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## The Man With Two Brians

**"I've had emotional gangsters run my life for 20 years. I pray to God with all my heart and soul that it doesn't happen again."**

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"Big Brian is not scared of anyone; Little Brian is scared of everyone. That is my problem." Beach Boy Brian Wilson's crippling mental illness is still far from behind him, but the man who brought us "the best album ever" is back on board (hoho!), managing to take renewed control of his, er, unconventional life and work...

Nowadays there is shagpile, not sand, beneath the piano legs. Business is conducted at the kitchen table, not in a tent. There are no addled, faux-mystical frauds hanging around, no lysergically charged leeches scuttling round his bed, no star-dazzled psychologists by his shoulder, no heavy-duty minders, no craven and insensitive businessmen picking at the royally-fried flesh. No. Life for Brian Wilson is contented; as contented, perhaps, as it has ever been.

**S**ome things, though, are the same. The voices still invade his head from time to time, even if the new medication is teaching them some discipline. The Beach Boys, naturally, are still “fucking assholes.” And the music? Well, that’s hardly changed, either, still retaining that astonishing beauty, that spirituality, that otherworldly naivete which was once, mistakenly, seen as something this remarkable man would grow out of.

*“Little surfer, little one, made my heart come all undone/Do you love me, do you surfer girl?”*

He’s singing now, sitting at the piano, hammering out a song he wrote some 33 years ago; its innocent sentiments would make most 53-year-old men shy away from it, ashamed. The voice is a little coarser, but there’s still an amazing depth of feeling invested in every last resonating syllable; an adolescent lust transfigured by a yearning, a high melancholy and a profound sense of uncertainty at what the future will hold; and sunny optimism underpinned with doubt, as ever, but now augmented by a powerful, reconciling faith...

The chorus ends, slides into a new bridge, written to comfort the singer in one of his regular emotional slumps. “God shines down his love and mercy/For those in need tonight,” he sings, with a passion and fervour almost strong enough to send the most defiant atheist spinning towards the nearest church. Beautiful? Damn near transcendental.



Finally the song finishes, and reality intervenes.

“If you put ‘Surfer Girl’ on the radio, I’ll give you 100 bucks,” says Brian Wilson, eyeing the ape recorder that’s been whirring round all along. He laughs. “I was feeling a little blue because I thought maybe life had deserted me, so I wrote a fairly sorrowful song. You know, maybe we’ll record it, but I think ‘God shines down his love and mercy for those in need tonight’ is a little personal, a little heavy. I’d rather do something that was similar to ‘Surfer Girl,’ but not quite that heavy. Because first of all the puck rockers, the young people will say: ‘Fuck the Beach Boys, they’re into a prissy little trip like ‘Surfer Girl’...how about some rock’n’roll? It’s all fucked up, it’s all screwed, deranged and hit to hell. Nobody can tell what’s happening.”

This is Brian Wilson in the summer of 1995. Newly wed, fat again and – after more than three decades of severe mental illness, shocking maltreatment and gross indulgence – in odd, stressed but relatively good shape. For the first time in seven years, there are new records to promote: understated, slick re-workings of old classics on ‘I Just Wasn’t Made for these Times’ and a vocals-only job on ‘Orange Crate Art,’ his most famous, fated collaborator Van Dyke Parks’ new homage to California. The pressure’s on and, for a man who has spent nearly 30 years in emotional suspension, that can be hard to deal with.

Much of that time has been a nightmare, a succession of soul-squashing depressions punctuated by brutally unsuitable therapy and endless, acrimonious litigation. Sometimes, though, when he speaks, it's as if none of it has happened. It's as if we're back in the Los Angeles of the mid-'60s, talking to a man preoccupied with Phil Spector, The Beatles and; his own enormous, mind-blowing music. It is, perhaps, one of the ways he deals with things. And another?

"I've got my secret here. I don't tell anybody my secret," confides Brian, still sitting by his piano. "I have a secret...I'll tell you anyway: I don't have any sex, OK? The secret is abstaining from orgasm. An Einsteinian formula that if you abstain from having an orgasm for, say, ten years, you create a void in your brain. In other words, if you don't express an orgasm for ten years, it's a long time, right? Most people think two weeks without an orgasm's a long time.

