



LOST IN MUSIC

Some call him a tortured genius. Others say he's just insane. Some claim he's suffering through an extended hiatus between transcendental works. Others reckon he's lost it altogether. The seven years since Brian Wilson's solo album have been crazy. Bill Holdship surfs this turbulent period in the convoluted Californian saga and encounters Brian during his highs and lows...

Brian Wilson was the first celebrity I met upon moving to Hollywood from Detroit in January, 1987. It was during a party at the ever-trendy showbiz watering-hole Spago that a tall, slender, good-looking and impeccably dressed man with sun-bleached hair was pointed out to me. By this time, of course, everyone interested in rock'n'roll knew some "Crazy Brian Wilson" stories - my personal favorite still being the time in a restaurant he buttered his head and stuck it between two pieces of bread - but this man hardly resembled that Brian.

"Well, it's been over 20 years since I did Pet Sounds," he continued. "And I'll tell you, I could make an even better record than Pet Sounds if I could just go into the studio for a week. But I can't right now because I have to see my psychologist every day.



"I could make a better record than Pet Sounds. But right now I have to see my psychologist..."

Brian Wilson on Malibu beach, 1991:
"If you can gurantee me that you'll let me out, then I'll do it. If you guys split and left me on the beach, that would be a pretty wierd trip! I'd be stuck in all this tape down on the beach..."

He tended to talk from the side of his mouth, as if he'd suffered a mild stroke. In fact, if you look at old footage, you'll see he had this lopsided speech style even as a youth. Perhaps, because he's deaf in one ear, he's speaking to the ear that can still hear sounds outside his head. I asked about an interview. He told me to write a phone number down. "Write 'Brian Wilson' at the top of that," he said. I assured him I wouldn't forget whose number it was. "No. No," he insisted. "Write 'Brian Wilson.' Because you never know you might forget..."

During the late '80's you'd hear reports that Brian Wilson was a virtual prisoner, but he seemed pretty ubiquitous to me, always cropping up somewhere - usually escorted by the eve-controversial Dr. Eugene Landy, the psychologist-cum-manager-cum-Svengali who has since been banned by the State of California from making any contact whatsoever with Brian, either personally or professionally. Sure, Landy was definitely a control freak - ironic, since Brian was reportedly such a control freak himself during his heyday. But during those years Brian insisted throughout it all that he wanted to remain with Dr. Landy. Of course, some would claim that this was because Landy had him in thrall like a hapless cult member. Then again, I was there the day the cover art for Brian's solo album was delivered; he reacted like a little kid jumping up and hugging Landy when he first saw it.

observed many things during that time. For instance, Brian's daughters walking right by him, failing to acknowledge their father - or he them - at another Hollywood part. And then there was the time that photographer Robert Matheu and I spent an unchaperoned afternoon with Brian at his home in Malibu. It was a quite extraordinary occasion - "What we're doing here is working for world peace," were Brian's words of greeting, after which he peeled a banana and handed it to Robert. Later we watched him dance with childlike abandon to The Ronettes' Be My Baby.

"It's psychedelic!" he exclaimed. "I see beautiful colors and people and everything inside my head when I listen to this music!" He was simply ecstatic. However, when we wanted to take a planned cover photo of Brian on the beach for California's BAM magazine, symbolically wrapped in recording tape for a story about the trouble surrounding the shelved Sweet Insanity album, he hesitated.

"Well, listen, I'm not in favor of it," he fretted. "Because I'm scared. I don't really like to have my arms and legs confined. But if you can guarantee me that you'll let me out, then I'll do it. I mean, if I said, 'Hey, let me out of this thing,' and you guys split and lift me on the beach, that would be pretty weird trip! I mean, I'd be stuck in all this tape down on the beach..."

I was one of a small group of writers who actually thought that Sweet Insanity was a better album than the first solo record and had a hard time understanding why Sire refused to release it. Even Andy Paley, Brian's most recent regular collaborator, producer and great friend, who remembers the recording of the album as "such an unpleasant experience," admits "there were good songs on it, Rainbow Eyes, in particular." And the pairing of Bob Dylan after the session: "He's crazy! He couldn't even find the microphone!"). But just the fact that I actually dared to champion the album at the time got me into so much trouble that it still boggles my mind.

You see, passions run high around The Beach Boys.

