

# Disney+ *The Beach Boys* documentary promotes California dream myth, covers little new ground

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A Kennedy/Marshall and White Horse Pictures Production, *The Beach Boys* is directed by Frank Marshall and Thom Zimny and written by Mark Monroe. Streaming on Disney+

The Beach Boys and the band's leader Brian Wilson have been the subject of numerous books, documentaries, biopics and dramatizations. Authors and filmmakers have sought to provide insight into the group's California beginnings, the Wilson family's turmoil and the interpersonal strains among the various bandmates. The life and music of Brian Wilson, the group's lead composer and musical architect, is a complex topic worthy of examination on its own.

The new documentary *The Beach Boys*, now streaming on Disney+, is the latest attempt at telling the band's story. The film falls flat, presenting a largely sanitized vision of the band and the times when the group and its members came of age. Any serious examination of the music and its evolution is also lacking.

A press release on the documentary describes it as "a celebration of the legendary band that revolutionized pop music, and the iconic, harmonious sound they created that personified the California dream, captivating fans for generations and generations to come." Longtime Beach Boys fans, and new ones, will enjoy the previously unseen footage of the group's original lineup—brothers Brian, Dennis and Carl Wilson, their cousin Mike Love and friend Al Jardine—at home in Hawthorne, California. The comings and goings of the group's personnel, as well as their experience recording and touring, are entertaining.

But in attempting to be all things to all popular music fans, the film paints a sentimental and nostalgic picture of The Beach Boys' stardom, downplays the disputes and tragedies plaguing the band and the Wilson family, and glosses over the musical sophistication of what many have described as Brian Wilson's genius.

The documentary begins with the band's early days honing the harmonious sound that would define them. Brian was fascinated with The Four Freshman, a vocal quartet that gained success in the mid-50s, who blended harmonic jazz arrangements with a big band sound. He has also cited George Gershwin as one of his early influences.

Chuck Berry ("The Father of Rock and Roll") had a big impact on the Beach Boys' early sound, with the band utilizing many of the guitarist's licks and riffs. Brian would spend hours at the piano nailing down the Freshmen's harmonies, and then teaching the parts to the others. Brian was a taskmaster, and the result was a unique harmonic sound that could be both otherworldly and intensely direct.

The Wilson boys' father, Murry, was the band's original manager, promoting their classic California surfer sound. This persona was largely a fiction, as Dennis was the only successful surfer among them. By the mid-60s, the band began transitioning from their beach-going themes to more personal and introspective lyrics and more ambitious orchestrations.

Murry—an aspiring songwriter in the 1930s and '40s who wasn't particularly successful—preferred that the group stick with the surfer vibe that had contributed to its commercial success, and was eventually fired by Brian and Mike as the band's manager. Although the film alludes to the friction between Murry and his sons, it fails to mention the extent of the physical violence he inflicted upon them. Brian, as the oldest, was the chief target of this abuse, and has said that blows to the head by his father left him "96 percent deaf in my right ear." Murry would later retaliate for being fired by selling the Beach Boys' song catalog for \$750,000, a measly sum even by 1960s standards.

In December 1964, on a flight to Houston while on tour, Brian had what has been described as a nervous breakdown, and from that time forward he would remain at home writing and arranging while the others were on tour, aside from their 2012 reunion tour. The touring group was comprised of Mike Love, Dennis and Carl Wilson, Al Jardine and a fifth member, a slot temporarily filled by Glen Campbell and eventually by Bruce Johnston. When the group returned to California after concert tours, Brian would have the arrangements mostly complete and the vocal harmonies would be blended in and layered on top.

The most interesting portion of the film concerns the recording and production of *Pet Sounds*, the Beach Boys' 11th studio album, between January and April 1966. The album was produced, arranged and almost entirely composed by Brian Wilson, with guest lyricist Tony Asher. Mike had previously been Brian's main lyricist. Fired up by the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* album, and seeking to outdo it, Brian set out to create "the greatest rock album ever made" in the early concept-album mode. Brian employed session musicians who would eventually come to be known as the Wrecking Crew for the recording sessions. Some of the film's only serious comments on Brian's style as an arranger come from these musicians, like this from guitarist/bassist Carole Kaye:

We felt a little bit more at home with Brian. He knew that we were jazz players. Brian was still inventing, he was constantly rewriting. He knew where he was going, but we didn't. ...

He kept getting better and better and better. I think not being schooled like we were was a great thing. He didn't know the limits. He didn't know that he was not supposed to do things.

And from drummer Hal Blaine:

Brian had something special from the start. He was hearing these arrangements in his head. Most arrangers are guys who have studied, studied, studied ...

Brian would explain it to us. It was a matter of us tuning in to what he was saying.

He was also willing to take feedback from the musicians and incorporate some of their ideas on tempo, timing, etc.

*Pet Sounds* was recorded from July 1965 through April 1966 and released on May 16, 1966. Brian idolized Phil Spector—famous for developing the “Wall of Sound” production style, characterized by its diffusion of tonal quality and dense orchestral sound. Spector produced acts like Ike & Tina Turner and The Ronettes (and was married to that group’s Veronica Bennett). Brian’s first wife Marilyn Rovell, who is featured sympathetically in the film, recounts how he was obsessed with The Ronettes’ “Be My Baby” because he loved its sound so much, playing it over and over again until it “drove her crazy.”

