

Pet Sounds Sessionography (2025)

Wouldn't It Be Nice

The first song on *Pet Sounds* was the fourth of the final album's lineup to enter the studio, with Brian beginning its production on Saturday, January 22, 1966 at Gold Star Recording Studios, while the rest of the Beach Boys were finishing up their first tour of Japan. Brian hadn't worked at the studio on Santa Monica Boulevard in roughly a year, the previous visit on B.B. business being his January 1965 attempt to bottle the Wall of Sound into "Do You Wanna Dance." Brian was back again that February to help Phil Spector out with a Darlene Love version of "Don't Hurt My Little Sister," and dropped in on numerous other sessions held by his idol/rival in the months to follow (including new personal obsession "This Could Be the Night"), but otherwise he wasn't in the habit of using Gold Star a whole lot when it came to his own group. By early '66, "Wouldn't It Be Nice" was percolating in Brian's head as the next possible single, and there was a certain *boom* and scale in mind for the track that could only be realized by Spector's favored echo chambers.

The tracking session was booked to start at 7:00pm, with 16 musicians contracted by Steve Douglas (including himself and session leader Hal Blaine) joining Brian and engineer Larry Levine in Gold Star's Studio A. Barney Kessel and Jerry Cole sat in the booth with Brian and Larry, as they would be playing guitars directly into the recording console, clean and swimming in reverb. The rest of the musicians were out on the studio floor: Hal Blaine leading the band on drums, Lyle Ritz on upright bass, Carol Kaye on Fender bass, Ray Pohlman on Danelectro 6-string bass, Bill Pitman on archtop acoustic guitar, Al De Lory and Larry Knechtel seated at two pianos (a 7' Steinway grand and a tacked upright respectively), Frankie Capp handling various percussion instruments, Carl Fortina and Frank Marocco on two accordions, and a horn section consisting of Roy Caton on trumpet, Steve Douglas and Plas Johnson both on tenor saxophones, and Jay Migliori on baritone sax. Brian dashed around the room teaching the musicians the arrangement, one part at a time, using the bulk of the session time to teach and rehearse the band before anyone even thought about rolling tape.

The introductory passage is a merry little ostinato between two electric 12-string guitars playing high up on the neck, lasting four measures. The dominant, slightly detuned lead guitar figure here is played by Barney Kessel on a Danelectro Bellzouki, one of the earliest commercially available electric 12-string instruments built in the teardrop shape of a bouzouki (the model of his instrument was likely the original 7010, but that's difficult to confirm). Brian once wrote to Barney, "Thank you for your happy guitar on 'Wouldn't It Be Nice.' It brought a kind of ring-a-ding sound. It gives people a boost, a real good boost." [Brian Away with Brian Wilson No. 4, Fall 1997] It sure does. The lower of the two guitars, a sort of harmony/support to the lead line in half notes, is played by Jerry Cole, probably using either a Fender or Mosrite. Because Barney and Jerry would be playing direct, inaudible to the rest of the band on the other side of the glass, Hal Blaine wore headphones to follow along with the intro and cue everyone else in the room. At the fourth bar, a downbeat smack on Hal's floor tom, snare, and kick cues the key change from A to F for the entrance of the vocal. The guitars drop out, and the song properly begins.

Five chordal instruments enter at the start of the verse: The pianos (in different octaves) and accordions (in unison) play shuffly swung eighth notes, and the acoustic guitar strums a supporting pattern that's buried down for texture. Three basses – not actually a typical amount heard together in Brian's productions – play a walking line in unison. Carol plays her Fender bass with a pick, but a deep, rounded-off tone without much of a discernible attack allows her instrument to blend with Lyle's into one solid undercurrent. Rather than exploiting the Dano bass for its trademark "click," Ray plays along gently to reinforce the body of the line. Hal's drumming is kept simple, sticking exclusively to the kick pedal, backbeat smacks on the snare and floor tom together, and sparse cymbal crashes on the transitions into each section. Frankie Capp fills in the high-end rhythmic space around him with some variety of jingle stick.

At the "B" section of this verse ("you know it's gonna make..."), the drums cut out while the horns hold deep block harmonies. Ray's Dano bass moves an octave up from the others as they play a dancing arpeggiated line across the chords. The accordions switch to a staccato quarter note feel, and Frankie moves over to timpani where he builds up

the same rhythm into an exit fill with Hal. The second verse is played identically, then an accordion and sax riff in octaves ushers in the bridge section.

