

# Brian Wilson and The Fine Art of Surfacing

*“Something’s got to motivate you to get out there and do some business, and a lot of times it’s your childhood...”*

It would appear Brian Wilson hasn't been getting out there and doing much business lately. It's been 11 years since *The Beach Boys Love You*, the last album he wrote and produced. And it had two songs that had been recorded seven years earlier. You have to go back 22 years, to the landmark *Pet Sounds*, to find the last album of all-new Brian Wilson recordings. And you have to push way back, all the way back to 1964 when he suffered the first of a series of nervous breakdowns while on the road, to find Brian Wilson the live performer, the touring musician.

Hasn't exactly kept himself in the public eye, has he? But you're about to see his name and face plastered all over the media. If it hasn't already started.



What, Brian Wilson? You mean that old, fat, crazy Beach Boy surfer who hasn't done anything good in over 20 years and who hasn't done anything noteworthy at all for ages except stay in bed for four year? That guy? Why would everybody be interested in him all of a sudden?

The answer to "why at all?" takes a bit of explaining, and has to do with the Brian Wilson legend, all the mysteries and misconceptions there are about this man so many really knowledgeable music people consider a flat-out genius. Misconceptions like, for example, all of the ones in the previous paragraph.



The answer to "why now?" is the scheduled July release of his self-titled solo album, his first solo album ever.

There's always a craziness surrounding the recording and release of an important new album by a big-name artist. But in nearly 20 years of writing about such things I have never witnessed or heard of anything quite like this. The news that Brian Wilson was finally in the studio again, and would deliver a solo album, sent an incredible buzz of anticipation

through the music community. A lot of people are very nuts over this event, for reasons unique to Brian, his history and his promise.

Brian Wilson was the main man, the creative force behind the first group legitimately able to lay claim to the title World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band. (Which mythical title the Beatles took to Europe, where it has mostly stayed since then.) Though The Beach Boys haven't had a hot new record in years (because Brian withdrew from the business), they have remained through up-and-down cycles one of the biggest concert draws ever, recycling the prodigious Brian Wilson songbook of pop gems to succeeding eager generations of wanna-be beach bums.

Brian has been by nature an intense, no-compromise visionary artist from the very start. Heading a family band brought a set of unique pressures to which he finally caved in, but when it came to the music he knew what was right and fought for it. While barely out of his teen he stood up to the giant Capitol Records and started making records on his own, outside their studios and with complete artistic control (unheard of then), inventing the concept of artist as producer. He spent \$50,000 and took the better part of six months to produce one three-and-a-half-minute single in 1966, but "Good Vibrations" set the music world on its ear.

He played a new song, "Surf's Up," for Leonard (N.Y. Philharmonic, West Side Story) Bernstein, and Leonard declared it the greatest piece of music written in the 20th Century. (Which so freaked out Brian that he didn't release it for four years.) The album he was laboring over at the time, his answer to the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper – he always felt very much in competition with them – became the lost Smile album, his master work that was never released (Purportedly he destroyed the tapes).

Based on stories his little brother Dennis told him, non-surfing Brian wrote a string of beach-blondes hits starting with "Surfin" in '61 that were so seductive it was the key element of the creation and the worldwide embrace of the California myth.

Colossal success and international stardom, especially at a tender age, are never easy to deal with, but Brian dealt with them horrifically. Family and business difficulties sparked the nervous breakdowns which were a convenient reason to ease touring; he zoomed way ahead of most of his peers in experimenting with drugs he soon massively abused, and became more and more reclusive after the collapse of Smile, withdrawing "in his room," "in bed" for years at a time, emerging only enough to foster stories of sandboxes and tents and bathrobe visits to the Troubadour. His marriage disintegrated, his family suffocated in a miasma of alcohol, sex, and drugs while Machiavellian management politics swirled around his quiescent talent.

**I**t took the outrageous methods of revered/reviled therapist Dr. Eugene Landy to pull Brian from the strand of self-destruction, and now he is enmeshed deep in a working relationship with the "mad" doctor that most associates of Brian's we spoke to feel it's crippling and parasitic, and that the attorney general's office charges is illegal. Landy is probably some sort of surrogate for Brian for the sick father who physically abused the Wilson boys and also inspired Brian to achieve greatness. Murry Wilson's death in 1973 devastated him, and brother Dennis' alcohol-induced drowning ten years later aggrieved him terribly.



It is against this backdrop, only briefly and incompletely sketched above, that the music world applauds the reemergence of Brian Wilson, and holds its collective breath to see how healthy he is and whether or not he's managed to deliver the long-long-long-awaited goods. But let's make something clear first: I am nowhere near being an expert on the chaotic life of Brian, and this is not The Brian Wilson Story (though it threatened to turn into that over two months' time).

This was to be "simply" an interview with Brian Wilson about his forthcoming solo album, but two things got in the way; it was difficult to get much straight poop about the album out of Brian, and you soon realize you can't write anything that makes any sense without dishing out large portions of history and background and, yes, judgments. A good reporter tries to avoid them: Just the facts ma'am. Let people draw their own conclusions. But around Brian Wilson, facts as we know them tend to disappear like shrimp on a buffet table. When writing about Brian, the best service you can offer the reader is any insight which may have resulted from your digging.

He is an artist wrapped densely in myth and enigma who, in person, in interview, creates as many questions as he answers. Is this guy crazy, or is he crazy like a fox? Missing a synapse or just as sensitive as a raw nerve ending? Startingly honest or putting you on? Childish naïve or a master manipulator? God only know, and Brian, and he's not telling, because when he tells you everything you wind up knowing nothing for certain. Reproducing the complete text of our interview, Q & A style, would only mislead, confuse or downright baffle any readers besides a handful of well-informed Wilsonologists.

So to gain even minimal understanding you are forced to listen to those who surround him and know him, and then the fun begins. Just when one source offers an interpretation and maybe additional information that seems to explain a point in question, along comes someone else in just as good a position to know who tells you something very different. And their interpretation makes sense too. You soon become desperate for even a silver of information that everyone agrees upon.

