

Beach Boys House: Dirt Sounds

Jeff Hassay and LeRoy Stevens Interview: December 2016

Dirt Sounds is a hand-made record containing soil from the house where Brian Wilson grew up in Hawthorne, California. The house no longer exists. There is a modest statue commemorating the location in a small, slightly derelict neighborhood. Dogs, cats, birds, cars, planes, a helicopter and various gardeners' power tools all lend their sonic presence along with the wind and Jeff's occasionally audible breath as he wanders the neighborhood. The audio is an 18 minute field recording of the location on an afternoon in 2016, almost exactly 50 years after the album Pet Sounds was released.

LS: When did you begin collecting soil?

JH: The first soil I got was from Chimayo, New Mexico maybe 8 years ago. Sarah and I were driving through and there's a church with dirt that supposedly has miraculous powers and has become a pilgrimage site. People will get dirt and rub it on their arthritis or on their bum knee. It's supposed to cure spiritual ills. I'm into the sense of magic. I thought that I should take some and grow something in it. Transfer the spell into something else.

Then I was in Palm Springs and it was raining and there was a giant rainbow. I pulled over and collected a patch of soil from the end of the rainbow. Somehow due to a trick of the light and mist I could actually stand at the beginning of the rainbow which happened to be a patch of dirt at the side of the freeway.

LS: They're places associated with the supernatural, but also from the homes of artists and musicians that you admire.

JH: Yeah, it's soil that has some special mojo to me specifically: Bob Dylan's house, the house where the Replacements met and rehearsed, Lee Lozano's unmarked grave. I grow Ingmar Bergman parsley! I cook with it. When Mitt Romney was running for president I went to his house, peed on it, and got dirt to grow tomatoes in that I would then throw at his house. I haven't finished the last part but I did grow marijuana in it. I mostly grow marijuana in the soils that I collect. It's funny how into it people can get but you never hear of anyone having weed that was grown in fascinating soil. Like soil from Prince's *Purple Rain* house. I have some and it literally turned a little purple!

LS: Nice!

JH: It's like when people are into wine and can taste the region that the grapes are from; terroir. It's cool how anal everything can get. Lately, I've been really into gardening. I like the whole idea of soil. What is soil? What is dirt? There are nutrients, broken down matter--I don't know exactly what's in there--but within it are the building blocks of life. It's amazing to me that a tomato seed can be almost indistinguishable from a marijuana seed. Inside is a little factory. You just moisturize the dirt, add some sun and that seed turns into a tomato. It's natural, yes, but also *supernatural*. I suspect there's something psychic packed into places and soils. When I go to the house that I grew up in there's all

sorts of energies and memories all around. The walls and the doorknobs and the crabgrass all have some of that absorbed into them. Like the Beach Boys family home. That's what made them--their environment to some degree.

LS: When did you first visit their home?

JH: A year or so ago. It was late-ish at night. As I parked I heard the loudest cat fight I had ever heard in my life. It was four minutes of shrill terror and I thought, I need to record this. So I pulled out my phone and as soon as I hit record, they stopped. There was also a mangy dog near the fence that was growling. It was so vivid. Immediately I thought, this is the real *Pet Sounds*!

That album [*Pet Sounds*] has always been very important to me. I've always listened to it. I imagine them growing up and this guy [Brian Wilson] is obsessed with music. He's driven by it. His dad's a frustrated songwriter, pushing music down the throats of his sons and nephews. Brian listened to music religiously, but also *sounds*—goats, dogs, cats and stuff around clearly affected him. The roar of the ocean. I think it's part of him and the pastoralism that he taps into. The belief that there was a better time when things were more pure and now modern life is fucking things up. He had these thoughts pulling on him. Going back to the site 50 years later, there's still birds squealing, dogs barking, lawn equipment buzzing. And it's a block from the airport so you can hear a plane taking off.

LS: In *Pet Sounds*, Brian Wilson collected sounds from outside and inserted them into a studio album. In a way, *Dirt Sounds* inverts that process.

JH: Yes. He brought sand from the beach so they could have their feet in sand. He brought in burning logs. They went to the San Diego Zoo and recorded animals. They put it *on* the record, we put it *in* the record.

LS: I wonder about your activity collecting soil and whether you consider it art?

JH: Not at first, but as the project took shape it began to veer towards that. The collection is over there [points to fifteen or so paper coffee cups labeled and filled with dirt]. Philip K Dick, that's one of my best.

LS: Where was that collected?

