

BRIAN WILSON'S "POCKET SYMPHONY"

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Composer and producer Brian Wilson had worked hard on the Beach Boys' "Pet Sounds" album, but he still had a tune in his head that he wanted out. Even at great expense.

Recorded over seven months at six different Los Angeles studios by dozens of musicians, "Good Vibrations" first appeared on Billboard's Hot 100 on Oct. 22, 1966 — 60 years ago.

Today "Good Vibrations" is regarded as one of the best and most influential single pop songs ever recorded.

FIRST, THE TRACK ...

By the end of 1965, Brian Wilson was growing out of his surf-and-cars song phase and was creating more introspective music. The Beatles released "Rubber Soul" in December 1965. Brian felt challenged to create a great album as well, so he began work on what would become his masterpiece, "Pet Sounds."

One track Brian couldn't quite make work for that album was one he called "Good Vibrations." Brian had long been obsessed with the idea of "vibrations."

"My mother used to tell me about vibrations," Wilson told Rolling Stone. "I didn't really understand too much of what she meant when I was a boy. It scared me, the word 'vibrations' — to think that invisible feelings existed. She also told me about dogs that would bark at some people, but wouldn't bark at others, and so it came to pass that we talked about good vibrations."

Wilson didn't have a clear idea just where he wanted this song to go. He'd record a bit, take a break to focus on other songs and then return to it days or weeks later.



At one point, Brian gave a copy of "Good Vibrations" to Capitol Records to release but then changed his mind the next day and took it back. At another point, he despaired of finishing the song and offered it to his friend Danny Hutton, telling Hutton it might be right for him. The next year, Hutton would found Three Dog Night.

After "Pet Sounds" was released, Brian returned to "Good Vibrations." He bounced from studio to studio with the studio musicians he used to play the backing tracks to his music — the same ones Phil Spector used, that called themselves "the Wrecking Crew" — and would sometimes keep them for just 10 minutes. Other times, he'd keep them nearly all night.

Brian used cellos on "Good Vibrations" but he wanted to contrast that with an otherworldly sound to match the eerie feeling he had of invisible vibrations. He settled on an instrument called the theremin, which is often used in horror or science fiction movies.

He couldn't locate an actual theremin, but he did come across an inventor named Paul Tanner, who had played trombone for Glenn Miller in the 1930s and 1940s. Tanner had developed an electronic device that would make a high-pitched whine when you placed your hand over it. By moving your hand up and down the device, you could change the sound.

"'Good Vibrations' required twenty-two sessions," Brian's cousin and fellow Beach Boy, Mike Love, wrote in his 2016 autobiography, "and the cost has been estimated at $10,000 to $50,000." ($103,389 to $516,944 in 2026 dollars).

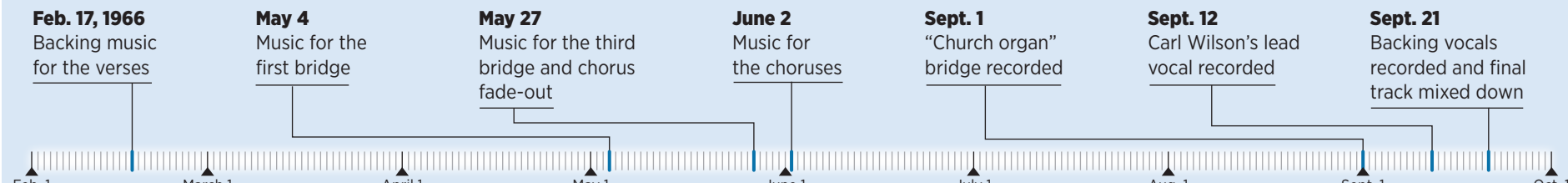
"I doubt Brian had any idea about the cost," Love wrote, "nor did he care."

LIKE A JIGSAW PUZZLE

Wilson brought his team of studio musicians in for multiple sessions over 1966 to work on what would become "Good Vibrations."

Among the members of the "Wrecking Crew" who participated in those sessions were guitarist Glen Campbell, drummer Hal Blaine and bass guitar player Carol Kaye.

While much of those sessions — up to 70 hours, reportedly — were discarded, here's when the actual parts that made up the final recording were laid down.



