

The Manson Connection

One day in 1968, Dennis Wilson picked up two female hitchhikers, an act which set in motion one of the darkest episodes in the Beach Boys history. *Vintage Rock* examines an unlikely friendship with one of the most notorious criminals of the 20th century.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

Dennis Wilson was fond of picking up hitchhikers. It helped if they were young, female and gorgeous, of course, as Patricia Krenwinkel and Ella Jo Bailey were that day in April 1968. Then 23 and at the wheel of a swanky, burgundy-hued Rolls-Royce, the impossibly handsome Beach Boy drummer shot the breeze with the two waif-like hippie chicks before dropping them off and heading home. Five days later, cruising around the Sunset Strip, he chanced upon Patricia and Ella Jo again. This time, however, he motored them back to his house at 14400 Sunset Boulevard. This wasn't unusual – Dennis was often inviting strangers back to his crib, if they looked interesting or weird enough. Every new encounter was a possible new adventure for Dennis. What the drummer didn't realise that day was that he'd opened the door, not to an adventure, but a nightmare.

"Are you going to hurt me?"

Those were the words Dennis Wilson spoke to Charles Manson when he first clocked eyes on him coming out of his Sunset Boulevard home later that night. "Do I look like I'm going to hurt you?" replied the diminutive Manson, before dropping to his knees and kissing Wilson's feet.

Patricia Krenwinkel and Ella Jo Bailey had no idea the guy who'd picked them up that afternoon was a famous rock star. It's only when the two girls had returned to the home they shared with a couple of dozen other middle class dropouts and their self-appointed leader, Charles Manson, that they

discovered that the man who'd beckoned them into his Rolls that day, was a Beach Boy. While Dennis Wilson's name didn't mean much to Krenwinkel and Bailey, it meant something to the burningly ambitious Manson who immediately made a beeline to Wilson's house. Its owner was out, but that didn't mean anything to Manson who, with his 'Family' in tow, simply broke in and made themselves at home. By the time Dennis got back the party was already in full flow.

THAT SHINDIG WENT on for days. And apart from indulging himself with several of the girls there, Dennis spent hours chattering to this crazy-eyed sage, who'd talk about how there was no such thing as right or wrong, good or bad, alive or dead... Dennis was enraptured by Manson's impregnable self-belief and confessed to his new friend about the beatings he'd suffered at the hands of his father. Manson looked into his eyes and told him that parents fuck their children up to build their own egos. Dennis nodded like this answered everything. Manson was just 10 years older

