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## Brian Wilson - Songwriter: 1969-1982

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Review by [Matt Hinrichs](#) | posted October 14, 2012 | [E-mail the Author](#)

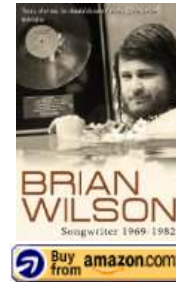


### The Movie

Or: *The Sandbox Years.*

The absorbing documentary *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969-1982* explores the wilderness years of The Beach Boys' troubled genius, picking up where 2010's *Songwriter 1962-1969* (reviewed [here](#) by DVD Talk's Bill Gibron) left off. Covering a period in Brian's career marked by psychotic issues, drug abuse, and occasional moments of brilliance, this British production deals adeptly with both Brian's inner demons and The Beach Boys' struggles to remain relevant in the '70s. The film actually serves as a good companion to the 2010 doc *Who Is Harry Nilsson (And Why Is Everybody Talking About Him)?* in dealing with the shell-shocked, blood-sucking aspects of the music biz so pervasive in that period.

If *Songwriter 1969-1982* demonstrates anything, it's that Brian Wilson and the other Beach Boys have had a messy, co-dependent relationship over the years. The doc opens with Brian, despondent and increasingly withdrawn after the shelving of the *Smile* album, at odds with band members like Mike Love pushing for simple, happy music and a record label hungry for more product from its damaged but still viable chief creative force. As a big fan of the band's underrated 1969-71 output, it's heartening to see that most of this doc's two hour-plus running time is devoted to that era. We witness the band severing ties from longtime label Capitol Records (issuing the achingly gorgeous single "Break Away" as a finale, a tune that Brian co-wrote with his father, Murry Wilson), starting their own label, putting out strong yet strangely out-of-step material (1970's *Sunflower* and its flop comeback single, "Add Some Music To Your Day"). All the while, the band's management and label attempt to keep the ever-more psychotically damaged Brian in the Beach Boys fold, mostly by sticking leftover *Smile* tracks on the albums. Much talk is devoted to Brian's state of mind during these years, but the film also spends a nice chunk discussing the ascendancy of Brian's brother, Carl, and his worthwhile contributions to the albums *Surf's Up* (1971), *Carl and the Passions - "So Tough"* (1972), and *Holland* (1973). With the arrival of the nostalgic best-of *Endless Summer* in 1974, the band became more or less consigned to being a Golden Oldies act, which made Brian's introspective, increasingly uncommercial songwriting an even more awkward fit.



CONTENT

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

VIDEO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

AUDIO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

EXTRAS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

REPLAY

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Songwriter 1969-1982* was that Brian accomplished some interesting non-Beach Boys work during that period. The film goes into some detail on Brian's 1969 collaboration with poet Stephen Kalinich on an album of spoken-word recitations scored with music. There's also some info on Brian's contributions to American Spring, a soft-rock female duo which comprised of his then-wife, Marilyn, and former sister-in-law, Diane Rovell. The mind reels of what he could have accomplished then, had he been of more sound mind and body. Instead, he was placed under the care of the notoriously fame-hungry shrink, Dr. Eugene Landy, and turned into a bloated parody of a has-been music star. When Brian makes a highly publicized return to the Boys for the *15 Big Ones* LP in 1976, it's almost painful to watch. In hindsight, it was too ill-timed and downright exploitative.

*Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969-1982* lacks the participation of Brian and most of the other still living Beach Boys (Bruce Johnston makes a too-brief appearance at the beginning). There are a few valuable insights from those who were around at the time, like engineer Stephen Desper. Most of the commentary comes from several authors and experts - which might be considered a hindrance, but I enjoyed their talents for putting you right there at the scene as things were happening. The film is a straightforward affair, narrated by an unseen British guy and copiously annotated with music clips and bits of vintage movie/TV shows (it includes part of the famous *Saturday Night Live* bit with John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd as cops escorting a be-robed Brian out to the beach). Some of the clips are excellently timed to what is under discussion, such as a telling bit with Beach Boy Al Jardine furiously glaring at a clueless Brian during a concert, circa 1977.

*Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969-1982* comes highly recommended for Beach Boys fans; for others, the experience might feel like watching *The Empire Strikes Back* while having never seen any of the other *Star Wars* flicks. It's obviously part of an ongoing thing. The film concludes with Brian and crew uncomfortably positioning themselves as ham-handed patriots for party hearty yuppies during the Reagan era, setting the stage for "kokomo" and beyond. I'm totally looking forward to the next installment.



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### The DVD:

#### Video

The DVD edition of *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969-1982* is given swell treatment by the fantastically named company Sexy Intellectual. The digitally shot 16x9 widescreen image is a bit hard-edged but nicely done overall. The filmmakers did a good job of mixing the new interview footage with vintage photos, period-appropriate stock footage (circa 1970 images of hippies during "This Old World," for example), concert footage, and windowboxed TV performance clips.

#### Audio

The disc's stereo soundtrack strikes a nicely mixed balance between crystalline, CD-quality music and pleasantly modulated dialogue. It's a good listen with neither element overwhelming the other. No subtitle options are available.

#### Extras

Supplementary interviews with the participants: *Philip Lambert: Behind the Music* (5:09) has the music professor (one of the speakers in the doc) explaining the complex chords in "Do It Again" and "Blueberry Hill"; *Out of Bed: The Man Behind the Myth* (6:46) gives some brief insights into the non-musical sides of Brian's personality; in *Brian Goes Country* (6:11), former Beach Boys manager Fred Vail discusses Brian's involvement with *Cows Come to Pasture*, an abandoned 1970 album of Country music. *Contributors' Biographies* and a page advertising other products by UK company Chrome Dreams round out the extras.

#### Final Thoughts:

The comprehensive, British-made music documentary *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969-1982* sheds a lot of light on the wilderness years of the tortured genius and erstwhile Beach Boy, coming across like a dry yet enthralling *Mojo* magazine oral history illustrated with music and pictures. The period covered here is probably not as essential as the hit-making, heady years covered in its predecessor (*1962-1969*), but for fans it's a pure pleasure. **Recommended.**

*Matt Hinrichs is a designer, artist and sometime writer who lives in sunny (and usually too hot) Phoenix, Arizona. Among his loves are oranges, going barefoot and blonde 1930s movie comedienne Joyce Compton. Since 2000, he has been scribbling away at Pop Culture weblog [Scrubbles.net](http://Scrubbles.net). One can also follow him on Twitter [@scrubbles](https://twitter.com/scrubbles).*

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