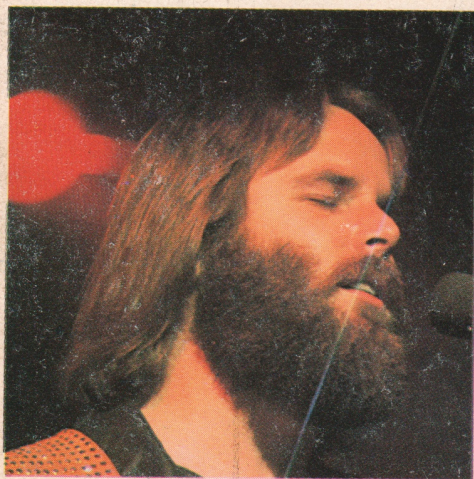


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## THE BEACH BOYS



**Good Vibrations  
are back**





# THE BEACH BOYS: RIDING A NEW WAVE

**A whole new generation is turning out to hear replays of Sixties anthems. Says Mike Love, "We're inseparable from the white middle-class karma"**

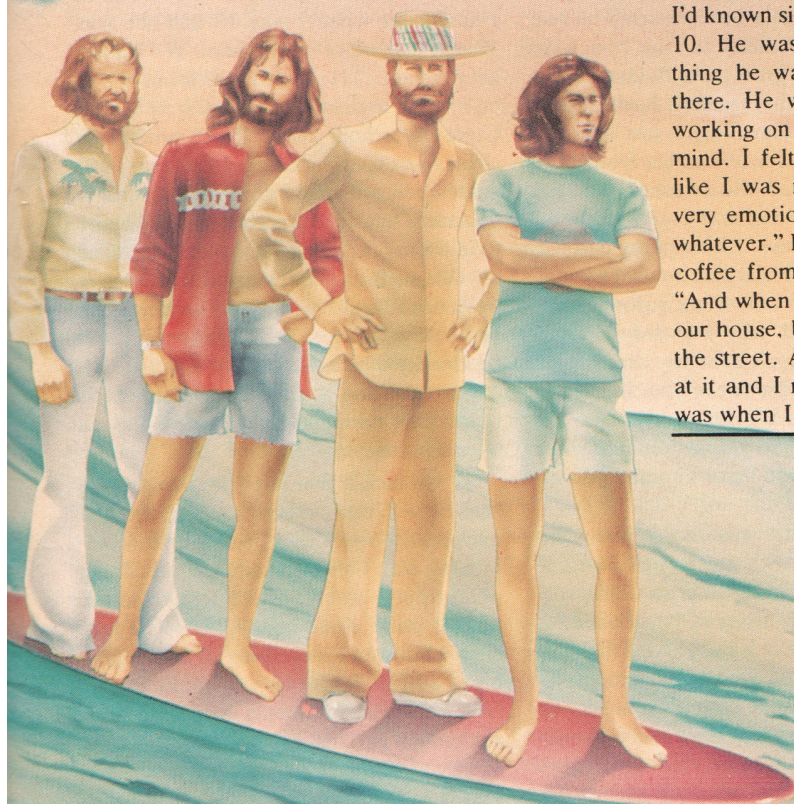
**By Neal Gabler**

On a small charter jet, Carl Wilson of the Beach Boys sits down next to me and hunches forward slightly to be heard over the thick hum of the engines. In the dim, yellowish plane light, he looks almost ethereal. "I've been thinking about the last time I went back to my old neighborhood in Hawthorne, California," he says softly. "I had this fantastic feeling. It seemed like such a big world when I was growing up. And now when I go back there it's just like... really small, you know. My car was too big to drive down the street. And then I saw a friend that I'd known since I was probably 9 or 10. He was still doing the same thing he was doing when I lived there. He was still in the garage working on a car. And it blew my mind. I felt—I was overwhelmed, like I was really going to have a very emotional experience, cry or whatever." He pauses to suck some coffee from a thin porcelain cup. "And when I was there I looked at our house, because he lived across the street. And I was looking over at it and I remembered the way it was when I grew up in it. And then

after I moved away, my dad—you know we all had a lot of money and all that stuff—rebuilt it and it looked really different from all the other places. It had a lot of big tropical trees. It was really a mind-blower." He rolls his eyes away and tilts his head back again. "I think I just wanted to hang on to what was, and yet, by looking at it, I got to see the distance we've been since I was 12 or 13. Now we are flying on this crazy thing. I think it's incredible."

What is really incredible is not how far the Beach Boys have come, but how long they've managed to stay there. In the fragile ego-world of rock, where groups last as long as mayflies, the Beach Boys have remained intact for 15 years, practically an eon in their business.