Musically, this bridge brings back the 12-string guitar cycle of the intro and layers it atop a whole new bed of harmonic color. De Lory's grand piano plays the straighter rhythm and two-chord vamp here, while Larry's tack piano adds the sparkle around it with changing left-hand accents and bright stabs on the offbeats. The three basses are in the same octave again, all playing a bouncy, syncopated line dictated by Brian that confounded Lyle Ritz when he started rehearsing it with the other instruments. "I was playing a bassline in the key of D," he remembered. "But the rest of the band was in another key. I knew that was wrong. So during a break, I looked at everybody else's music to see if it was a mistake. Because you can't do that. But he pulled it off; it was a melodic bassline." [Making of Pet Sounds] What's happening here to throw off Lyle's compass is that while the keyboards play A to D major triads, the moving bassline emphasizes the fourth and sixth of each chord while avoiding the root, coloring the harmonies into implied major and minor seventh slash chords from below. Basically, Lyle noticed he was playing D to G instead, and looked around the room to make sure his chart wasn't in the wrong key. This harmonic ground all would've been covered between both hands on the piano when Brian wrote the song, but in arranging it for a band, elements of the chord structures were parceled out to different places. Ray digs in with the Dano here for that clicky emphasis on the attack. Frankie switches to glockenspiel (which superseded finger cymbals tried initially), ringing out some pretty single notes as Hal ramps up the energy for the next key change back to F.

A repeat of the earlier saxophone riff leads way to a *ritardando*, where the verse "B" progression is slowed and extended as the song's climax. Rather than using, say, mandolins, or other stringed instruments that would typically fulfill this sort of role, it's actually the two accordionists who play held tremolo chords throughout the section, which came up as an impromptu suggestion on the day – an especially physically demanding task on their arms. Frank Marocco recalled that Brian's request for a specific kind of tremolo sound spurred them both to resort to what he called a "triple bellow shake," which is essentially a controlled jiggle of the bellows to create a rapid blinking effect. Needless to say, spasmodically jiggling one's limbs in a consistent, sustained way take after take was an exhausting ordeal, and Marocco quickly regretted making Brian aware it could be done, calling it the most difficult thing he ever had to play. But the effect was perfect for the song, so it went in. Marocco: "To make that sound, Carl and I played the same part in unison to achieve a chorusing effect. We probably used the violin reeds to get the string sound. I remember that session well, because I played a triple bellow shake, quickly moving the bellows in and out to simulate a shaking sound. Brian really liked that, but I created a real monster, because I had to do that for the whole session – one take after another. I was as sore as hell, and remember going home saying, 'Never again will I tell anyone I can do that!'" [Chuck Granata] Bill Pitman's acoustic guitar also strums tremolo chords to pad out the sound, atop four-part horn harmonies. Underneath this, the three basses play an elaboration of the earlier line, while timpani quarter notes build, louder and louder.

An arranged fill played between Hal on floor tom and Frankie on timpani brings in the tag. Here, a two-bar variation of the verse music just vamps: Frankie repeats the timpani part, Bill strums triplets, Ray plays a loping little bass fill, and both tenor saxes play the earlier riff while the bari adds a low accent on the downbeats. This repeats as a round indefinitely.

While the musicians worked with Brian to figure out and transcribe their parts, Larry set up the microphones and concocted a 3-track mix of the 12 signals coming through the board (the maximum amount that could run into Gold Star's recording console).

Only two inputs were needed for the drums. Unlike current practice, drums were still thought of as one instrument in the 3-track era, and Gold Star in particular stuck to one overhead microphone, with another mic down low to capture the bass drum if needed. Here, definition on the kick was important, so it was mic'd on its own, very likely with a ribbon microphone, another bygone practice. Limited photo evidence from this time shows that Gold Star often used the no-frills Electro-Voice 666 as an overhead, but sometimes the studios' only condenser mics fill in: the Neumann U47 or the Sony C37a. On this large session, very little is to be gained from the sharper resolution of a condenser mic

on the drums, so the 666 is the likely choice. The overhead mic would be positioned quite low, set up to get a good balance from the toms without the snare or cymbals overpowering.

The next three inputs would be basses. Lyle's double bass likely had a dynamic mic pointing at the F-hole of the instrument, and the electric instruments would have dynamic mics near the speakers of their amplifiers. One important element of these large-scale sessions is the surprisingly low volume on guitar and bass amps. Multiple photos show that guitarists and bassists routinely sat with their amps on chairs, speakers facing them for monitoring, ruling out anything louder than a whisper. Acoustic guitars at Gold Star were mic'd with ribbons or dynamics, not fussily placed but roughly at the bridge of the instrument. There is a crunchiness present on this input that suggests the tube amplifier in the console was doing its job.

Given the limited number of signal paths, percussion was grouped physically close together and often captured with one utility mic. Between various sections of the song, Frankie Capp moves between some variety of dry jingle stick, two timpani tuned to C and F, and a glockenspiel used for key moments in the bridge. Here, a dynamic mic suspended over the timpani would also have been responsible for getting a reasonably direct sound from the hand percussion, and to pick up the glockenspiel for its limited role.

The accordions were gathered around one mic. No evidence of how this might have been set up has been uncovered, but it is easy to imagine an RCA 77 or 44 being used to exploit the figure-of-eight polar pattern so that the accordionists could comfortably get close to either side of the microphone. Likewise, the horns would've gathered around one microphone to accommodate the limited inputs. The baritone sax's bell was likely right up on the mic (it would need to be close to get the extra deep proximity effect we hear on the track), which was probably an RCA 44 or 77, with the other players on the other side huddled in a group of three.

