

Reaganized Rock: The 1983 Beach Boys Ban and the U.S. Culture Wars

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BIO

Pekka Kolehmainen is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural History at the University of Turku. His Ph.D. dissertation concerns the ways in which rock music was defined and understood in relation to different ideas of “Americanness” within the context of the 1980s and 1990s culture wars in the United States. His broader interests include the cultural processes of conservatism in the Reagan-era United States, audiovisual and digital media cultures, and popular culture studies more generally.

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In 1983, Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary James Watt decided that rock bands would not perform at the Independence Day celebration that year because they would "attract unwanted elements." With the Beach Boys having played the event in the past, Watt suffered a backlash even from Reagan himself. In this article, I analyze the media discussions on the ideological undercurrents of how rock was being defined as an idea by the different people involved. I track rock's transformation from being a target of a culture war, to the terrain for such a struggle, and finally into a tool for demonstrating ideological allegiances.

Keywords: rock and conservatism; politics of rock; Beach Boys; reaganism; culture wars

Introduction

James G. Watt was a man of many controversies. During his tenure as President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior (1981–1983), he had reportedly claimed that there were no Democrats and Republicans, merely "liberals and Americans," and had once called American Indian reservations "shameful examples of the failures of socialism" ("Words Cited by Watt Critics" D10). However, his greatest public backlash came in 1983, following the news that he had banned rock music from the Fourth of July Independence Day celebration at the National Mall, a public park in the heart of Washington, D.C. Watt feared that such music would attract "the wrong element—drinking, drug-taking youths" (McCombs A1). He was spurred to action by complaints from previous years, which had seen performances by the folk-rock band the Grass Roots in 1982 and the surf-rock/pop-rock act the Beach Boys in 1981 and 1980. The latter, being the better known of the two, became the focal point of the budding media controversy.

The backlash was immediate. A Washington-based radio station said they had not received such an influx of calls since the Iran hostage crisis in 1979 ("Beach Boys Ban Stirs Bad Vibrations" 26). In Maine, a radio DJ locked himself in the studio while playing the Beach Boys non-stop until

Watt apologized (“DJ Locks Himself In, Wants Watt Apology” 1). Alongside rock fans and members of the media, a number of elected officials and members of the Reagan administration took part in the backlash. First Lady Nancy Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush both declared themselves to be fans of the band. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan forced James Watt to make an apology while holding a plaster model of a foot with a hole in the middle to symbolize how the Secretary had shot himself in the foot (Clines A14).

In this article, I will examine the ways in which the different sides in the controversy used and defined rock as an amorphous idea and then connected it to their varying visions of “Americanness.” By this, I refer to an assemblage of ideas, values, stories, and sensibilities that attempt to create a sense of the United States as an imagined community which invites individuals across vast geographical and cultural differences to locate themselves as members of a singular nation (Anderson 6–7; Billig 7–15). By either accepting or rejecting the proposed understanding of “Americanness,” individuals become either included in or excluded from its sphere (Lincoln 10–11).

For my understanding of the concept of rock, I follow Lawrence Grossberg’s suggestion (70–71) that rock is best approached as a formation of different cultural practices (musical, social, economic, political, technological, etc.) each involved with it but unable to define it conclusively. By the beginning of the 1980s especially, rock as a musical style had accumulated several decades of history, having gone through numerous iterations and transformations (Gillett; Frith 12–38, 61–179). It had become a vague category with increasingly blurred boundaries (Longhurst 107–126). Thus, I see rock as elastic and subject to being reinterpreted with each invocation of the idea. I will therefore track competing understandings of rock, which contain different assemblages of different cultural practices.

I approach the concept of “culture” through the tradition of cultural history which has regarded it as a multifaceted phenomenon that shapes our lives, thoughts, and available patterns of agency. Often, it has been seen as a web or a cage of possibilities that an individual sees in the surrounding

world and society, but one that they constantly shape and reshape in an endless cycle of interaction (Salmi 355–358). As such, I follow William H. Sewell Jr.’s argument (40–48) that culture should be approached simultaneously both as a system by which symbols and shared meanings make themselves understandable to us and a sphere of activity where these meanings are being constantly contested and altered. As certain symbols, meanings, and practices are being classified, here, under the signifier rock, one can either accept or reject this proposed understanding of rock within the larger sphere of “Americanness”; by doing so one also negotiates the place that these symbols, meanings, and practices hold within the larger imagined community of the United States in the 1980s.

The patriotic trappings of the Fourth of July and the Beach Boys’ place in the larger concept of rock history (or the question of whether they even count as rock) make this controversy an interesting case for studying the dynamics between rock/popular culture and the ideological structures involved in the understanding of nationhood during the Reagan-era. Specifically, I ask how this struggle over rock manifested the larger conflict over “Americanness” known as the culture wars. This is the battle between two opposing visions of the U.S. as an imagined community (liberal versus conservative, pluralist versus normative, progressivist versus orthodox) which led to increasing cultural and political polarization towards the end of the 20th century (Hartman 2; Hunter 42–45; Rodgers 3–6). While not the most fervent battleground in this culture war, the Beach Boys controversy of 1983 reveals ideological fractures and divisions through the way that rock as an idea was able to assume many different positions across events. James Watt was widely regarded as the principal conservative of Reagan’s first administration (Troy 63), reviled by liberals for his disdain for environmental regulations in particular (Goodman 1) and beloved by conservatives for much the same (see for example Winston 1399). Nevertheless, over the course of these events, he became excommunicated by his own political faction, as his understanding of the place of rock in the larger conception of “Americanness” proved to be at odds with the conservatives in power. Meanwhile, the Beach Boys’ status as a politically ambiguous band, with a history of flirting with both leftist (see

Carter 569) and right-wing causes (Segrave 269), opened their legacy into a site where the political allegiances of rock could be questioned and debated.

