

Brian Wilson made a mark on my generation

Wilson strummed the faces of millions of like-minded listeners dealing with loneliness, loss or lack of direction.

By [David McGrath](#)

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Brian Wilson is photographed at the console in his recording studio inside his St. Charles home in 1998.
Richard A. Chapman/Sun-Times

Around 10 years younger than the Beach Boys, I grew up listening to their music.

As if I had a choice!

It was everywhere. Every house, every car, every weekend cookout. The mall speakers at Evergreen Plaza. Movie soundtracks at the Double Drive-in Theater.

The low-octane, high-octave harmonies rained down all over. Like a sun shower — I wish I could say. Instead, it was more like pollen. The never-ending replays actually gave me a headache.

Sports cars and “woodies.” Surf boards. French bikinis. Pretty surfer girls with “bushy blonde hairdos.” Tanned handsome boys kissing “Hawaiian dolls” on beach blankets. California culture of youth, beauty, privilege, sexual ease. But I was born in Chicago.

I was raised on the South Side at 54th and Winchester, where the sunlight seldom, if ever, “played upon my hair.”

My father and mother both worked at Goldblatts, and the year I got my Social Security card, I landed my first job as a janitor at Montgomery Wards. No T-birds. No little deuce coupes or giddy-up 409 muscle cars. No “surfin’ safaris” to Waimea Bay.

No one I knew at the city college I attended went to Aruba, Jamaica, or Kokomo for spring break. After school, we reported to work, took the CTA bus home, then shoveled the snow.

And I had yet to find one of those Northern girls the Beach Boys sang about, who “keep their boyfriends warm at night.”

Then one winter day when we had freezing rain, I heard a song that touched my heart, with minor chords creating a soundtrack of longing, loss and sadness, “Oh Caroline, No” bewailed the end of a love affair, the speaker drenched in sadness “to watch a sweet thing die.”

Finally, an artist who felt our pain!

My former classmate and good friend who now lives in New York said he first heard “Caroline” while sitting in an Army service club in Fort Polk, Louisiana, before shipping out to Vietnam and shortly after receiving a Dear John letter.

“My young life was in ruins,” he told me. But listening to the song over and over, knowing another had the same soul-crushing experience, helped him come to terms with it.

Meanwhile, I was surprised to learn that the artist who wrote the song was Brian Wilson, lyricist, bassist and front man for the Beach Boys and for their previous decade of confection, who had transitioned from sugary fantasy to heart-rending reality with the release of their album “Pet Sounds.”

Reflecting on his own feelings of inadequacy and depression in tracks like, “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times,” and “You Still Believe in Me,” Wilson strummed the faces of millions of like-minded listeners dealing with loneliness, loss or lack of direction.

The album was transformational, a kind of validating perception of people’s quiet desperation. He sees us, I felt at the time. And the shared experience was intensified by the music’s cathartic instrumental accompaniment of harpsichord, piccolo and clarinet.

Among the album’s most popular tracks, the addictively rhythmic “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” was an ironic acknowledgment not just of one person’s unrequited love, but of all of our dreams deferred.

While my favorite number, “Sloop John B,” was a metaphor for life’s paradox: a jaunty, joyful sea shanty that comes to a sobering end with the verse: “I feel so broke up, I wanna go home.”

The album’s mega hit single, “God Only Knows,” with its lilting melody and aching plaintive refrain, is tinged with the fear of a monumental love disappearing. It’s the album’s one song that Paul McCartney says brought him to tears.

Wilson, whose midlife struggle with drugs and mental illness has been well chronicled, died on June 11 at age 82. I and millions of others will never forget how he applied his genius to enhance an entire generation’s quality of life with unique and sensually delightful music and a more honest understanding of who we are.

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