The pianos used one microphone apiece, which means certain compromises needed to be made about emphasizing a given range of the piano's compass. The few extant photographs of mic'd-up Gold Star pianos indicate that they liked to stick a Sennheiser 421 under the lid, and that a Sony C37a would be placed very close to the hammer point of the tack piano to really get the impact of the metal tacks hitting the strings.

The two electric 12-strings in the booth were likely ganged up to go in the same input, with volume balance between them being adjusted on the instruments themselves. A likely solution was a simple 2-to-1 Y-cord, but many period patch bays offered similar coupling functions.

Gold Star had its two famous echo chambers, and very likely an EMT plate or a spring reverb unit. Other outboard gear was very minimal. In addition to using a mono tape machine for slap delay, they had limited EQ available for each input (which was remoted to 12 small outboard EQ units housed in a rack under the console) and perhaps one or two limiters, used not for effect, but very simply to limit hot signals.

Any input could have reverb applied to it; a simple rotary knob on each channel would send that dry signal to one of three reverb send outputs, which normally correspond to the three program busses but can be overridden on the patch bay. The reverb outputs then go to the reverb chamber, where they are piped into space and picked up again by a microphone. That mic then goes back into the console, and can be boosted or cut to nothing before being recombined with the corresponding program output.

So, in summary, we have the 12 inputs:

- 1 – drums, overhead (sent to chamber)
- 2 – drums, kick
- 3 – Lyle's bass
- 4 – Carol's bass amp
- 5 – Ray's bass amp

- 6 – acoustic guitar (sent to chamber)
- 7 – percussion (sent to chamber)
- 8 – accordions (sent to chamber)
- 9 – horns (probably sent to a limiter)
- 10 – grand piano
- 11 – upright piano
- 12 – electric 12-string guitars into Y converter (sent to chamber)

Once the instruments were all set coming into the console, they were routed to three output busses: basses, drums, and percussion went to track 1, horns to track 2, and pianos, guitars, and accordions to track 3, plus all reverb sends from one or both chambers also to track 3. Bleed from instruments into other mics across channels is very apparent, and not discouraged, as the live room's resonance makes up an essential component of the Wall of Sound glue when packed together in its monaural end state. The grouping of instruments at this stage was crucial, because it determined what could be adjusted later. The choices made here make sense – a rhythm track to adjust for drive, the horns alone to adjust how much pad comes through, and the reverb-laden oddities could be brought up or down according to taste. Although the three reductions listed above are what hit the 3-track tape, Brian never would've listened to these groupings individually; the three program buss outputs were reduced to a single mono output within the console, and it's that output that would have hit the main monitor speaker in Gold Star's control room.

Once the ½" tape reel began rolling on Gold Star's 3-track machine, 21 takes were required to land a master, with the entire instrumental arrangement being performed live – no overdubbing. Brian kept the musicians into overtime until 11:30pm in his efforts to coordinate the tricky orchestration, probably not starting to record until after the standard three hours were already up.

As soon as the tape begins, Hal can be heard calling out, "Don't yell in the mic, Murry!" chastising Brian for his overly enthusiastic direction which was ringing in Hal's headphones. Take 1 is slated by Brian, who stops it immediately after hearing Hal's busy fill into the first verse: "No, don't start like that!" Brian sings the fill he wants from Hal, but Hal doesn't appreciate the volume: "DON'T YELL IN THE MIC! I can hear ya." Larry offers to turn down the volume in Hal's headphones and slates take 2, which Brian stops only one second in, not liking the articulation from Barney's guitar. Hal misses his intro again in take 3, causing Brian to once again explain what he wants for take 4. Barney, however, misunderstands, and stops playing in the fourth bar, prompting Brian to stop the take. Take 5 is stopped when Hal is still not playing exactly what Brian wants as his opening fill, and only after the breakdown is Brian finally able to properly communicate the part.

Larry skips take 6, and take 7 finally gets beyond the intro, but falls apart in the bridge, where without Hal's drums as a guide, the guitarists in the booth become rhythmically out of sync with the rest of the band on the floor. Brian takes the opportunity to fix some issues he'd been hearing, like busy timpani fills from Frank that need to be simplified. Take 8 is stopped in the intro, and Brian stops take 9 in the second verse, claiming that "we lost the accordion sound," a vital part of the arrangement. Brian re-slates take 9, which he promptly stops in the intro. Take 10 makes it to the bridge, but Brian stops the take for reasons unknown. Take 11 is the first to make it all the way through the fade, following a slightly awkward *a tempo* that only barely gets back to speed in time. "Okay, uh, let me do it this way," Brian says before Larry pauses the tape recorder.

Take 12 breaks down in the intro, and Brian takes another moment to focus on the accordions, instructing them to play in the same range, and at the same distance from the microphone, because "it's that certain vibration or frequency thing, when you're both about the same distance; it comes through great." He also makes a change to what they play in the fadeout, which was previously the saxophone riff: "Just play the verse thing. Just play du-du-du-du-du, okay?" Brian slates take 13, but Hal suggests 14 instead, which Brian immediately stops during the intro. Brian stops take 15 during the second verse, calls for a break, and emphasizes how sudden the *ritardando* should be coming out of the bridge.