During the different phases of the unfolding controversy, rock moved from being a target of a culture war perpetrated by James Watt to a terrain for the clash of different visions of “Americanness,” until it finally turned into a tool to be wielded in the larger cultural war about the very idea of “Americanness”. I call this process “Reaganization,” by which I mean that rock was transformed into a vague and almost fantastic notion which was scrubbed clean of any connections to those cultural practices that were ill-suited to the sense of “Americanness” being promoted by the conservative side of the culture wars.

As Anna Nekola has noted (408), there has at times been a tendency to dismiss right-wing attacks on rock as simply “wacky” and thus unworthy of further scrutiny, but this approach ignores the ways in which the political dynamics around popular culture can apprise us of the larger cultural and political trends taking place. Thus, rather than viewing the event as nothing but a small footnote in the larger history of attacks on rock (see for example, Denisoff 423–424; Martin & Segrave 268–269; Blecha 168), I use it as an opportunity to explore how the specific involvement of the Beach Boys as participants in a culture war conflict over rock brought to the foreground different strains of conservative thinking in regards to popular culture during this period in U.S. history. In the vein of Corey Robin (4–23), I see conservatism, not as a set of political goals as such, but rather a persuasion founded on a fundamental sense of a loss of power and prestige and a desire to restore culture back to its “proper” course.

I explore the event through media sources drawn from daily newspapers, both national and local, as well as from the political magazines the *National Review* and the *New Republic*. To obtain James Watt’s own account, I have used his 1985 book *The Courage of a Conservative*, which includes a section covering the Beach Boys controversy. I have also used the 2016 memoir of the Beach Boys singer Mike Love.

I begin by following the perspective of James Watt and looking at how rock was being constructed by him as a target of a culture war and the specific practices involved in this construction. I will then track the involvement of the Beach Boys which changed the terms of the debate around rock and conservatism. Finally, I will argue that the controversy resulted in the “Reaganization” of both the Beach Boys and rock more generally, through an application of a certain ideal of California as a cultural image; thus turning rock into a tool in the larger culture war at hand.

James Watt and Rock as a Target of a Culture War

[T]he liberals are in power. They are the Establishment. Whether one is talking about labor, education, business, the media, the arts or even government bureaucracy, liberalism reigns. Therefore, the burden of this battle is on conservative shoulders. We are the ones calling for change (Watt 36).

It was with these words that James Watt described the balance of power in the middle of the Reagan presidency, in 1985. He depicted a battle between two ideological sides: the liberals who controlled the state and entertainment and used both to drive their agenda of big government and lax morals, and the conservatives who tried to fight them off. Watt’s worldview appeared motivated by an animosity toward the countercultural politics that burst into the mainstream during the 1960s. In this, he followed the strain of culture war politics that posited the legacy of the 1960s as the primary tension in contemporary culture (Horwitz 13; Hartman 10–37; Prothero 180–195). Simultaneously, he exuded the kind of deep-felt distrust of institutions, politics at large, and the media that had continued to characterize post-World War II conservatism from its earliest expressions in the 1940s and the 1950s (Hemmer xii).

In the *New Republic*, Sidney Blumenthal described Watt’s book as a “martyr’s passion written by a martyr himself” (30). Indeed, a sense of martyrdom permeates the chapter on the Beach Boys controversy in particular. The root cause of the controversy, according to Watt, was his conservatism; its perpetrators the “members of the liberal press [who] saw an opportunity to create a controversy by censoring the facts and avoiding the real issues” (99). Watt thus placed the event in the larger

context of the “liberal media’s” continued attacks on conservatism. Nonetheless, what actually set the whole Beach Boys affair apart was that, unlike before, this time he did not have the White House’s support. On the topic of popular music, Watt felt betrayed by his allies (100).

According to Watt, the whole affair began in November 1982, when a mother representing the Washington chapter of Parents for Drug-free Youth expressed concern about “the use and sale of drugs at that free public concert sponsored by the Department of the Interior” (Watt 98). Watt responded by issuing a memorandum to the National Park Service saying that “future July 4 celebrations point to the glories of America in a patriotic and inspirational way that will attract the family” (99). There was a modicum of truth to Watt’s note about the role of media in the affair, distilled as it was through his larger grievances against the liberal media establishment. Watt had made no specific reference to the Beach Boys and they had not performed at the event in 1982. Therefore, the band only became involved once the news of his memorandum came out in April 1983. As the story moved across the media sphere, it took the shape of Watt specifically attacking the Beach Boys.

For Watt, the specifics around whichever rock bands had played the event were unimportant. What Watt dealt with was the larger cultural signifier of rock, with its own connotations of associated cultural practices. It was this entity associated with particular practices—drug-use, violence, societal turbulence—that had to be removed from the event in order to ensure its patriotic and family-friendly nature. In his book, Watt linked rock to a larger trend in which both art and popular culture were becoming increasingly violent and thus worthy of attention by conservatives. They had to be subjected to the same moral principles that were called upon to guide the nation as a whole (Watt 99).