"And I did that, y'know? My dad told me in high school: 'Son, now you're gonna be going through a lot of hell as you grow up, and the one thing you should never do is you should not have orgasms and masturbate and you should not fuck with girls.' And I tried it out. I'd been jacking off all summer, y'know? And towards the end of the summer, I'm going into my junior year in high school and my dad lays that on me. I go there and try it out and I say: 'What the fuck is this shit? Hey, wait a minute, man, I like not coming better than coming!'" And I kept going that way for a long, long time and finally I came to the conclusion that I'm gonna tell people my secret. But I just don't want some chick to go: 'Oh, that's your secret? Well here, I'll make you come'...Ain't that a weird trip?"

Isn't it just...

As far as weird trips go, the story of The Beach Boys ranks as one of the weirdest in the well-frazzled history of rock'n'roll. Initially, it all seemed so simple: gentle, talented Brian Wilson corralled his two brothers Dennis and Carl, plus his cousin Mike Love and a neighbor, Al Jardine, into a group. They meshed sweet, complex harmonies with the elemental rumble of early rock'n'roll, added lyrics that were paeans to the idyllic surf-cars-and-girls lifestyle of young, white, middle-class California, and - easy, easy - made some of the most blindingly great singles of all time.

Only The Beatles rivaled their popularity. But there were problems. The Boys manager - the Wilson's father, Murray - was a bullying, jealous failed songwriter who habitually interfered with the music, humiliated his sons and made appalling business decisions. And Brian's gentleness was increasingly revealed as emotional fragility. After several horrendous panic attacks, he stopped touring, experimented with hallucinogens and bedded down in the studio to work on ever-more ambitious music.

In, 1966, he completed 'Pet Sounds,' an album that still sounds so unbelievably lovely that the NME voted it the best album ever in 1993. The sheer scope of the music - intricate, dramatic and with an innate melancholy that perfectly complements the lyrics of fading innocence - set a new benchmark for rock'n'roll. It made anything seem possible. In response, The Beatles made 'Sgt. Pepper,' the concept album was thus invented and pretension was introduced to a new generation.

Meanwhile, Brian was taking things much farther. He wrote a stunning, multi-faceted, pocket-psychedelic symphony called 'Good Vibrations' that became his band's biggest hit yet. Then he started work on a lavish album, 'Smile,' that picked up where 'Pet Sounds' left off,

and threatened to revolutionize pop music completely. He called it, during work-in-progress interviews, his "Teenage symphony to God."

While the other Beach Boys continued their endless tour, Brian chose a brilliant young speed-freak, Van Dyke Parks, as his lyricist and co-pilot, who was at that time so poor he was "vaulting pay-toilets. I couldn't afford to change my mind."

'Smile,' though, was never finished. Brian's strange obsessive behavior worsened until he recorded 'Mrs. O'Leary's Cow'/'Fire' with an entire orchestra wearing fireman's helmet, then blamed the alchemic power of the music for starting a number of blazes in LA that same night.

The other Beach Boys - especially the frequently thuggish and philistine lead singer, Mike Love - were baffled by, and hated, the freaky new music, haranguing Parks over his impenetrable lyrics.

"I think 'Smile' was absolutely stellar for its time; it stretched the envelope. We were pushing the industry to do thing," remembers Van Dyke Parks. "And Brian was the most courageous, innovative personality I've ever met in the recording studio. Bar none. He showed valour, it was like I was with a great warrior. When I was interested in being a great lover, he showed me, at that early age, that he was interested in being a great warrior. He brought me into a New Age Of Man. He did something very fraternal for me. It was...an important relationship for me. And I would like to think that courage is contagious."

Courage and genius notwithstanding, Brian Wilson suffered a terrifying psychological collapse that caused him to spend much of the next 20 years cowering in his bed, a bloated and traumatized casualty. The other Beach Boys - including wild brother Dennis, by now consorting with Charles Manson - took musical control, with Brian contributing fewer and fewer songs, still occasionally brilliant, but often simpler and unmistakably disturbed.

Periodically, throughout the '70s, a Brian Wilson comeback campaign would be launched, only to be stymied by increasingly duff albums and his horribly erratic mental state. One psychologist - a former music business hustler called Dr. Eugene Landy - made some impression in the middle of the decade, but was dismissed by the band and Brian's then-wife Marilyn for outrageous salary demands and for dictating every single detail of his partner's life.