Now, after nearly a decade of obscurity, the group has triumphed, beaten the cultural rap and become more popular than ever. "Good Vibrations"? Absolutely. Today, the Beach Boys represent the unchallenged kings of the 1970s rock 'n roll revival. Last July, during a smashing tour, the group set a record for the highest single-







The way they were: the Beach Boys toward the end of their first peak in 1966. L. to R.: Mike Love, Brian Wilson and Carl Wilson. Bottom: Al Jardine and Dennis Wilson.

grossing concert ever. Three of their albums—full of early Sixties hits—made *Billboard's* top 150 in 1975, and wherever the group plays, it is to sellout halls, at a \$25,000 minimum. Twyla Tharp has written two ballets to their music, a concert with the Joffrey Ballet is being planned and Susan Ford has talked of inviting them to the White House. Investigators even found one of the Beach Boys' albums in Patty Hearst's otherwise explosive cache.

"Of course," smiles lead singer Mike Love. "She was a white kid growing up in America. If she didn't have the Beach Boys, then I'd have to say she was missing something."

Something a lot of people apparently want back again.

The main reason the Beach Boys have survived is that they are a family: the three Wilson brothers (Brian, who is 33, Dennis, who is 31, and Carl, who is 29); their cousin, Mike Love; and their high school chum, Alan Jardine. "I slept in the same room with Carl and Brian all my life," explains Dennis. "I've known Michael all my life. Alan all the way through school. We've done everything together. Shit, eat, fart, cry, laugh. Everything." Each member will tell you that there have been enormous tensions; it's not always smooth. "But even though they might do something outrageous,"

says Mike, "something that would break up another group, or cause a huge fight, the end result is that he's your cousin or your brother, and you've been through a lot of stuff together, and you love him."

Because they've been together so long, they have a history now, a cultural record. The Beach Boys are recounting that history while lazing in an exclusive Chicago hotel before a concert. The record begins, needless to say, back in California. Love grew up in Baldwin Hills. The Wilson brothers and Al Jardine grew up in suburban Hawthorne, just south of Los Angeles and a few miles from both Baldwin Hills and the beaches that rim the ocean. "We had a shitty childhood," Dennis Wilson says. "I mean my dad was a tyrant. He used to whale on us, physically beat the crap out of us. I don't know kids who got it like we did. His big number was, 'Don't ever lie. And if you lie, I'll beat the shit out of you. But if you go outside when it's raining, I'll beat the shit out of you!' So you go outside when it's raining and you lie to him and you get hit twice."

"I thought it was insane. But when we did anything with music, he'd just. . ." Dennis starts bawling like an ailing foghorn and rubbing his eyes. "I. . . Gawwwd! It's beautiful." Like a baby. And that was so real to see your father go through an experience, a change over your music. So we'd been singing since we were babies. We got off on the idea that three guys could sing harmony."

Wilson has long, wild hair parted

down the middle and a full beard, and he looks like a radical from the mid-Sixties plopped down in the middle of splendor. Though he detests the label, he has gotten the reputation over the years as the wild Beach Boy, largely because Charles Manson lived with him for a short time before the Tate murders ("There's some things I don't talk about. It's kind of a shame. One day in a book maybe") and because he is the protagonist of the surfing legend. Back in 1961, as the story goes, Dennis came home from a hard day of surfing and asked brother Brian to write a song about it. "Surfin'" sprung full-blown from Brian's head. Their father, Murry Wilson, a businessman and frustrated musician, peddled the song at various record companies, until Candix bought it and dubbed the group the Beach Boys. "Surfin'" was a hit, Capitol Records signed and promoted the group and the rest is history—theirs and ours.

"Before the group, I was in the oil business for a while. Gas and oil, check the tires." In his room, as he talks, Mike Love stretches his long body over two chairs. His brother Stan was a professional basketball player in both the NBA and ABA, and the resemblance is obvious. At 34, he is the oldest Beach Boy, and his red hair is thinning, but he has a way of crinkling his face into a smile and gulping for laughter that makes him look 14, even with his red beard. "I was a sheet-metal apprentice at my father's factory too. I was married. I married a cheerleader when I was 20 and she was 18 and just out of high school. We had to get married." He traces quotation marks in the air and laughs. "Which is in the Great American Way. That's where we glean our experiences. So I had two jobs. And when we made this record and it became a hit, the decision had to be made to leave my father's firm. I can remember my dad saying, 'Well, what if this doesn't work out?' And I said, 'So if it doesn't I'll be back scraping shit off of metal.' I had no idea we'd be as successful as we are today for as long a time. But I thought it was worth taking off a year. So far it's been a pretty long year."

