What are your memories of the Adult/Child sessions?

"We were involved in it. I assumed that they were going to be released. But for some reason it went sideways. I don't quite know. Mike would probably have thought maybe we should stay with the formula. The touring group had its own agenda. They were two different worlds."