

THE FUTURISTIC SOUNDS OF THE FACTORY FOREMAN

Unheeded in the archives of '60s popular culture, **TOM WILSON** was the producer behind the era's most daring artists, and the best-known overdubbing session of all time.

But behind his lightning-in-a-bottle work with Dylan, Zappa, Simon & Garfunkel and The Velvet Underground lies a treasure trove of delights, from Burt 'Robin' Ward to Soft Machine.

With a biopic now in development, **SEÁN CASEY** inspects the music factory. Portrait by **CHARLIE STEINER**
"He had vision, you know?"

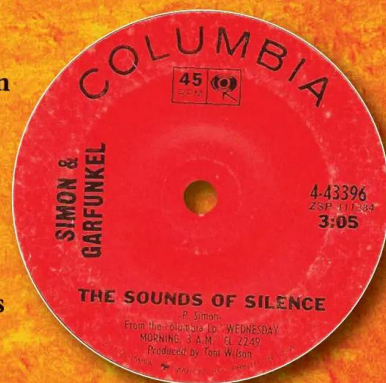
When Paul Simon heard the reupholstered version of his sombre folk song 'The Sound Of Silence' in 1965, he wasn't bowled over. Simon wrote the tune two years earlier and, with Art Garfunkel, recorded it for the duo's debut *Wednesday Morning, 3AM*, released on Columbia in October '64. In the face of Beatlemania, it flatlined. Assuming their career was over, Simon performed in small clubs across Europe and Garfunkel returned to university. Unbeknownst to them, as an analogue prototype of its later use as a desolation meme, the song's earnestness was an in-joke with the in-crowd. "[It] actually became a running joke," Dave Van Ronk remembered. "For a while there, it was only necessary to start singing, 'Hello darkness, my old friend' and everybody would crack up."

The track began to attract airplay on college radio, something that caught the attention of its producer. "So, we put this record out, and it sold maybe a thousand copies. That was it," Wilson told *Melody Maker* in '76. "But one day, Stan Kaven, a promotion guy, came to me and said it had suddenly sold X amount of copies. I said to him, 'Hey, be cool.' But he said, 'Yeah,' and he said most of them were sold in Miami. He said, according to our guy in

Miami it was 'The Sound Of Silence' they liked, but they wanted a beat put to it." During a session for Dylan's 'Like A Rolling Stone' in June '65, Wilson asked Al Gorgoni, Vinnie Bell, Joe Mack and Bobby Gregg to overdub guitars, bass and drums. The idea was simple: make Simon & Garfunkel sound like The Byrds who were flying high following the release of 'Mr Tambourine Man' two months earlier. Although the players had to slow to

keep in time with the original – recorded without a metronome – it worked. By January '66, the jingle-jangle remix was a smash, relegating its predecessor to a footnote. "The single was held up from July to late September or October," Wilson said, "by which time I'd left for MGM – more money – but, of course, it went to #1."

Wilson's ingenuity landed Simon & Garfunkel their first hit, but it wasn't his





Jazz roots, folk routes. Tom Wilson during the recording of The Mothers Of Invention's *We're Only In It For The Money*, Mayfair Recording Studio, New York, summer 1967

maiden voyage. Contrasting with contemporaries Phil Spector and George Martin, Wilson wasn't a hands-on producer crafting a distinctive sound, relying instead on his commercial senses, honed during his time as a deejay. Like a painter, he examined his surroundings before sketching; he didn't write the charts, he reflected them. "Nowadays they'd call him a producer, but back then they didn't call him that; he was a typical A&R man," Dylan said in 2017.

A Texas native, Wilson was imposing in stature (six-foot four), urbane in character. His career began at Harvard University. "I was president of the jazz society there and began to meet some of the musicians. We sponsored one of Dave Brubeck's earliest concerts. I did interviews with Charlie Parker and others, and we recorded Herb Pomeroy, Serge Chaloff and some more. We started to can programmes, and that's where I learned radio and recording technique."

After graduating, he launched Transition Records, a jazz label that became home to artists including Sun Ra and Donald Byrd. When it folded in 1957, he moved to United Artists and then Savoy, before joining Columbia as an in-house producer where he was assigned to folk revival poster boy Bob Dylan. "I'd been recording Sun Ra and Coltrane, and I thought folk music was for the dumb guys," Wilson said. "This guy played like the dumb guys. But then these words came out. I was flabbergasted. I said to Albert Grossman, who was there in the studio, 'If you put some background to this you might have a white Ray Charles with a message.'"