Something that is by no means agreed on by the general music-listening public is Brian's standing in the rock and roll firmament. Informal surveys would doubtlessly find many more people who would dismiss, have forgotten or even are unaware of him, than those who would call him genius, or even important. But try asking musicians, and you'll get very different results.

When the Beatles' bass player says he took up the bass because of Brian Wilson, that Pet Sounds inspired the Beatles to create Sgt. Pepper, that he thinks "God Only Knows" is the most perfect love song ever written – you have to pay attention.

Or maybe you don't. Maybe you can't put aside what a musical schlub McCartney's become since then. And maybe you just can't relate to Leonard Bernstein, either. Well then, do Dylan's hosannas mean anything to you? How about Townshend, Clapton, Springsteen, Jagger, Richards, Neil Young, Chrissie Hynde, Todd Rundgren, Ray Davies, Patti Smith, Randy Newman, John Cale, David Byrne, Ray Charles, George Martin?

Still can't relate? Then how about XTC, Robyn Hitchcock, R.E.M., Redd Kross, the Ramones, the Church, Rain Parade, Big Dipper, the Go-Betweens, Psychic TV, the Feelies, the dB's? -- all of whom, like the musicians previously noted, have proclaimed their admiration for Brian's work and his influence on their career.

Most of the new album does sound like Brian's old stuff; but the point is as popular as the old Beach Boys' hits were, buried inside those fluffy little Top Ten bon mots about cars and girls and surfing was the kind of musical construction and vision that earned him his unique reputation and praise of fellow giants in the music world. Not the kind of praise of that says merely "he was a man head of his time," because that's usually the consolation reserved for those who have reached the end of the line without recognition due them.

Brian's praise, especially from his peers, has nearly always included the hope that he would start making music again. It was his vision that he was known for, and that continued to flash in pieces of things he has shown the world in a generally unproductive and unimpressive 22 years, that kept his reputation as an innovator alive. To those who can hear the real essence of a song, and who know the mass popularity or mass rejection of an artist's output bears little relation to its artistic worth, Brian Wilson has always been on the cutting edge. Always been making alternative music.

So it seems a good number of current crop of musicians, as well as the best of the veterans, still listen to and are moved by Brian Wilson's music. But what does Brian Wilson listen to? It was the first question we asked him.

**Contrast**

Do you keep up with popular music much these days?

**Brian Wilson**

Well...yeah, I do...by being immersed in my own music. That's how I stay up with popular music, because I can't separate myself from anything else. I listen to records, I listen to radio, but...I don't know...I don't seem to get any satisfaction out of it. I don't get nothing good or satisfying out of it, so I don't know what to do.

*If you read those first two sentences and your reaction was –Huh? If you didn't quite catch the logic, if you thought Brian perhaps made a statement about his new music, maybe about its place on the contemporary scene, but didn't really answer the question, if you thought his hesitation at the beginning hinted at someone who was trying to choose the "right" response and then fell short trying to justify it, if his ending thought left you hoping the interviewer would ask him "what do you mean, you don't know what to do?...about what?" – then welcome to the Brian Wilson Interview. Where a lot of his responses seem half-baked, off the mark, incomplete or even total non-sequiturs – or maybe not, especially when you listen back to them a second and third time, and listen through the perspective of all the other things you've learned about him. You begin to suspect Brian makes perfect sense in his own way. Read other interviews he's done and you'll find the same dangling thoughts. Is it because of all the drugs he did for all of those years? Or is he manipulating the interview from word go, getting his ideas in without paying much attention to the question actually asked?*

*Expectations (in life, but especially in interviews with Brian Wilson) will kill you every time. Eagerly anticipated was the point in the interview where we would ask Brian to comment on the songs, one at a time. Since he was still in the recording-mixdown process, with everything fresh and undiluted by outside reaction, we thought it might be the perfect point in time to get some valuable insight from the author. This could turn out to be the heart of the interview. Being at the point of birth, so to speak, of these songs that had been gestating for several years in some cases, the proud father might have a lot to say about them. No such luck.*

**Contrast**

Let's go through the album, song by song. Is there any comment you'd like to make on them?

**Brian Wilson**

On the album?

**Contrast**

Yeah.

**Brian Wilson**

...on each song?

*As he still seemed puzzled or for some reason unwilling to jump into it, we suggested "maybe one sentence..." Some of his first responses were maybe one sentence, but certainly he wasn't offering the insight hoped for. And it soon disintegrated into a meaningless few words.*

So that you might have a better idea of what's on this album, what follows is Brian's responses to this line of inquiry succeeded, in parentheses, by my brief observations about each son.

*(It should be noted that, at our request, Warners' special project publicist David Leaf sat in on the interview. Leaf wrote a book titled The Beach Boys that could more accurately be called a Brian Wilson biography, probably knows as much about his life and music as anyone, and has been a trusted associate and friend of Brian's for years. Given Brian's mercurial nature, we felt we had a better chance of him opening up for the interview if Leaf was there. Also present at the interview, not at our request, was one of Brian's assistant, Kevin Leslie, dubbed behind his back "the surf nazi." It should be noted he interjected his comments into the interview only once.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Love and Mercy" – that would be my message of love to people.

*(C: Most of the songs seem mostly autobiographical, but this one does seem to be Brian's message to "the people," to the world. He sings of his dismay and fear over the pain, loneliness and violence he sees, through personal observation and through the media. Great synth-supported vocal tapestry preceding the final chorus. A strong lead-off song.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Nighttime" is the...trying to broaden people's awareness as to what time of the day it is that...the right time of day it is to, to socialize, you know?

*(C: Now, there's some real useful information. It's hard to imagine these lyrics are intended to convey anything more than "Fun, Fun, Fun." But it sounds like a good bet commercially, a good summer sing-along radio song. Nice sax work.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Walkin' the Line" is all about how life is sort of like walking on thin ice for me. I tread lightly on everything I do. I'm monitored 24 hours a day by a doctor, and I live the part. You know? I walk the line, so to speak.