Ultimately for Watt, rock was a tool for controlling people. At the heart of his call for “patriotic, family-based entertainment” was a question of citizenship. This is one of the traditional terrains where music and politics meet: the field of suppressing sounds (Cloonan 23–34). As John Street has noted, one of the primary entanglements between music and politics is in how “states

organize us through their management of music and sound more generally” (1). The logic lay in plain sight in Watt’s memorandum: in order to curb undesired activities and get rid of “unwanted elements,” one had to adjust the music being played at the event. Furthermore, this logic being applied to the context of the Fourth of July, a national celebration, gave it additional meaning. Shared musical tastes can serve a communal purpose (Street 171–172) and therefore controlling musical expressions is a way of imposing categorizations on audiences. On the national level, as argued by Kari Kallioniemi, “the redefinition of nation through popular music occurs in the interaction between lived experiences, the written texts, and the tradition” (5). The enshrinement of certain musical texts as canonized within a national celebration such as the Fourth of July granted them a special place in the composition of a sense of “Americanness.”

One can view Watt’s approach to rock through the work of Mary Douglas on the symbolic nature of dirt. According to Douglas (5–8), dirt is not a quality that exists in an absolute way, but rather a marker assigned to something that is out of place. Maintaining order and a sense of distinction between dirt and cleanliness have been largely considered marks of civilization. For conservatism, a sense of a hierarchic order as the organizing principle of society has likewise been paramount (Robin 28–29). As Jerome Himmelstein asserts, conservatism has believed that “American society on all levels has an organic order—harmonious, beneficent, and self-regulating—disturbed only by misguided ideas and policies, especially those propagated by a liberal elite” (14). The organic principle of this system implies its morally virtuous nature when left untampered. In Watt’s thinking, rock stood for these kinds of misguided ideas. His vision for the Fourth of July event was founded on a social order which placed families as the core unit of citizenship, and thus music that symbolized an alternative way of ordering society became dirt that had to be removed.

During the backlash, the Parks Service Spokesman Tom DeRocco revealed another connotation of Watt’s idea of rock: “Not to hark back to the 1960s days, but I am sure Mr. Watt was avoiding having another Woodstock kind of event” (“Watt Bans Rock Groups from July 4

Celebration” A18). Therefore, rock not only stood for an increasingly violent popular cultural landscape, but also carried the countercultural ethos of the 1960s, which conservatism saw as having caused the disintegration of the stable norms of society. While scholarship on modern conservatism tends to disagree on the extent to which the rise of the New Right (which Watt represented) can be attributed plainly to a backlash against the 1960s (see Phillips-Fein 723–743), the opposition to the decade and its liberalization of norms became, regardless of causality, a key tenet of modern conservatism (Robin 42) and the basic dilemma of the culture wars (Hartman 10). In Watt’s thinking, Woodstock served as the ultimate symbol of the interweaving of countercultural subversion and rock.

Through its association with the late-1960s counterculture and Woodstock, rock stood for an alternative way of ordering citizenship. In Watt’s view of rock, one can find traces of what Michael Kramer has discussed in his work on late-1960s rock culture and its relation to citizenship. Kramer argues that in the 1960s, rock served as an alternative instrument of citizenship and civic engagement, replacing older and more traditional means of communal belonging, such as families and local communities (8–12). It is this idea of rock as an alternative system that made it appear to Watt as inherently incompatible with the conservative social order. It appeared as an alternative way of privileging different cultural practices over others, supplanting those which Watt saw as more naturalized in the conservative hierarchical order.

Therefore, the Fourth of July appeared to Watt as a microcosm of the larger society, needing to be reconstructed and sanitized. This included categorizing both people and cultural elements as “unwanted.” As one writer for the *Washington Post* argued, Watt attempted to “give an unwelcome partisan tone to a civic celebration that many people of this city cherish, and to turn a traditional unifying event into a divisive one” (“The Music Critic” A22). Watt therefore wanted to assign symbolic citizenship to preferred groups of people while casting others out as “dirty.” The trait of the preferred group in question here was that of family. In cultivating the family as the hub of moral citizenship and the righteous order of society, Watt partook in the larger transformation of U.S.

culture which involved seizing the politics of “family values” as the principal domain of conservatism (Self 367–371).

For Watt, rock, and all the cultural practices he associated with it, was a target to be fought and to be excluded from the Fourth of July in order to return a proper order to the event. Rock served as a way of assigning citizenship and of marking groups as “unwanted.” However, had his attempt truly been to make this a partisan distinction, his effort was immediately thwarted by the Beach Boys entering the fray.

The Beach Boys and Rock as Terrain for Defining “Americanness”

James Watt was not just an average member of Reagan’s administration; he was a controversial figure, the prime representative of the newly emerged religious right in Reagan’s cabinet (Troy 65). As the *Washington Post* declared, “he’s Reagan’s lightning rod, the New Right’s darling, and an enigma” (Conaway B1). Therefore, once the media started circulating news of Watt’s “Beach Boys ban,” the story quickly turned against Watt as White House officials and other conservative politicians started performatively distancing themselves from Watt’s brand of conservative thinking, at least when it came to popular music and popular culture.

The backlash transpired to be the heaviest that Watt had faced (Shabecoff B28). The key contention became Watt’s observation that the music selection of the past years had been “hard rock.” This categorization inspired the White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver to remark: “I think for a lot of people the Beach Boys are an American institution. Anyone who thinks they are hard rock would think Mantovani plays jazz” (McCombs and Harrington A17). Describing the Beach Boys as an “institution” fundamentally disputed Watt’s view of rock as a complete system wholly incompatible with the ideal social order. While Watt dealt with rock as a monolith, others engaged in making distinctions.