The pair used the studio like a lab: trying and testing new combinations of players and sounds. Tuned into the emerging folk-rock wave, for *Bringing It All Back Home*, Wilson began overdubbing instruments – applying his cookie-cutter to recordings for Dion's *Wonder Where I'm Bound*, which remained unreleased until '69 (see sidebar). "He didn't divert what you were doing. He just kind of directed you," Dion wrote.

Wilson's work with Dylan ended in disagreement, supposedly over the final mix of 'Like A Rolling Stone', with the artist sardonically suggesting he would ask Spector to oversee his next album. Wilson shrugged it off, moving to MGM where he recruited musicians from Columbia, including Al Kooper, who famously joined that session. "He really saved my life that day on that 'Like A Rolling Stone' session," Kooper remembered. "I went over to Tom Wilson, and I was invited just to watch, you know, and I said, 'Man,

why don't you let me play the organ? I got a great part for this.' Which was bullshit. I had nothing. And he said, 'You're not an organ player'. And then they came to him and said, 'Phone call for you Tom.' And he just went and got the phone. And I went into the studio and sat down at the organ. He didn't say no. He just said I wasn't an organ player."

At MGM, Wilson was top dog, broadening the Verve imprint's output which sat firmly in folk until then. He embodied its rebrand from Folkways to Forecast, whipping out varied output, often without consulting anyone. "It took three days to cut an album. Then we never heard it again until we saw it in the stores," Kooper said.

He was behind releases such as Freda Payne's sassy *How Do You Say I Don't Love You Anymore* (the title-track written by Kooper) and Nick Ashford's 'California Soul' – penned in response to 'California Dreamin'' at Wilson's behest. The anodyne folk-rock of Jim & Jean, frenzied garage singles by The Enemys (featuring a pre-Three Dog Night Cory Wells) and African jazz of Hugh Masekela – initially deemed too exotic for MGM – were all issued due to Wilson's backing. But it was the psychedelic blues scene to which he was most drawn.

After Columbia declined, Wilson signed Kooper's loose collective The Blues Project and supervised debut *Live At The Café Au Go Go*, their first studio LP *Projections*, and singles by affiliates including Barry Goldberg, and former member Tommy Flanders' weekend anthem 'Friday Night City'. His non-interventionism became a calling card – and later a problem. "Tom was sort of a spectator sport producer. He didn't do all that much," Kooper recalled. "He'd put you in the studio and get the job done."

Nonetheless, Wilson was spearheading a sound that combined proficiency with originality, bringing together East and West coast styles. In '65, he flew to California and encountered The Mothers Of Invention at LA's Whisky A Go Go. Surprised to hear them singing about the Watts riots, he assumed he'd found another typical white blues band. "He stayed for five minutes, said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' slapped me on the back, shook my hand and said, 'Wonderful. We're gonna make a record of you,'" Zappa recalled.

At TTT Studios in Hollywood, Wilson heard 'Who Are The Brain Police?' and realised he'd let loose an entirely different beast, reportedly phoning his bosses in New York to tell them he had something strange on his hands. But he remained unperturbed, fully backing their debut

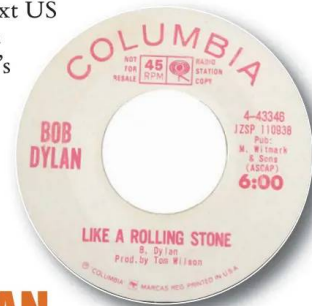
Freak Out!, a subversive mashup of piss-take, blues and doo-wop aberration that made even The Blues Project sound like Perry Como in treacle. "I promoted them myself," Wilson explained. "I had to sell it or lose my job."

He produced the Mothers' second album, appearing on the cover of their self-produced third, *We're Only In It For The Money*, and momentarily in the surreal documentary *Uncle Meat*, in which Zappa is heard talking about backing Wilson in running for presidency.