In fact, a year later the Beach Boys had turned out several hit records and had nearly every teen in America communing with California and hyperbolizing pond ripples into waves. "Surfing was the hottest craze since candy," says Dennis. "Everybody had something to do with being a surfer. I mean, you could not go anywhere without seeing woodies. I can remember as kids driving to the beach. We lived like five miles away, and there was a hill. There are always little hills before you get to the ocean. And I can

*Neal Gabler is a graduate student in film at the University of Michigan. This is his first piece for a national magazine.*



The result was a long string of hits and greater record sales than any other American group before or since. They were primitives, and their music was bathed in sentiment and sentimentality, but the sentimentality was credible because their fans had felt the same things and in the same ridiculously simple terms. That's why the Beach Boys could reify in their music a zillion wavering signals of American pop culture, while other, less naive, rock stars were out swiping T.S. Eliot's hubcaps. "When you're growing up, 17 or 18 years old, and you were going to the high school prom, and your dad gives you the keys to the car, gives you money to buy a corsage, gives you some more money to take the girl out after the date," says Mike Love, "how the fuck are you going to sit there and say on the other hand, 'OOOOOOO-weeeeeeee! My baby's left me and what a drag,' and all that shit? Aspersions have been cast on our musical and lyrical integrity because we haven't been intellectual enough. Well, how the

Though a lot of teens might have denied it, the Beach Boys were maturing too. And they were concerned. They played benefits for the antiwar movement, and Carl fought through the courts for six years as a conscientious objector. Musically, the *Pet Sounds* album (1966), which includes "God Only Knows" and "Wouldn't It Be Nice," was pivotal. "A lot of people say *Sgt. Pepper* was the first concept album," says Carl, who acknowledges his respect for the Beatles. "But the truth is that *Pet Sounds* was really the first. It was thematic musically." On the album there was no mention of surf or

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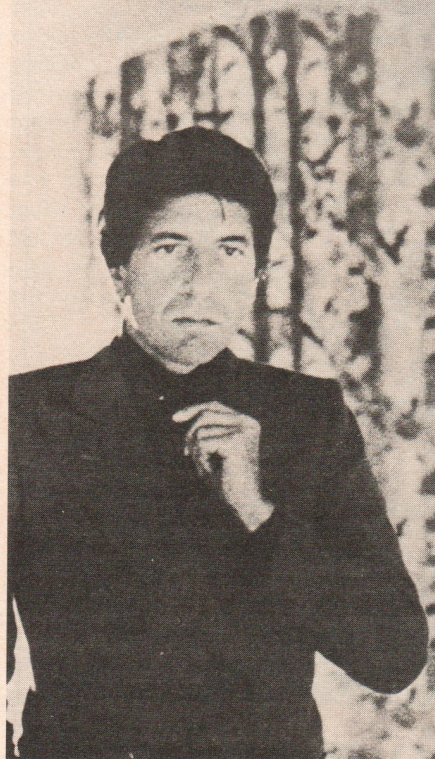
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an entire industry with the song structures he used, the bass lines he wrote, the arrangements he concocted and the independence he sought. But he was also shy to the point of being reclusive, insecure to the point of being neurotic, and that caused dissension and pain. Brian hasn't toured for a decade, preferring instead to concentrate on the music, and several breakdowns later he is no longer the "omnipresent, omnipotent dictator," in the respectful words of one Beach Boy. The rest of the group had to surface with their own musical expressions, and Brian became an elder statesman and collaborator, padding around his house like an exile, jamming occasionally with his friend Paul McCartney and constantly writing music, most of which he would never allow to be released. Brian is still a recluse; he doesn't travel, but the rest of the group have gradually come to terms with their problems.

TM was largely responsible. Carl shakes his head and grimaces without moving a facial muscle: "I've had the thought that had it not been for TM, I would have really had a hard time coping with all the pressures." The Beach Boys first met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the giggly main franchiser of transcendental meditation, in Paris at a worldwide TV hookup for UNICEF. It was 1967. Maharishi was sitting in the audience wrapped in his white robe watching Ravi Shankar rehearse. "I shook his hand and he goes—" Dennis makes a face like a Buddha. "And all of a sudden I felt this weirdness, this presence this guy had. Like out of left field. 'Live your life to the fullest.' First thing he ever said to me. So the next day I went over to his room, and he said, 'Tell me some words of your songs.' So we told him the lyrics to 'God Only Knows,' and he goes, 'That's the sun rising and the stars and the planets and it connects with. . . .' " Dennis scratches his beard wisely. "So I said, 'God this is great!' And he said, 'We'd like to initiate you into the program.' I said, 'What does that mean? How much?' And he said, 'We'll just do it to you tomorrow morning.' So I called Michael and all the guys in London. 'C'mon down here to Paris. We're all gonna meditate.' And then I got my mantra, and as Maharishi was giving them to us he says, 'What do you want?' I say, 'I want everything. Everything.' And he laughed and we meditated together. It was so wild."