One thing you quickly discover when you get in the middle of the Brian Wilson saga is that almost nothing comes in black and white. On one hand, it's an almost Shakespearean tragedy - a dysfunctional family, decay, betrayal, insanity, death. But you also quickly learn that there are so many gray areas, so much quicksand to negotiate. As legendary session percussionist Hal Blaine, who played drums on all The Beach Boys' biggest hits, says of the past 15 years and the long-running battle for the songs and soul of a troubled genius: "With Brian, it's like you're damned if you do...buy you're also damned if you don't."



The Beach Boys, 1964: (left to right) Al Jardine, Mike Love, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Brian Wilson. "I used to look at it as competitive. All groups have ego problems."

Indeed, you often don't know who or what to believe. For instance, do you believe Brian's late friend Gary Usher, one of The Beach Boys' early lyricists, who implied in his diaries, written during his work on the early stages of the Brian Wilson album, that Brian's musical gifts had dimmed somewhat? Or do you trust Andy Paley who vociferously rejects such a judgement? Then consider some of the commentators who had originally defended Dr. Landy only to become the strongest voices in the anti-Landy campaign later on. And what of John Mason, Brian's former personal attorney, who consistently defended Landy in the press - until he was taken off the payroll. At that point, he became one of the prime witnesses against Landy on a TV investigative report, claiming that Landy controlled Brian with pills and took just minutes to be effective (no pill other than cyanide works that fast).



Most bizarre of all is the first cousin/fellow Beach Boy Mike Love kept Brian in court for several years, fighting a lawsuit that ultimately saw Love win five million dollars in back royalties for "uncredited lyrics" that he had contributed to some of Brian's biggest hits. The suit came several years after Brian himself finally won a settlement of \$10 million from Almo-Irving music publishing for the music he'd written which his father had sold to the company for \$700,000 in 1969; observers maintain that Murry Wilson's sale of Sea of Tunes was a betrayal that played a significant part in Brian's eventual breakdown.

Brian in 1963 in an unpublished photo from Capitol Records.

The payout to Love didn't include the out-of-court settlement he received from the publishers of Brian's 1991 'autobiography,' *Wouldn't It Be Nice*, after Love sued Brian, Landy, co-writer/People Magazine staffer Todd Gold and publishers HarperCollins for libel. (Other suits are still pending, according to Landy.)

I recently ran into Todd Gold's wife. "Did you see those photos of Brian's wedding in People?" she asked incredulously. "You open the magazine, and there's Brian and Mike Love with their arms around each other. What's that all about?"

Shortly thereafter, with a typical media blitz, the reunited Beach Boys announced their first project together - the theme song to a new syndicated TV show, *Baywatch Nights*, a spin-off of the infamous sand, sea and silicone series. Meanwhile, Beach Boys fanatics on the Internet had been buzzing about the announcement in both *Billboard* and the *Hollywood Reporter* that Capitol planned to release a Smile box set some time this summer. Brian, it turns out, wants nothing to do with this.

Making sense of his treacherous maelstrom of head games, disinformation, madness and rumor that surrounds Brian Wilson is impossible - a problem compounded by Brian himself, whose memory is selective at best. He can rattle off amazing rock trivia when he wants; just ask him about production on early Four Seasons records, or about the time the Stones invited him to a Hollywood studio. ("They had some great marijuana. I couldn't find the door! I said,

“play that again,” and they said, “It is playing again, Brian!’ And then I couldn’t find the door!”) But I’ve also witnessed conversations in the past where Brian claimed to know nothing about the album The Beach boys ‘ Love You, although once a song from it, Mona, was mentioned, he happily began to sing it. Back on that extraordinary afternoon in Malibu, he asked Robert Matheu and me, “Carl sang Just Once in My Life, [on 15 Big Ones] didn’t he?” Actually, he was told, the singers were himself, Dennis, and Carl. He looked sad and confused. “No, not Dennis, Dennis drowned...”

Most of all, though, it’s the aforementioned passion that seems most injurious to the truth. Much of the confusion over the true nature of Brian Wilson ‘95 can be attributed Brian Wilson Fanatic.”



Left: Brian in the late 70’s with daughter Carnie (seated) and first wife Marilyn (standing). Right: with Carnie, whose own musical career takes off with Wilson Phillips.

