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Brian Wilson, Songwriter 1962-1969

Executive Produced by Rob Johnstone

Narrated by Thomas Arnold

Chrome Dreams, 2010

190 minutes / 2 disks, USD \$21.95

Chromedreams.co.uk

MVDvisual.com

Is there *anyone* who doubts that Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys was one of the great recording producers in rock'n'roll history? From the original bubblegum surf sound through the master work of *Pet Sounds*, there is hardly anyone who could touch his productions in harmony and layering of sounds.

If there is a person or two who are unaware of what lay behind – and beneath – the tracks, this British double-disk documentary set is for you. And if you are someone who is a fan of the man, well, this is also of interest.

Amid clips of the William Asher-directed Beach flicks of the early '60s, focusing on the likes of Dick Dale, the story starts off at the beginning, of the rising of the nascent surf scene and sound that was based on the likes of Dale and the Ventures. There is no mention of Duane Eddy's 1958 "Rebel Rouser," which I believe had a hand in that sound, though father of the twang guitar, Leo Fender (who lived near the Wilson family) *is* given credit. In fact, before the Beach Boys, most of the music that would fuel the surf sound would be instrumentals (Dale being a rare exception). Other major influences listed for Brian are the likes of Chuck Berry, B.B. King, Ray Charles, and the vocal jazz harmonies of the Four Freshmen. In fact, according to original Beach Boys member David Marks (1961-63; he left when Al Jardine came in), who is interviewed pretty extensively here, what made Wilson unique was his ability to effectively combine rock'n'roll and jazz.

As the Beach Boys [BB] started out, Brian used his music to bring people to him, rather than him having to go out to meet anyone, states BB biographer Peter Ames Carlin (*Catch a Wave: The Rise, Fall and Redemption of the Beach Boys*, 2006). That's just one of the many great insights presented by some interesting folks in their own right, who are interviewed for this set, such as other writers like Domenic Priore (*Smile: The Story of the Beach Boys' Lost Masterpiece*), Anthony DeCurtis (editor of *Rolling Stone* mag), and Phil Lambert (a music professor and author of *Inside the Music of the Beach Boys*). But more on the other talking heads later.

During the recording of their first single, "Surfin'," released on the indie Candix label, there is an audio of Brian pushing the other members to give what he wants to hear. While dad Murray is not mentioned at this point, there is obviously something that Brian picked up from him as far as stating his mind, even though he was shy outside the studio (and nowhere does this documentary mention the infamous story about how Brian could

not hear in stereo because of being deafened in one ear by a shot to the head by said Murray). Murray does come into the story after the single is a local hit and he uses it to push the interest of the BB to Capitol Records, who sign the band to much success for all.

We are, around this point, introduced to three key players in the BB history of this period through interviews: the BB's manager and promoter Fred Vail, LA producer and songwriter Russ Titelman, and close friend and confidant of Brian's, Danny Hutton, who would go on to his own fame in Three Dog Night.

There's a lot about Brian I didn't know in this period (I love the BB, but have not read too much of their history, including the books listed above), such as how he managed to find writing partners, and how he also produced many other bands, such as Jan and Dean (okay, I knew about them), and the Honeys (Brian would marry one of them and produce his part of Wilson Philips). I had always thought that all the of the BB had collaborated on the Jan and Dean material, but it seems that is where the animosity within the band seems to start, especially with vocalist/cousin Mike Love, and dad Murray, who were mad that the penned by Brian/sung by Jan and Dean "Surf City" went to No. 1 before anything by the BB.

At this juncture of the story, Phil Spector is introduced, with his infamous wall of sound. However, it is pointed out that Spector learned everything he knew from Leiber and Stoller, and Brian picked up some tricks from Phil. It seems Brian loved the Ronettes "Be My Baby" (what's not to love?), and musically, "Don't Worry Baby" his Brian's response to it (as is musically demonstrated). But as Bruce Johnson (BB member since 1965) points out, "Wilson overrated Phil Spector; Brian was light years beyond Phil Spector." Part of his rationale is that where Phil obsessively focused on the music, Brian did the same on both music and vocals, and in less time.

Phil famously used the same set of musicians over and over, dubbed the Wrecking Crew. Impressed by them, Brian flew them out and also used the same group, two of whom are represented in interviews here: the rightfully celebrated drummer Hal Blaine, and renowned bassist Carol Kaye, who was in the studio for more of the records we listen to from that time than anyone else; she is a true living legend and I'd love to see a documentary on *her* life. But, again, I digress... Blaine suggests at some point that, in the studio playing just bits of Brian's material, it was "infantile" stuff, seemingly "unsophisticated; we didn't realize how far out it was." Brian records all the songs with these musicians while the BB are on tour, and then when they come back, they record the vocals.

When the Beatles arrive, Capitol shifts its focus and starts to ignore the BB, much to Murray's agitation, who starts to harass the company, leading to his firing by Brian, now sole leader of the group. At this time, when "I Get Around" hits No. 1, Capitol starts being interested again. However, the BB was maturing, and after "All Summer Long," the focus of the band changed to pop, rather than just surf.

Thus ends the first disc, after 1 hr, 31 min. Please note that although I am telling a lot

here, I am only putting out a fraction of the story presented in this wonderful documentary.

At the start of the second disc, which is 1 hr. 38 min., the narrator fills in on the four LPs that followed their first hit. Brian, meanwhile, wanting to work in the studio rather than touring, is replaced on the road by Johnston (who is a great songwriter in his own right, including “I Write the Songs” [that’s right, it was *not* Manilow], and he had a hand in co-writing Elton John’s “Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me” and Floyd’s *The Wall*. Yes, I know, digress...).

It’s pretty common knowledge about Brian’s drug use, mental illnesses, and the like, but this film sheds some interesting light on the behind the scenes goings-on. The main focus of this second disc, though, is dedicated to their classic *Pet Sounds* and failed *Smile* albums. There is a lot of detail about the record, reactions, and tension within the BB, both in the studio and after. While I wrote 3 pages of notes about this period, well, I firmly believe it’s worth seeing it yourself, rather than waxing on and on.

The story of the Beach Boys is a fascinating tale of personalities, pressure and popular music of the period. The interviews are solid, the film clips are impeccable (including bits from *American Graffiti*, *The Last Picture Show* - which seems like an odd choice since it takes place in 1951 – and other sources. There’s lots of Beatles, Phil Spector, and especially of the Beach Boys live through the years; there is also plenty of still photographs to complement the narrative). This is good storytelling (and editing) without pandering to salaciousness. One of the better Chrome Dream British telly shows I’ve seen, and most of have been quite good.

There are two bonuses (other than detailed interviewee bios that are in too-tiny print that cannot be “zoomed,” one of my few complaints about Chrome Dream disks). The first is a 3-1/2 minute interview with Johnston called “*Pet Sounds* Preview: John and Paul Hear the Record,” where he discusses how he brought a pre-release tape of the LP to the UK, and played it for the two Beatles, which Johnston claims highly influenced the Beatles *Revolver* release. The second short, at 9-3/4 minutes, is called “End of an Era: The Beach Boys in the ‘70s.” The decline of the BB is discussed despite albums like *Wild Honey*, which went mostly unnoticed.

My only real complaint about the DVD (other than small text for the bios) is the (two-bar?) incidental music by Chris Ingham. Well, not the music itself, which can be heard on the opening clip below, but its overuse to the point of annoyance. Still, the overall package is worth the view.