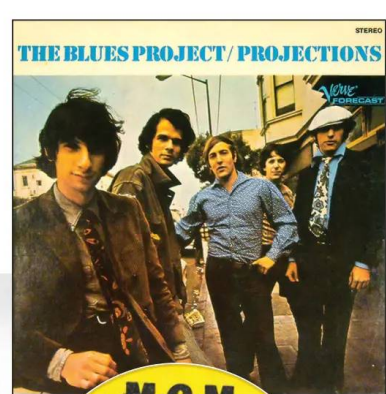
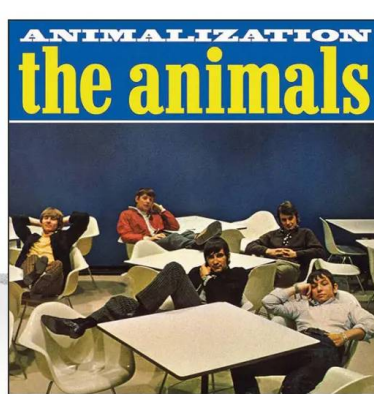
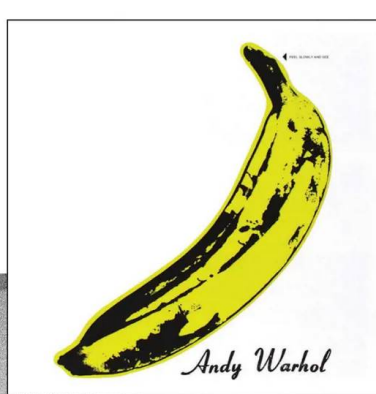
Their first collaboration, however, came in novel form. In '66, MGM signed Burt 'Robin' Ward to record a single, handing duties to Wilson who enlisted Zappa to write and arrange, resulting in 'Boy Wonder I Love You' – a now sought after single – and other sidekick ditties. That Zappa called it "one of the weirdness projects" is revealing, though for Zappa-ficionados, the full session recordings – bootlegged in 2004, including the superb 'Teenage Bill Of Rights' – are an important, even more bizarre, addition to his canon. Ward found it peculiar too. "They had incredibly long, scraggly hair, and clothes that appeared not to have been washed in this century, if ever," he scorned. "They were maniacs!"

The single was pulled due to pressure from religious groups who complained about its veiled sexuality, but Wilson's entanglement with Batman didn't end there. He produced cash-in album *Batman & Robin*, credited to The Sensational Guitars Of Dan & Dale, in fact a collaboration between The Sun Ra Arkestra and The Blues Project, explaining why 'Robin's Theme' sounds like the sidekick being taunted by a gang of soulful baddies.

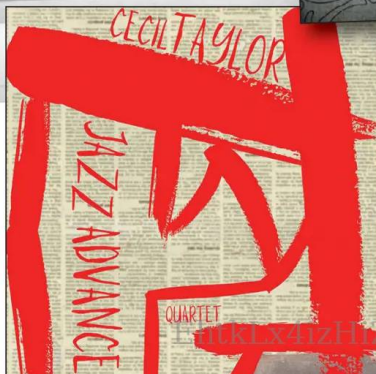
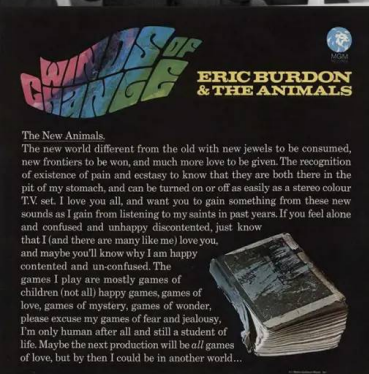
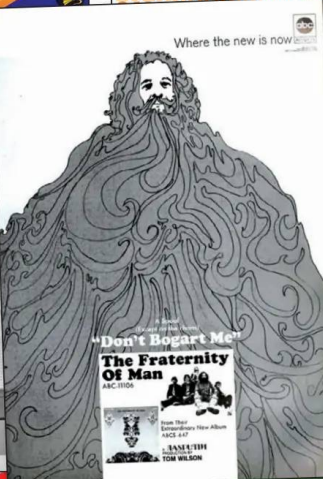
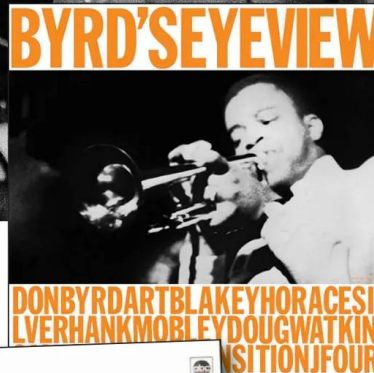
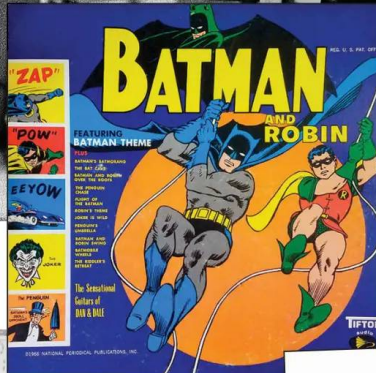
Wilson was a connector, picking and pairing personnel. He did so for The Animals, introducing them to Zappa, which radically altered their trajectory. One of few UK acts he produced, The Animals were at a crossroad following their success as part of The British Invasion. With tensions brewing with producer Mickie Most, at the end of '65, the group severed ties and signed with MGM in North America, landing on Wilson's desk soon after. Although their first Wilson-sponsored LP *Animalization* retains their recognisable rawness, their next US release *Animalism* showcases Zappa's arrangements on outliers 'All Night Long' and 'The Other Side Of Life'.