So The Beach Boys turned into a cabaret act. Mike Love, hooked on transcendental meditation, took cynical control of the band. Dennis wasted, died in a diving accident and Brian's state deteriorated until, in 1983, Landy was called back on to the job. For the best part of a decade, he cleaned Brian off street drugs, slimmed him down and helped him to record two solo albums (one, eponymously titled was released in 1988; the second, 'Sweet Insanity,' was shelved by the record company two years later). He also completely took over Brian's life.

Shortly before work began on that first album, Sire Records boss Seymour Stein appointed an experienced Boston producer and musician, Andy Paley, to look after the project. Paley - an obsessive Beach Boys fan, one-time Patti Smith Group member, Madonna sideman and Boys Wonder/Plastic Bertrand producer - immediately befriended Wilson, but discovered that Landy's influence had strayed way out of the treatment room and into the studio.

"I think they probably saved his life," says Paley, "but just because you're able to get someone off drugs or save someone's life doesn't make you a songwriter or a record producer."

The solo album – overproduced, but still Brian's best effort by far since the early '70s – was released and acclaimed. Brian appeared healthier, but rumors persisted that Landy's manipulation of him was increasing, suggesting he bullied him into writing songs at ridiculous speed and then pronounced the resulting doggerel to be genius. Paley had little to do with 'Sweet Insanity' – an album that reportedly contains duets with Paula Abdul and Bob Dylan, and features Brian rapping - and is clearly not heartbroken that Sire refused to release it.

"The State of California held a conservancy trial," explains Paley, "which is when they appoint a conservator to someone who needs help managing their own affairs. This is what happens when someone is perceived by good friends or the person in question as an evil, or bad, influence. Relatives can get together - in this case it was Carl and Brian's daughters and Brian's mother - and say: 'This guy's gotta go.' They had a conservancy hearing and trial and a new conservator was appointed and this guy was told to get lost.



**Brian with Dr. Eugene Landy, circa 1987**

"Things immediately took a turn for the better. Brian started have a life of his own. He wasn't allowed to have girlfriends before that – I mean, it was really rough. All those people were moved out of Brian's life by the State of California. By law.

"And the day, the very day, these people moved out of Brian's house, Brian called me and he said: 'Now I can do whatever I want. Come on over, let's write songs, let's have some fun.' He was so happy to be free."

It was around this time - late 1992 - that Van Dyke Parks reappeared on the scene, pursuing an erratic, idiosyncratic solo career with vague plans to make an album about the "quintessentially Californian experience," and with the idea of have Brian Wilson singing on it, especially on one song - 'Orange Crate Art.'

"I had waited 30 years and I thought that was an appropriate, a polite, amount of time," he says wryly. "I took it out to him one night in torrential rain, frightened to death to play it to him, because of his reputation for high standards in music. He's got two assistants in the room with him [men employed by the State of California after Landy had been dismissed] watching my every move, because they thought that I might give Brian some smack, uppers or downers or something, I guess. As far as I was concerned, the walls were melting, I was so petrified."

Brian, though, liked the song and agreed to sing on it. They went into the studio, with Parks gradually introducing more new songs, writing and producing everything and using Brian's multi-tracked voice as backgrounds, claiming he would add his own voice, as the lead, later.

"I continued to record the back-up voices, and then one day Brian said: 'Whose record is this?' I said: 'Well, it's our record, Brian.' We're maybe four tunes in and he's starting to get that sinking sensation that I'm tricking him into doing work. Every time we started a new song, he kept insisting that I start singing. I told him: 'quite frankly, Brian, I can't stand the sound of my own voice and I'd like to be able to listen to this.' He said: 'I don't blame you.' I was conning Brian Wilson into doing this, no two ways about it, I was conning him."

Brian, of course, ended up singing everything. The resulting album, 'Orange Crate Art' (due for release in early November) is a curiosity; ostensibly a mellow, crated Parks record, with celestial Brian Wilson vocals. A little cheesy in places - it's much closer in spirit to composers like George Gershwin than to anything so vulgar as rock'n'roll - it still makes for a fine showcase for that startling, soaring voice. Now that the project's completed, plans are afoot for the two of them to record an album of standards next year.

