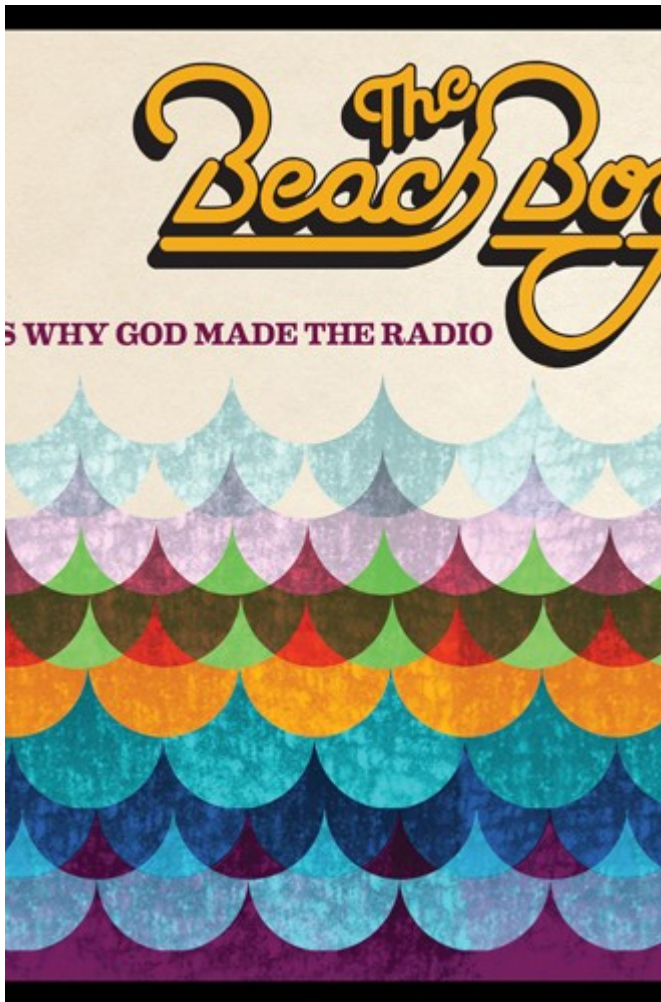


That's Why God Made the Radio, by The Beach Boys

reviewed by [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue

In Review



That's Why God Made the Radio

by The Beach Boys
Brother/Capitol

In 1966, the Beach Boys made waves by using *God* in a song title. "God Only Knows" became one of popular music's most heralded singles, marking a huge growth spurt for a band previously known for celebrating cars, girls and surf.

Now the surviving original members—Brian Wilson, Mike Love and Al Jardine—have reunited to mark the band’s 50th anniversary, this time invoking the Almighty in their album title. But projects like this raise inevitable fears about whether there’s any musical point. One hopes the group that inspired the Beatles to make *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* might still have something powerful to impart. Another round of songs about surf and sun—by men in their late sixties—could constitute a mawkish ode to arrested development, one with all the subtlety of a neon-blue Hawaiian shirt.

Some of the new album’s moments are indeed worthy of a surfboard-sized cringe. “The Private Life of Bill and Sue” takes a stab at lyrical depth (an apparent ode to gossip-rag, reality TV culture), but its bongo-laden, too breezy soundtrack invokes visions of a lounge band on a cruise ship. Likewise, “Beaches in Mind” wades through familiar surf. Even its lush harmonies can’t save it from sounding like an original by a Beach Boys cover band in Branson, Missouri.

But when *Radio* works, it dials in the group’s age of innocence, filtered through years of experience. “Strange World” shows Wilson in fine vocal form—the best he’s sounded in some time—singing about the passersby he sees on Santa Monica Pier: “It’s a strange world, there’s nothing to it / A strange world, I’m getting through it.” The refrain ends with “It’s a strange world after all,” a cheeky play on Disney’s “It’s a Small World (After All).” (Some 50 years earlier, “Surfer Girl” was Wilson’s take on the Disney song “When You Wish Upon a Star.”)

But it’s the closing trilogy that makes the album soar and sing beyond all expectations. “From There to Back Again” casts a spell with its gentle harmonies and images of surf washing up to the doorstep; it melts into “Pacific Coast Highway,” a musical road trip in which Wilson sings: “Sometimes I realize my days are getting long / Sometimes I realize it’s time to move along / And I want to go home.”

It’s a poignant setup for a song with a title that would have been unthinkable in the 1960s: “Summer’s Gone.” The track opens with swirling organ and bells that seem stripped from “California Girls,” setting up a mournful, down-tempo track that evokes a stroll on an empty boardwalk the day after Labor Day: “Summer’s gone, gone like yesterday / The nights grow cold, it’s time to go.” A meditation on mortality as much as on the end of an endless summer, it’s an album closer that could well serve as the group’s coda. If so, the Beach Boys sound a note of authenticity instead of blunt nostalgia, leaving us with a lingering sadness that’s

somehow sweet. Summer may be gone, but its afterglow lingers on.