Take 16 is complete, and nearly perfect, but Brian wants to keep going. Take 17 is stopped by Larry Levine during the intro, as people on the floor are making noise. Take 18 is stopped short as “something distorted on the very last note there.” Take 19 naturally breaks down among the musicians during the second verse, and take 20 is another short false start. 23 minutes into the reel of tape, take 21 is nailed (with Frank Capp finally on glockenspiel rather than fingers cymbals in the bridge), which Brian immediately recognizes. Larry stops the tape as soon as enough fadeout material is captured, so that Brian can thank the musicians and send them on their way.

Brian had walked into the studio on January 22 with the title “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” all of the backing music, a concept, and at least some semblance of melody and words. At one point during the session, Brian tells Frankie Capp, “You know in the part: ‘*We could get...*’ Well, like he knows the lyric, right?” He appears to be floating an early version of the line “*We could be married*” in the bridge, but other evidence indicates that Brian hadn’t yet finished the song or recruited a co-writer at the time of recording.

During the last week of January, looming pressure from Capitol Records to deliver product and desire for a fresh approach prompted Brian to enlist Tony Asher as his new lyrical collaborator. The very first thing the two did together was load up the tapes in Brian’s playback room and listen to the tracks he’d already recorded – these likely included “Sloop John B.” (completed), “Trombone Dixie,” “Run, James, Run,” “Let’s Go Away for Awhile,” “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” and “My Childhood.” According to Asher, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was kept at a distance during their first few days of writing sessions while Brian tinkered with the melody, and he didn’t seem to recall the track already existing before being asked to work on it, but it’s fairly probable that this was a part of the original listening batch. When Brian presented the completed music, Tony absconded from his co-writer’s oversight and gave himself some breathing room to pen the rest of the words alone.

The Beach Boys spent the end of the month vacationing in Hong Kong and Hawaii, played a show in Honolulu on January 29, then flew back to Los Angeles for another two weeks of R&R while Brian and Tony carried on writing. On February 10, the reunited group took photos for the cover of the album at the San Diego Zoo, surrounded by Jardine-aggravating goats, and it’s only after this that they headed into the studio to begin recording vocals for Brian’s new tracks.

“Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was one of the first songs that the Beach Boys worked on together in 1966, if not the very first. A vocal session took place at Western Recorders circa February 11 to 14 – exact date unknown due to a missing tape and tracksheet. Mono mixdowns and other material evidence nonetheless give us a good picture of exactly how the production came together. Brian and Chuck Britz dubbed the 3-track instrumental parts to mono on track 4 of a second generation ½” 4-track reel, freeing up three available tracks for vocal overdubbing.

Brian had mapped out an intricate vocal arrangement involving all six Beach Boys singing in six-part harmony at times, not even including the lead vocal. These would have to be recorded separately. Since Brian wanted to double-track both the backing vocals and the lead vocals, some internal combining was necessary to fit everything on the tape; when the group doubled their parts, Chuck ping-ponged the original performance together with the new layer, meaning the old track could then be taped over, and another was still open. This allowed the mono instrumental track, doubled backing vocals, and two layers of lead vocals all to share space on the same 4-track tape.

One of Brian’s pet projects in 1966 was Carl Wilson. As his little brother took flight leading the band on the road, Brian accrued heightened confidence in Carl’s abilities as a performer during the months leading up to *Pet Sounds*. Brian saw Carl as his most promising protégé, a trusted musical sounding board with whom he could test out ideas and connect with on spiritual matters. The two of them even held prayer rituals, where they’d light a candle, pray for people, pray to bring about love, and pray for an album better than *Rubber Soul*. And there was Carl’s lead voice, coming to the forefront on “Girl Don’t Tell Me,” the *Party!* album, and “The Little Girl I Once Knew,” which introduced a promising if unrefined extra dimension to the group’s sound. While working on *Pet Sounds*, Brian seemed determined to coax out the potential of his youngest sibling and amplify his importance in the group.

All this is to say that in “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” Carl sings the second-highest harmony part below Brian in a stack of six, which would’ve been unthinkable several albums ago (not least because the group didn’t have six members). Carl singing those notes in falsetto was a new frontier, previously always Al’s de facto role. This is a very tiny, and overelaborated, but important symptom of Brian’s changing attitude to using Carl in his music.

The backing vocals were handled by all of the group singing around two Neumann U47s (Mike on his own), though probably punched in section by section based on other examples of Brian’s work at the time. Their first instance comes at the “B” section of the first verse (*“you know it’s gonna make wee-oooh”*), where everyone fits into a four-part harmony stack designed to link up with and underscore the lead: Brian on top, Carl and Al together on the second part, Bruce and Dennis together on the third, Mike on the lowest. The “A” section of the second verse is where the six-part arrangement fires up: Brian and Carl sing the highest lines moving together with *“run, run, wee-oooh”* phrases; Al, Bruce, and Dennis take the more static parts below in descending order, also breaking into an *“after having”*; Mike sings a tumbling bass vocal. Backing vocals for the second “B” section (*“happy times together weeee...”*) were recorded in the same fashion as the first, with all six vocalists covering the four parts.

