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Kirk CURNUTT, *Brian Wilson*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Kirk Curnutt, *Brian Wilson, Icons of Pop Music*, Halstead & Lang, Equinox Publishing, 2012.

Finally, the Professors of English have gotten to Brian Wilson! This is great news, since we don't need any more chronologies, anthologies, mythologies, psychologies, or hagiographies. The main facts of his biography to date are settled, and those few in dispute are both long-standing and familiar to fans. Those interested in Wilson's music are in need of critical, broadly humanistic, and cross-cutting perspectives that illuminate the "backstage" of his biography—his cultural situation, his public image, the legends & myths concerning his life and works. These can only enlighten the analysis and appreciation of his artistic productions. A good teacher of the Higher Literature can provide this milieu, and we are fortunate that Kirk Curnutt has taken on the job.

He writes a telling and touching preface of how he came to his subject. Having often been quizzed myself about my interest in the Beach Boys, I register and note all the signs, references, and indicia of long-term exposure to the music catalog, as well as how the developing scholar handled these. It's as good an emotional appeal to a knowledgeable fan as Aristotle could have desired.

Throughout this fascinating book, Curnutt makes important thematic observations about

Brian's work, often using terms, snatches of lyric, song titles, and other saved bits of text produced by Brian and the Beach Boys, as well as their spokesmen, chroniclers, and critics. (Thanks to previous authors and collectors, the documentary record of Brian's professional career, at least, is extremely rich.) From his own training, Curnutt makes us aware of aspects of Brian's work that invite questions about race, gender, and social positioning. What's a white "glee club" doing with Chuck Berry licks? What's up with Brian's falsetto? What's so great about California? Further, even more interesting questions have emerged in the last twenty years, as Brian has returned to active status as a performer (albeit reading lyrics from a screen and pantomiming at an unplugged keyboard in concert). Why is there such affection for him? Why do we care so much?

Is it because Brian is a genius? Curnutt addresses this well-known matter straightaway in the Introduction and unpacks it neatly, providing a long-needed genealogy of this meme. Derek Taylor, a British publicist who arranged a release party for *Pet Sounds* attended by Lennon and McCartney, among others, is the source for the version that has held sway since 1966—that is, Brian Wilson has unfathomable depths of musical imagination, which elevates his music into the realms of Art. It is music to be listened to for meaning and nuance. Now it's true that if *Pet Sounds* were another *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)*, the claim would be laughable. But *Pet Sounds* is indeed a musical

text of unanticipated complexity: Tony Asher's lyrics are subtle and literate; Brian's music has a consistent richness of invention, arrangement, and production; and the order of the album's songs suggest the long arc of a song cycle, not merely a thematic collection. Though one can hear beginnings of this sensibility on the B-side of *The Beach Boys Today!* (which allows for a progressive, evolutionary reading of Brian's compositional career rather than a sudden breakthrough), not all the elements are in place, especially the keystone to high art: organic unity. *Pet Sounds* is really quite an extraordinary achievement, and if Derek Taylor needed to find some angle and catchphrase to publicize this, "genius"—despite all the contestation about the term—is not inapt.

But what about the surf and car songs of the preceding years? Curnutt deftly reminds us of another type of genius that Brian seemed to have until *Pet Sounds*: the ability to make hit records. This is the genius of commercial success, the ability to turn experimental mashups of Chuck Berry licks, "secret" and localized sub-cultural references, and state-of-the-art vocal arrangement into an ongoing project that escaped faddism and trendiness. Further, and most significantly, it was inimitable and therefore practically trademarked. Jan and Dean came close (with Brian's help!) to turning the Beach Boys' "sound" into a general style (e.g., "Little Old Lady from Pasadena"), but their hits only highlighted the fact that the Beach Boys were the leaders and the rest were followers. It's this sense of genius, the mysterious ability to make hit after hit, that allowed Taylor's version to resonate: the story had to be that Brian was going to take this ability and put it in service of higher art.