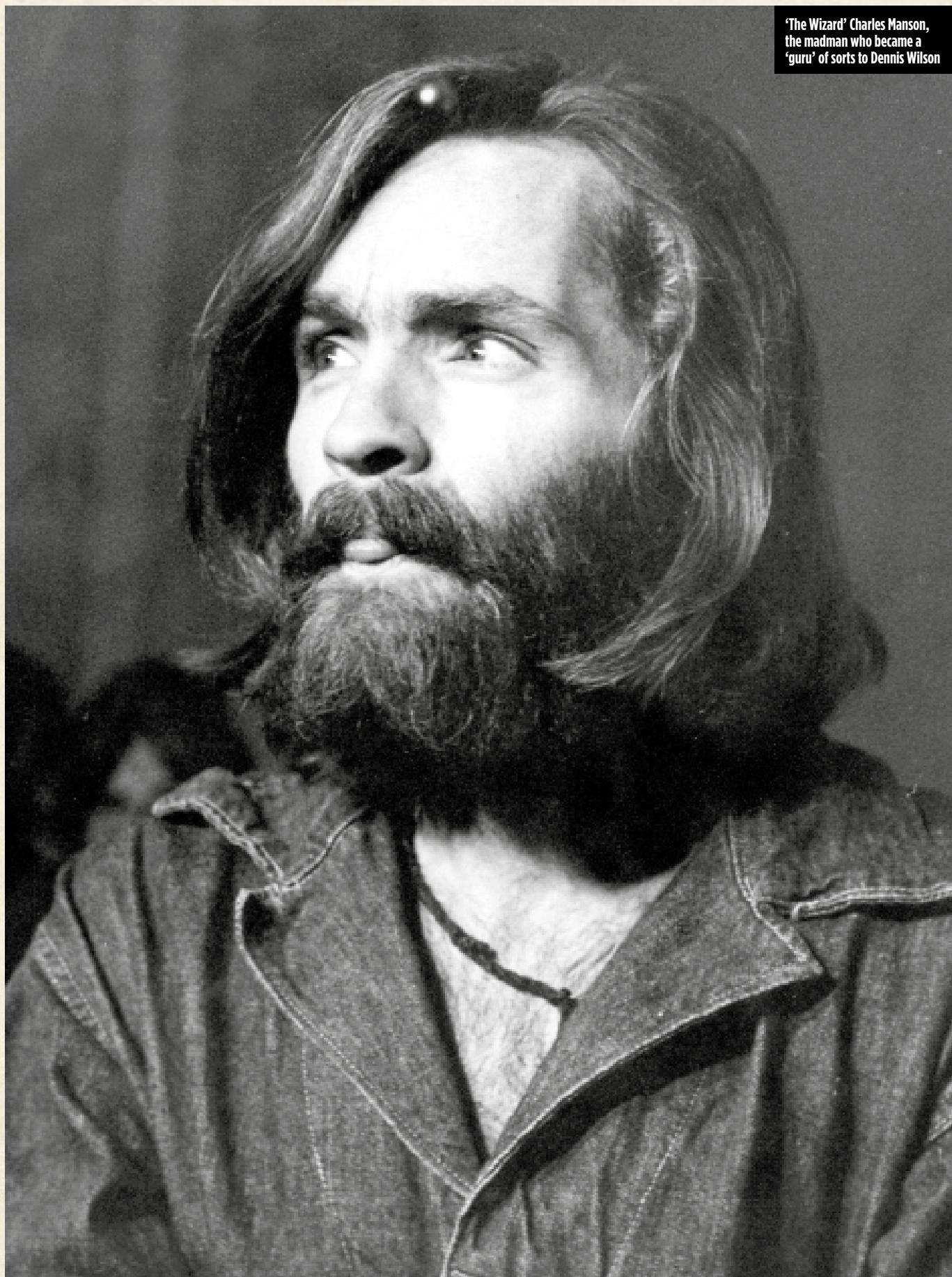
than Dennis but already the drummer had latched onto this street corner philosopher like he had the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi a few months before. The difference was, with this guru came the promise of lashings of sex and a waterfall of drugs.

For his part, the music-obsessed Charles Manson loved being up close with rock royalty. He'd learned to play guitar during one of the many prison stretches he'd done and had long lusted after a record contract. But if many of Southern California's long-hairs were using music to fertilise their dreams of a war-free world, Charles Manson wanted to do just the opposite. A virulent white supremacist, he believed a race war was brewing, giving it the name 'Helter Skelter' after the song on The Beatles' 'White Album'.

"Kids respond to music," Manson told *Rolling Stone* in 1969. "They can hear it, they're not so conditioned they can't feel it. Music seldom gets to grown-ups. It gets through to the young mind that's still open."

Dennis then was Manson's key to propagandising the entire world in the way he'd done his coterie of followers. Manson was careful not to alienate his new friend, keeping much of the 'Helter Skelter' theories to himself, but what potty wisdom he did share with Dennis, the drummer lapped up. Soon, the starry-eyed Dennis began to introduce Manson to friends, his family, and eventually The Beach Boys. "This is Charlie," he would say. "He is a wizard, man." 'The Wizard' is how Dennis would refer to Manson throughout their ➤

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'The Wizard' Charles Manson,
the madman who became a
'guru' of sorts to Dennis Wilson

