Why Can't Brian Wilson Get A Record Deal?

With Producer Andy Paley's support, the onetime Beach Boys mastermind is still making music that lives up to his formidable legend, but will anyone ever get to hear it?

At a small house party in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, one of the older partygoers ambles over to the living room piano and, standing over the keys, tentatively plunks out a few notes. The out-of-kilter melody he plays is instantly recognizable...

By Chuck Crisafulli Photograph by Robert Matheu/Retna

It's the opening passage to the Beach Boys' celebration of SoCal nubility, "California Girls." The piano can barely be heard over the party mix tape blasting out of the stereo, and the brief performance would hardly be worth noting-except that the intro to the song has been played by the man who wrote it, Brian Wilson.

Given the tales of madness, excess, and dissolution that have surrounded Wilson for three decades, some might assume that a weak pass at a golden oldie is all the architect of so much pop beauty is capable of these days. Certainly, the 54-year old erstwhile Beach Boy is a long way from the days when he burned up the pop charts with hit after sundrenched hit. His only solo album was released in 1988, and a second recorded soon after was scrapped when it was deemed "uncommercial" by label honchos. Orange Crate Art, last year's collaboration with Wilson's finest writing partner, Van Dyke Parks, captured only a few of the sparks of old. And projects such as the Don Was-directed Wilson documentary, I Just Wasn't Made for These Times, as well as occasional work with the Beach Boys, mostly have centered on those old sun 'n' fun hits.

But as the real, live Brian Wilson has seemed to quiet down, that other Brian, Brian the legend-the fragile genius, holy fool, enigmatic man child, infinitely talented, perplexingly troubled, unhinged master of sophisticated pop splendor-is hotter than ever.

Whatever one makes of the guy shyly plunking at the piano, there's no denying that his personal legend and musical legacy have bloomed into a pop aesthetic that turns up all over other people's records these days.

Andy Paley

The odd thing is, the real Brian Wilson can do a lot more than plunk. In fact, he's making music that lives up to his formidable legend.

Outside the house party, in producer Andy Paley's car the music blasting out of a boom box is so good it's almost heartbreaking. Shimmering layers of vocal harmonies, a melody as simple and graceful as it is unpredictable, and some effecting lovelorn lyrics move atop an ingenious arrangement that brings together twanging guitar, bass harmonica, a string section, and a multitude of interlocking percussion. Everything that Brian Wilson fans get weak and fuzzy-headed over-the dead-on hooks, the Pet Sounds-era pop grandeur, the oddball intensity of Smile outtakes-it's all here in this intricate. elaborate, but nonetheless rockin' track.

But this is no unearthed gem from some 30-year-old recording session; it's "Chain Reaction of Love," a brand-new song on which Paley and Wilson are in the process of putting the finishing touches. There's plenty more like it on tape, and it's all the kind of stuff most hardcore Wilson lovers gave up hoping for long ago: There's the honking rave-up charge of "Desert Drive," the drop-dead gorgeous balladry of "Gettin' in Over My Head," dance tunes, love songs, a celebration of weekends in the city, a quirky paean to a farmer's market. It's perfect pop, and pure Brian, circa 1997.

"It's his stuff," Paley says excitedly. He paid for the studio. He pays for the musicians. He runs the session-This is how it's going to be-bam, bam, bam'. He just has to make this music.

There's no record deal. He's not making an album; he's just making music. And at this point, we've got hours of stuff on tape."

Getting pure Brian down on tape is a labor of love for Paley. In the Beach Boy's heyday, Wilson relied on close collaborations to bring out the best in him, but in later years his talents were overshadowed, if not actively diminished, by those with whom he worked; witness his teaming with his former therapist, the controversial Dr. Eugene Landy, or his sorry output with the Mike Love-dominated Beach Boys of recent years. Through the '80s and early '90s, an almost comically overblown barrage of lawsuits, business tangles, and personal problems distracted Wilson from his music. But in the past few years, Paley has given Wilson the artistic support that he'd gone too long without.

"Brian was being pushed and pulled in a lot of different directions for a long time," Paley says." It was a real mess, and he was in all these legal tangles. Then (in 1991), the state of California had a conservancy trial and Brian was appointed a conservator to take care of his affairs. Suddenly Brian was a free man. The day that happened, Brian called me up and said, "Hey, Andy-I can do whatever I want. Come on over' We've been writing and working and recording ever since."

Aside from his work with Wilson, Paley has put together a mind-boggling rock 'n' roll resume. He grew up in tiny Halfmoon, New York ("It's not on most maps," he says), and got his professional start at age eight when the first song he wrote, "The Little Porcupine," was recorded for a children's record. He dropped out of high school at 15 and began writing and performing with a number of groups, including the Sidewinders, who recorded a Lenny Kaye-produced album for RCA. Paley got a taste of teen idoldom when he and his brother, Jonathan, formed the appropriately named Paley Brothers and found themselves touring with Sean Cassidy and being profiled in Tiger Beat and 16. Before disbanding, the Paley Brothers recorded with Phil Spector and fronted the Ramones for the cover of "C'Mon Let's Go" featured in Rock 'n' Roll High School.