Since moving to LA, I’ve encountered people who are as obsessed with Smile the same way people are obsessed with the Kennedy assassination. Never forget, also, that Hollywood is a place where people will sell their souls not only for 15 minutes of fame but for a chance to be near that 15 minutes of fame. A couple of years ago I met Brian’s post-Landy ‘co-manager’ of the time - a Malibu carpenter who informed me that he was now writing songs with Brian. The carpenter was an accomplished blues harpist, and we all know that if anyone’s music calls for blues harp, it’s surely Brian Wilson’s...

Woodwork squeaks and out come the freaks. There are fans who feel it’s their role in life to protect Brian’s image. Something about the vulnerability of the finest Beach Boys music must act as a beacon for unbalanced people, fans who project their demands onto Brian in a way that’s unique among performer/fan relationships. When I did that 1991 cover story on Brian for BAM - in which I defended Sweet Insanity and the autobiography, while publishing Wilson’s statements regarding Land - I actually received several death threats.

You see there are those who want you to believe that Brian is the same person he always was, although a chat with drummer Hal Blaine (who literally sobs when recalling a meeting with Brian during the “lost years”), or session bassist Carol Kaye (who says seeing news footage last year of Brian reacting angrily to Love’s lawsuit “is the Brian I remember, the one

in control") will quickly dispel that notion. But these 'Fans' will try to convince you that, once again, "Brian is back" - which, unfortunately has been the case most years since 1976. The really weird thing, however, is that this time, it might actually be true.

Late April 1995, and it's a typical Tuesday night on Hollywood's Sunset Strip. The lights are bright, the clubs are open, and a constant parade of vehicles cruise the legendary stretch of pavement. The buzz isn't quite what it was, however, thanks to recent a "pay to play" door policy whereby local bands are forced to post anything up to \$1,000 against the number of paid admissions they draw to a gig, but The Roxy actually has, for a Tuesday, a fairly healthy crowd inside its intimate confines.

"Hurdles? My cousin sued me for five million dollars..."

The Wondermints - one of the few local unsigned bands with any kind of a local rep these days - are onstage, and the group's manager, former Dramarama bassist Chris Carter, has pulled out all the stops to get friends, associates and music biz VIP's to see his band. The group are said to be a blend of Raspberries, Beatles and Beach Boys. Tonight, they sound a lot like Badfinger by way of Jellyfish. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, either. After encoring with a cover of Herb Alpert's theme to Casino Royale, the band dedicate their last song of the evening to "a very special person in the audience tonight," launching into a letterperfect cover of The Beach Boys' 1968 hit Darlin'.

The "very special person" shows virtually no emotion as the song plays. One observer notes later, "He just looked pained. That was a very painful period in his life."

What Brian Wilson may actually be thinking at any given moment these days...well, God only knows.

Brian and his bride of two months, Melinda Kae Letbetter, have come to the Roxy with Brian's longtime friend, KROQ DJ and perennial Hollywood scenemaker Rodney Bingenheimer, who's brought along another very special friend. Nine out of every 10 people who approach their table ignore Brian Wilson and opt for the autograph of that friend - Kato Kaelin, the man fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have been OJ Simpson's house guest and companion on the night of "the murder of the century." And the man who's parlayed his involvement into a strange kind of stardom. The week of this show he's on the cover of the entertainment section of Sunday's LA Times. Only in Hollywood, et cetera.

If any of this bothers Brian Wilson, he certainly doesn't show it. He keeps to himself, occasionally whispering something into his wife's ear, sharing a private joke. He looks better tonight than he has in a while - well groomed, dressed in a dark outfit - although he has retained the girth he's gained over the last four years, a result, he stresses "Of those trials. All those goddamn trials! But I'm gonna start running again soon." But bothered? Brian Wilson has been involved in too many bizarre events to be disturbed, or impressed, by anything this town has to offer today.

Does it even bother him that 'the boys' currently advertise their live performances as The Beach Boys featuring John Stamos? The latter is a current teeny bop heart-throb, best known for playing the lead character on Full House, one of the most popular, and vacuous, American TV sitcoms of the last decade. When Stamos performs with the band, he augments regular percussionist Mike Kowalski on drums and also sings Forever, one of the late Dennis Wilson's signature songs.

Then again, what does Brian Wilson have to prove vis-a-vis The Beach Boys in 1955? As Andy Paley says, "If there's anyone in pop music who doesn't have to prove himself, it would have to be Brian Wilson."

