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Media Analysis of *The Beach Boys Today!*

The Beach Boys were a popular recording group that capitalized on the emerging youth market in the 1960s with songs that celebrated teenage romance and frolicsome exaltations in the sun. The early part of the decade was a time of relative peace and economic prosperity and, in America, the youth culture was seeking new outlets for entertainment and creative expressions that reflected this newly liberated attitude. As historian Russel B. Nye writes, “This mass society had leisure time, money, and cultural unity; it needed a new art—neither folk nor elite—to instruct and entertain it” (qtd. in Silverblatt 93). By tapping into the motifs of West Coast surf culture, the Beach Boys were able to build a profitable catalogue of record releases that hinged on the idea that they were a hip, socially liberated group. At the height of their popularity in 1965, the group released the critically lauded and commercially successful album *The Beach Boys Today!* on Capitol Records (now a wholly-owned subsidiary of EMI). However, although *The Beach Boys Today!* was both marketed to and a reflection of progressive youth culture in the mid-1960s, it also served to reinforce traditional gender roles in which women are expected to remain steadfast and faithful to their partner, while men are free to dance and flirt with any partner they choose.

As Silverblatt notes in *Media Literacy*, “The *title* of a media presentation often encapsulates the essential meaning of the media presentation” (135). In the instance of *The Beach Boys Today!* there’s a great deal we can learn about the album’s meaning just by

investigating the title and cover art. The band name, *The Beach Boys*, connotes youthful exuberance and an infatuation with surf culture, while the exclamatory *Today!* tacked onto the end of the title suggests that this music is hip and contemporary. (Even today, Top 40 radio hits are repackaged and sold to the youth market in compilations branded *Now That's What I Call Music!* in order to appeal to the consumer who doesn't want to get stuck listening to yesteryear's tunes.) To really drive the point home of the band's hipness, the cover photograph shows the five Beach Boys posing poolside—smiling, suntanned and wearing fashionable V-neck sweaters, they're the epitome of West Coast cool.

By this point in their career, the Beach Boys had become a recognizable brand. *Today!* was their eighth studio album since the band formed in 1962, and it was the first of three albums they would release in 1965. While their manifest reason for creating music was to entertain, the latent function behind their constant touring and recording in the early- to mid-1960s was economic: music is a business, and writing new hit singles is the only guarantee of achieving financial success. “Popular artists discovered that they could make a living by attracting a mass audience that would patronize their art,” writes Silverblatt. “In this sense, popular art became a consumer product, not unlike a pair of shoes or a new rug” (93). The Beach Boys had already released several charting singles up to this point—“Surfin' USA,” “Catch a Wave” and “Little Deuce Coupe,” to name a few—and in effect they had carved out a formulaic niche for their continued popularity. Their signature sound borrowed the tremolo-tinged guitars and fast-pattering drums of '60s surf music, the lush four-part harmonies of doo-wop groups, and the melodic deftness of famous Brill Building songwriters like Ellie Greenwich or Doc Pomus.

*Today!* consists of 12 tracks, six to each side of the record, all roughly falling within the preferred radio timeframe of 2:00 to 3:00 minutes. The A-side of the vinyl record opens with a

cover of Bobby Freeman's 1958 hit "Do You Wanna Dance?" that the Beach Boys issued as a single to coincide with the album's release. The A-side also included two other songs that had been released as singles the previous year, "When I Grow Up (To Be a Man)" and "Dance, Dance, Dance." Interestingly, the only song from this album to reach the #1 spot on the U.S. charts was not intended to be a single at all: "Help Me, Rhonda" was the longest song on the album, with several fade-ins and fade-outs that stretched the track's running time to 3:06. When it became evident that radio DJs across the country were playing the song, the band quickly headed back into the studio to re-record the track, eliminate the fake fade-out/fade-in ending, add a guitar solo and an "h" to Rhonda's name, and trim 20 seconds off the total length of the song to make it more amenable to airplay ("Help Me, Rhonda"). Although "Help Me, Rhonda" is a very entertaining song, the Beach Boys' last-minute revisions to the song demonstrate all the acumen of keen business strategists responding to real-time changes in media messaging.