Paley went on to tour with the Patti Smith Group as a multi-instrumentalist, and began his producing career in earnest working with Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers. In the past decade, he's produced a heap of artists, including John Wesley Harding, Greenberry Woods, LaVern Baker, NRBQ, and Jerry Lee Lewis, along with songs for Ren & Stimpy and a couple multiplexes full of soundtrack albums.

Paley first met Wilson when he was called in as a producer on the 1988 Brian Wilson album. At that point, many doubted that Wilson, on the road back from a breakdown and still deeply involved with Landy, was capable of anything close to his previous artistic achievements. Still, for Paley, a longtime Wilson fan, it was a dream job. "I didn't have any mixed feelings about it, but I was very curious about what was going to happen" he says. "I was really happy, maybe a little relieved, to see how creative he was and what a nice guy he was. This situation was very weird, but aside from all the strange things going on outside his musical life, he was still able to write great songs. It was just so hard to get anything accomplished. A lot of things were in the way of Brian's music. We ended up with a pretty good record, but it wasn't as good as it could have been because there were too many cooks and Brian wasn't really calling the shots. I worked on the second one that didn't come out (it was to be called Sweet Insanity), and that was even less real Brian than the first one. It was very frustrating."

Conditions now are simple and loose. When Wilson and Paley have the urge, they get together at one or the other's house and sketch out ideas on a boom box ("Brian just got a four-track mini-studio he's learning to use, but it's mostly boom box for us," Paley says). Both contribute musical and lyrical ideas until a song is ripe, then Wilson books studio time and tells Paley what kinds of players he wants to use.

"I pull out the union book and take care of most of his requests," Paley says.
"We can do a lot with just the two of us, but sometimes he'll want harmonica or a stand-up-bass. An oboe. I brought in three French-horn players once, and he only used them for four bars of one song, but, of course, it was absolutely perfect and nothing else would have worked. We've had Danny Hutton from Three Dog Night-an old friend of Brian's -come in and do some vocals, and Elliot Easton of the Cars has done guitar on some tracks. Whatever Brian wants, we get it in there."

For Wilson, a studio full of willing compatriots is a vital sanctuary. "He's always into it." Paley says. "Always. You can see how much he loves working. When he was being sued by Mike Love a while back he'd come straight from the courtroom to the studio. He'd show up in a suit and tie and just get right to work."

Working so intimately with Wilson, Paley has had the opportunity to witness some of the unorthodox studio techniques that have earned Wilson the sometimes burdensome "genius" tag. "When I was a kid listening to Beach Boys records, "Paley says, "I used to go nuts trying to figure out what the hell was going on. It sounded so easy, but you'd get to a spot where it was, Jesus, is that a major chord or a minor chord? Now that I'm in the studio with Brian, I know that sometimes he's playing both. He'll do things that sound like they're going to be terribly dissonant, but when it's all put together, it's beautiful. It's actually a great sort of philosophy: You put something kind of weird under these incredible gorgeous harmonies, and that little something often drives the harmonies to another level. It's been gratifying to see some of his arrangement tricks up close. It's like, 'Oh, Ok, I wasn't crazy when I heard what I thought I heard on your records."

It's questionable whether the public will hear the new music Wilson's been able to crate with the help of Paley. In the close-knit community of major-label executives, Wilson is still seen as an unreliable '60s casualty with no commercial track record of late.

"Label people haven't expressed much interest," Paley says. "The problem is that people have heard all the stories about him and they don't really know what he's up to. It would take hearing this stuff for anybody to actually get excited about it. And I don't blame anybody for having their doubts about Brian, because you look at what's been out there and it doesn't tell you what he's capable of. The Beach Boys' country album? Come on."

Wilson still finds himself running into some of the same old obstacles. When he played some of the new tracks for the Beach Boys, hoping that the group might pull together for an album, the members were politely supportive, but ultimately declined his invitation. And some of Wilson's closet associates, having heard the Paley tracks, have suggested he worry less about his finely crafted, organically rendered arrangements and try to sound "more like Kenny G." Perhaps understandably, Wilson is not too eager to hear a stranger's assessment of his work, and although he's happy to have Paley talk about the new music, a much-discussed interview with Brian never materializes.

But when Wilson does find a crow willing to give his new songs a chance, he is clearly electrified. By the end of the San Fernando house party, the stereo has been turned off, and Wilson is seated at the piano, pounding through a fiercely rocking version of "Desert Drive," with Paley leaning over his shoulder to contribute harmonies. Wilson's brow is furrowed in concentration as he plays and sings, but when he finishes, the small roar of applause brings a huge smile to his face. The Rock and Roll Hall of Famer with millions of record sales to his credit seems absolutely, unabashedly delighted that an audience numbering in the low double digits-including some who have no idea who Wilson is-approves of his new song. "Brian doesn't go out that much, "Paley says," and he doesn't really play like that for people. But we went out to eat after the party, and all he could talk about was, 'Man, did you see those people! They loved it! That was rock 'n' roll!' He got off on that more than playing an amphitheater somewhere or standing on a stage with the Beach Boys. That little group of people in that living room grooving to 'Desert Drive' -to him, that was the greatest. And I think with songs like that, he could still really surprise anybody that thinks he's a lost cause. He's still got it; everything that made him great in the past, he's still got it in there. I know for a fact he does."