The most exciting music Brian Wilson has made in the past two years, however, is neither 'Orange Crate Art' nor the Don Was-masterminded documentary soundtrack 'I Just Wasn't Made For These Times.' In Andy Paley's tiny, airless office at Elektra Records in Beverly Hills, the lights switched off, a tape is playing that would stun any Beach Boys fan: dozens of songs, recorded with Paley, that are quite simply the most consistent and inspiring music Brian has made for at least 25 years. For any elder statesman of rock, they would be shockingly good. For a man allegedly a gibbering wreck, they're nothing short of revelatory.

Paley, who worked in the mid-'70s with Phil Spector, has helped rebuild the surging, intricate wall of sound that characterized the greatest Beach Boys records. No synthesizers have been used on these practically completed recordings, funded by Wilson himself. Paley nods and sings along proudly, claiming every period of The Beach Boys' career is reflected in the music: raw, 'Surfin' USA'-style rockers like 'I'm Broke' and 'Desert Drive;' anguished, glimmering ballads like 'It's Not Easy Being Me;' the authentically staggering 'Getting In Over My Head;' 'Smile'-like sound pictures such as 'Saturday Morning In The City;' and driving, awesomely inventive cascades of beautiful sound like 'Chain Reaction Of Love.'

There's one song on the tape, though, that throws up a completely different set of possibilities. In February, Wilson and Paley were coerced into recording - with The Beach Boys - one piece, 'Dancin' The Night Away' for a new TV series, Baywatch Nights. Camera crews were present for the reunion. Brian and Mike Love posed happily together. But only the vocals for the bridge were completed - Carl Wilson singing lead in his still-perfect falsetto - before the session broke up acrimoniously.

"I think Brian's gotta make up his mind if he wants to make a Beach Boys record or a Brian Wilson record," explains Paley, clearly and understandably frustrated, "'cos he changes his mind about that all the time. Half the time he's into it, half the time he's not. You never know what he's gonna say about it..."

"but I'll tell you, really I don't think that's gonna happen, because Brian and I had a meeting with Mike Love and he listened to everything and Brian really stuck up for these songs and told him he didn't want them changed in any way. I know he's so anxious for this music to come out, and I know I am, too."

Y'know, you'll have to take these birds out of here before we do this interview, 'cos they're gonna be chirping..."

Brian Wilson is preparing his kitchen for an interview. Present are his doting new wife Melinda Ledbetter, a maid, who is fixing him a big glass of Diet Coke; his amiable new manager David Leaf, a TV producer and Beach boys biographer, and a couple of tropical birds. It's a relatively unshowy house by LA standards sat high up in Laurel Canyon on a security-guarded estate. Business files litter the big kitchen table and, nearby, a china dog observes a scene from a shelf. From where I sit, it appears to be wearing a plastic fireman's helmet.

Heavy and graying, Wilson hardly looks like a rock star - but he doesn't look much like the wasted and ravaged monster of legend, either. Andy Paley claimed: "He's the best comedian I know," and it's immediately apparent that he's not averse to taking the piss out of himself and public perceptions of himself - hence the terrifying gurning he turns on for the VOX photographer's camera. The trouble is, as his moods swing wildly from sentence to sentence, it's hard to tell when he's joking and when he isn't.

Often, he has that innocent world view, awkwardness and arcane language of a pampered Californian kid of the early '60s. Other times, he'll gaze off sadly into the distance and then erupt with rage, and all the demons that have plagued his adult life become suddenly and disturbingly apparent. Then, it's clear Brian Wilson will never be totally free of the mental horrors he's gone through. Like he says, it's a weird trip...

The first thing Brian says to me is: You talk."

No, you talk, that's fine.

"No. I think we have a good start with everything."

OK. Some tracks I heard, like 'Getting In Over My Head,' sounds like one of the most soulful records you've ever made; kind of bluesy, raw and passionate. Were you trying to achieve that?

"No...well, yeah, we wanted to achieve...First of all we need to do the one thing in life that we should do, and that is to bring spiritual love to people. Which we did in the '60s, and over the years, and I feel another cycle coming on to maybe have what I call a carte blanche from God to record. I don't think I thoroughly understand what that really means."

He laughs gently.

What do you think it means?

"Well, one way would be to say green lights, but that's kinda scary, y'know, so I guess you could say, just another chance to express ourselves and do something that people would like, that we could bring spiritual security to people. And people like Phil Spector, who made music that was an inspiration to The Beach Boys to messenger images - I mean, er, to messenger the messages, to deliver the messages for people, how small it ever might be or how insignificant it might be, at least we do know that we're doing some good, y'know? But not really a lot, though."