JH: In Fullerton [California] in the place where he was in 1972 when he saw God. God came to him as a pink light. I think he was doing a lot of speed at the time. He's written about it extensively. That's where he had this psychic shift. I think he really became a mad man. He did his most canonical work after that. It's just a little gated apartment building in a bland, monotonous neighborhood. I had to sneak in. A lot of the soil that I have involved me having to do shady private-eye stuff. Track a place down, trespass somewhere, smuggle a cup of dirt through customs and not declare it. Customs forms specifically ask if you are bringing soil with you. I always say no and hope that I won't have to explain later.

I started to think of it more as an art piece after doing it for a while and maybe just becoming aware of what I was doing. At the time, Sarah and I wrote reviews called *Parallel and Simultaneous*. We would make up an artist and write a synopsis of their body of work. It was a good way to think about art and go off on mental tangents. I would ask Sarah, has anyone done this? Taken it further? Is this allowed?

LS: Visiting these sites demystifies the genius in a way, but also reveals and extends stories that lay dormant within the soil. I see a relationship between your production and distribution of site-specific weed and book publishing. You actively produce books that are largely bootlegs of rare editions, lost or unpublished manuscripts. When did you begin making them?

JH: I started in the 90's by making J.D. Salinger books. It was a long and expensive process so I ended up selling them on eBay to fund it. I would also record *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *West Wing* episodes and would sell them for \$20 an episode.

LS: Would you make a DVD collection of the season?

JH: That would have been easier. DVDs were around but VHS tapes were still more popular at the time. The first and last episodes of the season were the most important, because the networks would show it and then maybe not play it again for 6 weeks, if ever. So if you were a fan and missed it, that's it. At that time I also got deeper into the Beach Boys. I compiled songs into what I considered to be the ideal version of the Beach Boys *Smile* album. I read everything I could about it, bought bootlegs, traded tapes and found things on Napster. It would sell for \$60 and the Salinger would sell for like \$300. I could sell a couple per week and I lived off that. When I realized, maybe 7 years ago, that I could print my own books, I published a revised and much better version of Salinger. Then, after his death, all these letters came out that had never been seen or published. So I did a new edition with letters, stuff he wrote in college and later I did an edition with unpublished stories that I photographed at the Ransom Center in Texas.

LS: Rather than facsimiles, they tend to be new books created from fragments that are compiled and edited by you.

JH: Yeah, I copyedit and design them. I did other books like *Penetration* by Ingo Swann. He did remote viewing for the government for twenty years and wrote the book about it. It's so bizarre. It can't all be true. But clearly some of it must be kind-of-true or have some validity. The original is hard to find and sells for a crazy amount. So I just decided to re-print it.

Then I acquired the screenplay for the *Tony Clifton Story* by Andy Kauffman and Bob Zmuda. Because of legal reasons it will never be able to come out. It's a shame because it's a good screenplay. So I printed that. I just did *Morrissey: Complaints and Apologies*, compiled from 8 years of press statements. I omitted everything that wasn't a complaint or an apology. I didn't have to omit much.

I'm working on some new ones now. I'm slowly finding short stories written by Leonard Cohen. I'm almost done with *Strategic Boogie Woogie* which consists of writings by

musicians about art. There's one by George Harrison where he's writing to his father explaining why being an artist is valid. Another is a letter from Frank Sinatra bitching out George Michael for wanting to step away from fame.

LS: Do you publish your own writing?

JH: I've done a few of my own. *Before and After the P Was Silent* and a book of poems called *Diet of Worms*.

LS: Do you put your name on these books?

JH: No, never.

LS: But you list your publishing company, Stagger Fancy Press?

JH: Yeah. I've thought of having a website, but I'd rather be anonymous and just do it. I like the existential / Zen aspect of making something, trying to remove ego and then put it out, in the void. I have all these different projects and I'm excited about all of them. That's the one litmus test. Also, like the marijuana, the books are nice to give to people and I like using a different part of my brain. For me, it's a refreshing change from working on music, or cooking.

I make music videos too in a similar spirit to the books. I don't think that I'm ever listed as the director / editor. The videos are mainly found footage, stuff that interests me. It's nice not to have to worry about clearing permissions. Sometimes I shoot them too or dance in them. Briefly last year a record label asked me to make videos for some of their artists. I did it and I think I did a good job but they were considered a little too bizarre. It helped me to realize that with most things I don't really know what I'm doing so I don't have to worry about doing them correctly. I can be imperfect as long as it's interesting. To be interesting, something should be a little bizarre.