Thanks to The Beach Boys, there was a time when Brian Wilson ruled the Sunset Strip. As Danny Hutton - former Three Dog Night vocalist and one of Brian's best friends since the mid '60's - says in *I Just Wasn't Made For These Times*, a splendid new documentary on Brian's life produced and directed by Don Was, Brian Wilson intimidated people in LA during the '60's. Not through any sort of arrogance or cruelty on his part; he's always been much too childlike for that. No, it was because of the incredible creative energy and power that radiated from the kid from Hawthorne, a hick suburb 20 minutes south of downtown LA. Some take it a step further by suggesting that Brian Wilson invented the Sunset Strip. After all, when you're talking states of mind, well, Brian Wilson invented California.

When I approach Brian's table to request an interview, he gives no indication whether he remembers me or not. Melinda, however, recalls our meeting during an interview at Don Was's Mulholland Drive estate a week after the premiere of the documentary, only four days before the couple's wedding in February. I reintroduce myself, shake hands and suggest that we get together with Andy Paley when the latter returns from Baltimore where he's producing a band for Elektra Records.

"Whatever you want," is Brian's response. "We'll do it. Whatever you want. And it'll be a good one."

It's almost as though the request could've been followed with, "While we're at it, Brian, why don't you come over and paint my house this weekend, and Brian would've replied, "What time do you want me there?" Which is to say that Brian sometimes seems like Zelig, a human chameleon, all too eager to blend in. A psychotherapist would probably relate it to the abuse Brian reportedly suffered as a child. Brian frequently seems to become the person he's with, mimicking them, saying what he thinks they want to hear, wholeheartedly agreeing with them.

Brian appears more content than I've ever seen him. Certainly there have been all kinds of projects to occupy him lately. First, there was the aforementioned Santa Monica tribute concert last year which featured Brian himself, backed by a band that included both Paley brother, Andy and Jonathan, as well as former Cars guitarist Elliot Easton, Ren & Stimpy voice artist/guitarist Billy West, and a small string and horn section. They performed *I'm A Little Teapot* ("Well, that's part of it," Brian tells me), *California Girls*, *409* and *Do It Again*. It was a wonderful show, far better than anything the Beach Boys have managed in years.

Then there are the 30 songs Brian and Andy Paley have recently recorded together. Not to mention the tracks they contributed to tribute albums for both Doc Pomus and Harry Nilsson. There's the long-awaited Van Dyke Parks LP *Orange Crate Art*, which features Brian's voice on Park's material as well as covers of Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue* and Louis Armstrong's *What A Wonderful World*. There's the aforementioned documentary, which is a treasure for any Wilson fan, and the soundtrack to the film. And then there's that strange Beach Boys reunion...

REWIND TO MY FEBRUARY interview.

Don Was is describing his intentions behind the making of *I Just Wasn't Made For These Times*: "I knew that people have heard the phrase 'Brian Wilson is a genius' for years. People who make records understand why that is true, but it's really hard to explain to someone who doesn't make music. And that really was one of my goals with this film - so that someone who's not a musician could walk away with some understanding of why you should look at more than just the striped shirts and surfing lyrics to understand."

It's a bright sunny day and we're sitting near the pool on the patio of Don's spectacular estate which also houses a recording studio and video production facility. Brian has just showed up, accompanied by Melinda (who will become his new bride four days later), and after playing a new composition on the baby grand he lights a Kool cigarette and joins us. He appears relaxed; not nearly as tense as he once seemed, although he does fall backwards, wiping out in his chair, during the course of the interview. ("That would've been good!" he jokes. "I'll crack my head on the cement, and we can finish this interview in the hospital!") "It'll blow some minds," say Brian of the documentary. "I went through lots of bullshit to get this thing cut. I was having some problems as far as my identity is concerned. I had to figure out what mattered and what didn't. But Don gave me full rein and a lot of space. At first, I thought this is gonna be contrived. The songs were all old-hat. But then I understood the context of it all, so I felt free to talk without worrying about what I was saying. I got a sense of myself - a sense of worth. I am a celebrity. I accept it. And that's all."

"Great artists never want to go back," elaborates Was. "And he was writing new songs. But I wanted him to see that making people understand about the old stuff would give them a greater understanding and appreciation of the new stuff."