Next came the bridge, for which Brian wrote a six-part *“run, run, wee-oooh”* stretching out into a long harmony pad through the rest of the section, sung in descending order by Brian, Al, Bruce, Carl, Dennis, and Mike. Backing vocals for the final slow verse “B” section were sung in the same configuration as before. In the tag, Brian and Carl reprise their two-part *“run, run, wee-oooh”* harmony from the second verse and repeat it as a round.

Moving onto lead vocals, Brian kept everybody but Al Jardine on the floor. Although only Brian and Mike would be featured lead vocalists on the song, other small cameo pieces were needed from Carl, Dennis, and Bruce. A brighter sound from Brian than the others suggests that he was singing alone into a Shure 545, which Chuck usually liked to use on him to capture a certain character of his tonality. Brian performs the opening verses, which at this point began with the lyric: *“Wouldn’t it be nice to live together / In the kind of world where we belong?”* In an odd little decision, Brian had Mike on hand at the mic *just* to sing the word *“such”* before *“happy times together...”* in the second verse.

Mike sings the *“maybe if...”* lead vocal for the first part of the bridge, then Brian takes over at *“we could be married,”* and Carl echoes Brian’s two lines with a lower countermelody. Following Brian’s singing of the title line, Dennis comes in with a *“ba ba ba ba”* scat vocal matching the sax riff, while Bruce harmonizes a third above, faintly.

Brian returns to lead for the slow half-verse, and after his final *“wouldn’t it be nice,”* Dennis and Bruce reprise their harmonized scat part through the fade. Mike sings a doo-wop-esque lead couplet in the tag that he made up during the session, a part that was ultimately responsible for awarding him a writer’s credit: *“Good night, whoa-ho, baby / Sleep tight, whoa-ho, baby.”*

On February 16, while dubbing down material for the album, Brian and Chuck mixed the song to mono and spliced it onto a ¼” compilation reel of mono masters. This version of the song was considered a satisfactory final product at the time of mixing, but after he lived with a dub copy of the song for a while, it dawned on Brian that he wasn’t satisfied with the entire vocal performance. [Note: This February 16 mix was released under the subtitle “Alternate Mix 2” as CD 3 track 27 on the 1997 30th anniversary *Pet Sounds Sessions* box set, and CD 3 track 21 on the 2016 50th anniversary version of the same].

His own lead vocal was one issue. It was shrill, pitchy, and chronically behind the beat. Starting on a belted A4, then diving all over the place and frequently reaching back up to the top without many opportunities to catch breath, this was one of the most challenging melodies Brian had ever written for himself to sing, and he was clearly still figuring out how to approach it (although Mike’s part in the bridge was probably his best ever attempt). The backing vocals had pitch problems of their own (largely coming from Brian on the highest parts, admittedly), and Brian was stuck on the feeling that they lacked the power, punch, and rhythmic precision to lock in with either the track or the lead singer.

On a few occasions, Bruce recalled an interesting scenario in which Brian tried to rehearse (or maybe even re-record) the parts in his home playback room on Laurel Way: “The worst rhythm that we did ... I think we sang it at Western, and we were using 4-track. And then Brian had a Scully 4-track, and we went up to his house to sing it. We couldn’t get the rhythm sung as precisely as he wanted it. So we recorded that a lot. There are many recordings of it.” [unknown source]

However that turned out, the gang were back at Western in late February or early March to completely re-record their vocals. Painstakingly erasing and replacing the existing parts, the collective Beach Boys overdubbed a nearly identical backing vocal arrangement piece by piece, albeit with a couple of tiny adjustments. The lower four harmony parts in the second verse now follow the top two into the same “*run, run, wee-oooh*” breaks. The word “*talk*” in the final verse is expanded with another high note to a five-part harmony. The harmonies also support the words “*but let’s*” in that too, where the lead had been unaccompanied in the earlier mix. Someone goes very out of tune there. All parts were doubled, as before.

In redoing the lead tracks, Brian made other subtle changes to the plan while also altering his singing approach – sweetening it up a little, as Murry would say. The second half of the bridge features a third “*we could be married*” response from Mike, and the harmonized “*ba ba ba ba*” scat part turned into a unison vocal between Dennis and Bruce. With all background and lead parts revised and doubled, Brian made one last tweak before dubbing it down: he replaced that “*ba ba ba ba*” part at the end of the bridge (but not the tag), singing and doubling it himself, which also forced him to re-sing the “*oh, wouldn’t it be nice*” that precedes it as a punch-in on other tracks, slightly cutting off Carl’s “*then we’d be happy*.” On March 3, amid a session mostly devoted to “I Know There’s an Answer,” Brian and Chuck mixed “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” to mono a second time, taking three complete attempts to perfect the balance [“Alternate Mix 1,” CD 3 track 13 on 1997’s *Pet Sounds Sessions*, CD 3 track 9 on the 2016 reissue]. But again, upon playback review at home, Brian just wasn’t happy with the way the song sounded. It wasn’t making the cut. Diving back in would require a drastic rethink.