"I'D BEEN RECORDING SUN RA AND COLTRANE, AND I THOUGHT FOLK MUSIC WAS FOR THE DUMB GUYS. DYLAN GUY PLAYED LIKE THE DUMB GUYS. BUT THEN THESE WORDS CAME OUT. I WAS FLABBERGASTED" TOM WILSON



A selection of Wilson productions; Frank Zappa, engineer Gary Kellgren, Mothers bassist Roy Estrada and Wilson recording *We're Only In It For The Money*, Mayfair Recording Studio, New York, summer 1967 (this pic); Wilson with Connie Francis recording her *Movie Greats Of The 60's*, '66 (below left); Wilson with Nico during sessions for *Chelsea Girl* at Mayfair, May '67 (below right)





Wilson (second left) at the LA Record Plant launch party, December 1969; Wilson (left) joins the Mothers, Gail Zappa and Jimi Hendrix for *We're Only In It For The Money's* inner sleeve; Wilson recording one of his *Music Factory* shows, '68; *The New York Times Magazine* cover story, September '68

As Eric Burdon revelled in his newfound kinship, breathlessly telling *Hit Parade* of his time on the "freakout scene", Zappa was less impressed, saying, "On 4th July '66, on what you might describe as a moment's notice, I was asked to manufacture, on behalf of Tom Wilson, for The Animals, a musical organisation from England, a set of arrangements." With the band absent owing to a "monster party" the night before, Zappa set to work with session players Carol Kaye and Don Randi, crafting The Animals' new sound, before Burdon *et al* arrived in the afternoon to overdub vocals. "The two songs the union cats played sounded pretty tight. They sounded better than The Animals," Zappa remarked.

Burdon's fresh influences modelled the sound of The Animals' psychedelic reincarnation. Shedding their blues roots, Wilson-produced albums *Winds Of Change* and *The Twain Shall Meet*, find the two remaining originals, Burdon and Barry Jenkins, exploring eastern philosophy and anti-war lyricism over predilections of the times: sitars, oboes, horns, flutes, even bagpipes. For all its pastiche poetry, sycophantic name-dropping and derivative hipness, Wilson's patronage of Burdon, changed their material noticeably, transmuting them from Northwest drinkers to West Coast thinkers. So emphatic was Wilson's influence, according to Burdon's rambling sleeve notes for *Winds Of Change*, it even cured his prejudice.

Wilson was enjoying California, but didn't abandon New York. After attempting to bag them for Columbia in '65, he signed The Velvet Underground to MGM, supervising their iconic debut and even requesting a radio-friendly single, which became 'Sunday Morning'. Though most songs were credited to Andy Warhol as producer, John Cale later set the record straight. "Warhol didn't do anything. Tom Wilson produced nearly all the tracks."



Recorded throughout '66, sessions also spawned Nico's *Chelsea Girl* after Wilson was talked out of showcasing her vocals more on the Velvet's debut. Now regarded a singular *avant-garde* folk album, Nico wasn't thrilled with Larry Fallon's arrangements, overdubbed at Wilson's request. "I asked for drums, they said no. I asked for more guitars, they said no. And I asked for simplicity, and they covered it in flutes!" she complained in '81. "The first time I heard the album, I cried, and it was all because of the flute."

With eight albums in the Top 100 in '67, Wilson's signature had become successful experimentation. The same year he began promoting his wares further when MGM sponsored *Music Factory*, a free-form radio show beginning life in New York, and syndicated to 100-plus regional stations. Bookended by Zappa's 'Help I'm A Rock' as intro and outro theme, over the next year, he hosted 25 episodes featuring interviews with his artists and other MGM/Verve acts, including Odetta and Tim Buckley, as well as Ultimate Spinach, and The Appletree Theatre, displaying his interest in the embryonic Bosstown Sound – a slogan coined by fellow producer Alan Lorber. Thanks to music historian Irwin Chusid,

all episodes of *Music Factory* are available online, preserving these unique time-capsules and offering a glimpse into the artists, parlance and (repetitive) commercial programming tickling the eardrums of '60s audiences.