It's Don who first brings up a Beach Boys reunion when asked about future projects. So, Why? "Well, I spoke to Mike about a week ago," says Brian. "The first thing he says is 'I really wanna get together with Don Was. I said that's what I've been after you to do for about a year now! There was so much enthusiasm in Mike's voice. So, we're cool now. Mike and I are just cool. There's a lot of shit Andy and I got written for him. I just had to get through that goddamn trial! I totally went crazy over that! Lots of stress! But I got through it. That's how it works. You've got hurdles, you know? A hurdle to me represents lots of mental effort and extreme mental stress. It's like a woman having a baby. What stress! To go through that! And for that big baby to come out of that little vagina. NOBODY KNOWS HOW THAT'S DONE! Someone can try to explain it, but you see the woman afterwards and she's cool. With artistic things, it's the same thing. Art doesn't come easy. It never did!"

But isn't there a danger of Mike Love beating him up again...?

"No, Mike doesn't beat me up," he says, very matter-of-factly. "Mike is not a violent guy."

I meant emotionally.

"Oh, emotionally?" He pauses. "Well, Mike definitely knows how to put a little wrath into the way he speaks. You know what I mean? His language."

Mike's always sort of been depicted as the 'bad' guy who needs Brian more than...

"Now, wait a minute," says Brian. "That isn't...I mean, what year and on what level are we talking about?"

I can understand why you'd want to get back together with Carl. He's your brother, for God's sakes. And that scene in the movie where you sin In My Room and God Only Knows with Carl and your mother is very moving, but...

"My mom was like..." he sighs, "out to lunch. I mean, I like my mom, but everything she says is 'Carl this and Carl that!' I say, Shit, if you wanna go love one of your sons, then go love Carl! Fuck, go to Carl's house! Don't fuckin' talk to me regarding Carl! Because that's what she always does!"

Don interrupts diplomatically. "Maybe I can put this in a larger perspective. This happens with every band, I don't care if it's The Rolling Stones or kids in a garage somewhere. It's a biological thing. People originally knew who to survive in the jungle, and I think there's this chemical competitive instinct in all people.

"When a band starts out, they want to conquer the world, so that's what they're competing against. Then they get on the radio, they have hit records, the cars, the girls. But they're still producing that testosterone, so they begin competing with each other. I've worked with lotsa band, and I've seen it time and time again. And then being family only compounds it - 'Mom liked you better' or whatever.

"It's very hard to assign value to every person in a band. When I first met The Beach boys - the first time, in San Diego - I expected Mike Love especially to be the living embodiment of evil. But I thought he was OK. He said to me 'Look, I've been doing this for 30 years. I've given my whole adult life to The Beach boys. Maybe I'm not as great as Brian, but I've made some contributions. And every article I've ever seen, it's been Brian And The Four Assholes.'

"So, there is resentment. But it happens in every band, and I know because it happened to my own band Was (Not Was). David - my best friend since I was 11 - and I haven't spoken in nearly two years. Sometimes, it takes somebody from the outside to intervene and say, 'C'mon, let's forget about lawyers for five minutes.' Because none of it precludes making good music together."

"I'm not competitive with Mike Love," Brian asserts. "Never was. I always accepted him as the best singer in the group. I never squawked about that. I was the producer. But I have to say a couple of things." He sighs. "What do you do when you're frightened by a project, but have a lot of faith in your ability? How do you break the ice so you're not scared of them - and they're not scared of you? How do you do that? Do you say, 'Guys, we've had problems over the years?' So, what is the best way to get over that fright - the shock - of working with them? And how do I see where they're coming from. What do I do? Do I laugh? Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! What do I do? Maybe one of you can answer that?"

Don speaks first. "I think you don't forget the past, but you accentuate the positive. "We've been in court, but you're my cousin, and you're my brother..."

"But how does anyone walk into a room, and in that room is like the whole goddamn world?" Brian is animated now. "How do you do it? You go into that room, and you see God, and then you express him. But how do you hang in at that level? Does it take a lot of will-power? Or a lot of courage?"

"You know what?" asks Don. "Everyone's scared. But the important thing is not to reveal too much of your fear. Take that kid in Counting Crows [Adam Duritz], for example - they sold five million albums with their first record." Brian finds this very funny and he laughs hard. "You think he's not scared? But the important thing is to go forward and do your best."

"OK, you've answered it!" exclaims Brian. "But now what kind of record is it going to be? Is it a family record? Or is it like a group record?" He pauses. "So can we do the actual interview?"

Isn't that what we're doing?

"No. We're talking about The Beach Boys."

Okay. There was a disturbing rumor going around, Brian, that you're doing street drugs again.