The ambiguity of the Beach Boys in the larger classification of rock allowed the specifics of Watt's memorandum to be rejected without taking issue with the greater ideological structure underneath it all. Rather than arguing for or against rock as a whole, the discussion focused on where the Beach Boys stood in the larger context of rock. Rather than the closed signifier used by Watt, rock's meaning became open and malleable, with some formations of rock capable of rising to the status of an "American institution" while others (the legitimate "hard rock") remained potentially worthy of being barred from the event. The long-standing conservative magazine the *National Review* emphasized this distinction by noting that Watt's concerns about rock were valid, but he had simply misfired in targeting the Beach Boys ("Watt's Shots Rock Rock" 477).

Reagan himself demonstrated this with a joke, as he was prone to do, saying that he only knew the Beach Boys were "not a rock group" because Nancy had told him ("Remarks and a Question-and-answer Session at the Annual Convention of the American Newspaper Publishers Association in New York City"). Reagan's self-deprecating joke suggested that upon learning about the "wholesome" nature of the Beach Boys, he had ceased seeing the band's music as rock. Rock by and large remained associated with cultural practices that clashed with the norms of the ordered society, while the Beach Boys were associated with the more harmless teenage pop music of the late-1950s that rock and roll originally had originally developed into before the "rock revolution" of the mid-1960s (Frith 99–100; Gillett 177–179). In a sense, the argument echoes what Elijah Wald has noted (15) regarding how rock in the late 1960s became a way assigning music with (white) respectability over the danceable entertainment-factor of rock and roll steeped in African American musical tradition. Nevertheless, the actual distinctions made in 1983 both between the good and bad kind of rock and between rock and whatever the Beach Boys were seen to play, differed strongly from those made by Wald.

Attempts to shore up the image of the Beach Boys as a family-friendly band with patriotic credentials took place robustly across the media sphere. It was undoubtedly helped by the Beach Boys themselves being a band founded on a family unit—not only in the sense of Brian, Dennis, and Carl

being brothers and Mike Love the cousin of the three, but also in the sense that the siblings' father Murry had served as an early producer/manager for the band, rocky as that relationship might have been (Gaines 35–71; Tobler 22). In addition to Watt's afore-mentioned apology, it was reported that Nancy Reagan had personally called the band to apologize. Publicly, she emphasized that she encouraged her children to listen to the Beach Boys (Clines A14). Vice-President George H.W. Bush also came to the band's defense, as the Beach Boys had played fundraisers for him in the past (Martin & Segrave 269). While in Watt's thinking one could see rock as temporally bound on both historic (to Woodstock and the 1960s, as demonstrated earlier) and personal (to period of youth, demonstrated by his characterizing young people as "unwanted" in his memorandum) levels, the public response elevated the Beach Boys to a timeless status, transcending both historical periods and generational divisions (Romano F1). This inspired a writer for the *New Republic* to remark in a celebratory manner that "rock has arrived" ("Art for Politics' Sake" 5). It had achieved a state of ubiquity that meant it could be considered part of a general sense of "Americanness."

Timothy D. Taylor has pointed to 1983 and the release of the movie *The Big Chill* in the fall of that year as a watershed moment in nostalgia for the 1960s becoming a commercially viable business venture for the music industry (167). The movie, directed by Lawrence Kasdan, was in itself an exploration of the cultural legacy of the 1960s, focusing on a group of former counterculture radicals coming to terms with their lives in the Reagan-era United States. The success of the movie's soundtrack, filled with classic rock songs from the 1960s (including "Wouldn't It Be Nice" by the Beach Boys), was a key development in a larger shift from viewing rock and popular music as purely the domain of young people. The Beach Boys were well-positioned to prosper in this environment since, as Johnny Morgan has noted, nostalgia was the band's "foundation stone and secret weapon" (8).

A week after Watt's memorandum had appeared in the national news, Mike Love of the band took to the pages of the *Washington Post* not just to defend the Beach Boys, but to bring rock itself

to a similar sphere of respectability. Love emphasized that while much of Watt's backlash had centered on the Beach Boys, the larger question of rock remained unsettled. In the piece, Love looked back on rock history and affirmed rock's standing as a fundamental part of "Americanness," being a mixture of black and white musical traditions "incorporating all the facets of the musical spectrum" ("Mike Love on Rock 'N' Roll" B1). To demonstrate the all-encompassing appeal of the surf music played by the band, Love cited the success of the surf movie *The Endless Summer* (1966) in Wichita, Kansas ("Mike Love on Rock 'N' Roll" B9). In so doing, he tapped into what Thomas Frank has described as the everyman, salt-of-the-earth quality that Kansas holds in U.S. popular imagination, being the home of Superman and the place to which Dorothy yearns to return (28–29). Love depicted rock as a national mode of leisure that resonated even in the smallest towns in the middle of the country.

To contrast this "Americanness" of rock's tradition, Mike Love noted that, "[s]ome people who think of rock 'n' roll think of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. They came from England to become rock 'n' roll heroes in America. But remember, rock 'n' roll started in America, not Britain" ("Mike Love on Rock 'N' Roll" B1). Mike Love invoked a similar period of disruption and upheaval that, for instance, conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has seen in the 1960s in relation to U.S. history as a whole (4–7). Love reached beyond the time of turmoil which James Watt had placed at the core of his conception of rock, toward a more elusive national past where Love found an almost harmonious coming together of equal parts of rhythm and blues and country, of black and white musicians, all fusing together into rock. Just as the normative tendencies associated with conservative thinking in the culture wars looked to the 1950s and beyond to find a time when society had still observed the transcendent hierarchies of the heteronormative social order (Hartman 5; Self 5–7; Hunter 108–113), so too did Mike Love find such order for rock in the 1950s and the early 1960s. All this was filtered vis-à-vis 1983, when the country was undergoing an influx of new wave rock which has been dubbed the Second British Invasion (Cateforis 52–57). Indeed, the *New Republic* piece

which saw Watt's backlash as an affirmation of rock "having arrived" likewise pointed to the Clash as an example of a band against which Watt's offensive might have been more warranted ("Art for Politics' Sake 5).