While '65 through '67 represent his

commercial zenith, Wilson's entrepreneurial spirit remained. At the start of '68, he resigned as A&R Director for MGM, establishing The Tom Wilson Organisation incorporating multiple production, management and publishing companies such as Rasputin Productions, Gunga Din, Lumumba, Reluctant Management,

Terrible Tunes and Maudlin Melodies. He struck distribution deals with major labels ABC, Capitol and his former employers MGM, later explaining his decision to go it alone. "You know why I went independent? Because I got tired of making money for a millionaire who didn't even bother to send me a Christmas card."

Wilson was a gambler. Sometimes it paid off, often it didn't. In his first year as an independent, he issued albums by The Purpose, The Bagatelle, Central Nervous System and Ill Wind. Most were recorded at New York's Record Plant with young engineer Eddie Kramer (sessions for the latter were anything but convivial, with the group frustrated by Wilson's preoccupation – supposedly mostly on the phone or reading the paper).

In late '68, a *New York Times Magazine* profile was published, depicting Wilson as a wealthy mover and shaker: a lothario with his finger on the pulse of popular culture. For the cover, above the subtitle



"YOU KNOW WHY I WENT INDEPENDENT? BECAUSE I GOT TIRED OF MAKING MONEY FOR A MILLIONAIRE WHO DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER TO SEND ME A CHRISTMAS CARD" TOM WILSON

"A record producer is a psychoanalyst with rhythm," he's photographed with Ellen McIlwaine, singer of Fear Itself, another fresh signing. Ostensibly a puff piece, it tickles at Wilson's less public image, describing a fraught telephone call with a label executive, and his reluctance to discuss drug taking (according to Zappa, Wilson had taken LSD the evening they met and during the mixing of *Freak Out!*). "Just don't say anything that might hurt my family," he requested.

With Chas Chandler, he co-produced Soft Machine's debut, though his hands-off approach went down like a cup of cold sick again. "We had the guy who did Dylan, and all he did was sit on the telephone and talk to his girlfriend while we played a live set," Kevin Ayers told *Uncut*. "So, there was no production whatsoever. It was one of the reasons I got out of Soft Machine. A top producer, a top studio, but no-one seems to give a fuck."

A year later he earned a gold disc for Fraternity Of Man's stoned country ballad 'Don't Bogart Me' following its inclusion in *Easy Rider*, but his finely tuned senses were waning. He switched lanes, producing *Detroit 1984*, an album of Motown covers given psychedelic makeovers by non-existent band Albino Gorilla, and soon after found himself at that label, producing for the soul giant's mis-directed Natural Resources imprint. Named after a Martha Reeves & The Vandellas album, the subsidiary was home for artistic orphans in the wake of Rare Earth's funk-rock success. Judging by the output, it's unlikely Berry Gordy sent a Christmas card either, but releases by Earthquene and Noel Redding's post-Fat Mattress band Road contain glimmers of potential, likely what Wilson saw.

As glam-rock and smooth soul took hold, his output slowed to a trickle. His work with former Bar-Kay Vernon Burch saw him trying his hand at disco, but it didn't work out. Initially paired by Stax stalwart David Porter, Wilson was heard in a heated altercation with the artist over production credits during an interview in '76.

That year, connected to complications resulting from Marfan Syndrome, Wilson suffered his first heart attack, but he continued to pursue new avenues. He relocated to London, and with frequent collaborator Fallon, penned an R&B opera entitled *Mind Flyers Of Gondwana*, a morality tale combining African American history with the legend of Atlantis. Set to star Gladys Knight, Minnie Riperton and Gil Scott-Heron, with Bob Marley earmarked for the soundtrack, they hoped Stanley Kubrick would direct a big screen adaptation. Neither materialised. Kubrick was likely too exhausted after (watching) *Barry Lyndon*.

Wilson returned to the US, dying of a heart attack soon after in '78 at the age of 47. Despite his cross-genre success, fanfare in the wake of his passing was limited. His stewardship of "electric Dylan" was neglected in *No Direction Home* and he received only a cursory mention in Todd Haynes' documentary *The Velvet Underground*. Even the date of his death on his gravestone was incorrect.