"Who?"

You.

"Drugs?"

Yeah.

He laughs. "I'm the opposite of drugs, man! Drugs! God, I wish! I'd like to get rid of my emotional pain - Percodan, Vikadan, or morphine. You know? Pain killers. But, no, not quite. No pain killers for me! I'm as sober as I could ever be!

How about the Smile rumors? Any truth in the box set coming out?

"Uh, no. Not that I know of." He looks confused.

"I think the only way to release Smile would be as an interactive CD-ROM, and let people create their own Smile," offers Don. "Because there's like 30 hours of tape. Every different take."

"Brian: "Well, they're all on The Beach Boys box, aren't they?"

Don: "But he means all the unfinished stuff. If you were to listen to 20 hours of Smile..."

Brian: "I'd be overdosed!"

Don: "Could you finish it?"

Brian: "I could do it, but it would take a long time>"

Don: "How long?"

Brian: "At least two months."

Don: "Would you want to do it?"

Brian: "No."

Don: "Why not?"

Brian: "Because the music's passe."

Don: "Well, I don't see that they could release it without Brian."

I ask Don why the movie pretty much ignores the strangeness surrounding Brian, those aforementioned gray areas.

"Well, my feeling is I'm a musician, so I wanted to do a film about his music, everything regarding his personal life in the movie relates to the music. I could've done 30 hours of film on Brian. He's the most enigmatic person I've ever know. The whole basis for this film comes from a performance I did with him for an AIDS benefit a few years ago. It was a weird gig. Reagan was there and all these celebrities. But Brian did a version of Love & Mercy that was purely transcendental. I mean, it was literally one of the five pivotal points in my life! And I thought if people could only see this - if they could only see this part of Brian Wilson.

"Everyone has some sort of emotional stake in Brian's music, and the movie shows that - from Thurston Moore [of Sonic Youth] to David Crosby and Graham Nash. So this is the important thing - not the sordid details and the gossip."

Brian's been thinking. "Anyway, it's all over now between Mike and me." he reiterates before preparing to leave with Melinda for some last-minute wedding errands. "Him and me and Andy Paley - probably one of the great undiscovered songwriters of today - are gonna get together and ramrod a record deal through!

"This was a good interview." He adds. And the happy couple are on their way.

Late April 1995. Andy Paley calls one Saturday afternoon to say that he and Brian have time for a brief talk between the studio where Brian's been working on Orange Crate Art with Van Dyke Parks and a radio interview. They're set to begin rehearsals the following day for a Las Vegas gig with The Beach boys that Brian's promised he'll do the following weekend - provided that Andy can join him onstage. Brian says it's his first Beach Boys gig in seven years.

The notion of this show strikes me as especially weird. Andy had told me earlier that the first recording session with the reunited Beach Boys hadn't gone well at all.

"Man, I hated that," Brian told Andy afterwards. "I'll write the parts; you record them; then I'll come in and help mix it afterwards. We'll do it that way."

Brian's looks a little unkempt today, unshaven, but probably no worse than lots of people who've been spending a lot of time in the studio.

So, how's it going with The Beach Boys, anyway?

"Very cool," Brian says. "It's getting a little better. It's actually a lot better than it used to be."

So Mike hasn't been taking control?

"No. Mike is just very ambitious, and he wants to see something good happen again for The Beach Boys. But I do, too. I want The Beach Boys to be a group that everyone likes."

You realize, don't you, that a lot of people out there are wondering why you feel you need The Beach Boys, when they've always just been your instrument and your 'voice'?

"No, I don't feel that way," he says quickly. "Mike and Carl are great singers. By any standards. And I never ever considered myself to be the star singer in The Beach Boys. I was more or less...a background singer - someone you can hear, but not out front yelling and screaming and doing, y'know, the cool jerk!"

Well, I didn't mean the "voice" so much as the version...

"Well, I think the creative force. Sure! The song architect. But, then people say 'you're the singer,' and it all gets out of whack! The other guys don't get fair credit for what they're capable of doing!

"but we have to get a deal for the guys. If we don't get that deal, we can't record yet."

Past contracts have stipulated that you have to write and produce 80 per cent of the material. Is it a similar thing?

"Yeah."

So the major obstacles are all out of the way?

"I call them hurdles." Corrects Brian. "Actually, the last major hurdle as the court suit and Mike Love. But it brought Mike and me back together. But like I said, we have to get a deal for the boys so they know where they stand and they're happy with the deal. Then we'll just go in the studio and cut their heads off! They're great artists."

