

There are pop albums and there are *legendary* pop albums. The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* epitomizes the latter category. Released in 1966, it is considered by artists, listeners, and critics to be one of the finest pop albums ever made.¹ Sir Paul McCartney called it the best album of the 20th century, and cited it as the inspiration for the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.² Critics and fans alike rank *Pet Sounds* as one of the best albums of all time, and place the Beach Boys' founder and visionary Brian Wilson high on the list of great songwriters and record producers in pop music history.³

Inspired by the legendary producer Phil Spector and his "wall of sound" style of production,⁴ Wilson crafted an album of heartfelt poignancy, enhanced by his innovative orchestral and studio ideas. Wilson created the album partially out of a desire for the Beach Boys to be taken more seriously as a group.⁵ The result is a gorgeous collection of eleven vocal songs and two instrumentals, including *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, *God Only Knows*, and *Sloop John B*.⁶ The songs are linked by lyrical themes, unusual chord structures, unorthodox orchestrations, and the easily recognizable Beach Boys vocal sound. Each song is a sonic delight in itself, but as a cyclical whole they slowly reveal the tortured and gifted musical genius of Brian Wilson.

God Only Knows is perhaps the finest song on the album. It has an unusual chord progression, an unorthodox orchestration, a memorable melody, and the glorious vocal harmonies of the five Beach Boys. This combination of musical elements reinforces the meaning of the lyrics, written by Wilson and Tony Asher. McCartney called it the greatest love song ever written.⁷

Wilson used a number of different Southern California session musicians on each song, a loosely-knit group that was later referred to as "The Wrecking Crew".⁸ With these accomplished musicians at his disposal

1 <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/the-beach-boys-pet-sounds-20120524>

2 http://albumlinernotes.com/Paul_McCartney_Comments.html

3 <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/the-beach-boys-pet-sounds-20120524>

4 Charles Granata, *Wouldn't It Be Nice: Brian Wilson and the Making of The Beach Boys' Pet Sounds*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 119-22.

5 Brian Wilson, *Wouldn't It Be Nice: My Own Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 142.

6 The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds*, Capitol Records, 72435-21241-2-1, D131646, CD.

7 Wilson, 142.

8 Brad Elliott, *The Beach Boys Pet Sounds Liner Notes*, Accessed April 10th, 2016, <http://www.beachboysfanclub.com/ps-liner.html>.

in the studio, Wilson was able to create his “pocket symphonies”.⁹ *God Only Knows* itself utilized a wide variety of instruments when it was recorded at Western Recorders on March 9th and 10th, 1966. (The vocal tracks were overdubbed in March and April). In addition to Carl Wilson's lead vocal and the vocal harmonies, Wilson used a string quartet, French horn, alto flutes, saxophones, bass clarinet, two accordions, piano, organ, guitar, upright and electric bass, drums and a variety of percussion. Despite the large ensemble of twenty-three musicians, the music itself is restrained and never feels cluttered.

The overall form of *God Only Knows* is as follows:

Introduction- eight measures

Verse 1- eight measures

Chorus 1- four measures (with the A/E-B/F#-C/G turnaround from the introduction)

Verse 2- eight measures

Chorus 2- three measures (no turnaround)

Instrumental tutti interlude- four measures

Vocal interlude (vocables)- eight measures

Chorus 3 (up a major 4th)- three measures

Verse 3- eight measures

Chorus 4- three measure canon over repeated chorus chord progression

The melody begins with a soaring French Horn line over staccato keyboards (Ex.1). Wilson sung the part to studio veteran Alan Robinson. As Robinson told Charles Granata:

“French horns are in the highest harmonic range, and because the notes are so close together and require smaller lip adjustments, you can do a sweep and cover all the harmonics between the five notes... Normally I would have played a clean slur, but Brian came up with the idea of using a glissando.”¹⁰

⁹ *Wikipedia*, “Good Vibrations”, Accessed April 16th, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Vibrations#cite_note-FOOTNOTESTebbins2011-47.

¹⁰ Granata, 156-7.