To be sure, luck and market (cultural) conditions play their part in pop-music success, but Brian once again timed things perfectly, since *Pet Sounds* was released at a moment when adults realized that the teenagers were coming into majority and bringing their music with them. The condescension that marked establishment discussion of "teenage" music in the early 1960s (most famously, as Curnutt reminds us, in Tom Wolfe's portrait of Phil Spector, "The First Tycoon of Teen") disappeared so quickly that Leonard Bernstein—a leading cultural-capitalist—was praising "Surf's Up" on a CBS News special in 1967. ("The [best rock music] is so exciting and vital, not to say significant, that it claims the attention of every thinking person.") In these new circumstances, what may have been a publicist's puffery became a serious critical point.

Curnutt follows the "genius" thread through the next phases of Brian's biography, where it acquired some telling adjectives. The *Smile* debacle showed Brian to be a "troubled" genius, while the sad state of Brian's life in the mid-1970s suggested that he was a "mad" genius. At the current point in Brian's career, his genius is cliché and part of his history rather than the present, despite continuing to underwrite the devotion many fans continue to give his releases. But it's a powerful history, and in the end, Curnutt offers both a penetrating critique and an appreciation of the myth. If his Preface—written by the longtime, adoring fan—threatened to turn off readers with less investment in Brian Wilson than Curnutt has, his Introduction shows how much that investment can return when the experienced literary scholar gets to work.

The main body of the book contains three chapters: on lyrics and related texts; on musical expression and materials; and on Brian's "peculiar appeal" as a pop icon. Curnutt examines song lyrics as an English professor does, which is to say that his close readings often freshen up overfamiliar lyrics and invite a new (re)hearing of songs. Further, he performs extremely useful meta-critique of the standard line about Beach Boys' lyrics. For example, *Pet Sounds* and *Smile* aside (that is, leaving out the lyrical contributions of Tony Asher and Van Dyke Parks), the catalog has been characterized as having a few serious, "melancholy" songs dispersed in an emulsion of silly adolescent ephemera—and some of the latter seem decidedly pre-adolescent, working the margins of childlike/childish. In this situation, critics tend to over-focus on the melancholic mode to justify their work, skirting and skimming over the rest as unserious and not worth the effort. A nexus between the melancholic songs and biography is also commonly understood, so that, for example, "In My Room," "Till I Die," and "Caroline No," describe, respectively, Brian's escape from his domineering father, Murry, his episodes of depression in the early 1970s, and disenchantment (according to her) with his first wife, Marilyn. Curnutt rightly suggests that these critical efforts reflect an "...anxiety toward his lyrics' susceptibility to being dismissed as 'dumb'." Curnutt himself appears not to have these anxieties, and he is able to read some apparently silly songs as "gift gestures...that promote human connection and empathy." "Meant for You," a short introit to *Friends*, perfectly encapsulates this sensibility. But one can also read this in "Vegetables," with its exhortations for healthy eating,

or "Friends," which reminiscences of favors done and received. (Tellingly, Curnutt points out that Brian himself believes he himself is "gifted," and that much of his music is meant as a thank offering to whatever spiritual force is responsible.) In sum, this general broadening of critical attention to Brian's lyrics is an outstanding contribution of Curnutt's book, one which I began to realize clearly in his brilliant discussion juxtaposing "masterpiece" *Smile* and "embarrassing" *The Beach Boys Love You* together under the rubric of "Adult Child."

Equally insightful and ear-opening is the final chapter, which explores critical and historical contexts of Brian's reputation and public image. Here, Curnutt picks up themes from the first part of the book—genius, melancholy, innocence, among others—and works out a reception history of them among critics and fans. For a fan as involved as Curnutt obviously has been, he achieves remarkable scholarly objectivity about the issues in play. It's refreshing, for example, to have the agon between Brian and cousin Mike Love—a foundational myth for the failure to complete *Smile* and for Brian's withdrawal from the Beach Boys—described with sympathy for Love's contributions and achievements (e.g., being the energetic front man for a band that has been touring constantly for 50 years). One might expect, for a book about Brian Wilson rather than the Beach Boys, that the various moves to precipitate out Brian from his bandmates, family, "bad" influences, and the like would be endorsed. But Curnutt places these under critical scrutiny and achieves a more nuanced portrait of Brian as a result.