So the competitive edge is gone between you guys?

"I used to look at it as competitive, and some people being better than the other. Now I look at it as equals. No one in the band is better than the other. Ego problems. Ego problems. But all groups do that. They all have problems."

It's just so hard to believe you'd want to work with Mike again after the trial.

"I heard someone say something in the recording studio today. It never happened. That's the way I feel about Mike. It never happened."

Andy laughs particularly hard at this.

"It never happened," Brian continues. "Mike and I never had a problem. We'll wipe the slate clean, and pretend we never had a problem. First of all, we're a family. So, our voices blend. And it's up to us. Actually, it's up to Andy and me. So, we have to make sure that what we do is cool and make sure the lyrics don't get into too weird of a bag. Too far out. But I think we'll do it as we go. We'll come up with lines in the studio!"

Are you going to tour with the band?

"Yeah, I think so. I might. If they want me to. Sometimes, the guys - I think they don't want me there a little bit. Other times, they do. I'll make up my own mind..."

Why do you think that is?

"I don't know. All the bullshit what went on."

Where do you think The Beach boys fit in today's market?

"There's no way to answer that. I've talked to Andy about it. There's no one formula today.

I heard Tony Bennett was selling to 18 year-old girls. So, if he can do that, I think we can. I still want to make records for five to 80 year-olds.

"I think Kokomo was a very good record. And I think the stuff we're doing is just as appropriate for the market as that was. And I think what we're gonna do here is have so many different kinds of songs that we can have six singles on one album! There are six singles on this record already, and when we get The Beach Boys' voices on them, even better!"

Brian looks at his watch. "Listen, we're gonna have to go meet Rodney," he says. "It's almost five o'clock."

They invite me to come along. In the parking lot, Brian and I talk about pharmaceuticals. Has he tried Prozac?

"Oh, God, no!" he says. "I tried Prozac and I nearly went nuts! I felt like my head was going to explode. I had a very bad reaction.

Well, you seem to be in a lot better spirits than you were when I first met you. You're more in control (and I mean it).

"Yeah, I am. I'm getting there. I'm forcing my way out. It's almost as though I went into an egg and just had to poke my way out of it."

May. It's several weeks after The Beach Boys' show, three weeks after our lunch, and Andy says things have changed again; that Brian felt uncomfortable in Vegas.

"They were nice," Paley says. "I mainly talked to Carl and Bruce. Carl asked what I wanted to do. I said I'd rather do nothing, but Carl said, 'You have to or Brian won't go onstage.' So Brian sang Don't Worry, Baby, In My Room and Surfer Girl in the middle of the show and then we came back out for the encores. I felt OK, because they ended up with like 20 people onstage - John Stamos, Billy Hinsche, Ed Carter, Mike Kowalski, Mike Love's son, Al Jardine's

son, the cheerleaders! So, I just hid behind everyone!

"But Brian said that he didn't really enjoy it. He said he thought Mike Love got pissed off because Brian got two standing ovations both nights. He said, 'I think he holds it against me, but I can't help it!' I said, 'Yeah, I know, Brian.' I don't even know that that's true."

Well, you mentioned earlier that there was a problem in the studio.

"Yeah. Everything seemed fine during the session. But Brian told me afterwards that he hated it. Never wanted to do it again. And he couldn't explain why."

Didn't Mike want to rewrite the songs?

"Yeah." Paley laughs. "But I'm still a fan. I mean, everyone tells me Brian is the way he is due to Mike. But when I think of these people, it's like they influenced me big time when I was a kid, so sometimes it's hard to relate to them as real people. It's so strange, because even though Brian is my friend, I grew up thinking the guy was, y'know, some weird cartoon character. Not someone I could relate to. Mike still has that status with me. It's like when I produced Jerry Lee Lewis, people were asking, 'Don't you know what he did to his wives?' Well, I don't know, and I don't think about it. He's a great musician. So I have to admit that Mike Love made contributions to pop music that have influenced me."

So, is Brian on form?

"Yeah, He's like an old pro. And if he feels like showing off, watch out, he's great. If he wants to, he's really, really got it. And he still has great writing chops. And incredible memory for details. We were in the studio today and he's coming up with these incredible parts. He occasionally comes up with some amazing songs, and he's putting everything on tape. Tons of stuff. And he's paying for it all. Which is really good because no one's telling him what to do.