This way of characterizing history was akin to Ronald Reagan's presidential persona. Policies and ideologies aside, Reagan's demeanor and style were more in line with the musical stylings of the early 1960s Beach Boys than with the hopeless struggle of an embattled conservative against a superior and elusive foe personified in James Watt. As Daniel T. Rodgers has noted, Reagan's presidential tone differed from the established conservative rhetoric of freedom which Reagan had readily employed in the past. He tapped more rarely into the conservative notion of freedom which was constantly weighed down by a sense of responsibility, a need for sacrifice, and a requirement for self-restraint. Instead, Reagan used a more aspirational understanding of freedom which operated without restraints (Rodgers 22–31; see also Foner 310–327). In a similar sense, Gil Troy has described Reagan as "America's favorite storyteller, improvising a narrative about the present and future rooted in Americas' mythic past" (8). There was thus a sense of airiness to Ronald Reagan which was capable of masking complex realities under the veil of fantastic simplicity. This aesthetic sensibility resonated with that of the Beach Boys, or at least the version represented by Mike Love, the one band member who remained rooted in the earlier half of the 1960s.

In his 2016 memoir, Mike Love recalls one of the key devastating events in the mid-1960s which served to bring an end to the optimistic era first sparked by the election of John F. Kennedy: the 1965 Watts riots that fueled anti-Civil Rights sentiment in the country and helped turn the tide against President Lyndon Johnson (Isserman and Kazin 140–142). Love recalls deliberating whether such an event taking place in California would demand a turn toward social activism by a band so heavily associated with the state (*Good Vibrations* 122). Ultimately, he decided that their music was "a way to lift spirits, to bring people together, to offer them an escape" (*Good Vibrations* 120). Love

had therefore chosen to remain committed to the fantastic imaging of near-mythic California that the Beach Boys had helped implant in the U.S. cultural imagination in the early 1960s.

It is telling that during this period of the early 1980s when the Beach Boys were being hailed as paragons of family-friendly rock, Brian Wilson, the primary songwriter of the band, was battling drug-addiction and mental health issues and was largely omitted from the discussions (Morgan 211–215). Simultaneously, Dennis Wilson was struggling with his own addictions, and the year would end with his tragic, drinking-induced drowning in December 1983 (Gaines 7–33, 350). In order for rock to be “Reaganized” over the course of the controversy and cleansed of elements that made it ill-fitting for the greater narratives of “Americanness” being proposed, the same had to happen to the Beach Boys as a band. The timelessness with which the Beach Boys were bestowed operated by taking a snapshot of the band’s career—centered around their first hits—and extrapolating it to represent their full career. The more psychedelic elements of the band’s work and the later, the darker tones of both their music and their lives were omitted from the depiction. This was remarked upon by music critic Geoffrey Himes in September 1983 in a piece published in the *Musician*:

With the possible exception of Elvis Presley, the Beach Boys’ story contains more contradictions than any rock ‘n’ roll act in history. When Secretary of the Interior James Watt attacked the Beach Boys last spring as a “hard rock band” that attracted the “wrong element,” many reports gleefully pointed out that the Beach Boys had played a benefit concert for George Bush during the 1980 campaign. They neglected to point out that the Beach Boys first played the Washington Mall in 1971 as a warm-up for the May Day demonstrations, one of the most radical actions of the anti-war movement (Himes 65).

Himes thus disputed the image being put forth in the public sphere that depicted the Beach Boys as a band unlinked to the political turmoil of the 1960s. Indeed, the Beach Boys discography is hardly as confined to the early 1960s surfing sensibilities as the public portrayal in 1983 would have suggested. For instance, as noted by Dale Carter (573), the originally unreleased *Smile Sessions* recorded between 1966 and 1967 were filled not only with experimental musical arrangements a far-cry from the relative simplicity of surfing music, but also with lyrics exploring an imagery of Americana that was deeply resonant with the progressive movements occurring in academic historiography at the

time. Brian Wilson's lyrical collaborator for the album, Van Dyke Parks, pushed the work to explore themes critical of the classic historical composition of "Americanness," by highlighting issues such as the plight of marginalized ethnicities, the dispossessed native peoples in U.S. history, and the struggle of the average people against the forces of corporate dominion (567–569). It is notable that these lyrics faced opposition from Mike Love in particular, who felt them incongruent with his image of the Beach Boys as a band (566).

Himes looked to reconcile the ambiguous dissonance between the timeless image of the band being promoted in the media in 1983 and the real, historic band with its ups and downs and thematic complexities, by presenting a dualistic view of the band. The clean and wholesome surface concealed surprising depths and darker undercurrents. He linked this view to the persona of Brian Wilson in particular:

While their famous singles certainly support their wholesome, all-American image, their albums are filled with brooding, troubled meditations by leader Brian Wilson, one of rock's most puzzling enigmas. Most reports consigned the Beach Boys to the nostalgic oblivion of an oldies band, but they have continued to release albums that always contain several examples of exquisitely imaginative pop (Himes 65).