David Leaf mentioned that your emotional security in the past year or two has been a contributory factor to becoming so productive again.

"Yeah, yeah, that's very true. And I'm having a real time trying to put the pieces back together from this breakdown I had a while ago. But I'm getting there."

When did you have the breakdown?

"Well," he sighs deeply, "I had the breakdown like, I dunno, a couple of years ago I guess. And then, like, I thought: As long as I'm having a nervous breakdown, it might as well be a good nervous breakdown."

The whole machinery surrounding you now - Melinda, David, Andy - seems very secure.

"It's like a shell to me. It curves like this" - he reaches out expansively - "like I'm back here in this shell and they're screening out some of the bad shit and keeping some of the cool shit cool, y'know? And it's kinda scary, but it's like playing football. When you first learn how to play football it's kinda scary, to get hit real hard by a tackler, y'know? But then, later on, you get mad and you start slamming around because there's no other way to do it."

"When I was playing football in high school I got hit so hard that I quit the team, y'know? Three guys hit me and knocked me on the ground so hard that I lost consciousness for 20 to 30 seconds. I got up, I said: 'I quit.' Never came back. I got knocked a little bit too hard, no way I could hang in there and play that rough. I was so scared of getting beat up I quit."

Did the experience make you a bit more nervous?

"Yeah, it shook me up enough to make me nervous but, y'know," he sighs again, "...I like to play cook, y'know? That's what I wanted to do, was to try to get some cools going. But now I get teased back from a lot of people: 'Do I wanna get rough?' or 'Do I wanna get heavy?' and I say: 'Well, yeah, I think I can, probably.'"

"But I never know from day to day what the fuck is really up, that's the only problem with me. I know The Beach Boys are good, I know I can make music, but the rest of the trip I don't know about. It's confusing, it's very confusing. The shell around me has given me a strength inside not to blast open, but to pry open something good and new, something positive. And I think that's what I could do."

Tell me about the songs on 'I Just Wasn't Made For These Times.'

"They were all done in three days, the whole album. I walked in there and Don Was says," - he clicks his fingers authoritatively - 'Let's do this song.' I knew all the songs anyway but I couldn't remember the lyrics, right, so he put the lyrics in front of me and blew them up real big, 'cos I can't see without my glasses. These giant words like: 'GET TOGETHER AND DO IT AGAIN' It was really great, standing there, singing, I didn't know what was going on."

So you had no creative input?

"Right. I was totally at the mercy of my producer."

What about the Van Dyke Parks record?

"Erm, same thing to him. It's like being at the mercy of somebody that great."



But Van Dyke gave the impression that he was quite scared of working with you.

"Oh, I don't think so," he sneers. "I think he's jiving you. Don't believe that for a second. I think he's telling you a big hype. I know Van Dyke better than that and I think he's lying to you. He's looking at you and telling you a dirty lie."

He claimed he tricked you into singing lead.

"Yeah, he tricked me alright. He sure did, and I listened and saw why he wanted me to do it, 'cos they're good: good leads. And he's going 'You're the best singer in the whole world.'"

Did it represent a healing of the trauma between the two of you over 'Smile'?

"Sure. It sure was."

Is the ghost laid to rest?

"Not completely, no. But I wish. I'd have hoped for something a little better. I think we can do better."

'Desert Drive' is great.

"Oh, 'Desert Drive.' Don't tell me about that." He appears stunned.

Why?

"Heavy duty, man. I mean, honest to God, it's enough to jump up. The only time I ever really jumped out of my chair in 30 years was when I heard Andy's stuff, where Andy was at with his music. It got me off my chair, clapping my hands, moving around, writing songs, y'know? It took 30 years - since Phil Spector's records - to get that inspiration. So when it comes along you recognize it, you don't fuck with it, 'cos it's the real thing. I don't want to go [he puts on a whiny voice]: 'Oh, I'm too scared to work with Andy Paley but I still think he's great.' That's bullshit, too. Being scared of somebody is bullshit, of course."

So you're not scared of anyone?

"Erm..." He bangs his glass down hard on the table. "I divide it into two things: Big Brian is not scared of anybody and Little Brian is scared of everybody. So that's my problem."