Maharishi prophesied that if they continued to meditate, they would become the most influential group in the world. (He told the Beatles that if *they* continued to meditate, they would stay together.) The Beach Boys meditated



hard. A few months after the Paris meeting, Mike Love took off for India to study with Maharishi, and both he and Al Jardine became teachers of TM. Then they planned a worldwide tour to introduce Maharishi to colleges and universities. But that was before TM became the chic way to raise consciousness, and few things *seemed* more incongruous (actually TM was a natural development from the early beach and fun philosophy, a spiritual counterpart) than our collective troubadour climbing out of a dune buggy to scale the Himalayas and meditate. The tour was booked into large halls, the small audiences were discourteous and the Beach Boys were forced to abort the project after two shows.

Only the last few TM-crazed years have vindicated them. In fact, one might even detect a cultural correlation between TM's popularity and that of the Beach Boys. Rick Nelson (not the singer) was West Coast coordinator for Students International Meditation Society when he met Mike Love and Al Jardine at a TM center in 1972. Mike invited him to dinner; he went to work as the group's sound man and was finally promoted to road manager. So for the last three years Nelson has seen every Beach Boys concert, which means he has seen the group over 250 times. "When I first started out with them, we were doing a lot of college gymnasiums, and since then we've started doing large, outdoor sellouts. No one can really say what's caused that, but my own personal theory is that the show is totally happy. I've never seen a down show. Night after night, it's up, up, up. The music is a positive, creative force (TM words). And people are ready for that these days. People need it or enjoy it or are looking for it."

At their recent concerts, the Beach Boys haven't played any new material (they have been working on an album for three years), but there is none of the old frustration that used to sour the shows. "I think we totally jumped out of the entrapment," says Carl. "I think it happened maybe a year or two ago when we stopped resisting our past and having people enjoy our older stuff." Mike Love concurs. "You never get tired of it. You see what those songs can do to an audience. It's fun and it's totally relevant. That's why we'll always have a public. There's no time limit now. We're like the Mills Brothers. A couple of them may die, they may change, but they've still got the sound." Dennis is even more sanguine. "I can tell you the day the Beach Boys will no longer exist." When? "Never. They'll be on stage in wheelchairs."

The way things are going for them,

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY NICHAMIN BOOM GRAPHICS



The Beach Boys and supporting cast on tour last summer: The old hits are performed with new energy, and every night is up, up, up.

he may be right. There is a new generation of teens weaned on Nixon and glitter rock and without any positive, satisfying youth experience to cherish and stamp as their own. "I notice that our audience gets younger and younger," says Carl. "Four years ago we would play Carnegie Hall and schools, and we'd have a totally student audience. Last spring we played the Anaheim baseball park, and it blew Brian's mind to see 12-year-old people experiencing his music as new." For that

**Maharishi Mahesh Yogi prophesied that if the Beach Boys meditated, they would become the most influential group in the world. He told the Beatles that if they continued to meditate, they would stay together**

generation, the Beach Boys' music transports them back to the early Sixties, when people did go to the prom and scamper on the beach. It's manufactured nostalgia, by the audience rather than the Beach Boys—but it works and you can't knock it. The new Beach Boys fans may not be able to celebrate the good times and the good things they have; there's been too much innocence lost for that. But they can celebrate instead an attitude they don't have toward these things: they can romanticize the romanticization of things, and assuage their middle-class

guilt at having too much. Through the Beach Boys they can plug in to the legendary innocence of the early Sixties. In a sense, then, the Beach Boys are doing in music what Gerald Ford was supposed to do in politics. They represent a kind of wholesome virtue, and they stand in roughly the same relationship to Alice Cooper or the Rolling Stones that Ford once stood to Nixon. "I just think there's a lot of agreement," explains Carl, "that we're one of the real things."

But Mike Love has his own theory, and it sets the Beach Boys in some final perspective. "They're all digging the Beach Boys," Love explains. "And there's only one reason for that. It's not because the music is abstract or intellectual or the blues or anything like that. It is because it has reencapsulated the same things that honestly and really identify with all kids growing up in a certain socioeconomic strata, and our experiences are indigenous to that." Love's long fingers flit through the air underscoring his point. "The Beach Boys are very much products of our society, and we're inseparable from the white, middle-class karma. And that's why I think a hundred years from now people will listen to the Beach Boys' music, and they won't be listening to a lot of other groups. They'll study it the same way they study classical music, Beethoven or someone like that. And 'Fun, Fun, Fun'—a guy will sit up there and show a hologram of somebody running through an A & W stand in a Thunderbird, or maybe *American Graffiti*. And he'll explain to them: 'This is what it was all like.'"