Himes highlighted how the whole public affair around rock music and the Beach Boys had served to produce a fantasized version of the band which was purged of all the blemishes that might tarnish its image in the eyes of the conservative ethos and moral order. The constructed "Reaganized" image of the band was presented as static and un-evolving, stuck in perpetuity in that cultural moment which had given them birth in the early 1960s and which they were endlessly reproducing. Meanwhile, Himes depicts the band not as a relic of the past but an entity with both a history and agency within the present. This dualism was focalized in the division between the shy and troubled genius songwriter persona of Brian Wilson and the cocky, flamboyant singer Mike Love, in a way that made the band itself a microcosm of the entire culture war phenomenon. In this vein, Himes continues:

Brian instilled rock 'n' roll with the suburban idealism that has shaped it ever since. [...] But when that idealism collided with adult disappointments, the optimism darkened, the music grew complicated, the hits dwindled (Himes 66).

The paragraph could as easily be a description of the standard narrative of the 1960s, beginning with unbridled optimism and a belief in the capacity of humans to create a better world and ending in disillusionment. Bernard von Bothmer has elaborated on the importance of the legacy of the 1960s in U.S. politics ever since. In his argument, there are two 1960s: the good sixties which stand for hope, optimism, and the rise of civil rights, and the bad sixties that contain the civil unrest of the latter half of the decade, the Vietnam War demonstrations, and the countercultural excesses. A basic political strategy has been to ascribe the “bad sixties” as a territory of one’s political opponents while claiming the “good sixties” as one’s own. As such, there has been a tendency on the conservative side to promote the “bad sixties” as the dominant interpretation of the decade while regarding the “good sixties” as part of the 1950s era (11–27).

Within this framework of division, the version of the Beach Boys represented by Mike Love remained safe, locked culturally in that first half of the 1960s—the “good sixties”—and thus more of a product of the 1950s than the popular understanding of the 1960s. This can even be seen in perhaps the band’s most political song, “Student Demonstration Time” from the 1971 album *Surf’s Up*. The song, based on the R&B classic “Riot in Cell Block #9,” was rewritten by Mike Love (Gaines 243). While possessing a mild antiwar bent, the song was largely a reaction to a number of student antiwar protests, many of them named in the song. The overall tone of the song remains sympathetic towards the police sent to quell the riots, with lines such as “[d]own to Isla Vista where police felt so harassed” and “Jackson State brothers learned not to say nasty things about Southern policemen’s mothers.” The emphasis remains on the feelings of the police, i.e. the forces looking to uphold the societal hierarchy against the rioters. In his 2016 memoir, Mike Love notes that the song “wasn’t so much a protest song as a message for kids to stay safe” (*Good Vibrations* 233). Thus, the song can be quite concretely read as a rejection of the “bad sixties” and the associated political unrest and a desire to return to a safer and more harmonious time.

In James Davison Hunter's classification of the culture wars, the conservative (orthodox) side was a side that celebrated stability and staticity, the unmoving transcendental values untouched by time, while the liberal (progressivist) element was constantly in motion, shaping and reshaping its values and truths in a state of endless flux (Hunter 43–45). In a similar manner, the “Reaganized” version of the Beach Boys embodied in Mike Love celebrated a band stuck in time, static, imbued with the same basic values and motivations since its inception; while Brian Wilson's version was mobile, changing, and evolving. As Himes pointed out, it was decidedly the former that dominated the debates. It is therefore in this image of early 1960s California and the Beach Boys of that era where the blueprint for an understanding of rock can be found that remained purified of any contamination from the polluting cultural practices and upheavals of the latter half of the 1960s.

The Beach Boys and California Conservatism

The popular image of California that the Beach Boys had heralded to the national consciousness in the early 1960s had been a construction in more ways than one. It is well known that the Beach Boys were not acutely involved with the surfing culture they helped popularize. Their claim to it was in no small part artificial (Morgan 30). In addition to this, the very notion of California itself that they cherished was manufactured. In the highly diverse community of Southern California, the very beaches whose virtues the Beach Boys extolled were kept segregated, often by the use of force. Whiteness was the unquestioned norm in the popular image of California surf life and while sex was on some level glorified, it was heteronormative and, ultimately, “safe” (Bukowczyk 96–106). While portrayed as a fantastic land of aspirations, the California presented in this imagery did not constitute a substantial break from the larger hierarchical social order. Even in the early 1960s, the version of California embodied in the band was in essence “Reaganized,” resembling the depiction by Gil Troy of South Carolina in *The Big Chill*: “All hints of racism have been swept under the rug” (116).

The version of the Beach Boys founded on this sense of “Californianness” presented a finely cultivated, stable system of images that resisted upheavals and corresponded well with the notions of social order found in the sphere of conservatism. The *National Review* reflected on it by noting that

[t]he Beatles ventured witty portraits of despair. The Rolling Stones huffed and puffed and boasted how evil they were. Jim Morrison fancied himself some sort of plutonic daimon [sic]. Not so the Beach Boys, whose tunes, year in, year out, for two decades, have celebrated, as in the second stanza of “California Girls,” T-birds, surfing, sun, sand, and the young lovelies thereon, all of them (it went without saying) blondes. Not a high form of patriotism, but there is in the coltishness something very American (“Watt’s Shots Rock Rock” 477).

Once again, it was largely British bands who exemplified the bad kind of rock, while Jim Morrison, on the other hand, represented rock entangled with the countercultural tendencies of the late-1960s. Meanwhile, the Beach Boys were vested with comfortable stability that resisted upheavals. The elements seen as permeating the Beach Boys’ music were afforded the quality of patriotism, even if not a high form of such. Simultaneously, the article affirmed Watt’s worries as grounded in reality: “Since the orgies of the late Sixties, rock concerts have in fact enjoyed a double standard according to which, if people don’t rut communally or OD on heroin, the evening is deemed a high social success. The point isn’t that Rock is Bad, but that crowds behave worse” (“Watt’s Shots Rock Rock” 477). The notion of a “double standard” depicted rock concerts as ruptures in spheres of public morality where the mores and norms of society broke down and the bar for good behavior was lowered.

