

BEACH BOYS' BRIAN WILSON, AS TEEN, SERENADES FRESHMEN

by Mike McCoy, FFS Wisconsin Rep

Many Four Freshmen fans already are aware of the repeated credit Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys has given to the Four Freshmen for the influences that group had on him as he grew up and, by extension, on the sound of the Beach Boys.

What I didn't know until this year was one of the earliest manifestations of that respect. It came while Brian was still a teenager, experimenting with music and harmonies in his home and in his garage and likely a couple of years before the Beach Boys sang for the first time together and produced their first album.

It was about 1960 in the Los Angeles suburb of Hawthorne, where the Wilson family lived. According to one account, "countless hours already had been spent around the family's Hammond, with big brother Brian teaching (brother) Carl, (mother) Audree and (father) Murry the intricate harmonies he'd learned from his favorite vocal group, "The Four Freshmen."

"When he was a teenager Brian got a reel-to-reel tape recorder and he began to use this new tool to experiment with harmonies, even employing a primitive 'multitracking' technique using a second tape recorder to overdub his own vocals."

It was a unique fusion that Wilson had been tinkering with in the family garage where, inspired by The Four Freshmen and their complex vocal blends, and armed with a multitrack tape recorder, he'd spent hours exploring the intricacies of harmony and melody. By overlapping his own dynamic voice (which peaked in a soaring falsetto) and various instruments, he could create the effect of a full group."

Using that taping equipment, he recorded himself singing all the parts on his own tribute to "the wonderful sound of The Four Freshmen" - in a number he simply called "Happy Birthday, Four Freshmen." It's to the tune we all know, and ran just under a minute.

I didn't know it existed, or was available to fans, until I stumbled across the two-CD set entitled "The Beach Boys: Hawthorne, CA, Birthplace of a Musical Legacy." In the bins at Borders one May day, I found it as the fourth track on Disc One (out of 57 tracks on both CD's). It turned out it had been released in May 2001, but I missed that announcement and had overlooked the CD since in my previous store visits.

Notes in the CD liner - the source of the quotes which appear above except for the "unique fusion" section - add that, on the Happy Birthday number "the sound quality is a bit rough, but on this fragment of tape we can hear Brian's talent beginning to emerge on his own tribute to the wonderful sound of The Four Freshmen."

(Brian also is quoted in the liner notes, saying: "The Four Freshmen were probably the greatest harmonic group of all

time...I immediately took to the sounds their voices made, and I started learning their harmonies."

If you're both a Four Freshmen and Beach Boys fan (as I am), it's a CD set you'll probably want for your collection, even though it costs around \$25-28 new, depending on where you buy it. (Used copies may be available for half that, or less.) It's loaded with previously-unreleased material, apparently from the Beach Boys' own archives, including excerpts from rehearsal sessions that give you some fascinating insights into how the Beach Boys worked and blended together. There's a lot more that can be said about the other cuts, but I'll leave that for discussions in a Beach Boys forum sometime.

Even if you don't choose to buy it, you can hear about half of "Happy Birthday, Four Freshmen" online at CD Universe by going to <<http://www.cduniverse.com>> searching for it, and then clicking on No. 4 in the "Track Listing." You also can check out the titles of all of the other tracks and hear portions of each, if you're interested.

Serious Four Freshmen fans may wish to listen not only to that, but also Track 5 to hear Bobby Troups' finest effort, "Their Hearts Were Full of Spring." It was taped at a live rehearsal in August 1967 when the Beach Boys were off and running in their fifth year together. As the liner notes point out, this song was one of Brian's favorite numbers. You can hear the Freshmen influences. (That's probably because, I'm told, Brian copied the Four Freshmen arrangement off a recording.)

Meanwhile, on the anniversary of the first professional appearance, in Fort Wayne, IN, by the members of the group who later would be known as The Four Freshmen - Sept. 20 - I'll take a few minutes during the day to slip the CD into my player, hit Track 4, sit back, and sing along with Brian Wilson "Happy Birthday, Four Freshmen."

If you want to learn more about Brian Wilson, check out Brian's own Web sit at <<http://www.brianwilson.com/brian/index.html>> (That's also the source of the "unique fusion" quote used above.)

There's also a review of the CD at "What You Need to Know About" at <http://classicrock.about.com/library/reviews/blbeachboys.htm>

For more on the Beach Boys, check out - www.beachboysband.com

For online availability of this album and prices, check your favorite online music sources or simply enter these two terms (with quotes where marked) into your Web search engine - "beach boys" and hawthorne.