Ex.1

Heavily Swung 8th Notes

French Horn

Keyboards

Basses/Guitar

f

f

f

5

A E A E

A E/G# F#min7

Fl. A/E B/F# C/G

> > - >

> > - >

This melody reappears in different forms throughout the song. As David Wright explained to this

This melody re-appears in different forms throughout the song. As David Wright explained to Charles Granata:

“The melody doesn’t progress randomly: it keeps driving home a musical point. The French horn is heard at the beginning, and repeats itself above his voice at the end. Its theme is reinforced throughout the piece. He understood that you don’t make a musical point just once—you restate it a little differently each time.”¹¹

The harmony in the first four measures is I-V-I-V, a fairly standard pop chord progression. Bassists Carol Kaye and Lyle Ritz play the 3rd of the E major chord (G#) in measure six, and then an F# in the following measure, turning the A major triad into an F# minor 7th. This bass line descends, sigh-like, until the eighth measure. This eighth measure is harmonically ambiguous. There are three major chords in a row with their respective 5^{ths} in the bass. This measure creates suspense, giving the listener a sense of harmonic unease. It appears again later in the song.

The introduction begins in A major, but the C/G chord in measure eight is a quiet plateau of a not-quite cadence. This leads into the verse, which itself starts on a D major chord with an A in the bass, a whole step up from the preceding chord.

Orchestrally, it is unlike any other pop song before it. Sleigh bells and percussion come in on the fifth measure, and alto flutes enter on the eighth measure. Hal Blaine, the drummer on the recording session, suggested playing plastic orange juice cartons with his drum sticks. The result is like the sound of a wood block without as sharp a sound.¹² Wilson wrote that he put masking tape over the piano strings to give it more of a plucking sound. The instrumental combination is unusual, but Wilson’s keen sense of orchestration molds it into a cohesive sound, blending instruments into one timbre.

This instrumentation continues into the verse and Carl Wilson’s vocal. The lyrics fit the music and vice versa. Wilson was reticent to put the word “God” in the title, fearing that it would discourage radio stations from playing the song. As the song isn’t a religious song per se, no one seemed to mind.

¹¹ Granata, 158.

¹² Kent Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Rolls Best-Kept Secret*. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012), 155.

Here Wilson and Tony Asher say so much, yet so simply:

I may not always love you

But long as there are stars above you

You never need to doubt it

I'll make you so sure about it

God only knows what I'd be without you

If you should ever leave me

Though life would still go on believe me

The world could show nothing to me

So what good would living do me

*God only knows what I'd be without you.*¹³

Harmonically, the verse begins on the aforementioned D/A chord, which adds suspense, as the song initially seems to be in A major. D major is the IV chord here, with the tonic (A) in the bass. This suspended sound resolves to B minor, which sounds like a new tonic at first. The diatonic melody belies a complicated chord structure underneath (See Ex. 2).

This use of inverted triads, while hardly new, had been rarely used in rock music up to this point. Harmonically, Pet Sounds is closer to the music of Mussorgsky and other late Romantic composers than to rock and roll and jazz. It's not that he was using something new; it's that he was using a harmonic vocabulary in a completely new setting.

¹³ Google Play, "God Only Knows (The Stereo Mix) (1996 Digital Remaster)", Accessed March 17th, 2016, https://play.google.com/music/preview/T6ss3qvfyjvnx2pu4eadqgj2ty?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics.

Ex. 2

Verse

Measures 1-4 of the Verse section. The treble staff contains a melody with a triplet in measure 1. The bass staff has a continuous eighth-note pattern. Chords are indicated below the staff: D/A, Bmin(add 9), F#min7, and F#min6/A.

5

Measures 5-8 of the Verse section. The treble staff continues the melody. The bass staff has a continuous eighth-note pattern. Chords are indicated below the staff: E/B, Cdim7, E/B, and Bbmin7b5.

9

Chorus

Measures 9-12 of the Chorus section. The treble staff contains a melody starting with a rest in measure 9. The bass staff has a continuous eighth-note pattern. Chords are indicated below the staff: A, E/G#, F#min7, A/E, B/F#, and C/G. Dynamics include *f* in measure 10 and *f* in measure 12.

The last four bars in this example is the chorus, with Carl Wilson singing “God only knows what I’d be without you”. It concludes with the same chord progression as the eighth measure of the introduction.

Songwriter and author Gary Ewer calls the verse a “fragile” chord progression,¹⁴ as the inverted bass notes create a feeling of uncertainty, which reflects the lyrics. When the chorus finally arrives, the A major chord roots the passage and strengthens the meaning of the lyrics. The musical narrator is nervous about what he’s saying in the verse, but the chorus is strong and affirms what he truly believes, lyrically and musically.