While the A-side of *Today!* is frontloaded with up-tempo hits, the B-side consists of slower, more introspective ballads. Brian Wilson, the group's producer and primary songwriter, used the platform to experiment with more baroque arrangements, incorporating vibraphones, timpani, timbales, autoharp, French horns, baritone saxophones and other orchestral instrumentation into the Beach Boys' pop sound. It's interesting to note the stylistic demarcation of the jubilant A-side and melancholic B-side to *Today!* The history of pop music up to this point has been primarily driven by singles and 45s; the album format was essentially a long-playing collection of random songs that were recorded around the same time. The decision to treat the long-playing album as a unique artistic format, in which creative statements can be made across a *group* of songs as opposed to discrete song units, was a fairly novel concept at the time. The Beach Boys would stretch this idea to their artistic apex a year later with the album *Pet Sounds*

(the Beach Boys' creative rivals, the Beatles, would respond in kind in 1967 with *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and together these two records are heralded by critics as a turning point where musicians strove to create great, coherent *albums* as opposed to just hit-or-miss singles). In Silverblatt's terms, the singles-driven radio format was just entering its "mature" phase, while the concept of the LP as a coherent piece of work was just entering the "popular" phase (78-82). In light of this development, it's worth pointing out that at the time *Today!* was made, Brian Wilson had temporarily retired from the stage to focus exclusively on writing in the studio.

The worldview expressed in *The Beach Boys Today!* is what Silverblatt might term the "romantic ideal" (108), echoing sentiments of love and beauty, and the idea that good behavior is always rewarded in the end. Even the *Today!* of the title suggests a cavalier *carpe diem* attitude to taking on the world. But underneath this surface romanticism, several of these songs contain messages that effectively serve to reinforce behavioral norms. Fidelity and commitment are two issues that come up repeatedly on *Today!* For example, "I'm So Young" and "In the Back of My Mind" both have protagonists who are fearful of settling down with their partner. "Good to My Baby" and "She Knows Me Too Well" acknowledge anxiety over losing one's partner to an interloper, and in the latter example, singer Brian Wilson acknowledges a double-standard on the fidelity issue between his girlfriend and himself, "I get so jealous of the other guy, and then I'm not happy 'til I make her break down and cry / When I look at the girls it must kill her inside, but it'd be another story if she looked at the guys." The album's breakout hit, "Help Me, Ronda," deals with someone whose bride-to-be left to be with another man, and the only thing that could make him whole again would be to fall into the loving arms of Ronda—the subtext being that the gravest transgression in the social code occurs when a woman is unfaithful to a man. One song in

particular, “Don’t Hurt My Little Sister,” goes as far as to provide direct instructions to “you,” the listener, on how to properly treat the singer’s sister so that she doesn’t cry again (hint: you “treat her nice”). While the lyrics can be trite and repetitive, they function as cultural transmitters of acceptable behavior in a language that anyone can understand. Additionally, with every song sung from the first person perspective, it makes it easier for the listener to identify with the message being delivered.

*The Beach Boys Today!* is a celebration of American youth culture. It’s a vibrant album filled with references to cars, girls, rock & roll radio, and dancing (remarkably, no mention of surfing is made in this album; this is one even their landlocked fans can identify with). In some sense, the buoyancy of the music and the album’s preoccupation with being young and in love is a reflection of American prosperity in the decades following World War II. However, this fortified optimism may also have been a projected ideal, an escapist fantasy, rather than an accurate reading of the current sociopolitical temperature—the Cold War was in full effect, and President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated less than two years earlier, clearly there was some general anxiety about what the future may hold. The single “When I Grow Up (To Be a Man)” deals with some of these fears about the future, however obliquely. Lead vocalist Mike Love lists off his fears about growing up (“Will I settle down fast or will I first wanna travel the world?”; “Will my kids be proud or think their old man is really a square?”), meanwhile, in the background, the remaining Beach Boys are counting off the years from age 14 to 32, until the song fades out. “Now I’m young and free,” goes the song’s chorus, “but how will it be when I grow up to be a man?”

The album’s twin recurrent themes—a fear of settling down on the one hand, and a celebration of casual dalliances with members of the opposite sex on the other—may be seen by

some as a precursor to the breakdown of social mores leading to the “sexual revolution” later in the decade. However, the freedom that results from the unencumbered life of leisure celebrated by the Beach Boys on these songs is a privilege enjoyed primarily by educated, socioeconomically stable men. Time and again, it is the men who are free to cut loose after a hard day at school and pick a dance partner of their choosing, while the women are implicitly scolded for the mere thought of being anything less than devout to their male counterpart. In many respects, the endless summer fantasy of the Beach Boys represents a longing to be stuck in a perpetual adolescence.

Works Cited

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