By early March, Brian’s perfectionism was starting to feel the pinch of recording on only four tracks. The previous year, at the suggestion of Bruce Johnston, much of the *Summer Days (and Summer Nights!!)* album was finished in Studio A at Columbia Records, home to the first 1” 8-track tape recorder in Los Angeles. Being the label’s own studio, not just meant for any old group to wander into, Bruce used his staff producer status and the sway of the Beach Boys’ name to get them inside. Capitol can’t have been too happy, but they’d already given Brian carte blanche to record wherever he wanted. Flash forward to *Pet Sounds*, and Bruce’s production partner Terry Melcher again pulled strings to get Brian time at Columbia, where he hoped to quickly complete the remaining songs for the project with their unique tape machine permitting much greater flexibility over recording the Boys’ voices.

They couldn’t get into Columbia right away, so on an unknown date within the window of March 7 to 9, the group came back to Western to record some preparatory 4-track work on “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times,” “I’m Waiting for the Day,” and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” knowing that these tunes would be copied to 8-track for more vocal parts later in the week. With that in mind, Brian wanted to change the way he was handling “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” to resolve those rhythmic issues that were nagging at him – basically, by doing the lead *before* the main backing vocals this time so they’d have a reference to synchronize with.

That wasn’t actually the first thing he did. The entire group knew the arrangement inside and out by this point, and with the promise of eight tracks, all of the parts were like a shopping list that Brian just had to run through and check off in whatever order he liked. Everything on tape thus far was disregarded, and the new set of overdubs began with Brian and Carl recording several key background parts on track 3 – parts that were previously sung in tandem with the full group, but could now afford their own space on tape. They started at the second verse’s highest two moving harmonies, “*run, run, wee-oooh*” included, as well as Carl harmonizing to “*after having*.” The brothers then sang the response vocals in the bridge, Carl echoing the “*we could be married*” and “*and then we’d be happy*” lines, and Brian adding the second “*we could be married*” counter melody between them (formerly Mike’s spot). In the fadeout, they covered their two-part “*run, run, wee-oooh*” round. These vocals were recorded with a healthy amount of reverb printed to tape and Brian didn’t feel they needed to be doubled.

Brian re-sang the lead for the opening verses, second half of bridge, and final verse onto track 1, which he doubled onto track 2 with both signals combined together (dry). Mike was right there beside him, adding his “*well, such*” cameo in the second verse, and nothing else. Why the rest of his parts weren’t recorded at this time isn’t quite explainable. The most notable aspect of Brian’s third lead vocal performance (aside from it being another steady improvement) is that the opening lines are now swapped around, starting with the more evocative: “*Wouldn’t it be nice if we were older? Then we wouldn’t have to wait so long.*” On track 3, Brian punched in the scat riff at the end of the bridge, and doubled it only from the second round on track 2, being careful not to erase any of his lead.

In the wee hours of Thursday, March 10, Brian closed out a nocturnal “God Only Knows” tracking session at Western and hopped across the road to CBS, where he, Bruce, and Carl continued to work on vocals until Carl was too exhausted to keep singing, then continued to work a little more. Brian brought along several tapes to Columbia Studios that morning, those being “God Only Knows,” “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times,” “I’m Waiting for the Day,” and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” which were all transferred from ½” 4-track to 1” 8-track in one go. Early on March 11, the full group, accompanied by Tony Asher and Terry Melcher, checked into Columbia for a marathon session described by Dennis as about ten hours, laying down vocals on several songs before they had to fly out for a show in Cleveland at 8:30pm. The engineer for this session was photographed, but his name isn’t known.

Recording vocals at Columbia Studios would’ve been a dramatic contrast to Gold Star or Western. Those studios were independents, which meant that, despite their very successful track records, they did not have the resources of a major label industry behemoth like Columbia. That sweet CBS money had built a magnificent, state-of-art facility across the street from Western, with a giant live room (described as feeling like a big, dark spaceship) and a well stocked, luxurious control room. In addition to a custom 16-input console, the facility had dozens of reverb options and many more outboard processing units that Western or Gold Star could, frankly, not fit in their tiny control booths. And, another great luxury at Columbia was their collection of fine Austrian tube condenser microphones. The AKG c12 is a legendary microphone, with originals selling for tens of thousands of dollars, and it is this microphone that Columbia engineers loved to use on vocals. Most photos of the band singing at Columbia show them singing around the AKG c12.

The group would sing around one or two mics (and at CBS as elsewhere, Mike often got his own mic when singing low parts) which would feed into the custom Columbia board. Because their facilities offered a little more flexibility with the capacity to handle 8-track tape, Columbia engineers tended to record the Boys’ voices completely dry, leaving reverb till the mixing stage. Also evident on these vocals is the increased use of extensive compression and limiting. Again, this was helped by the bevy of options in the control room, ranks of custom CBS limiters and EQ units, plus the usual suspects from Pultec, Universal Audio, RCA, Hycor, Cinema Engineering, and others. Because of this extra processing, a lot of the vocals from Columbia sessions hit the tape with a heavier, tighter sound than those done at Western, as the voices meld together through dozens of vacuum tubes.