The verse has four short phrases, which add to the uncertainty of the musical narrator’s feelings. After the French horn introduction, the staccato keyboards stand out more, as nothing sustains for more than three beats. In contrast, the chorus is one long phrase that assuages all doubt as to the singer’s feelings. As Ewer wrote, “It has the effect of the chorus sounding almost like a sigh”.¹⁵

The second verse (“If you should ever leave me...”) is identical to the first verse, except for the addition of the string quartet and soft French horn. However, the chord progression feels heavier the second time around, as if the weight of the previous verse and chorus is sinking into the listener’s head. Even though the string lines are very basic, they propel the song forward.

The second chorus is nearly the same as the first, only with the strings and added percussion. Wilson’s point gets nailed home with this second recitation of “God only knows what I’d be without you”. But he does something slightly unusual here, by removing the last measure of the previous chorus. (This is the turnaround of the the eighth measure of the introduction). Instead, we have another tutti, and a very odd one at that. It features nearly the whole ensemble, and has nothing to do with what comes before or after it (Ex.3).

¹⁴ Gary Ewer, *Classic Song Analysis: “God Only Knows” (Wilson/Asher)*, Posted October 26th, 2011, Accessed March 21st, 2016, <http://www.beachboysfanclub.com/ps-tracks.html>.

¹⁵ Ewer, 2.

Ex.3

Interlude

The musical score for 'Interlude' is written for piano in E major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking. The right hand plays a series of chords, mostly triads and dyads, with eighth notes and rests. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and rests. The second system continues the same rhythmic and harmonic pattern, ending with a repeat sign. The overall mood is contemplative and rhythmic.

While the first measure uses the tonic chord with the 5th in the bass (A/E) the second measure transposes that chord down a whole step. This takes the passage out of the diatonic A major realm in a slightly shocking way. It is the loudest part of the entire song, and is further defined by the tutti's straight eighth-notes.

Up to this point, the ensemble, and the rhythm section in particular, had been playing with a pronounced shuffle-like swing feel. Don Randi's choppy quarter notes on the piano imply the swing, while bassist Kaye and Ritz phrase their eighth notes in more of a dotted eighth/sixteenth note feel. For the instrumental interlude, the eighth notes are played rigidly, as if the entire orchestra suddenly snapped to attention. This phrasing idea came from pianist Randi.¹⁶

This interlude acts as an aural palate cleanser. It is possible that a continued shuffle/swing feel would get tiring to the average listener. The tutti acts as a wake-up call, and allows the song to progress. Even though this section is an anomaly in the entire form of the song, it effectively ends the first half of the song, entering at 1:04 and ending at 1:12. The song fades out just shy of the three-minute mark, so in classical form analysis, the instrumental interlude can be considered the beginning of the development.

If approached from this theoretical viewpoint, the next section, the vocal interlude could easily be called the development (See Ex. 4). The original rhythmic feel returns and the keyboards renew their choppy pattern. There are more "fragile" chords¹⁷ that return to the unease of the verse harmonies.

Yet atop this, Wilson devises a four part vocalise, using the trademark Beach Boys "bomp-a-bomp" vocables. The lead vocal echoes the French horn line of the introduction. This is a classic example of Beach Boys vocal arranging, inspired by Wilson's love for the vocal group The Four Freshmen.¹⁸

¹⁶ Elliot, 2.

¹⁷ Ewer, 1.

¹⁸ Wilson, 34.

Ex. 4

Ex. 4 is a musical score in 4/4 time, featuring three vocal parts (vocal 1, vocal 2, vocal 3) and a bass line. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#).

Measures 1-4:

- vocal 1:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.
- vocal 2:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.
- Bass:** Plays a continuous eighth-note pattern: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4.
- Chords:** G/D, Emin6/G, Bmin7/F#, Bmin7, E7/D.
- vocal 3:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.

Measures 5-8:

- vocal 1:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.
- vocal 2:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.
- Bass:** Plays a continuous eighth-note pattern: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4.
- Chords:** A/E, Fdim7, A/E, Ebmin7b5.
- vocal 3:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.

Measures 9-12 (CHORUS):

- lead vocal:** Starts with a whole rest, then plays a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a half note B4, and a whole note C5.
- Bass:** Plays a continuous eighth-note pattern: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4.
- Chords:** D, A/C#, Bmin.

The vocal interlude climaxes with another lush sigh-like “aah” on an E-flat diminished seventh chord. It doesn’t resolve in a traditional way, or return to the verse. It’s as if the entire interlude builds over a series of unstable chords to end in a heavenly chord of bliss.