It's here that Pfonetic Productions – makers of *Immediate Family*, a film about '70s session musicians – step in, with a new biopic of Wilson's life in the pipeline. "We're still in the development stage so don't have a release date yet, but feel good about the direction we're headed in," co-founder Greg Richling tells *Shindig!*. "Tom's son (Tom Wilson III) has been so invaluable, and he's become a good friend. Through him, we really have a sense of what kind of man his father was behind the scenes."

But why a biopic, given Pfonetic's recent success with documentaries? "We felt there was enough range to Tom's story to warrant a biopic and because information on Tom is anaemic, we got the essence of the man through conversations with his son in addition to the usual archival available. The time he existed in and the renaissance man he proved himself to be, gave us an opportunity to tell the story in a feature film where there's more room for poetic license, as long as it stays true to the man he was.

"It's an exciting story driven by Tom as the central character, determined to make it against all odds; a Black Harvard graduate starting out in the '50s, trying to succeed in a white world during racial conflict and navigating being in a bi-racial marriage with children in that era. It goes beyond merely recounting events like recording 'Like A Rolling Stone' and reveals business and personal relationships that had a strong impact on his brief, yet remarkable life."

More than 45 years after his death, this visionary producer will finally receive the flowers he deserves. Though a release date may not be imminent, whenever it lands, *Shindig!* is in. [GH](#)

With thanks to Greg Richling and Tom Wilson III

In Restless Dreams: The Music Of Paul Simon is now available on streaming platforms

WILSON'S WORLD

SEAN CASEY picks five Tom oddities

The Purpose

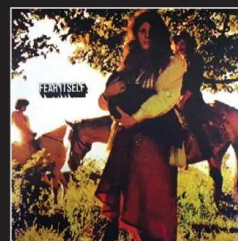
The Purpose Of The Purpose Is The Blues (ABC, 1968)



John McVie and Butterfield-Blues, elevated by Robert 'Chocolate' Wright's finger-blistering drumming.

Fear Itself

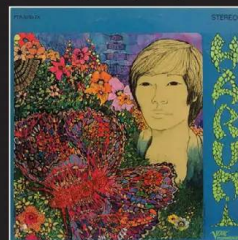
Fear Itself (Dot, 1968)



Album was killed by a drunk driver.

Harumi

Harumi (Verve, 1968)



Ando, a Manhattan photographer with records showing he passed away a year later.

Dion

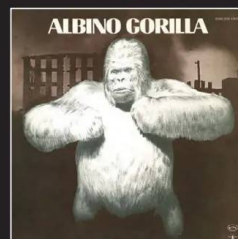
Wonder Where I'm Bound (Columbia, 1969)



Wilson's (and Kooper's) input.

Albino Gorilla

Detroit 1984 (Kama Sutra, 1970)



Norman Whitfield's 'Psychedelic Shack', which was sampled by A Tribe Called Quest, Large Professor and J Dilla among others.

John McDuffy spent the early '60s performing with The Kingbees alongside future Carole King guitarist Danny Kortchmar before joining The Blues Project temporarily. It's here the trace goes cold, but it's likely that his connection with Kooper led to this solitary LP by his new upstart. 'Dustcracks, Bugs And Roaches' and 'Give In' present a unique blend of Dr

After a stint in New York, vocalist Ellen McIlwaine returned to Atlanta to form Fear Itself who found themselves at The Record Plant with Wilson and Kramer to record their eponymous debut. Often attracting Big Brother and Jefferson Airplane parallels, its blend of fuzzy blues and acid-rock was highly regarded, but the group's tenure was cut-short when bassist Paul

Speaking of Wilson in 1989, Zappa said, "One day he came in and announced that he had just signed a Japanese psychedelic artist named Harumi, and Harumi was making some kind of flower-power album. I never heard the album." In fact, Harumi was a New Yorker, one of scant details known, though a 2006 article about an eviction protest names him as Harumi

Dion DiMucci's recordings with Wilson – evidently made in parallel with *Bringing it All Back Home* – sat dormant for four years until they were paired with other unreleased material following Dion's return to the charts. Despite being stitched together from various sessions with different personnel, it works well with 'Now' and 'Wake Up Baby' best exposing

Even compared with the *avant-garde* rock Wilson was known for, this is far out. An unknown band – supposedly featuring Bernard 'Pretty' Purdie on drums – take on Motown with Jamaican rhythms, funk-drenched interludes and a cover showing dystopian Detroit being overrun by an oculocutaneous primate. It appears on crate-digging lists due to its version of