In this light, a powerful "Let Brian be Brian" urge can be seen as a common thread among

his fans: it is best for him to be free to make his art without undue pressure and influence from others. (The relationship between this urge and belief in Brian's "genius" is clear: genius is an individual attribute.) Yet the full picture of Brian's work that Curnutt presents shows how Brian has never successfully worked alone. He has always needed collaborators (mostly lyricists, including Love) or assistants of various stripes as part of his artistic project. Sometimes they are characterized as benign and helpful, such as Van Dyke Parks, and sometimes as malign and dangerous, such as controversial psychotherapist Eugene Landy. About the latter, Curnutt makes good promise in the preface to downplay both Murry Wilson and Landy in his account, both of whom have been figures of sensational and even lurid interest in most biographies. Yet Landy's influence on Brian during the production of his first solo album, 1988's *Brian Wilson*, was paramount, and for Curnutt not to weave this fact into the critical tapestry is, to this reader, a missed opportunity. Instead, Scott Bennet's role in *That Lucky Old Sun* is analyzed for the very issues that Landy's role first broached and presented most compellingly.

The issue of collaboration can be pushed further, I think. A surprising conclusion one can draw from Curnutt's work is that Brian Wilson is a "producer who composed," not the other way around. (In this, he is quite like his early model, Phil Spector) The producer's role is entirely collaborative and coordinating, just like it is in other multimedia arts. Brian composed chord progressions from the piano, some routine and stock, others new and experimental for pop music. These structural members were fully elaborated in the recording studio with Brian rehearsing, directing, and taking suggestions

from respected session players. (If you've heard tapes of the Beach Boys recording sessions circa 1966, it's clear how this process played out.) Brian's first compositional impulse, it appears, is not to create from scratch, but to arrange and transcribe. In this, he put himself through, by all accounts, what harmony teachers would recognize as an intense course of ear training—listening to Four Freshman records and playing them on the keyboard, trial and error, until note-perfect. It's this musical-training behavior that allowed Brian quickly to "get" blues licks and songforms, and then to layer vocals into them. Further, Brian's arranging skills are responsible for that quintessential quality of the Beach Boys' early music, what Jim Miller memorably described as "a weird cross between Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and Chuck Berry." Identifiable traces of hybridity in a musical structure or utterance are, I submit, evidence of the arranger's art rather than of the composer's work (i.e., *opus*). Given how much care he took in crafting the chord changes, vocal lines, instrumentation, and sound effects, it seems perfectly understandable that someone else might get the lyrics started, or that ones he wrote himself wouldn't evince the same rich detail of invention as the music.

This complicates Curnutt's discussion of lyrics, as good and generative as it is, because it's not quite clear who's really responsible for them, since the role of collaborators complicates in general the picture of Brian as auteur and as solitary genius. This picture has become even harder to draw in recent years, as Brian no longer even produces records the way he once did. I hear much more jobbing out of work to collaborating producers of his recent records. Indeed, I detect a certain ennui in Brian about the work of

making records—a sense of “yeah, whatever...” to any assent he gives to a suggestion from a collaborator. It’s one reason why the 2004 *Smile* release has a bit of the bootleg about it; Brian heard the song sequencing of some of the better sourced bootlegs and agreed to it. (A scene in “Beautiful Dreamer,” a documentary about the making of *Smile*—in which his “musical secretary,” Darian Sahanaja, plays portions a bootleg to Brian’s evident approval—all but confirms this.)