*(C: This is more like it. Not earthshaking revelation, but at least we hear from the writer that this is about him, about how he sees his life. Unfortunately, this is as good as it gets the rest of his responses could practically have been written by anyone just looking at the titles. There's another theme in this song. We asked Brian if many of the words which seemed to be referring to the love a woman weren't really about music. He laughed, heartily, at the suggestion – then said "yeah...you're right.")*

*"If I don't get my way this time I'll die and that's no lie" could, of course, be about almost anything. It's easy to read things unintended into song lyrics. But if you know something of the years of struggle he's gone through to get this record made, you'll pick up many allusions to it throughout the LP.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Melt Away" is also another love song, a message of love.

*(C: The opening line is something Brian's been wanting to cry out to the world for years: "I wonder why/nothin' ever seems to go my way?" It's a plaintive acknowledgment that the world's not waiting just for him, that it doesn't seem to care what he can be. Beautiful arrangement, using rich, deep voices the way he used to use the high ones. One of four resplendent love songs on this album.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"There's So Many" is...also another love song, it's another love song."

*(C: I'm afraid I have to disagree, Brian. This is not just "another love song." This is an absolutely gorgeous piece, deeply affecting both lyrically and musically. As a song about a true love out of reach, it's splendid; as a metaphor for the pain he's suffered not being able to do the one thing that gives his life meaning, making music, it's enough to make you cry. Amidst harps and chimes, his aching voice soars "up in the sky/where angels fly in heaven's eye," until it explodes into a celestial chorus "where planets are spinning around." Andy Paley's vocals add much to this one.)*

**Brian Wilson**

A song called "One For The boys" ...that is a love song, another love song.

*(C: Right, and who do you think "the boys" are? Though he quickly assured us earlier he still considers himself a Beach boy, at another point in the interview Brian said, about The Beach Boys, "they haven't been too close to me lately." If Custer had said that about his rapport with the local Native Americans it would've been only a slightly sillier understatement. But Brian's like that. He seems incapable of hurting anyone, doesn't even speak ill of people, not even those who have done him real dirty.*

*There's so much to marvel about as one digs into the incredible history of Brian Wilson, but among all the bizarre and beautiful and terrible things, the one that most stands out over everything else is the way everyone, it seems, who gets to know this man even a little, loves him. I think that speaks volumes – as does this short song without words, an a cappella beauty just made for the Boys, but since this album couldn't have been made with them involved, Brian did it all himself. Listen to it, and in one minute and 41 seconds of he sublime sound of only voices you will have the answer to a lot of questions about The Beach Boys.)*

**Brian Wilson**

What else is there?

**David Leaf**

"Baby Let Your Hair Grow Long..."

**Brian Wilson**

"Baby Let Your Hair Grow Long" is a sex song. A romantic sexual song.

*(C: If this is a sex song, Tipper Gore can retire. Classic BW rhythm and arrangement, from electric saw to choral crescendo surrounded by wall of sound with kitchen sinkful of instruments. He told us he "hair grow long" lyric has no connection to "Caroline, No.")*

**Brian Wilson**

"Let It Shine," that's a love song...that I wrote with, actually, Jeff Lynne wrote most of it. I wrote some of the lyrics with Jeff Lynne.

*(C: ELO founder Lynne, producer of George Harrison's recent Cloud Nine LP, also produced this and his stamp is clearly on it. If Brian wants to go a more commercial route, Lynne could take him. Good sound, but a little of the edge missing compared to the other cuts. Brian's got a pretty good track record all by himself when it comes to producing hits.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Let's Do It Again" is a semi-commercial kind of song, a nowadays kind of song, you know?

*(C: This one apparently didn't make it onto the album, and I didn't get to hear it.)*

**Brian Wilson**

"Little Children" is...a song about little children. It's about how they're marching along. They're gettin' on.

**David Leaf**

The freedom they have, like from responsibility.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, yeah. The freedom. The responsibility thing. There is no real responsibility when you're a kid, you know? There is when you're a kid, you know? There is when you grow up, though. You develop and acquire it, you know what I mean? But you don't have, like, uh...(long pause)...let's see, here – yeah, you know what I mean. Yeah, of course.

**Contrast**

Probably, in your career, though, you were sheltered from a lot of responsibility.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Contrast**

Maybe in some ways you were never given the chance to grow up the way most people get to.

**Brian Wilson**

Right. Mostly in the area of financial responsibility. Of watching over your finances and...being aware of what's going on with your finances.

*(C: This is indeed a juvenile song, my least favorite on the LP. The bells and parts of the melody make it sound like a silly Christmas song, unsettling to hear on a summertime release. But it is growing on me a bit. This song, musically refined, but lyrically nearly identical, dates from at least 1977, and has shown up on bootlegs).*

*There is one important song from the album that's mysteriously missing. I recall Brian mentioning it during the interview. Not much that was illuminating, per usual, but he indicated it was one of his favorites, and that others who had heard it also favored it. "meet Me in My Dreams tonight" proved to be as elusive as its title: it's the one number we wound up lacking as we cajoled the rest out of Warner Bros., a few cuts at a time, and somehow our brief discussion of it during the interview didn't make it onto tape – gremlins, I guess. I did hear it just once, in a car in a restaurant parking lot, and it was immediately impressive.*



*No matter what your opinion of the rest of the album, you've got to acknowledge the last song as being different, out there, daring. It's eight minutes long, it's titled "Rio Grande," Brian called it also "Life Suite" (probably based on its original concept), and it's the kind of ambitious creation Brian has always been capable of and sometimes delivered when he was able to ignore all of those around him clamoring and pressuring for another hit. If you're familiar with "Good Vibrations," whose form Brian dubbed a "pocket symphony," and other similar ones like "Heroes and Villians," "Cabinessence," and "Cool, Cool Water," you'll be prepared for "Rio Grande." But it's still different from anything else he's ever done, bound to elicit strong reactions.*

*Here's what he had to say about it:*

**Brian Wilson**

First of all, that's probably the best thing in the whole album. And second of all, it's taken the longest to do, and we're most...explicitly trying very hard to pull it together, so that it makes sense, you know? So that people can hear it and it'll flow naturally from one thing to another. Real hard to do at first.