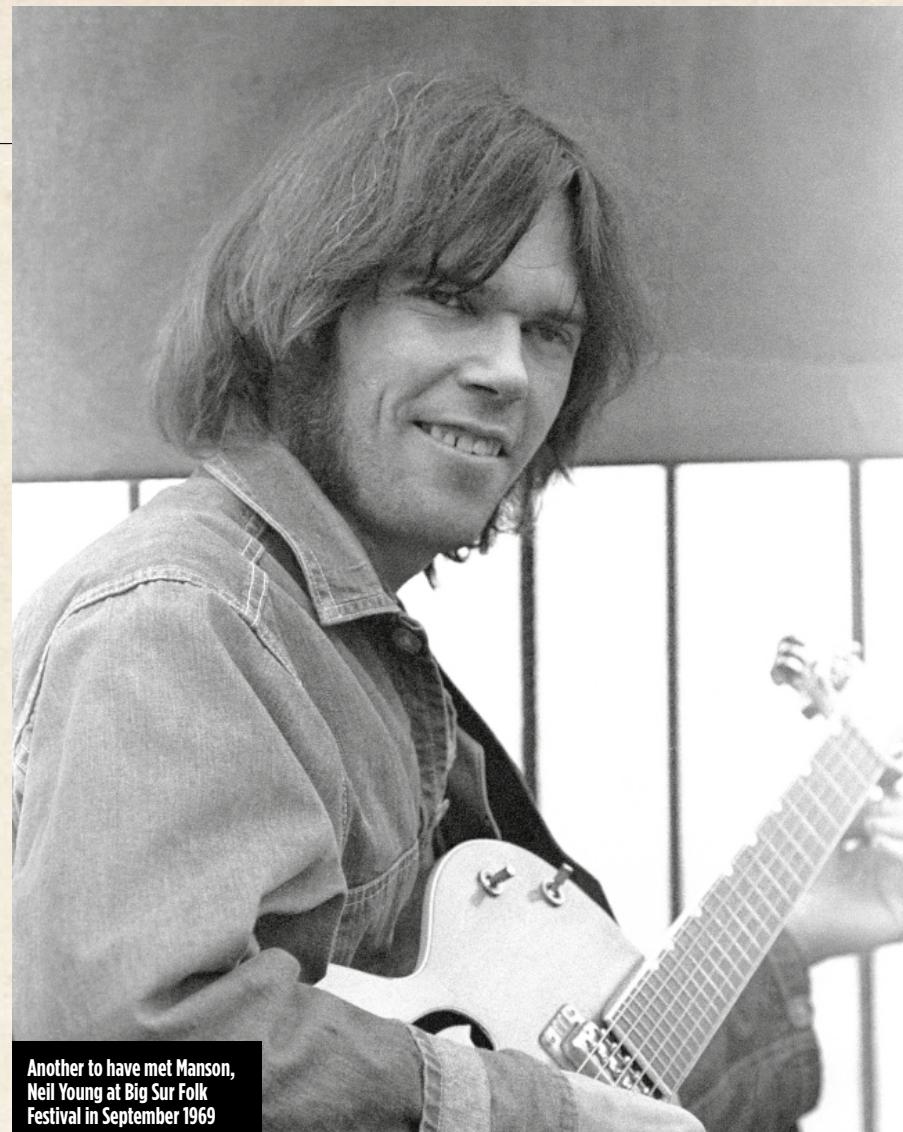
friendship. The name gives a clue as to the glorified status Manson had with Dennis, that he was more than simply a new buddy, he was a guru. Dennis Wilson had fallen under Charles Manson's spell just as Patricia Krenwinkel and Ella Jo Bailey, and countless others had done. The difference for Manson was that Dennis Wilson was well-connected.

It was Dennis who introduced Manson to Neil Young, who too became pally with the charismatic outsider. Manson would play songs to Young, who at that time had just split from Buffalo Springfield, and the guitarist, it appears, was smitten.

"He would sit down with the guitar and start playing and make up stuff, different every time," Young said in a 1986 interview. "Musically I thought he was very unique. I thought he really had something crazy, something great. He was like a living poet. It was always coming out."

NOT EVERYONE WAS as dazzled as Neil Young though. Brian Wilson took an immediate dislike to Manson and told his brother there was no way he'd work with him. Mike Love and Bruce Johnston too were wary of Dennis' newest mate. On one evening, they found themselves at Dennis' log cabin-styled home along with Manson and his acolytes and recalled that they were the only guests with their clothes on. As Dennis and the Family got down to an acid-fuelled orgy, Love and Johnston made their excuses and scooted. "I can remember driving back to Brian's house, just a couple miles down Sunset Boulevard, thinking, 'Well Dennis, you really got 'em.'

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Another to have met Manson,
Neil Young at Big Sur Folk
Festival in September 1969

You really got something on your hands now," Love said.

