NEW ON DVD

By Pete Roche

It wasn't always easy for Brian Wilson to keep those "Good Vibrations" happenin'.

The man who architected the Beach Boys' most memorable hits (and hidden gems) is once again the subject of a meticulously researched biopic in *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1969 – 1982*.

Note those years. The follow-to the exhaustive 2010 documentary *Brian Wilson: Songwriter 1962-1969*, this sequel DVD covers Wilson's less celebrated, post "California Girls" work, when the once-brilliant composer became an apathetic recluse. This is the era Steven Page was referring to when he sang, "I'm lyin' in bed just like Brian Wilson did" on the 1994 Barenaked Ladies hit about the legendary musician—a period fraught with profound personal difficulties and career missteps.

Quick, can you name a bona fide Beach Boys hit from the 1970's?

There weren't many. Certainly none to rival Wilson's output from the early '60s. This film explains why, in a chronological dissection of the man behind the myth.

The impact of mental illness and drug addiction on the eldest Wilson's creativity is given close scrutiny here, as is the Beach Boys' fight for relevance in changing musical climes. We're walked through the masterful *Pet Sounds,* tiptoed behind the scenes of the aborted *Smile* album, and guided through each subsequent release with input from the people closest to Brian at the time: Promoter Fred Vail, "Wrecking Crew" drummer Hal Blaine, studio engineer Earl Mackey, mixer Stephen Delper, and friends Mark Volman (of The Turtles) and Danny Hutton (Three Dog Night). There's also insightful commentary from writers and musicologists like Peter Ames Carlin and Dominic Priore.

Professor Phillip Lambert (New York Department of Fine Arts) discusses the musical significance of classics ("Til I Die," "Do It Again") and obscurities ("This Whole World"). He even taps out some of the more peculiar chord progressions on piano, just in case you weren't already aware of Wilson's compositional prowess.

Wilson quit traveling with the Beach Boys in 1965 after a panic attack on an airplane. He decided to concentrate on writing material at home while his brothers continued globetrotting, with Bruce Johnston (who is also interviewed) filling in on bass. The arrangement work for a while; Wilson had most of *Pet Sounds* ready for vocal overdubs when the band returned.

Inspired by The Beatles' move from pop songs to longer, more sophisticated (and experimental) musical passages (a la *Rubber Soul*), Wilson employed producer Phil Spector's legendary rhythm and string sections to score the music he'd been hearing in his mind. *Pet Sounds* is universally praised now, with songs like "Caroline, No," "Sloop John B," and "Wouldn't It Be Nice" considered as good (if not better) as anything by Lennon / McCartney—but the hit-hungry executives at Capitol Records didn't understand Wilson's new approach.

"It's as great as pop music gets," says Melody Maker scribe Barney Hoskyns.

Undaunted by the album's lukewarm reception in the U.S., Wilson cobbled together various other bits into the single Capitol wanted—"Good Vibrations." The psychedelic, there min-infused chestnut placated Wilson's bosses and intrigued listeners, but the song's author was tired of being made to feel like he *had* to top himself, and that each new record *had* to outsell the last.

Smile found Wilson at a creative plateau. In hindsight, his sandbox piano (and insistence that everyone wear fireman helmets in the studio) could be regarded as early signs of Brian's mental regression, but the songsmith's eccentricities weren't so alarming at the time.

"Mine was not to ask why," says Blaine.

"It was all in fun. It was his piano in his sandbox in his house. I didn't care, as long as we were making records and getting wealthy from it all."

But vocalist Mike Love fiercely opposed the nature of Brian's new work with outsider lyricist Van Dyke Parks. Love—who'd sang lead on many of the Beach Boys' early girl and car-centric chart-toppers—felt Wilson was straying too far from the good-time aesthetic audiences expected of the band. He wanted to stick to the formula, indifferent to his cousin's ambition. Brian relented, shelved the *Smile* tapes, and withdrew from the outside world. Whether Wilson's isolation was more a product of his degenerative emotional state or a conscious effort to ward off further stress, failure, and heartbreak remains anyone's guess.

People were less educated about addiction and depression in those days, observes Hoskyns. Instead of being sent to a rehab facility (which became chic ten years later) most rock stars were left to "flounder."

Wilson felt constant pressure to reconcile the band's early triumphs with his own changing impulses, yet he refused to simply cough up hit singles on demand. It's likely his mental illness allowed him to overlook the fact that his brothers weren't the only one relying on his magic: the band's extended families, their employees, and other associates also depended on him to deliver.

Sadly, Brian was the one guy who *didn't* want Brian to deliver, notes Wilson biographer Peter Ames Carlin.

"He got tired of hearing 'Brian, You gotta, you gotta, you *gotta*,'" suspects music historian Domenic Priore. "You can't just turn it on like a faucet."

But the band was under contract—parts of which stipulated that Brian author a certain amount of Beach Boys material on all Capitol releases. Made desperate by Brian's lethargy, the guys repurposed music from plundered *Smile* tapes to strengthen *Smiley Smile* and *Friends*. Carl became the band's de facto leader, and was instrumental in guiding the group, acting as conduit between his homebody older sibling and the band.

But one journalist quips that *20/20*'s cover of "I Can Hear Music" was just "Carl emulating Brian emulating Phil Spector," and that Brian couldn't have cared less that the Beach Boys were no longer an innovative hit-making machine.

The nostalgic, drum-gated "Do It Again" charted in '68—but didn't really offer a map for the band's future. Although they'd swapped their striped shirts and white slacks for long hair and hippie beards, the Beach Boys were still regarded by many as an "establishment" act, and each new album only lent credence to arguments that the Wilson camp was out of touch in the Summer of Love. The counter-culture youth movement craved music that was either spaced out (Pink Floyd), confrontational (Led Zeppelin), or maybe both (Jimi Hendrix Experience).

The Beach Boys were neither.

Even on their best days, they'd become "first among equals" in a market now populated with skillful, topical tunesmiths like Crosby, Stills & Nash, James Taylor, Jackson Browne, and Joni Mitchell. But the film's commentators are quick to point out the diamonds scattered amongst the group's later, oft-maligned efforts. To provide Capitol with the group's last single, Brian reworked an oldie co-written with his boorish father (and ex-manager), Murray Wilson. "Break Away" failed to generate interest—but lived up to its title in distancing the Beach Boys from their longtime label.

1970's *Sunflower* showed a band poised for a comeback—even Brian was enthusiastic—but the LP underperformed. One critic surmises that "Add Some Music To Your Day" was "too nice, like saccharine" for

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