**Contrast**

Musically it certainly flows. The lyrics are a little mysterious to me. I grew up in New Mexico, in Albuquerque, which is on the Rio Grande (small laugh, from Leaf and Leslie, probably of anticipation)...

**Brian Wilson**

Right...

**Contrast**

-- and I never saw a steamboat on the Rio Grande, for one thing. It almost seemed like a fairy tale, sort of a fantasy, maybe.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah.

**Contrast**

Can you talk about that a little bit? Where the idea came from, where some of the images might have come from?

**Brian Wilson**

Aahhh...boy, I don't know, I...

**David Leaf**

Didn't Lenny want you to do something different than just another song?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, Lenny...(Warner Bros. President) Waronker, right. Lenny Waronker is kind of responsible for a lot of it.

**Contrast**

Do you remember where the idea came from in the first place?

**Brian Wilson**

Me and Andy. It was born between me and ("Rio Grande" co-producer) Andy Paley. He conceptualized lyrically what was happening. He did a little more of the lyrics than I did, but we collaborated on the music and got the music together, and the two, the music and the lyrics, are a perfect marriage, you know what I mean? I mean, a perfect marriage.

*There's one other song done during this time that I was able to hear, which won't be on Brian Wilson but is due to be released later this year. It will be part of a project of re-recordings by high-profile musicians of songs from the Smithsonian archives, and Brian chose to interpret Leadbelly's "Goodnight, Irene" in his purest, gorgeous signature style. It opens with Brian just wailing a cappella, his voice hanging in space, with rich echo. A little tack piano sneaks into the background, then start silence just before the explosion of a single drumbeat followed by a thousand angelic voices supporting the chorus.*

*The jarring juxtaposition of Brian's oh-so-white Southern California voice and musical style on top of this familiar rural Southern blues classic is made all the more startling through Brian's choice to sing the original lyrics, unknown to most of the millions who have heard, loved, sung this song. The very first words you hear him sing are, "Sometimes I lives in the country..." but what's really affecting is the discovery that Leadbelly wrote it "...goodnight, Irene, goodnight, Irene, I get you in my dreams," not the genteel and romantic "I'll see you in my dreams." Reminds us of the Police hit "Every Breath You Take," who sinister lyrics were glossed over by the masses who wanted to hear it as a nice love song.*

**Contrast**

How long have you been writing this album?

**Brian Wilson** Four and a half...about five years. I went through my stage of writing songs, as a songwriter, and then when it came time to record by album, we took from a reservoir of songs, the ones that we thought were the most commercial and the best songs for the album. We took about 15, or 18 songs –we've recorded about 18 songs, and now we've narrowed it down to around ten songs.

**Contrast**

So some of these go back as far as four and a half or five years?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, yeah, way back there, yeah – at least, at least.

**Contrast**

Any of them farther than that? Any of them that were pieces or fragments of stuff?

**Brian Wilson**

No, yeah...some do, some go back ten years, couple of pieces.

**Contrast**

Ideas, maybe, that you always liked?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah. Gene's good at doing that, he's good at taking one thing and putting it into another thing. He's very good at that.

**Contrast**

Besides his role of helping you personally, what's been his role in the making of this album?

**Brian Wilson**

He's the executive producer. He's the overseer of the whole thing. Meaning that he is in a position to send...vibrations to us, to make edits, and make suggestions in the production. He's like a producer, only it's just a way of saying that he's the high producer, so he puts "executive" before the word producer. So, in a sense, "executive" doesn't necessarily need to be there, he could just say "producer," or we could e "assistant," but he says "No!" – he's the executive producer and I'm the producer. That's all, simple as that.

**Contrast**

You usually collaborate with people. With this album, you did some collaboration as far as the music and as far as the words, or have you written all of the music yourself?

**Brian Wilson**

No, no. Dr. Landy and I collaborated on a lot of it, and Andy Paley collaborated with me on a lot of it. Basically, Dr. Landy and I. That really is the central collaborative effort that takes place between Gene and myself. It took us 11 months and 800,000 buck to et. It's a high-budget album, you know what I mean?

**David Leaf**

It could've been high...

**Brian Wilson**

It's not your regular album, it's your more high-budget album. That's because when I told (Landy), he said I want you to make a solo album, and I said, well, if we can do it at my pace. So we went right to the tea with that one. He ways "Fine! We'll take all day long to get one track or one of this or one instrument, just as long as it takes you – go at your pace!" So I want at my pace, and it's costing a hell of a lot of money and...ahhh, boy, you know, all the rest. But it's getting there.

Sire Records' Andy Paley, who also co-produced "goodnight, Irene," was brought in from the very beginning of the album project, spending the whole 11 months with Brian and taking on an increasingly active role. He put the final cost of the album at one million dollars. Warner Bros. (who distributes Sire) head Waronker, also involved from day one but personally present only during the "Rio Grande" sessions, strongly disputes both of those figures. "They really don't know what the costs are," he said. Though unwilling to come up with a figure, he said \$1,000,000 was "a tremendous overstatement –way over."

**Contrast**

You've been satisfied with the results?

**Brian Wilson**

Very, very satisfied.

**Contrast**

It might've been different if there had been a situation where a record company was pushing you and saying, well, Brian, it's three months overdue, and \$300,000 overdue...

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, I know.

**Contrast**

Would it have been possible under those circumstances?

**Brian Wilson**

No, no, it wouldn't have. Well, we did get it done, that was great. We had a good solid year now, just about a month shy of production. And it's been a real learning experience, 'cause we're doing it now differently than I used to. I used to get a group of people out there, a band, and produce the band live. Now everything's done with synthesizers. I would overdub, I'd play all the keyboard stuff, and then I'd have my right hand, my assistant producer Andy Paley, play the guitar, and bass, and drums—he can play four instruments, piano too. Which is great.