At the same time, the affirmation that rock was not necessarily bad suggested that its core idea could be redeemed by removing those cultural practices that associated it with the “bad sixties” or that were seen as unseemly imports by British musicians. Through the more innocent and, importantly, limit-adhering music of the Beach Boys, rock could be assembled in a way that made it good and wholesome. This respect for limitations and boundaries is what Greil Marcus has noted to be the key to the ethos of the Beach Boys: “The Beach Boys celebrated California hedonism, looked for its limits, and found them. Their pleasures [...] always radiated affection—perhaps those pleasures

were rooted in friendship, or its memory, or its fantasy” (321). Marcus found the sexual hedonism of the Beach Boys to be more innocent, based on genuine affection within societal hierarchies, and with clearly defined boundaries. Similarly, one of the key upheavals of the sexual liberation of the late 1960s from a conservative perspective was not so much the proliferation of sexual acts, but rather the break-down of the unspoken boundaries that (had) contained them (Self 189).

This sense of California was met with those brought to the White House by Ronald Reagan himself: the sense of an imaginary golden era Hollywood and the Sunbelt-based political conservatism that had helped him rise to the forefront of national politics. Indeed, one of the key developments in the surge of conservative politics during the 1960s and the 1970s had been the economic, cultural, and social transformation of the Sunbelt states ranging from Florida through the old Southern states to the western inland states and finally to Southern California. The rise of technological industries and the growth of suburban living areas in these states had created communities where flourishing brands of conservative activism and thinking were moving the geographical locus of conservatism both south and west. As a result, the main tenets of conservatism became more populist, more middle class, and more antiestablishment (McGirr 5–11; Schulman 114).

While this geographical shift helped make conservatism more palatable to larger segments of the population across wide swaths of the nation, it was precisely California that saw the rise of Ronald Reagan as the inheritor of Barry Goldwater’s conservative hero figure status (McGirr 187–214), and that witnessed the first shots of the tax revolt in 1978 which paved way for the small government ideology of the Reagan administration (Schulman 194–206). As Lisa McGirr has noted (8), the grassroots populist elements of Sunbelt-style conservatism in the 1960s and early 1970s belied the contemporary stereotypes of conservatives as merely fringe crackpots or people marginalized in modern society: they were often middle-class people with technological industry jobs who actively participated in the modern consumer society. She further argues that both Reagan’s and Nixon’s appeals to a vague sense of “middle America” proved more successful in persuading these Sunbelt

conservatives than for instance George Wallace's stricter, race-based Southern working-class populism (212). It was exactly this sensibility of "middle Americanness"—undefined and vague, unified but lacking distinction—that Mike Love invoked with his references to the Kansas appeal of the Beach Boys and surfing culture. The sensibilities of early 1960s California and its surfing rock were promoted as the communal glue sustaining "middle Americanness" as a community.

Reagan also carried with him an idea of California and the image of Hollywood glamor that was not as much contemporary in the 1980s as it was a window to a fictionalized past—the one he had inhabited as an actor. This made his administration's embrace of the Beach Boys and thus, by extension, a certain conception of rock a natural one. Reagan and his California cohort carried an aesthetic view of politics which saw the presidency through the lens of mediation and the electronic media (Johnson 139–141). This tendency was remarked upon by Reagan's economic advisor David Stockman with derision: "they lived off the tube" (7). At the center of Stockman's ire was Reagan's image maker and PR advisor Michael Deaver who likewise was one of the more vocal defenders of the Beach Boys. For both Stockman and Watt, the affinity of Reagan's White House for popular cultural politics was detrimental to addressing serious issues and ideas.

The Beach Boys controversy provoked a trend among politicians to demonstrate their knowledge of the Beach Boys' back catalogue to differentiate themselves from the popular musical cluelessness of James Watt. For instance, when asked to comment at a luncheon unrelated to the whole Beach Boys episode, White House Communications Director David Gergen remarked that, "I'm just getting good vibrations from it," referencing the Beach Boys song "Good Vibrations" (Harrington B9). Meanwhile, Democratic Representative George Miller (Ca.) begged Reagan to reign in James Watt by alluding to 'Help Me Rhonda' and 'Let Him Run Wild': "Help me Ronald, don't let him run wild" (Clines A14). Republican Senator Bob Dole from Kansas stated that, "The Beach Boys are not hazardous to your health," while Democratic Representative Thomas J. Downey of New York prescribed a "Surfin' Safari" to clear Watt's musical sensibilities (Ibid.).

In a rebuff of Watt's attempt at division and classification, the quality that came to differentiate members of the preferred class from others was a working knowledge of the Beach Boys. The assemblage of rock which combined a loose sensibility of the early-1960s rock and roll with the cultural practices of Californianness as a form of "Middle Americanness" was fully subsumed into the natural order of U.S. culture. Meanwhile, it was Watt's sensibilities that were marked as being "out of place" in the Mary Douglas sense, and therefore dirty.