So there are still people out there...

"...that I can't deal with. Absolutely, in any way at all."

Anyone we can talk about?

"Yeah, you," he abruptly switches from seriousness to silliness. "You are the man of the hour, you're the interviewer."

Van Dyke says he wants to do an album of cover versions with you.

"Nah, he's lying to you. Oh no... standards, you mean? Oh yeah. Well, we're not gonna do that 'til next year, maybe October or November. But I'm gonna go crazy, I'm slowly losing my fucking mind over these new projects. But what the fuck - it's what you should do."

You seem to have so many things on the boil at the moment.

"Yeah, I've got a few things going on, but my brain is totally bombarded, y'know? Calls from people, thoughts of people, voices in my head. I've gotten into a spin here a little bit, y'know?"

You're feeling pretty stressed out by it all?

"Yeah."

It's weird: nothing for seven years, then two albums in two months...

"And, of course, my solo career isn't doing to well until we find out what the fuck's going on with the sales. I'd be glad if we sold 20 records," he jokes, distracting himself from real concern. "I don't care. Twenty-five records! Wow! Your album's sold 25 records!"

I think you're doing a bit better than that.

"Thing is, would you buy a record if you liked it? Do you buy records when you hear them on the radio? Do you actually go to the store and buy a record? You do? We do the same thing, my wife and I, we buy Willie Nelson records."

What've you listed to recently?

"Willie Nelson. He's our featured Artist."

So you're into Country now?

"Oh yeah. Wow, that's another story there."

Why?

"I dunno. It makes me laugh. Ha ha ha ha ha," he chuckles fakely. "Oh boy."

Andy says you're undecided which material is for your solo career and which is for The Beach Boys?

"Well, we've already gone through that shit with Melinda and David. The Beach Boys are out. The Beach Boys are being assholes to me. So I take the lesser of two evils; I'll work on my own, solo, before I work with a bunch of guys that don't give a shit about me."

Why are they being assholes to you, Brian?

"Why? Well, there's probably five or six real good reasons why they don't like me. One is they're jealous. Two: em, they're assholes. Three: they're too businessmen and too businesslike. And four: there's no respect. They have no respect for me. They just spit at me and kick me, no respect at all. I say 'Well, fuck it then!'" He's really wound up now.

Even Carl's doing this to you?

"Carl is my brother, but Carl is an asshole. I love Carl, I love his singing, but he's an asshole to me. Those guys are assholes. I oughta beat the hell out of them all. I dunno, I'd probably get beat up if I tried that."

You reckon?

"I'd get beat to hell. Mike would beat me. I couldn't handle that - he's very bulky, strong, he'd beat the hell out of me!

Al's quite small, you could have a go with him.

"Al's cool, man. He's not too good a singer, but he's a pretty nice man."

Did the latest Beach Boys "asshole" behavior come about around the Baywatch Nights recording?

"Yeah, we managed to get Carl on tape but we couldn't get Mike on tape. That wasn't the best chemistry or song for The Beach Boys that we were doing. We could try another one, there's always something else to try."

But you don't really want to at the moment?

"No. Assholes should be treated like assholes. That's how I feel about my group. I can't get nothing but detours and bad vibes, it makes me wanna split the state and go live in Miami or Hawaii and live a couple of years on my - our - money and not do anything. Y'know, it's a tragedy that people get that way. They'd rather destroy something than do something. I'm just waiting around, I'm as positive as I can possibly be."

What are they trying to destroy exactly?

"Well, I think The Beach Boys are trying to destroy me as a producer. I think they're trying to make Terry Melcher [veteran producer who co-wrote 'Kokomo'] their hero and me their villain. Fuck that shit, y'know? I'm not gonna go through that."

It's incredibly sad when you think what you've done for them.

"I think it's sad, yeah."

You think Mike'd still be pumping gas if it wasn't for you?

"Nooo. I ain't shit when it comes down to it, but I certainly don't think he is, either," he laughs. "I mean, a fight is a fight, y'know?"

But you've had so many fights with him over the years and yet still you go into the studio with him?

"You mean being in the same room with him? We can still do that, yeah. We still have that together, but we've gotta work on ourselves. How would you deal with it? If you went in the studio with The Beach Boys, and you were gonna produce them, how would you go about doing it?"

I don't know...hold a gun to their heads, I think.