LS: Copying a book can be similar to tracing. I think something of the scribe always rubs off.

JH: There's a Borges story where an imagined author rewrites *Don Quixote* word for word. He's just writing it, and it happens to be the exact same. Is the text by Cervantes or the imagined author? or Borges?

LS: This record is a real abstraction. An artifact. Part of the actual geography dislocated. But there's still this mystery. I've never been to the Beach Boys site, even though it isn't that far--but somehow it's more fun to imagine the place.

JH: Yeah, it's all about the *thought* of it. That's what's nice about the dirt in the records. It fetishizes something overlooked and ordinarily valueless.

The city tore down the Wilson house to build the 105 freeway. Where their house was, is now a hill and the 105. A few years ago the city made the site into a historical landmark. There's something so beautiful about how it backs up against the freeway, sprinkled with piss from countless homeless people and animals in an anonymous suburban

neighborhood near a cruddy airport. There's no sign when driving. You just come upon it. It's unremarkable in every way and it will take your breath away if you let it.

LS: He created a world in his music. It's a kind of fiction.

JH: He needed to! His family life was bad and his inner life was conflicted. But that's what's beautiful about it. A rose can grow out of shit. Something remarkable can come out of something so bland. People who live along that street know it's the Beach Boys site and I think that's nice for them. They're clearly on the lower economic bracket. There's shitty run down houses, but hey, it's the American dream. We can make this happen!

LS: It must be strange to live in a place that's a pilgrimage for people. To have people sneaking in the bushes. There's a story where Bob Dylan visited his childhood home. He stepped out of a limousine, went into the yard and apparently swung from the laundry line, then got back in the car and took off.

JH: Damn, imagine that!

LS: The *Dirt Sounds* recording reveals so much about the neighborhood. There are moments when a person with high heels seems to walk by and later a landscaping crew enters. It's almost choreographed the way things seem to keep emerging.

JH: I parked right in front of the monument. I knew that 100 feet to the south, there was a gnarly dog eager to bark and I knew I wanted that. There were cats.

LS: Those cats were probably once pets.

JH: They were wild and now they're wild again.

To my left there was a film shoot going on. It's so LA. In the middle of this barren neighborhood at 3pm, in derelict run-down places, they're fucking shooting a movie. But it was really mellow, so they were probably setting-up to shoot at 8pm. There's a bored, retired cop, traffic cones and a small film crew just sitting there about 1,000 feet away. All this on a street that is probably completely empty 98% of the time. I took a bag full of soil for the records but I didn't have a shovel so I used my coffee cup which was a slow dig in the hard soil.

LS: Did you record it with your phone?

JH: Yeah. I start at the monument, then I go up to the unhinged dog and it's screaming at me and now I look very suspect. Standing there antagonizing the dog--and then this woman walks by and I decide to start walking too, right behind her but I realize that walking right behind a woman on an empty street probably isn't cool. At that point, the cop is looking at me. Then I had to pee. So at the end, I turn the corner, put the phone down where there was a guy cutting and blowing the grass. So I'm peeing and sort of watching what's going on, but the gardener is looking at me. Catches me in my turpitude. It would have been a good video. At some point I put the phone up to my mouth to make it look like I was talking.

LS: Listening to the record, you're almost waiting for something to happen, you think maybe it doesn't work, there's nothing there, then all of a sudden something crystal clear comes in. A wind chime or helicopter.

JH: Peaks out of the noise, the aether. There is a little bit of soil that pierces the top of the record that could possibly damage your record needle. So in some ways, it's anti-music, nihilism.

LS: It tears away at it. Also, you're playing the landscape. You can touch the soil. It sticks through. The album is a kind of concrete music. It's conceptual, but expressed so physically. The experience of listening is equal to touching it.

JH: I'm sure there are literally little bits of concrete in there. Some of the records have other debris that was in the soil like twigs and bugs.

LS: It's like Jurassic Park.

JH: Ricardo Montalbán used to do commercials selling pieces of Jesus' cross. Little slivers of wood. I remember watching when I was a kid, spellbound. I knew that it was bullshit. But what if it *was* Christ's cross!? The thought of it is really something. With this record, you can see the soil. Imagine the potential. It's displayed, captured.

LS: Distilled.

JH: Psychic soil from Brian Wilson!

BEACH BOYS HOUSE: DIRT SOUNDS Jeff Hassay

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