What’s unusual here is that Wilson returns to the chorus, but transposes it up a major fourth. So instead of the chorus sounding lower than the verse, here it is higher, as if it’s a passing reference to what the lyrics have told the listener before.

From this transposed chorus, the song repeats the second verse with the same instrumentation. Wilson adds a downward arpeggio on the flute over the sixth and seventh measures, which is made spookier by the use of echo. This is the only difference between the second and third verses, because the lyrics are identical. It doesn’t matter to the song, because the verse is just as powerful to the listener the second time he/she hears it.

The third chorus begins the same as the second chorus, but tacks on an extra measure of E/G# as the vocal rises on the elongation of the word “you” (See Ex. 5). This turns the three measure chorus into a four measure chorus. Here Wilson takes some of the ideas from the vocal interlude but uses them in different ways.

Four voices sing in a round, starting with the lead vocal (Vocal 1) singing the melody for two measures, then resting for two more. Vocal 2 enters on the third measure in an echo of Vocal 1. Vocal 3 sings the triplet figure “God only knows” over the E/G# as a turnaround to go back to the tonic key of A major. Finally, Vocal 4 uses vocables to sing the French horn part from the introduction, nicely bookending this phrase and the beginning and the end.

Ex. 5

Lead Vocal

Vocal 2

Vocal 3

Vocal 4

A E/G# F#min7 E/G# A

E/G# F#min7 E/G#

©

On the second “God only knows” lyric, the instrumentation changes to bring the listener even closer to the meaning of the song. Wilson does this by paring the instrumentation down to basses, strings, and

percussion. Hal Blaine's snare drum enters on the fifth measure along with the keyboards. There is a tambourine on beats two and four, which propels the rhythm forward in its crescendo. But as the round gets bigger, the mix fades. Wilson leaves us on a high note, with the jubilant voices ringing in our heads.

Wilson's use of the recording studio gave him ample room to experiment with sounds and textures. He used the studio itself as an instrument, creating sounds that would be very difficult to replicate live. While musicians and producers had been using the studio in this way for years, Wilson established his own sound. He gave the musicians printed music and verbal instructions, which let them create some of their own parts. Wilson knew the sounds he wanted, but wasn't always sure how to get them.¹⁹ The ability and patience of the studio musicians helped Wilson achieve his musical vision.

Even though all twenty-three musicians on *God Only Knows* played simultaneously in the same room, it took Wilson and engineer Chuck Britz to get the balance right between the instruments. The low flutes and harpsichord would be barely audible in a live setting or if mixed at their natural volume. *Pet Sounds* was also mixed in mono, just as Spector's productions were.²⁰

Just as it is almost pointless to address the song as a whole without considering the musical arrangement and production techniques, analyzing *God Only Knows* without examining the lyrics is to lose so much of the overall meaning of the song.

Composers and songwriters have long used musical elements to reinforce the meaning of the lyric. The verse melody and harmony reflect the statement of the lyrics. Here, the singer is awash with emotion and feels unsure of how he should express his feelings. The tenuous harmony adds to the hesitancy, which is further buoyed by a with lots of leaps and skips. Not only is the singer nervous, but his melody is akin to stammering and jarring bursts of emotion. When he finally arrives at the chorus, his feelings, and therefore the harmony, are made clear.

A less complicated melody would have lessened the point that Wilson and Asher make with their lyrics. The syncopations and stresses on off-beats add to the tension. A push and pull exists throughout the

¹⁹ Granata, 143-4.

²⁰ Granata, 124-8.

verse; the singer expresses his feelings in words while the band represents his heart.

On *Pet Sounds* in general, Wilson released himself from the standard Verse-Chorus forms that were typical of mid 1960s pop music. Although *God Only Knows* seems simple, the form is quite complex. There are unusual phrase lengths- the second chorus is three measures long, while the other two are four measures long. Yet they sound natural, not forced. The meaning of the song dictated how the form was to be laid out. It is due to the excellent studio musicians and the exquisite Beach Boys harmonies that the song is so cohesive, despite its many layers and sections.

When you factor in all these aspects- composing, lyric-writing, orchestrating, vocalizing, using the studio as an instrument, and mixing the whole thing down to a beautiful three-minute wonder, you realize that *God Only Knows* might not just be the greatest love song ever- it could also be the greatest song ever recorded.

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