**Contrast**

When you used to do some things in the studio—at home, for example—weren't you doing it by yourself then?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, somewhat. Carried the load by myself for a while, and then shared it with other people.

**Contrast**

So is this recording experience different from that?

**Brian Wilson**

Only through the sense of intensity, it's a little more intense, and a little more...under pressure. Besides the general pressure of working, you know, I mean, if you have a job where you answer phones, and (he pretends to hold a telephone up to his ear, stick plugs in a switchboard, put down the phone and pick up another—frantic activity): "Yes, who is it? Oh, hold on please..." (makes buzzing noises) stop, have lunch, and... That's a pressure in itself. But the kind of pressure that we have, is the Gene pressure. I obviously can be living in awe of the guy, right? A little scared of him, because of his ability, in business and music. So that's the pressure I have. Generally, it's just the Gene pressure. Just the idea that he wants it right. He's a fierce competitor, when it comes to getting something that's good. He wants a successful album. And he knows in his heart what's going to be a hit and what isn't, and I think he really believes in this album. That's what I think. I think he believes in it enough to stick with it. He hasn't once said "Fuck the album! It's off, the album is off."

**David Leaf**

Does he help you believe in it – in yourself?

**Brian Wilson**

No. I do that all by myself.

**Contrast**

Is there ever an artistic conflict between the two of you; is there something that you really believe in musically and he says, I don't think that works?

**Brian Wilson**

Yes. We've had a couple of those. Not very many. We've had a few...artistic...conflicts – dilemmas, conflicts.

**Contrast**

What happens then, you arm wrestle?

**Brian Wilson**

No, we don't, no, no, no he's the boss. That's why he set it up that way, so if we did run into that kind of problem, he'd just step in and say, "No (makes buzzing sound, seven times)...that'll be this and that'll be that, and (three buzzes)...you know?"

**Contrast**

So you're letting him be the final arbiter...

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, yes...

**Contrast**

...of all conflicts?

**Brian Wilson**

Yes, yes.

**Contrast**

And you feel that's what it take to...

**Brian Wilson**

(laughs loudly)

**Contrast**

...get this thing done?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah (more laughter).

**Leslie:**

Doesn't he ask you musically, though, Brian?

**Brian Wilson**

Oh, yeah, sometimes he does.

**Leslie:** I mean, he always tells you, "you're the genius in the music..."

**Brian Wilson**

Yes...

**Leslie:** "...what do we do here?"

**Brian Wilson**

Uh, he does that.

**Leslie:** That's not the impression I got.

**Brian Wilson**

Sometimes, when we have arguments, he does win the argument, as...the executive producer. But musically, I do have the top hand on that, what goes on tape, musically. But I don't know how we work it, I don't know how we ever make ends meet, you know? Because it's very difficult at times, to work, in a studio. I mean, if the guy's a Brian Wilson, and the idea that I don't want to fail—say, if I was afraid that if I failed I'd fuckin' kick myself in the ass forever. So I wasn't in the market to fail and personal projects. But we usually do succeed.

*The assertion by intimates that Brian is "uncontrollable" in interviews, meaning there's no way to stop him from blurting out the truth no matter how unflattering it may be, seems credible. But there's a catch: the truth he pours out, it seems, is what's true for him at that moment, and if you ask him the same question the next day he may give you another truthful answer that's 180 degrees removed.*

*An example of that type of Brianism: our interview concluded on a strange note, with Brian relating a "joke" about the album, that "if it does as well as we hoped it would, it could revolutionize the shoe industry."*

*He seemed, at that moment, to relax for the only time during the interview as he uncontrollably cracked up trying to deliver the punch line. The other two people present, Leaf and Leslie, laughed heartily at this joke I figured they must have heard before. Brian repeated it, savoring it, with a slight twist on the punch line; more laughter ensued, and as I still didn't get it I wrote it off as being an "in" joke whose original context was what made it funny.*

*No so, I was later told. It's just a dumb joke, an example of Brian's strange sense of what's funny. But when Leaf asked Brian, rather perfunctorily, if he minded if that joke from the interview be included in the promotional material he was writing for the album, he reported that Brian seemed almost shocked at the suggestion. "Oh, no, David, that's a private joke, you can't use that!"*

*Returning to the subject of what music he's been listening to, we asked Brian if there was anyone he's heard on the radio lately who stands out.*

**Brian Wilson**

Tears for Fears did, I like their stuff. And Anita Baker is another one I though was great.

**Contrast**

So you're flipping around the dial, then?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, been flipping around.

**Contrast**

Have you acquired any records lately?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, I bought Stevie Wonder's Musiquarium.

## **Contrast**

And that made your top Ten of all time...

*My introduction to Brian Wilson came about a half hour before he appeared for the interview at Ground Control Studios in Santa Monica, where most of the album was recorded and mixed. A legal pad lying on top of a monitor had a numbered list of LPs written on it. Leaf was showing me around the studios, and when he spied the pad picked it up and said, "I'll bet this is that list they asked Brian to make of his ten favorite albums of all time." He said some writer was assembling a book of such lists solicited from top stars. So my introduction to the legendary Mr. Wilson came aptly, I mused, in the form of a sneak peek at the list of albums he thought were the best ever made.*

*So go ahead, guess, what do you think topped the list? If you know something about Brian you might've guessed Sgt. Pepper, and you'd almost be right. He placed that number three. If you know a lot about Brian you might know he's a huge Randy Newman fan: his Sail Away LP was #2. But crowning the list was his own Pet Sounds, the each Boys LP some people consider Brian's real first solo album. However, three different inside sources suggested Brian's management might've convinced him it would look better to put his own album at the top. They also hinted his placing two Paul Simon discs in his top five might've come about the same way. But anyone who knows even a little about Brian would not be surprised at his sticking three Four Freshmen LPs on that list. They were a major influence in his teens, and out of that grew the dazzling vocal harmonies that have been a Brian Wilson signature ever since. (Since I saw the list only briefly and had to memorize it, I'm not positive about the titles of the Four Freshmen albums.)*