When, in the second chapter, Curnutt details techniques of musical compositions and arrangements, the book makes a strong case for the value of examples using lead-sheet/guitar-tab symbols at the least, standard Western notation in the acceptable middle, with visually annotated audio clips an ideal. (The latter can’t be implemented in hardcopy, of course.) Curnutt uses lead-sheet symbols to good effect in various places, such as his discussion of Brian’s use of chord inversions and unusual bass notes (p. 105) and certain *a capella* effects (p. 78). But musical notation is really needed convey effects described in the discussion of “Add Some Music to Your Day” (p. 99) among other places. I do note that books in the “Icons of Pop Music” series are “designed for undergraduates and the general reader,” which underscores the fact that musical notation isn’t widely read these days, so the expenses of acquiring the expertise in the first place and of printing the artwork in the last are, alas, difficult to bear. But the insuperable difficulties that we have describing musical structures and effects in pure prose are on display throughout the chapter.

All this is to say that for knowledgeable, notationally-literate musicians, Curnutt’s book

is missing what a good grounding in music theory—including harmony, ear training, form—enables: more integrated text-music readings of the songs as well as observations about musical genre and—for *Smile* in particular—motivic integration between songs. Fortunately, he recognizes Philip Lambert’s *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson* as an excellent guide to these matters, and the musically sophisticated reader of Curnutt’s work can put the two books in productive dialogue. (Lambert’s book, too, lacks musical notation, and perhaps for the same reasons as Curnutt’s. But his descriptions benefit from his training as a music analyst, and he moreover deploys helpful schematic charts, tables, etc. that don’t require music-notation literacy.)

A small point: songs are referred to by the album they first appeared on. This flattens out the representation of the catalog: significant differences between single vs. album versions are effaced, for one thing, as are differences among live versions. I wish that date-of-release was the primary index, or date of composition if a song wasn’t released at all (or only as part of a later reissue). I hold with many that, until *Pet Sounds*, the single was the basic unit of art for the Beach Boys and albums were uneven assemblies. Thereafter, albums were the basic unit (if also uneven at times) and individual songs were extracts. This scheme has its complications, especially as *Smile*-era songs were portioned out in later albums, but music history is better represented by “facts of composition” than by ad-hoc marketing devices, which pre-*Pet Sounds* albums certainly were (along with many later compilation albums, starting with *Endless Summer*).

Brian Wilson, Icons of Pop Music

And a final word about the book cover: a blue-tinted, soulful photoportrait from the 2000s of an older Brian Wilson. The striped shirt is long gone; also the falsetto, the long hair, the beard, the bloat, the bathrobe, the medicated vacancy of the Landy years. This image of

a later middle-aged Brian—mature, knowing, and self-possessed—is perfect for this work of cultural-textural analysis Curnutt accomplishes with such distinction in this book.

Daniel HARRISON

Fabien Hein, *Do It Yourself : autodétermination et culture punk*, Congé-sur-Orne, Le Passager Clandestin, 2012.

Dans cet ouvrage, Fabien Hein se propose d'aborder l'histoire de la « culture punk » par le biais de son mode privilégié de production, le *Do It Yourself* (DIY), littéralement « fais le toi-même », qui participe d'une forme d'autodétermination et de débrouillardise revendi-

quée visant à échapper au contrôle du système « dominant » de production des biens culturels, notamment à celui des *majors*. Et, symétriquement, d'aborder le DIY et les questions que ce mode entrepreneurial soulève d'un point de vue sociologique par le biais de la « culture punk » et de son histoire. Ni véritable enquête sociologique au sens strict du terme, ni approche exclusivement historique, la démarche de l'auteur consiste à retracer différents exemples en multipliant et en croisant habilement les sources et les différents témoignages de figures-clés dans la mouvance *punk*, et à les interroger dans une logique heuristique. À travers cette démarche se laisse ainsi dessiner, page après page, témoignage après témoignage, exemple après exemple, une forme de mouvement circulaire entre le punk tel qu'il se pense, c'est à dire une certaine vision du monde et de l'individu, et le punk tel qu'il se fait, au sens très matériel et pragmatique des techniques de production engagées pour créer les biens culturels punk – mouvement duquel participe ce que l'auteur nomme les « trois grands piliers originaux » du punk : refus du consumérisme, rébellion contre