"Reaganized" Rock as a Tool in the Culture War

The acceptance of this loose rock assemblage into the canon of "Americanness" was what truly led to the "Reaganization" of rock as an idea. Watt's sensibilities were labeled as out of place both by public sentiment expressed across media—via him being, for instance, dubbed the "Chief Nerd" of the Reagan administration (Clines A14)—and the performative displays of Beach Boys prowess by members of the political class. People rallied behind the Beach Boys as representatives of a certain sense of a rock ethos. The Beach Boys became a symbol, as remarked upon by Mike Love in his autobiography:

We hadn't had a hit song in seven years, and what little media coverage we did receive usually focused on our status as an "oldies band," the disarray within the group, or Brian's health. But James Watt delivered the Dis Heard 'Round the World, and we were now deluged with support, DJs, editorial writers, music critics, and even politicians rallied to our defense (*Good Vibrations* 303).

Bands benefitting from being associated with controversies is of course a well-worn notion across popular music history (Kärjä 99–100). What is of note here is that this was not merely titillation inspired by forbidden fruit; defending the Beach Boys became a cultural marker, a way of declaring one's allegiance in the culture war over the legacy of rock, and doing so in a terrain that was harmless and risk-free. The Beach Boys controversy allowed one to stand up for a vague idea of rock, which perhaps carried a mild sense of the cultural practice of rebelliousness but in a way that was untarnished by the political and cultural turmoil of the latter half of the 1960s or the excesses of contemporary popular culture. This was remarked upon in April 1983 by *Variety*:

[Watt has] given this venerable band the hippest image they've had in over a decade. By forecasting that the laidback Southern California rock group would attract the 'wrong element' to their concert [...] Watt made the Beach Boys look like the standard-bearers of youthful rebellion. ("Longplay Shorts" 70).

Thus, seeing the band became not only an act of ideological resistance against the type of hardnosed cultural conservatism represented by James Watt, but also one that was condoned by the Reagan administration and conservative politics at large. The *New York Times* report on the Beach Boys concert in Atlantic City on the Fourth of July included an interview with a Major from the U.S. Air Force, who noted that "it would be politic [sic] not to like the Beach Boys after the President backed them 100 percent" (Norman B2). Liking the Beach Boys became a naturalized act, seemingly freed of any political baggage, yet paradoxically tied to the politics that gave it meaning ("Politics Rolled Aside, Reagan's Rock" 8). To *not* like the Beach Boys was seen as a political act of subversion.

Meanwhile, Watt's comment about "unwanted elements" became a rallying cry, capitalized upon by both the band and the Reagan administration. In June 1983, the band came to Washington D.C. to play a concert at the RFK Stadium and to perform a fundraiser for the Special Olympics at the White House. At the RFK Stadium, reports mention fans carrying banners insulting James Watt, while Mike Love shouted: "I thank you all undesirable elements for coming" (Feinman C1). The media played along, focusing extra attention on covering the band. At the White House fundraiser, Mike Love joked about the situation, calling the high-profile audience of politicians and celebrities a group of "desirable elements" (Radcliffe C1). Thus, Watt's exclusionary ideals were turned against him, becoming a way of demonstrating unity with the Beach Boys and a certain ideal of early 1960s optimism.

Conclusions

James Watt sought to use his idea of rock as a way of imposing a specific social order on the Fourth of July event, to exclude certain cultural practices from its sphere, and to redefine citizenship in accordance with his vision of "Americanness" as a static and unmoving classification based on the

principles of family values. The backlash he faced reveals a great deal about the politics of popular culture and conservatism in the early 1980s. James Watt's dismissal by his peers tells of a desire—politically motivated as it may be—to subsume into its sphere popular cultural forms that had often run counter to conservative worldviews. In the process, an idea of rock had to be cultivated and shaped to fit a specific cultural system. Instead of seeing rock as fundamentally out of place and therefore “dirt” or “pollution”, it was allowed within the civilized order by means of shaping it in accordance of the sensibilities of the early 1960s Beach Boys and their popularized image of California.

Through this “Reaganization,” rock was stripped of those cultural practices that aligned it too strongly with the moral or political tendencies that made it ill-fitting with the hierarchical social order. An assemblage of rock had to be created that allowed it to remain associated with the “good sixties” and the more harmless pop music of the 1950s, rather than the social upheavals and countercultural tendencies of the late 1960s.

This was a process that took place in effect rather than perhaps on purpose and thus occurred behind the lines and on the outskirts of thinking. It was a cultural change, rather than an explicitly political one. Nonetheless, the whole affair displayed a trajectory in which different conceptions of rock struggled against one another over public acceptance and in the end evolved into specifically honed tools for expressing particular political and ideological sentiments.

In his work on music and politics, John Street has argued that the two should not be seen as separate entities that only occasionally collide with one another. Instead, music and politics should be seen as two ends of a singular continuum (1). In much the same way, I see rock and ideology similarly conjoined here. Through articulating a specific understanding of rock at this particular time and place in U.S. history, the individuals involved were also engaged in the ideological structures that gave the emerging assemblage its cultural meaning. In standing for rock music against James Watt, an ideological stance could be taken against a vague sentiment symbolized by Watt—the kind which viewed all rock and much of popular culture in a hostile light—without subscribing to a more deeply

permissive view of society. The Beach Boys of Mike Love and the early 1960s came to symbolize a “Reaganized” form of rock music, seemingly scrupulous and aspirational, celebrating hedonistic pleasures only within a framework of clear boundaries between right and wrong. Through these sensibilities, the very idea of rock was tilted further toward its more pop-like and politically cleansed iteration in the late 1950s and early 1960s, making it commonsensically subsumable to the prevailing ideals of “Americanness” in the United States of the 1980s. Watt’s attack gave it the edge it needed to carry rock’s undertones of anti-establishment sensibility while being simultaneously enshrined by the very establishment itself.

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