*Here's the complete list:*

- 1) *Pet Sounds – Beach Boys*
- 2) *Sail Away – Randy Newman*
- 3) *Sgt. Pepper - Beatles*
- 4) *Graceland - Paul Simon*
- 5) *Hearts and Bones - Paul Simon*
- 6) *Four Frosh and Five Trombones - Four Freshmen*
- 7) *For Love - Four Freshman*
- 8) *First Love - Four Freshman*
- 9) *Rubber Soul - Beatles*
- 10) *Musiquarium - Stevie Wonder*

*You'd also have to question whether an album he revealed he (most?) recently acquired is indeed one of his favorite of all time or just a current fave, especially when it's a collection like Musiquarium. But such a list by anyone, of course, means nothing more than a glimpse at some personal part of them at that point in time.*

*Continuing the questions about Brian's thoughts about the current music scene he's reentering, we asked him if he had watched the recent Grammy Awards. He said he did, and tha he thought it was "kinda far out' 'new faces, new places," a rather odd assessment, really, when most other observers were struck at how many old faces were competing this year, contemporaries in Brian's early heyday like Dylan, George Harrison, the Grateful Dead.*

*Pointing out that it seemed like a number of performers who were popular with young music fans in the '60s, but were passed over for Grammys, were not getting their due, we asked how he felt about that:*

**Contrast**

Would you be interested in getting a Grammy:

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, it'd be nice. It all depends on if I deserve it or not. If I deserve it then I think I should get it. And it would be great to get it. It's a good feeling to get an award. We (The Beach Boys) got into the Hall of Fame, into the rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We were inducted.

**Contrast**

With some pretty good company (the Beatles, The Supremes, Bob Dylan), too.

**Brian Wilson**

Yes, yes.

**Contrast**

So you were there for that, and you gave a speech, didn't you?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, I did.

**Contrast**

Or, you said a few words...

**Brian Wilson**

I said a speech, yeah – I read a speech, I didn't say it.

**Contrast**

Could you tell us about that? David was telling me a little bit about what you said, and I was intrigued. Do you remember, could you...

**Brian Wilson**

(pause) Uh, you mean on the speech?

**Contrast**

Yeah.

**Brian Wilson**

Uh, I just said that, uh, told some of the chronology or the history of The Beach Boys and what The Beach Boys...you know, just the chronology of the group and what had happened and how we got started, how we feel the music is something that touches people, and that we all share that a feeling in this room, we all share that feeling in music. You know, that kind of thing.

**Contrast**

Didn't you say something about it coming from God through you?



**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, sort of like that. It comes through you, you're just a human being but God writes it through you.

**Contrast**

Do you get that feeling sometimes, that music just has to come out, and you're sort of forced to the piano?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah (raising his voice, inflecting almost to a growl, with a brief sparkle in his eye and a race of a smile curling his lips)...yyeahhh! Yeah, I get that all the time. I gotta make, you know, it always pushes me. I'm driven, by my ego and my love for music. It's like being driven, right? You gotta get it out.

*If those seemed like leading questions, like we were fishing for something, you're right. Brian's appearances at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ceremonies the previous two years made an impression on probably most of the music biz heavyweights in attendance. But at least two of them came away convinced that a Brian Wilson as healthy as the one they saw had to start making music again, and since they were both presidents of major record companies they were in a position to do something about it. Through Lenny Waronker of Warner Bros. found himself flying back to California on the same plane with Brian, his scruples lift him pondering Brian's future without even speaking to him. Sire's Seymour Stein, however, made his move and had Brian signed as a solo artist, with obvious full support from parent company Warner's.*

*At the first of those two awards ceremonies it was Brian's mere appearance that made music news, and also his moving a cappella rendering of "On Broadway," honoring Leiber and Stoller. The following year it was The Beach Boys' induction that brought him there, and it was his remarks about the source of music and its healing and creative powers that moved people. That's what we are trying to get Brian to talk about, rather than his first recollection that he spoke about the chronology of The Beach Boys. Fishing abandoned, we returned to questions about current musical influences, only to get another surprising response:*

**Contrast**

Is there anybody now who really moves you or influences you?

**Brian Wilson**

David Bowie, vocally. And who else?...um...

**David Leaf**Michael Jackson

**Brian Wilson**

Michael Jackson, has been a tremendous influence on my dancing.

**Contrast**

So we're going to see dancing at the Grammys, right?

**Brian Wilson**

Yes (laughter from all present). I can dance, I'd like to try, I really would.

*It was too much to resist a silent chuckle – the thought of this musical giant who, while now trim and fit, had tragically become infamous for the image of his 300-plus body parked in bed for four years – saying he wanted to wow'em at the Grammys a la Michael. Picture a pas de deux?*

*Naming David Bowie when asked who on the current scene moves him may have been another of Brian's undetectable jokes. Two insiders reacted that way when told of that response, and one of them said he accompanied Brian not long ago to a David Bowie concert and said Brian's reaction to the Thin White Duke's handling of "God Only Knows" was indeed strong but hardly complimentary. If that's true, are we to figure Brian had a complete change of mind since the concert, reevaluating and finding a touch of genius in the singing, or is he presenting a completely false image to the world through that response for the benefit of the one person who was with him that night who will know it was an absurd response? A joke?*

*The part about Michael Jackson, surprising as that may seem – as was Brian's declared inclination to boogie in public – is probably true. At another point in the interview Brian brought up the subject of rigidity, in relation to musical accomplishment:*

*BW: Rigidity is a problem in life; by rigid I mean not able to adapt to a situation physically. You know, you have to learn to use your body as a language, body language, if you want to get anywhere. If a person can't use that, then that's a tool they don't have.*

### **Contrast**

Are you doing anything to expand the use of the awareness of your body?

