

No rock band has experienced more tumult and caused more anxiety among its fan base than the Beach Boys. Unless you were there, between 1969 and 1982, it's difficult to imagine that this most American of ensembles rode a roller-coaster that carried them from the highs of immense popular and critical acceptance to the lows caused by Brian Wilson's breakdowns, public rejection of the band's most artistically ambitious material and their label's demand for Top 40 hits. It played out on the pages of Rolling Stone and via the rumor mill, which made Brian sound as if he was either completely out of his mind or was under the control of an evil puppet master. Brian had more than his fair share of mental problems, certainly, and his personal psychologist did as much harm as good. The fact that he didn't finally join Jimi, Janis, Jim and a dozen other dead musicians in Rock 'n' Roll Heaven suggests he might have carried an angel on his shoulder. After many years spent walking the razor's edge, Wilson returned to his piano, the stage and recording studio. Alone among the Wilson brothers, he's still alive to tell the tale.

"Songwriter 1969-1982" extends Sexy Intellectual's previous critical biography, "Songwriter 1962-1969," which chronicled the band's spectacular rise to the top of the charts and wildly innovative studio work that led to "Good Vibrations" and other psychedelic-surf music. "1969-1982" is a far more downbeat documentary. In addition to the headline-making turmoil, the Beach Boys were coming apart at the seams. Towards the end of the '70s, Brian's music was emanating from places the others couldn't understand or appreciate, especially when a resurgence of interest in the early material promised a continuous stream of revenues from concerts and greatest-hits albums. Brian would be wheeled out on stage and treated as if he was a "trained bear." As is typical in documentaries from Sexy Intellectual, the interviews with critics, historians, producers and collaborators are smart, interesting and based on intimate knowledge of the subject. If Brian's life story reads like a novel, it's nice to know that the final chapter has yet to be written. The DVD adds extended interviews and the insightful featurettes, "Behind the Music," "Out of Bed/The Man Behind the Myth" and "Brian Goes Country."

By Gary Dretzka

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