First order of business for “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” on its third-generation tape was filling in Mike’s bridge lead vocal, which he double-tracked on tracks 5 and 8 (delivered a little more aggressively than before). On the same tracks, Mike added the “*good night*” tag lead vocal while Brian sang the scat part.

On tracks 1 and 6, all six of the group recorded a new set of the main backing vocals packed with thick compression, aided by having Brian’s lead in the headphones to give them something to follow. The “*you know it’s gonna make*” “B” section parts (still a little rushed, probably to Brian’s dismay) were divided up with some unison into Brian and Bruce together at the top, then Carl and Al, then Dennis, then Mike, with Carl splitting off into a fifth harmony above Al on “*wee-oooh*” in the first verse and “*we*” in the second. In the second verse “A” section, the most historically difficult passage to pull off, Brian simplified the lower four parts to save himself a headache. They became a less mobile stack of *oooooh*’s performed by six singers in the same groupings, removing the “*run, run,*” keeping the harmonized “*after having,*” and ditching Mike’s agile bass line for a static part. In the bridge, the group nailed the six-part bridge pad in its original configuration of Brian, Al, Bruce, Carl, Dennis, Mike. The final verse was tackled like the earlier ones, except

for a five-part harmony on the word “*talk*” wherein Carl breaks off above Al. Without needing to punch in, Brian and Carl launched straight from there into the “*run, run, wee-oooh*” tag, which actually doubled and tripled what was already on track 3.

On track 7, Carl and Brian doubled the bridge response vocals. Brian can be heard complaining about a splinter in one of his knee bones while waiting for the mark: “I swear to God. (*sigh*) It’s all fucked up.”

While the other Beach Boys were away for a short stretch of shows across the country, Brian mixed “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” to mono for a third time the following day, trying out two different approaches. The first take was attempted with track 3 muted entirely, leaving out Brian and Carl’s higher background vocals, and Brian’s main scat vocal at the end of the bridge, while the second mix take left this track up in the balance. Preferring the latter, Brian brought the tape over to Western and spliced it onto a compilation reel of the album’s mono masters. [This mix, and thus this take of Brian’s lead vocal, has not been commercially released.] But was he actually done with the song? No.

Most likely on Sunday, March 20, during a session which also involved work on “God Only Knows,” Brian was back at Columbia again recording a new lead vocal in the verses, which he overdubbed onto tracks 5 and 8 (with live tape echo helping him along). This was definitely his most assured performance to date, finally capturing the sweetness that he’d sacrificed to be able to hit the notes in earlier versions, and now without the “*such*” interjection in the second verse. Brian also replaced the scat vocal at the end of the bridge on 3 and 7, changing the end of the phrase from a “*ba ba ba*” to a “*de do do*.” The song was remixed, feeling quite worthy this time (despite Mike’s bridge vocal double being pulled up slightly late), and Brian wrote down “FINAL MASTERS” under both titles on the box. [This mix was issued by mistake on early Beach Boys CDs in the mid-late 1980s, such as *Made in U.S.A.* and *Still Cruisin’*.]

But wait! There’s more!

On Friday, March 25, while also working on “Here Today,” Brian had Mike re-sing his lead vocal in the bridge with a gentler delivery, a bit closer to the way he’d done it at Western. “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was given a fifth “final” mixdown, and at last, Brian actually seemed to be at peace with it. This mix stands out from the others due to swathes of reverb on the verse lead vocal and heavy overall limiting, resulting in some crunchy distortion. Brian’s earlier combined lead vocal on track 2 hadn’t been erased from the tape, and as such, elements can still be discerned underneath its replacement. [The first half of this mix has not seen official release, but beginning at the bridge, this is the mix that can be heard on any mono edition of *Pet Sounds*.]

The *Pet Sounds* album was assembled at Capitol on Monday, April 4, with this most recent version of “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” as the opening track on side A. Lacquer parts were cut the following day, but that somehow isn’t even the end of the story. Partly due to the urging of A&R man Steve Douglas, who thought the mix seemed rushed and messy, Brian recalled the entire album and realized he wasn’t entirely happy about the vocals on several songs. To no surprise at all, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was one of those cuts deemed in need of further revision. Once the Beach Boys came back from a short tour around Texas and Florida, the group spent a further week at Columbia re-recording vocals in a gallant final effort to make the album as good as it possibly could be.

On Monday, April 11, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was the starting point of the fix-up project. Ralph Valentin engineered (Brian’s favorite guy to work with at Columbia), and another staff member by the initials P.R. served as second engineer. Only Brian, Dennis, Carl, and Bruce were in the studio this day, operating on a lean and mean plan to right the ship. They first set about re-recording the lower harmonies of the verse backing vocals, a neater four singers for the four parts, stacked Brian, Bruce, Carl, then Dennis – who, in a notable turn, sings a version of the moving bass vocal in the second verse that used to be Mike’s, now fully restored to the arrangement and fleshed out to a more important role.