"Really? Oh, so you'd force The Beach Boys like a gangster?"

Well, from what I know about Mike, it seems that force is the only thing he understands.

"He relates to that. That's a good idea, thank you," he laughs. "That's really cool. You mean put on the pressure?"

Yeah. How many times has he done that to you over the years?

"Probably once."

Melinda snorts. "Oh yeah, with a couple of zeroes behind it."

"He put me on an insecurity trip for about a hundred years by just not looking at me like he really cared that much for me."

"Brian lets his emotions get involved with his family and his work," interjects Melinda. She has left her seat and is now supportively stroking her husband's neck and shoulders tenderly as she talks. "With them, it's all work."

"I mean, I don't care," continues Brian, clearly meaning the opposite. "The only things I have to go on are feelings. If I feel that nobody likes me, or that the group is a big scam, it's gonna put me on a bummer but the worse it gets to me, the worse it'll be for me later. Because you can't put a person through that much bullshit and not expect that person to turn up with some kind of ego-trip disaster that's gonna fucking scare people to death."

"I dunno. We're taking chances. If we try something heavy we stand a chance of getting knocked off because somebody else in a higher position would not want us to get anywhere. So that's my problem. I used to think gangsters ruled my life, but I don't think that anymore."

But emotional gangsters have, in the past, used nasty techniques to rule your life?

"What it applies to me is," he taps out the rhythm of his words with his glass, "I'M-BEING-FORCED-TO-DO-SOMETHING-I-DON'T-WANNA-DO. I've had emotional gangsters run my life for 20 years. I pray to God with all my heart and soul that it doesn't happen again. I don't wanna go back to that place."

"It's like a double-edged sword," Melinda explains. "He loves the sound, but he doesn't want the problems."

"The bottom line is: all I have to go on is how I feel. And if I feel like I'm being rejected or The Beach Boys don't wanna work with me, or somebody else doesn't wanna work with me, I'll go elsewhere."

They know which buttons to push.

"Yeah, that's true. I dunno...Fuck the fucking Beach boys. I mean, that is the truth, man. I'm sorry to have a negative on them. You probably want me to say: 'Hohoho, everything's great. Oh wow.'"

How much money have they taken off...

"Oh hell...Mike clobbered me. He got five big million dollars from me [for 'uncredited lyrics' that Love successfully claimed he had written to some of the group's biggest hits]. That's a lot of money. I didn't care. I said: 'You deserve it, you didn't get anywhere with 'California Girls' so, fine, here's your money.'

"That's cool, no problem," he adds sarcastically, "I don't miss it. I was real rich one time - I had five million bucks in he bank last year, and I lost it."

Yet you still go on TV with Mike, he goes to your wedding, Carl's your best man - how'd you up with that? How'd you let them back into your life?

"I dunno. It hurts me a little bit, but I don't mind Carl being around."

Melinda comes to his rescue again. "Brian thinks blood is thicker than water, regardless of what goes on with these guys. In some respects, they're still family, and he's probably more forgiving than you or I would be."

"Hey, love is the answer in a lot of cases," he says determinedly.

Brian's off on another tangent now.

"Our friend Andy [Paley] is a mental genius but he's a little crippled, y'know? His hell is, of course, that he feels shitty about working with me. I can tell, when he talks to me, that he'd rather work with Phil Spector or something."

"Brian!" shouts Melinda, exasperated.

"OK, I being negative, alright, maybe, but that's how I feel." He bangs on the table emphatically.

"The bottom line is: no booze parties, no big huh-huh-huh. The real trip is that we're gonna go forward with a solo career and we're not gonna let anybody like The Beach Boys slow us down or fuck us up. The Boys are big businessmen, and people are a little scared of 'em, but at the same time there are people in the industry who can kick The Beach Boys right out of the world."

But all The Beach Boys do is cynically cash in on your reputation.

"But the Boys themselves didn't even know what the fuck they were doing. They didn't realize that they were being messengers for higher people."

Melinda: "That's how he looks upon them; as the messengers of his music."

"And they were so scared that they literally kicked some butt. And nobody can sing better than Mike Love - he's the best singer in the whole industry, except for Danny [Hutton, an old friend of Brian's and former leader of Three Dog Night]."

What about Carl?

"Nah. Carl can't sing for shit. The best he can do onstage is go: 'Ho!' and yell.