Manson and his followers would spend the next few months living in Dennis' house, rent-free. "Dennis was all too happy to allow Manson and his girls to move in, use his charge cards, take his clothes, eat his food, even drive his Mercedes," Love reflected

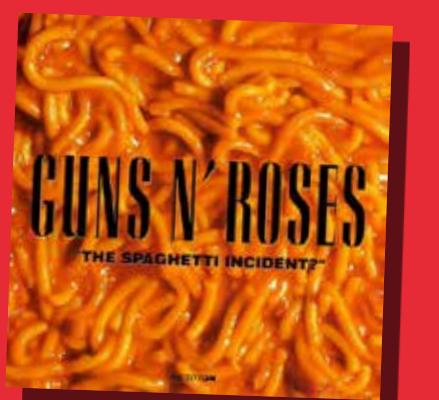
in his 2016 memoir, *Good Vibrations*. "Manson, after all, had something for Dennis – a stable of young women who catered to his every desire."

Dennis was almost pathologically generous, a quality Manson and his followers took full advantage of. During their stay at *chez* Wilson they managed to total two of Dennis' cars – a £21,000 Mercedes and a Ferrari 275GTB, and, pilfering his credit cards, blew over \$100,000. As regards his possessions, it was basically a free for all. If it wasn't

Charlie don't surf

Charles Manson has been a figure of fascination for many in music over the years. Various bands have covered his songs, including Guns N' Roses who recorded the Manson track *Look At Your Game, Girl* on their 1993 covers album *The Spaghetti Incident?*. The move wasn't without controversy, and eventually the group decided to donate all royalties from the cover to go to the relatives of the Family's victims.

Marilyn Manson has also, somewhat unsurprisingly, been inspired by Charles Manson's music. On his first album, *Portrait Of An American Family*, he recorded a song titled *My Monkey*, which includes lyrics taken from the Manson track *Mechanical Man*. Following Charles Manson's death in 2017, his namesake recorded a cover of the song *Sick City*, prompting Kiss' Paul Stanley to tweet, "[It's] pathetic when somebody [whose] career never really took off is desperate enough to try for publicity by connecting himself to the news of a murdering scumbag's death."



nailed down, they took it – clothes, food, gold records, anything. And when a bout of gonorrhoea spread through the Family, Dennis took them all to a doctor in Beverly Hills, shedding out over a thousand bucks in penicillin shots. "It was probably the largest gonorrhoea bill in history," he said later.

Persuaded of Manson's brilliance, Dennis wanted Brother Records to put out The Wizard's music, except no one else in The Beach Boys was convinced this was anywhere near a good idea. Behind his back, they referred to the unkempt and often foul-smelling Manson as 'pig-pen', and as he hung around and played, it soon became evident to the band that he'd only mastered a few chords. They decided to run a background check on Manson, only to discover that he had a string of criminal offences behind him and a clutch of prison stretches. Only Dennis didn't mind. It only confirmed to him that Manson lived it like he talked it. In a town full of fake outlaws and toothless rebels, here was the real deal.

ONE OF THOSE within The Beach Boys circle that was intrigued by Manson was Terry Melcher. In the early 60s, he'd been one half of Bruce & Terry alongside Bruce Johnston and had been introduced into The Beach Boys' orbit through his old partner. By now a producer, Dennis figured Terry Melcher (who, incidentally, was also the son of Hollywood icon Doris Day) would be a good contact for Manson. After meeting at Melcher's home at 10050 Cielo Drive, Manson agreed to a formal audition. In the end, though, Melcher said no. And Manson wasn't very good at accepting rejection.

Despite his band's scepticism about Manson, and the fact that nothing had come of the Melcher meet-up, Dennis suggested that the two of them collaborate on some songs. Manson gave Dennis two sets of lyrics, one for something called *Garbage Dump* ("When you're livin' on the road/ And you think sometimes you're starvin'/ Get on off that trip my friend/ Just get in them cans and start carvin'") and another called *Cease To Exist* ("Pretty girl, pretty, pretty girl/ Cease to exist/ Just come and say you love me/ Give up your world/ C'mon you can be"), telling him, "Do what you like with the music, just don't change the words".

But while Dennis' faith in Manson as a mentor and musician was unwavering, he



Terry Melcher with girlfriend Candice Bergen in '68 – Melcher would produce The Beach Boys' No.1 *Kokomo* in 1988

was however beginning to tire of having the Family clogging up his home 24/7. Especially galling was when Dennis brought a girl of his own back. Invariably, Manson would try to entice them into the group, which usually started with having sex with him. When one of Dennis' girlfriends said no, Manson pulled a knife out. "You know, I could cut you up in little pieces," he told her.