... AND THEN, THE WORDS

When Wilson first came up with the idea of "Good Vibrations," he was in the middle of working on his "Pet Sounds" album. He asked Tony Asher, the lyricist he had hired to collaborate with him on that project, to take a crack at writing "Good Vibrations."

"He wanted to call the song 'Good Vibes,' " Asher told NPR. "And I remember when he began to play this little riff, which he said he had been working on. He was saying something like, you know, 'Good, good vibes, I get good vibes,' or something like that.

"I kept saying to him, 'You know, it really ought to be vibrations.' And he said, 'Yeah, but that's not what people say.' "

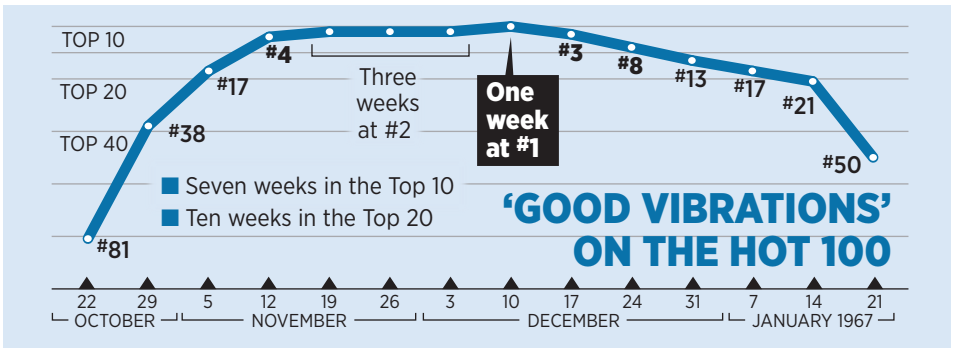
When it came time to record the vocals, Brian turned to his usual collaborator, his cousin and lead singer of the Beach Boys, Mike Love.

"I didn't have much time, as Brian kept making changes on the track until he gave it to me," Love wrote. "I also tend to procrastinate. As a result, I hadn't written anything until the day that we were supposed to record the vocals."

Love drove to the session with his wife in the passenger seat. He put in a tape of the song, handed his wife a note pad and began the drive up Highway 101.



The Beach Boys on Zuma Beach in 1967. From left: Lead guitarist Carl Wilson, guitarist Alan Jardine, Brian Wilson, Mike Love, and drummer Dennis Wilson.



"I needed words that conformed to the tempo as well as the concept of 'vibrations,' and I thought they needed to be something that our fans could connect to." he wrote. "And what's easier to connect to than boy-girl?"

Over the 20 minute ride, Love composed what he called the "poem" and his wife wrote it down. When he walked into the studio on Sunset Boulevard, he handed the note pad to Brian.

Brian had intended for his brother and the Beach Boys' drummer, Dennis Wilson, to sing lead on "Good Vibrations." But when the day rolled around, Dennis was suffering from laryngitis. Brian asked his other brother, lead guitarist Carl, to step up.

"In the vocal sessions, Brian demanded not only the right note but the right timbre, until all four parts blended together," Love wrote. "Seeking extra texture, we did twenty-five to thirty overdubs for one section that was no longer than five seconds long."

Love wrote that Brian surprised him by cutting off a couple of words completing a rhyme on one verse:

"Close my eyes, she's somehow closer now/Softly smile, I know she must be kind/When I look in her eyes, she goes with me to a blossom world we find."

"I can't argue with ending on 'blossom world,' " Love wrote, "evoking the peace movement that was gaining steam while suggesting the euphoria of being in love."

Sources: "The Beach Boys and the California Myth" by David Leaf, "Catch a Wave: The Rise, Fall & Redemption of the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson" by Peter Ames Carlin, "Heroes and Villains: The True Story of the Beach Boys" by Steven Gaines, "Good Vibrations: My Life as a Beach Boy" by Mike Love with James S. Hirsch, "Inside the Music of Brian Wilson" by Philip Lambert, "Add Some Music to Your Day: Analyzing and Enjoying the Music of the Beach Boys" edited by Don Cunningham and Jeff Bleiel, "Origins of a Song: 202 True Inspirations Behind the World's Greatest Lyrics" by Jake Grogan, SongFacts, American Songwriter, Billboard, NPR's "All Things Considered," Roli.com, Bibliolore.org, Elpee.jp

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