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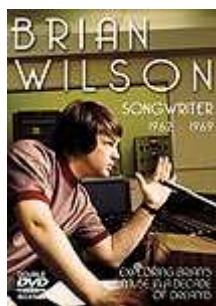
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## *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1962-1969*

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By **Christian Lipski**



Each new documentary about **Brian Wilson** or the Beach Boys adds another drop to the ocean of product already available. Many of them are the same old story, with poorly-researched information and no original music. This is most certainly not the case with *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1962-1969*. At three hours of interview and analysis spanning two discs, the new release from Sexy Intellectual stands head and shoulders above its peers.

The most obvious difference is the presence of musical analysis in the film. Philip Lambert, Professor of Music Theory at the City University of New York, is the author of *Inside the Music of Brian Wilson*, and provides insight into the way Wilson constructed his songs. In the upbeat “Little Deuce Coupe,” for example, Wilson bucks tradition by introducing minor chords into the chorus. To Lambert, this represents a merging of the surf and jazz styles that influenced Wilson. He looks at the soaring wail at the end of “Fun, Fun, Fun” and proclaims that the song “has everything you could ever want in a Beach Boys song,” and is “a celebration of life.” Later in the Beach Boys’ career, Lambert classes the *Pet Sounds* album as a “song cycle” and compares it to works by classical masters Schubert and Schumann, while also pointing out that “God Only Knows” never really stabilizes on a single key. Seated at a piano, he is able to illustrate his points by playing them for the viewer. Lambert’s presence helps to lend an air of scholarship to the film.

Dovetailing with the analysis of the music is the film's examination of Wilson's biography and its influence on his music. Much like the late Timothy White did in his book *The Nearest Faraway Place: Brian Wilson, The Beach Boys, And The Southern California Experience*, the film spends time looking at the culture Wilson grew up in, and points out the way it affected the songs created within that culture. From his exposure to The Four Freshmen, Brian began to focus on complex harmonies and creating a single new sound from multiple sources. His jazz experiences added a new dimension to the standard surf songs. Chuck Berry's impact on guitarists Carl Wilson and David Marks meant that electric guitars were also important to the songs. Wilson's growing fascination with producer Phil Spector spurred him on to greater feats in the studio.

An interesting observation from *Wild Honey's* engineer Bill Halverson is that Wilson's retreat from hands-on producing resulted in a stripped-down sound in contrast to the richly-produced *Pet Sounds*, and heralded the "roots" movement in music. Soon to reject baroque orchestral studio creations would be Dylan (*John Wesley Harding*), The Byrds (*Sweetheart of the Rodeo*), and The Beatles (*Get Back*, the original concept for *Let It Be*). Conversely, the DVD also points out where events begin to clash with the music Wilson produced, as the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan all addressed the cultural struggles of the 1960s, but the Beach Boys were much delayed in joining the party. *Brian Wilson: Songwriter* sheds helpful light on Wilson's environment to reveal the artist's origins.

The sources interviewed for the film are strong choices. Original guitarist David Marks steps to the forefront of the band's history and has interesting stories about the Beach Boys' early days. Although a later addition to the band, Bruce Johnston has the most history and is happy to talk about it. He is very complimentary of Wilson and defends seeming missteps like *Smiley Smile* ("It's a true psychedelic album") and the collapse of the *Smile* project ("Mike [Love] got a bad rap. . . Brian overthought the album"). Studio musicians Carol Kaye, Hal Blaine, and Billy Hinsche add their own memories of Wilson's work.

Although Mike Love and Al Jardine are not included, Danny Hutton, friend of Wilson and singer for Three Dog Night, provides interesting information about the post-*Pet Sounds* years, starting with the way that Mike Love and the rest of the band pressured Wilson to scuttle his project with Hutton and reclaim the song "Darlin'." Along with analysis from Lambert, we get commentary from biographer Peter Ames Carlin, *Rolling Stone* writer Anthony deCurtis, and Beach Boys scholar Domenic Priore.

Acting as a kind of decoration for the analysis and commentary are the many stories and film clips from Wilson's past. Former promoter and manager Fred Vail is quite entertaining as he talks about the band's first headlining gig in Sacramento, where the Boys earn a pittance compared to the thousands raked in by the promoter. Later, after Wilson gave away "Surf City" to Jan and Dean, Vail laughs as he recalls Jan Berry's visit to a Beach Boys recording session dressed as a "song pirate," infuriating Wilson's father Murry. Bruce Johnston, in an extra feature on Disc 2, tells the story of hanging out in London with Keith Moon and playing the *Pet Sounds* acetate for John Lennon and Paul McCartney. His own reaction to the groundbreaking album was, "Either this is #1 or our career is over!"

At the beginning of the film, there is footage of the band at the beach in the early '60s, with Love and Dennis Wilson shirtless, fraternizing with bikini-clad girls while Carl Wilson and Marks sit off to the side, much more reserved in their nerdy white T-shirts. These glimpses into Wilson's life provide some necessary context for his songs, and are entertaining to boot.

*Brian Wilson: Songwriter* is a little light on musical analysis for the later albums, but the interviews during that period are fascinating. Some commonly-held ideas are challenged, as when Carlin claims that the reason Wilson was described as spending so much time in bed in the '70s is that he was usually out very late, partying with friends. It's an interesting take on the "broken Brian" legend that survives to this day.

The DVD paints a picture of a sensitive outsider with a gift for translating the music in his head into reality. In the film, Wilson's importance as a composer and producer is well-defined, and his musical legacy is cemented

further. *Brian Wilson: Songwriter* is an important addition to the collection of any student of popular music, and a must-have for fans of Wilson's work.

***Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1962 – 1969*** was released on November 23 and is available to order from [See Of Sound](#).

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