

POPPY DE GARMO

Kali Goddess of Empowerment, 2011
Taken at Wanderlust Squaw Valley
digital image, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: the artist

one could say, on intuition. The words are the least of it—they are there mostly to evoke the mood, to *suggest*. It's pure feel, some inner sense (those “vibes”) translated almost perfectly into three and a half minutes of music.

Never easy to dance to (you can see kids on *American Bandstand* just *stopping*—a horror to programmers), “Good Vibrations” was a roller-coaster ride of sounds, filled with aural peaks and valleys, a series of beautiful rising and falling waves. I remember it: in somebody's basement, all of us waiting, swaying slightly through the interludes, listening as the song finally broke into its rhythm and set us free to move, only to loop down again into that hush, that soft heart at its center:

*Gotta keep those loving good vibrations a-happening
with her*

Mike Love's voice chants along with a pulsing base line, that heartbeat underlying the song, rising and rising like a beautiful wave to a wordless sound:

Ahhhhhh!

That was us as we stood there at thirteen, open-mouthed, holding hands, our eyes staring off into space, afraid to look at each other, afraid and yet filled with longing and amazement. That was the moment that caught us before we crashed back into adolescence and the exhilaration of the dance, whatever the dance might hold.

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Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* came out the same summer—1966—as *Pet Sounds*. Dylan had his motorcycle accident and disappeared for two years. The war escalated. Drug use intensified, and the music scene shifted radically.

Brian's intention was to shift right along—in fact, to ride out in front of the wave, even ahead of the Beatles, as he had done with *Pet Sounds*. Competition with them remained intense, and so that fall Brian was already thinking about the next album. “Designed to combine the divine and the dumb, an expression of Brian's heaven-sent music, outrageous sense of humor and belief in the healing power of laughter,” it was originally to be called *Dumb Angel* but this was subsequently changed to *Smile*. Brian explained

that he was “doing the spiritual sound...religious music. That's where I'm going...writing a teenage symphony to God.”

This was to be both deep and humorous music, a kind of compendium of Americana and (perhaps) of his own family's westward migration, filled with cowboy riffs, harmonicas and banjos, Old Hollywood clichés, commercials, 1950s harmonies, railroads, and Chinese immigrants all linked together through musical and verbal puns:

Have you seen the Grand Coolie workin' on the railroad?

Combining outright silliness and utter sublimity, *Smile* would be a huge and wonderful joke on America, on our obsession with heroes and villains. It would also, implicitly, be a declaration of musical independence, the logical next move after the elegy to adolescence that was *Pet Sounds*.

Smile combined everything Brian was reaching for: an innocence, a childlike quality joined with an utterly sophisticated musical sense and with lyrics that evoke more than tell; that move by indirection, humor, puns and pure sound. Consider, for example, the famous “Surf's Up.” Released first in 1971 in a cobbled-together version combining a number of different sections of *Smile* material, the song still gives some idea of the complexity, the humor, and the pathos of what the Beach Boys were trying to do—which, put simply, was to grow up.

Rising out of a baroque set of lyrics, evoking Victorian nostalgia more than California sunshine (*Carriage across the fog/Two-step to lamp lights cellar tune*), the song culminates in a place of great simplicity and sadness:

*Surf's up, umhmm
Aboard a tidal wave
Come about hard and join
the young and often spring you gave
I heard the word
wonderful thing
a children's song*

There's an *awareness* here: a knowledge of loss, of change, of time. And this knowledge in turn makes possible a kind of resurrection. In the end, the Beach Boys