Dennis wouldn’t usually sing this sort of part, but like Carl and his miraculous heretofore untapped high voice, Brian was on a kick nurturing vocal niches within his group that previous Beach Boys music hadn’t really allowed them to

explore. Mike may have had the warm, rounded tone, and was more precise about his pitch, but Dennis actually possessed a stronger voice in that deep register, capable of projecting his notes over a powerful track – which is exactly what “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” called for. To overcome Dennis’ nervousness about doing the part and to help him stay directional on the mic, Brian came up with a certain technique. “One of the features of this record is that Dennis sings a special way, cupping his hands,” he said in 1966. “I had thought for hours of the best way to achieve the sound and Dennis dug the idea because he knew it would work. So we practiced for hours until it did.” (Brian Wilson, 1966)

Carl too remembered this being a breakthrough moment: “Dennis did the bass vocals in the verse, and he did a great job on it. He was thrilled at the way it sounded, so proud that it came out so cool.” (Making of Pet Sounds, David Leaf) Overhead, the Brian, Bruce, Carl trio in the middle lean into the doo-wop stylings, trading the old “*run, run, wee-ooh*” for “*wop-bop-badoo*” phrases. In the last verse, Brian reverted the stack on the word “*talk*” to its earlier four-part configuration. These vocals were overdubbed onto tracks 2 and 5, without the heavy compression, a thinner and rougher timbre to cut through the mix that finally executed the rhythmic precision Brian was after all along. Still, Carl came to feel that they didn’t quite nail it: “The one song that sticks out in my mind the most is ‘Wouldn’t It Be Nice.’ Brilliant parts. It was hard to sing without getting tears in your eyes. We all seem to remember singing it a lot. Many times. Many days. In fact, I don’t think we ever got ‘em right. It still feels a little rushed. I wish they were sung more on time, not so on top of the beat.” (Making of Pet Sounds, David Leaf)

Brian next sang *another* new verse lead vocal on tracks 3 and 8 (his fifth overall). This one was recorded dry and pitched slightly differently again: a little more pinched, a little more ragged, a little younger, a little gentler on the high parts. He really sounded like he meant it. So many attempts, and this was the reading that tipped it from a good performance to a perfect one. Finally, Brian and Carl re-recorded the high parts in the second verse onto tracks 1 and 6, doubled to match the rest of the stack, and forgoing the “*after having*” harmony.

Living with everything for a couple of days brought Brian to the realization that actually, he did still like most of the current master mix that had been on his album assembly. So on April 13, he merely mixed the new opening verses to mono (attempt #6) and stopped at the bridge, where he planned to splice the two mixes together [This partial mix is not released]. But there were still wobbles.

The final, final, actual real last additions to “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” were recorded circa April 14 to 16, right down to the wire during the penultimate session for the whole album. Brian decided to replace Mike’s lead in the bridge and sing it himself, which he did on tracks 5 and 8, completely erasing the old parts in the process. Some odd harmonic distortion got stuck to the vocal on track 8, but otherwise he handled it beautifully. The section’s former vocalist was actually around when this happened – during the same session, Mike was at the studio to tweak some parts on “Here Today.” Also wishing to re-record both the lead and response vocals for the following line (but not wiping the old performance), Brian sang “*we could be married, and then we’d be happy*” on track 5, while Carl sang his response vocal live into the same mic, and Mike took Brian’s old second response part. For the very last overdub, these three voices were ping-ponged to track 8 while being lightly doubled. A technical malfunction caused the second layer to be nigh on imperceptible and more harmonic distortion to occur.

Moving behind the board for what would be the final mixdown, Brian decided that he liked the first lines of the bridge that he sang, but not the revised “*we could be married*” etc. that the trio just recorded. “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” mono mix number seven included the first part of the bridge with Brian’s new vocal, but he stopped rolling tape in the middle of “*we could be married.*” And then Brian second-guessed himself again. He opted the ditch the whole revised bridge section and go back to Mike, essentially deciding not to use any of the day’s work, so an edit was made splicing mix #7 (up to the bridge) into mix #5 (from the bridge). [This is the final composite mix heard on the mono album; the unused partial bridge from mix #7 with Brian’s lead has not been released.] (Note: The old backing vocals still on the multitrack jut in at “*never ending.*”)

With that, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” was finally, genuinely, completed. It was by far, without contest, the most extensive amount of time Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys had ever devoted to the production of a single song. Production

moved across three multitrack tape formats at three different studios: ½” 3-track at Gold Star, ½” 4-track at Western, and 1” 8-track at Columbia (with some alleged unused work done in Brian’s house). On Sunday, April 17, the *Pet Sounds* album was re-compiled at Capitol with the new mixes implemented in the same sequence.

The hybrid edit compromise means that several of the latest elements recorded don’t feature in the album’s mono master. Not only were the bridge revisions bypassed, but Brian’s lead vocal and the group backing vocals in the *ritardando* section recorded April 11 aren’t used either. All of these components can however be heard in Mark Linett’s 1996 stereo mix; *both* sets of backing vocals in the closing verse actually still co-exist on the 8-track master, so a quadruple-tracked wall of Beach Boys are used in that version. The later 2001 stereo mix syncs part of the mono mix with Mike’s bridge lead to elements of the multitrack, restoring the “correct” vocal in that section that listeners were familiar with for 30 years.