"The truth is, there's no getting out of bad vibes, no getting out of people that don't like you."

"The problem is, the reality is, he does care," continues Melinda, honestly, "but it's a constant struggle. All he's ever wanted is for them to be nice to him. It's so hard for him to have any type of conflict in his life. He just hates conflict. He wants everything to be OK all the time."

Do you remember a time when you were as happy and contented as now?

"Well, er...no. Actually, no. Well this interview of course is a big breakthrough." He laughs again. "I had a dream the other night and I kept dreaming that I said to myself: 'I wanna break on through to the other side!' Didn't some group do a song like that? Morrison, right? Morrison from The Doors. I'm trying to write a song about that."

And what's on the other side?

"Ohhh..." - he starts singing again - "'Milk and honey on the other side, Hallelujah!' The last coupla days, my brain just hasn't been functioning right. I have auditory hallucinations in my head."

Melinda elucidates: "Basically, Brian has problems with depression. Day to day it varies, and auditory hallucinations are caused because the neuro-transmitters in the brain have gone haywire. So we're on new medication, we've alleviated a lot of the old medication. So some days he has great days, and other days are..."

"...Lousy," he mumbles.

"...Lousy. And the problem is that stress is a major cause of auditory hallucinations through depression. It's an on-going thing that Brian's always gonna be dealing with, but for the first time in his life he's with people that understand what he's going through instead of saying: 'You're crazy.' And what we know about the brain is...nothing."

Brian burps loudly. "I'm not sure about the brain, but I don't understand what goes on between brain and emotion when you write a song. Are you writing a song from your soul or from your brain? It's weird. What goes on?"

"The amazing part," wonders his wife, "is many creative people suffer from depression. Maybe that's the part of the brain that deals with creativity, too."

So would you have sacrificed the creativity to have avoided the depression?

"Yeah. It gets back to being scared, because if you're depressed, that's gonna fuck your mind up. Being depressed these days, that throws your mind into a scared situation."

But for an entire life of complete emotional and psychological simplicity, would you have sacrificed every note of music that you've written and played?

He becomes vague and makes desperate attempts to change the subject. Melinda firmly takes over the questioning. "No, Brian. If, in fact, you could have a life free of depression and auditory hallucinations, free of all the emotional insecurity that you've gone through, would you trade that with having your life with music?"

He answers very quietly, "No."

"No, I don't think so," she says, satisfied.

"As much emotional security as I have, I still need more, though," he returns.

But music's so important to you that you're prepared to go through the rough times?

He's very distant, suddenly exhausted.

"Yeah. Oh yeah."

Afterwards, sitting outside Brian Wilson's house, staring out over the valley, David Leaf says that Brian changes his opinions all the time, that what we just heard was only representative of what he thought and felt today, this lunch time. "Later," he says, "he might sit down and write a song specifically for The Beach Boys."

Plainly, his indecisiveness is actually a tremendous volatility. And seeing someone still so patently talented being torn apart by what is, ultimately, fairly trivial shit, is awfully sad.

But then again, he is an ill man who appears, for once, to be being properly looked after. As Melinda said: "Basically, we call a spade a spade now; it's Brian suffering from depression. Before, people tried to hid it. You don't have to be afraid to tell somebody that you're hearing a voice in your head."

The old stories about Brian Wilson finding incredible solace in his music are all true, and the things he says shows that he has at least some perspective and a tenacious grasp on reality; his own situation is far stronger than many people are prepared to give him credit for.

"If I'm scared, I'm gonna be good scared," he says. "I don't wanna be fucking scared. Not this bullshit about I can't do it, I can't walk out my door, I'm afraid of The Rolling Stones, I'm afraid of Phil Spector. That's bullshit. Life is a big scare test for me.

"You wanna hear the tip of all tips? To hear it is to handle it. I figured that out. I was going through a lot of hell, a lot of confusion, a lot of sorrow, right? And I was hearing things, I'd hear a record on the radio or I heard someone talking and I said to myself: 'To hear it is to handle it.' I finally got that, 'cos before, I could hear it and I couldn't handle it. So if I can handle what I hear, hey! fuck you, I'm gonna be cool - that's all there is to it. It's a heavy-duty thing but, believe me, it doesn't take much, man.

"It just takes a slight, little voice, a slight, little idea to make my whole fucking day...that's all."