"We've just been doing what he likes to do - the kind of records he's always liked; I don't try to change anything in any way - his vision of what he wants. When he says 'Do this!' In the studio, I do it. I don't question it. If he knows what he wants, I do it or get somebody who can."

Ultimately then, he doesn't need The Beach Boys?

"I know," says Andy. "but I can't make up his mind for him. It's too controversial. If I gave my opinion...I don't know what my opinion even is at this point! I just want to see this record come out. I'd love to hear the right voices on the tunes. And if Brian thinks Carl, Mike and Al are the right voices, well, great!"

There is as Peter Guralnick once wrote of Elvis a ystery surrounding Brian Wilson that will never to solved. There can never be a definitive summation of the man. And that's why writers like Leaf, Timothy White and myself will continue to be accused of "feeding a now-unrealistic rock 'n' roll myth."

Maybe it's wrong for Brain's friends to "protect his public image," because it just reinforces the really insane belief that, unlike cancer or diabetes, mental illness is something of which you should be ashamed. By the same token, it's equally wrong for the people who've never

even met this man to use words like 'vegetable' and 'idiot savant' when describing Brian Wilson.

Brian will never be 'well' again, like he'll never be 21 again. But we should hope that he'll also never again be as scared and helpless as he was during the depths of his breakdown at the close of the '60s. It's fine for us to help for great music from Brian again, but if it doesn't happen, that's OK too. His achievement is already colossal. Now life goes on. Brian is newly married, older, different; he must do whatever he must do.

There are two statements from Don Was's film that remain with you long after the final credits have rolled. The first come from Brian's younger daughter Wendy, reminiscing about an abnormal childhood: "I have to keep reminding myself that this is what he's here for - to create beautiful music." The other comes from Thurston Moore, who reportedly first discovered The Beach Boys via a Patti Smith review of The Beach Boys Love You and has henceforth associated Brian Wilson with the Velvet Underground/Iggy Pop faction of modern pop music: "To me, it's really fascinating to hear such complex harmony coming out of someone who's considered 'not right.' I mean, I'm learning something about beauty from this person. So, it's like, hey, who's 'not right' here?"

WE ARRIVE AT KROQ TO TAPE THE RADIO SPECIAL. BRIAN IS now three hours late. Anxious folks in the studio - several unsigned local bands, the show's hosts, technicians, and assorted friends, lovers, and hangers-on have gathered in the hallway to stare at the legendary 'genius madman.'

It's decided that following a brief interview, Brian and Andy will play several songs with some of the musicians in the studio, including The Wondermints and former Blondie drummer Clem Burke. Brian sits at the baby grand piano. Andy borrows an electric guitar, and the material is discussed.

"How about Good Vibrations?" suggests a Wondermint.

"Oh, God, no!" retorts the song's composer.

God Only Know, California Girls, Do It Again and Darlin' make the final cut, and Brian then leads the band through a rehearsal of each song once (and only once). Occasionally, a musician has a question, which they almost always ask Andy. Each time, though, Andy defers to Brian: "I don't know. Ask Brian."

Brian stops one song in the middle. "No. Do it this way," he demonstrates. He's in total control now. And then it's time for the taping.

"So, Brian, tell us what's going on with the Beach Boys," inquires DJ Chris Carter.

"Well, lots of stuff is going on that I can't talk about," he replies. "No, we have lots of music going on inside our heads. [But] it's nice to know that all the music in the universe has fallen down on this little band today. It's a good thing, not a bad thing. 'Cos at least you know it's all music." He's a tad nervous.

Carter: "Well, The Beach Boys are going to Vegas next week. What can you tell us regarding that?"

“Well, my cousin sued me for five million dollars.” The entire studio erupts in hysterical laughter. “As soon as all that legal stuff was over, we became friends again. And now we’re just waiting to go in the studio together.”

The first two songs sound beautiful, of course, but it’s Do It Again where they hit their stride. Brian has made it a show stopper in every performance he’s done over the past year. The scene in the film where Brian performs it with his daughters Carnie and Wendy is a great moment in modern rock video.

The song reaches its climax. Brian’s piano is up in the mix, and Andy launches into the archetypal fuzztone guitar solo. At this precise moment, there are no gray areas. There only seems to be a certain peace on earth and everything makes sense.

This is what it’s all about. This is what matters.