In scenes from the *Pet Sounds* sessions, you can see how Brian lived and breathed the creative process, bouncing ideas off the session musicians and attempting to translate to them the music he conceived in his mind in tone and nuance. He demanded perfection and was known for insisting on take after take after take. Mike Love comments, “We called him dog ears. Brian could hear things that most human beings could not.”

*Pet Sounds* incorporated elements of pop, jazz, classical and avant-garde musical styles and has been labeled progressive pop, progressive rock, art rock, chamber pop, psychedelic rock/pop. The recording included instruments rarely used at the time in rock music—bicycle bells, French horn, flutes, Electro-Theremin, string sections and soda cans. Some 20 musicians were hired for the recording sessions. Brian had sought to transcend the surfer boy lyrics and musical pigeonholing and *Pet Sounds* makes a dramatic achievement in this regard.

“God Only Knows” is considered by many to be *Pet Sounds*’ masterpiece. It has garnered accolades from many popular musicians as their favorite piece of all time; Paul McCartney has called it the “perfect song.” Brian has pointed to lyricist Asher’s affinity for standards such as “Stella by Starlight,” by Victor Young, as inspiration for the song, and stated in his 1991 memoir that the melody for “God Only Knows” was influenced by “a John Sebastian song I had been listening to”—The Lovin’ Spoonful’s 1965 hit “You Didn’t Have to Be So Nice.”

Musicians and other listeners alike have analyzed and reanalyzed the lyrics to “God Only Knows.” The words are both ambiguous and, according to Brian, spiritual.

Take the beginning verses:

I may not always love you  
But long as there are stars above you  
You never need to doubt it  
I’ll make you so sure about it  
God only knows what I’d be without you  
If you should ever leave me  
Well, life would still go on, believe me  
The world could show nothing to me  
So what good would living do me?  
God only knows what I’d be without you

Though some say the song suggests suicide, both Wilson and Asher have dismissed this idea. The lead is sung clearly and sweetly by Carl Wilson. The magic of the song, in this reviewer’s view, is the partnering of the lyrical ambiguity with the musical. The song utilizes three

contrapuntal vocal parts, i.e., the voices are harmonically correlated yet independent in rhythm. The song includes a relative change in pitch over time, and—with its competition between the keys of E and A—leaves the listener wondering where it is leading, and if/when it will resolve. “God Only Knows” also deviates from the standard popular song format, includes a Baroque-esque interlude, and ends with a series of vocal rounds.

Capitol records was wary of the uncharted waters of *Pet Sounds* and put out the *Best of the Beach Boys* compilation shortly after it was released. *Pet Sounds* peaked at No. 2 on the UK LP charts and No. 8 on the US charts. The album has gained critical acclaim in the ensuing years.

It was during the *Pet Sounds* vocal recording sessions that acrimony began to intensify among the Beach Boys members. It is disappointing that the documentary basically draws to a close after the recording of *Good Vibrations*, the group’s next project.

We are provided with few cues on how The Beach Boys transitioned from the beachy surfer sound of the early ’60s to the more musically sophisticated and introspective *Pet Sounds*—as well as the subsequent development of Brian’s solo career. Scenes of the Vietnam War, student protests and civil rights marches are flashed across the screen. The viewer is left with the impression that the group just wasn’t “hip” enough, or, as Brian sings in a track from *Pet Sounds*, “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times.”

While a direct reflection of social change in popular music is difficult to pin down, the filmmakers should tell us *something* about how it is refracted through the music of the band. Did their rise from humble beginnings to commercial success leave a void that needed to be filled? Was the California dream all an illusion? Did they, and Brian in particular, identify with the change that was in the air among America’s youth? Did they want to contribute something more lasting and substantial?

At the film’s close we see an apparently amicable reunion of the five surviving Beach Boys on a beach in California. All is apparently well, and we are supposed to feel the love, but we really don’t know why.

The film skirts over Mike Love’s lawsuits over song credits and numerous suits by members of the band against Brian over defamatory comments in an autobiography and other issues. The early deaths of Dennis (in 1983, of drowning at age 39) and Carl (in 1991, of lung cancer at age 51) are referenced only in a closing title.

Brian’s struggles with mental health and drug use are also glossed over. In particular, his association with psychologist Eugene Landy, who exerted control over all aspects of his life, pumping him with drugs and controlling his friendships and business connections, gets no mention.

The 2014 film *Love & Mercy*, directed by Bill Pohlad and starring John Cusack, Paul Dano, Elizabeth Banks and Paul Giamatti, dramatizes the period of Brian’s life when he meets Melinda Ledbetter, who was to become his second wife, and who is credited with obtaining a restraining order against Landy and breaking Brian from this abusive relationship. *Love & Mercy* is recommended for a serious approach to this part of Brian’s life.

Melinda and Brian married in 1995 and went on to adopt five children. Brian is also father to two daughters from his first marriage, Carnie and Wendy Wilson, known as co-founders of the group Wilson Phillips, along with Chynna Phillips, the daughter of John and Michell Phillips of the Mamas & The Papas.

Melinda Wilson died on January 24, 2024. Following her death, Brian, now 81, has been placed under a legal conservatorship by a Los Angeles judge due to a “major neurocognitive disorder,” with longtime manager LeeAnn Hard and publicist Jean Sievers named as conservators.



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