### **Brian Wilson**

Oh yeah, I do a little of everything. I run, I swim, I work out with weights, I do aerobics. I did a lot of dancing in the last half a year, a lot of dancing exercises, to "Love and Mercy" and "Nighttime" and "Walkin' the Line" and "Melt Away." I had a trainer who was a combination trainer and choreographer, and I got the benefits of the choreography. So that's pretty good.

### **Contrast**

When did that idea come to you, that loosening up your body might have some influence on your music?

### **Brian Wilson**

Well, I don't know, I think maybe when I was in high school I probably ran across the idea of what is important about communication by using your body. You can communicate so much more with your body than you can with just your head, just your mouth.

*In early May, Brian could be seen in a corny but charming cameo appearance on "The New Leave it to Beaver" TV series, playing a high school history teacher "Mr. Hawthorne" (Brian grew up in Hawthorne, Ca.). A couple of weeks later he was the featured guest on "Lil' Art's Poker Party," a very informal music talk show on L.A. public access cable TV. We asked him about his dabbling in acting, which was obviously a learning and coming-out discipline for him. Not for the first time, he took it to some unexpected areas.*

**Contrast**

Has it been fun, or...

**Brian Wilson**

Oh, Yeah!

**Contrast**

...or kind of a chore?

**Brian Wilson**

Both.

**Contrast**

A challenge?

**Brian Wilson**

It's mostly a challenge. You're right, that's the right word, challenge. It's a challenge for me to get over the aspect of kicking ass, and relating to the fact that you're just gonna get in there and kick ass and nothing else. Which is hard to get away from. You know, it's something that you live with, it's something like a stake in your heart. You have this feeling of having had your ass kicked in the pst and you remember these experiences. They all go to sleep in your subconscious mind but...you still remember them, you know what I mean? Sometimes consciously, but most of the time, subconsciously. It's like being bothered: you don't know what it is. It's just memories, trying to get up in your mind. That's what I go through a lot. And...y brother Carl, similar. He kind of has a little mechanism going on in his head, like I do. We're very much the same in that we both have a little feeling of revenge in life.

My dad kicked my ass – oh, God, he just wiped me out, you know? He was just a strong-willed guy that kind of bulldozed his way through, you know, and kind of knocked people around. He just started knocking people all over this place. Carl...me and Dennis and Carl caught hell, a lot of the time. It was a hell of a deal. I didn't like the feeling...I didn't like the feeling of, uh...being hit. It bothered me. I didn't like it.

**Contrast**

But you do feel that that pushed you and got you to perform on the level that you did.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, it did. It got us cranking. Something's got to motivate you to get out there and do some business, and a lot of he times it's your childhood, because...You gotta remember something: when you're a kid, you have no defenses against your dad, or your mom, you know what I mean. You're totally dependent on them. And if they whack you around you've got nothing but pain, and sorrow...that follows you around, you know? If you get whacked around, you're dead.

**Contrast**

I think a lot of people are verbally whacked around.

**Brian Wilson**

Yes

**Contrast**

In ways that may not be as obvious as it was in your life.

**Brian Wilson**

Oh, it can be just as painful...

**Contrast**

People far into their adult life are still motivated by...

**Brian Wilson**

Right!

**Contrast**

...by the way they were treated as kids. Like you say, kids are defenseless, really.

**David Leaf**

You might want to talk about what's motivating you know to make this new record.

**Brian Wilson**

Oh yea, Well, well you are. And Gene, and Kevin, and all of the people in my life, all go into what I'm doing...

**Contrast**

But there are a lot of people who have been wanting you to do that for a long time, and trying to motivate you. What's the difference now? Why now, after all these years, is it finally happening?

**Brian Wilson**

I think it's got to surface eventually. I think it's scary – I think we're all afraid of what's inside of us, you know, all of our memories. If you put them all together you'd freak out. There's no way to handle all all of your subconscious memory. If you put them all together, and added it all up...Or say you took a pad of paper, and filled it, page after page, with things that happened to you, you'd stop somewhere and say oh man, I can't handle this shit! But no, that's why the mind is divided up into a subconscious and a conscious, because you can't handle it in your conscious mind, all of it. You can only handle an ongoing thing, and a few memories now and then. But by and large it's usually the conscious mind that's in operation. And sometimes things surface, you know what I mean? They surface up, into your conscious mind, and that's when you become angry, or scared, or upset.

**Contrast**

Are those the sort of things that stopped you before?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, that got in the way, yeah.

**Contrast**

So you're at the point now where those things are still there, but you've got a handle on them...

**Brian Wilson**

You become more...possibly at peace, maybe, might even be the right word...with yourself if you have a handle on all of the bad things that happened to you in your life. You say to yourself, well, there's no way to get over this shit, you know. But yet somehow you do anyway.

**David Leaf**

You wee real determined to overcome it.

**Brian Wilson**

Oh, yeah. Anger was the one thing I want through about ten years ago. I started throwing things at windows, and breaking all my windows in my house. A lot of anger was coming up for a couple of years. And then it went away, it went to sleep, then I went back to visit.

*Brian talked about his anger twice more during the interview. At one point he was describing the way his manager, Dr. Landy, would get him back on track during visits to the studio:*

**Brian Wilson**

He is a genius. (speaks very softly) He is a genius...uh, producer... It's just the way he does things. the way he'll use his hands, and the way he moves his head. He knows what he's doing.

**David Leaf**

Kind of your life producer...

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, he really is. It's kind of scary to stay up with him. Sometimes I get angry with him and I don't tell him. (laughs) I don't dare 'cause I don't want to start a rift – I can't afford it, you know?

**Contrast**

Especially not at this point.

**Brian Wilson**

No.

**Contrast**

-- when (the album's) almost done.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah, yeah.

*At another point he was talking again about anger and the creative process, and that led to some interesting areas:*

**Brian Wilson** I never fight, that's another thing I've learned, self-control over anger. You can suppress the anger and it doesn't necessarily have to be depression, what they call...suppressed anger is depression. It can be creativity. In a lot of things. Anger is something that comes up all of the time in my head and I suppress it, I suppress that anger. I'm afraid to become angry with Dr. Landy, or a staff member. I feel like it would be two steps in reverse, two steps backwards.

**David Leaf**

Did any of the songs on this album come out of that anger? Is there any...

**Brian Wilson**

Oh, no, no, none of them, no, no, no.

**David Leaf**

They came out of love?

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah.

**Contrast**

Sounds like maybe you're channeling the anger now, instead of suppressing it.

**Brian Wilson**

Well...I'm trying that, I'm giving it a try. (sigh) It's something that we all have to learn, you know, how to understand this feeling of anger and just what to do about it. Sometimes it doesn't seem to go anywhere. And if it's not depression then it's going to be creativity, probably. Probably spontaneous creation, cre-a-tivity, they call it, creativity. The ability to put on the canvas how you feel, or what you...an artist, you know, the ability, like the Mona Lisa – what an example of what a person felt like, created a, a feeling in a smile or in a face. That face and hat smile are so...It makes you wonder if she's smiling, or what she's thing, you know? How it was created like that...

**Contrast**

So obviously the artist was able to very much pinpoint sort of a subtle feeling...

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah! I mean, to get across...oohhh, a subtle subtler feeling, you know, like...a subtler feeling that you feel, that you don't know if you are going to be able to get it out, or on paper. That way, it can be done...like that (snaps fingers), instead of feeling that you're not going to get the chance to really do that. It's very subtle. It can be done every day in life – you don't have to go out and be in a studio making music to do that, either. But that is a high point in a person's life, to go into a studio, of course, and make music. It's the high point of my life. I value that more than fucking, you know? I mean to me, the highest thing in the world is to make music. But...maybe someone else might not agree with me, you know what I mean? What can I do about that? I can't do nothin'.

**Contrast**

Has there ever been a time in your life when you thought maybe you'd never make music again?

**Brian Wilson**

Sure, maybe a couple...ten years ago, I was definitely hooked on cocaine. It's the biggest...the worst hang-up I've ever had in my life. I Had to have that stuff, I had to have it.

**David Leaf**

How did you beat it?

**Brian Wilson**

I was forced to, by Dr. Landy, to stop.

**Contrast**

Did it take very long?

**Brian Wilson**

It took a while. It took a month or two to get it out of my system, up here (pointing), out of my head.

**Contrast**

So at that point you had some despairing thoughts that maybe you'd never make music again?

**Brian Wilson**

Ahh, yeah, I definitely had those feelings.

**Contrast**

Have you ever wanted to, though, turn your back on it?

**Brian Wilson**

The music?

**Contrast**

Yeah.

**Brian Wilson**

Yeah!

**Contrast**

Have you ever felt like, this is too much hassle, I want to be a bricklayer or something?

**Brian Wilson**

I spent a couple of years in the last...five years, spent a couple years where my life was upside down, I couldn't fucking find the trees from the forest, is it? --the forest for the trees. I had a real problem with that. I was really in trouble with my self-identity, you know what I mean? I had a lot of problems going on. But I got through it. I got through it. I wasn't really looking for anything after that. I found it. So I didn't have to look for it, you know what I mean?

**Contrast**

What makes you happiest in life?

## **Brian Wilson**

When I'm able to create. When God gives me the ability to create, say, music, or whatever, whatever it might be at the time that's happening. So that's the thing for me. but it's a hard...it's a hard hill to hoe.

*It's no secret that Brian Wilson has been through a lot. A lot of pain, a lot of pressure, a lot of drugs, manipulation, failure, abuse, betrayal, mental breakdown. It shows up often in his speech, in his movements, his thoughts, on his face. You might feel he asked for a lot of it, created it, let it happen by not being strong enough at the right times. Be that as it may, Brian Wilson today is a product, as are we all, of what went before. You can't change that, you can only deal with it and go on – or not deal with it and hide or run away. Brian's done more than his share of the latter.*

*But now he's reemerging. Anyone with an urge to declare "Brian's Back!" should stifle it; that slogan is a political promise already used up years ago, prematurely and for the gain of many but not Brian. It could be that Brian is just blindly following a game plan devised for him, going from point A to interview B to photo shoot C like an automation, able to do it only because he's not emotionally engaged. Maybe, and maybe that's the necessary course, maybe that's what will lead him to a point where he'll be able to manage his own life and career.*

*It's my conclusion that he's more actively involved than that. That he's making decisions, and living with the consequences, even though there's still a tremendous amount of manipulation directed his way, much of it by those who love him and feel they know what's best for him. If he is actively involved, then you have to give him credit for something important: courage. He's doing a lot of ordinary things that have been extremely difficult for him in the past, and he keeps pushing on. He doesn't run away and pull the covers over his head.*

*And he's done one extraordinary thing: he's produced his first solo album, 27 years after his first Beach Boys recording. And it's good, very, very good, though in some ways that doesn't even matter. If he stayed "in his room," the Brian Wilson legend would surely have continued and grown. Now we have something to measure the legend against, and you know, and he knew, from the beginning, that nothing could really measure up to everyone's expectations. Most rockers his age long ago gave up trying to match their vital output of 20 or even 10 years before; if it was better than the last album, that's a victory. But Brian's last albums were ten or 20 years ago.*

*No one has ever been in the position Brian Wilson finds himself in now. By deciding to record this new album, he knew full well what he was setting himself up for. Maybe his dormant but still-powerful creative drive left him no choice, but still it was an act of great courage to make this album and send it out into the world.*

*This unwieldy story could not have been written as accurately and intelligibly as it was without the absolutely vital assistance of David Leaf. All shortcomings are strictly mine. Of all the material I used to try to understand B.W., The Beach Boys is the one I most highly recommend. Leaf as a biographer is as much a fan as a journalist, but his book is well-researched and highly entertaining, full of unique insights and crammed with literally hundreds of great photos. It's a fascinating piece of rock journalism, and practically a necessity with anyone with more than a passing interest in Brian.*