But Dennis didn't boot the Family out. Instead, he packed his bags and moved

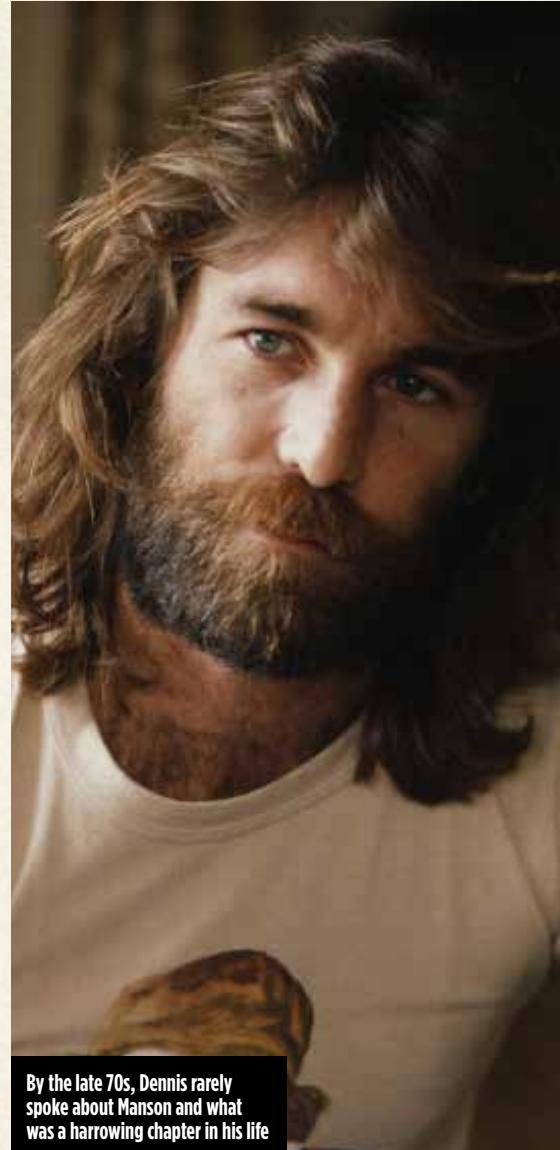
out himself, choosing a new, smaller place elsewhere in LA, letting the landlord of 14400 Sunset Boulevard do the job of evicting Manson and his posse.

Spahn Ranch, an old 55-acre former movie set once owned by silent film actor William S. Hart, would become the new base for the Family, and Dennis would be a frequent visitor. He may have tired of the group filching his stuff and wrecking his cars, but he still dug the perma-available ➤

ANY CHANCE WE COULD CHANGE THIS PIC? SEEMS A BIT... SEXY GIVEN WHAT HAPPENED TO HER. IF THERE ARE NO OTHERS, NO WORRIES.

The B

A pregnant Sharon Tate on the set of her final film *12 + 1* in June 1969, shortly before her murder



By the late 70s, Dennis rarely spoke about Manson and what was a harrowing chapter in his life

10050 Cielo Drive, site of the chilling Manson Family murders in August 1969



sex and Manson himself still held a dark allure for him.

One day, Dennis arrived with news. He told Manson The Beach Boys had decided to record *Cease To Exist*. Okay, it wasn't a contract to record the song himself, but it was something. Or so Manson thought.

WHEN THE BEACH Boys finally came to wax *Cease To Exist* it was barely recognisable from the song that Manson had played to Dennis all those months previous. Recorded under the title *Never Learn Not To Love* as the B-side to their *Bluebirds Over The Mountain* single, Manson was pissed not only to learn that the lyrics had been significantly changed, but the songwriting credit went to Dennis Wilson.

Manson was infuriated, sending Dennis a single bullet, and telling him, "Every time you look at it, I want you to think how nice it is your kids are still safe." According to Van Dyke Parks, Dennis, in response, "grabbed Manson by the head and threw him to the ground and began pummeling him."

Of course, Manson and Wilson's short-lived friendship would have been largely ignored by history, save for what happened on the night of 8-9 August 1969 when four members of the Family – Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel and Linda Kasabian – drove from Spahn Ranch to 10050 Cielo Drive and, on Manson's orders, butchered five people, including the pregnant actress Sharon Tate, wife of the film director Roman Polanski.

Shortly after the murders, Manson visited Wilson's home, telling him that he had "just been to the moon", before demanding money. Wilson, by then aware of how dangerous Manson was, paid up. Two months later, Manson, along with the four Family members, was arrested and charged with numerous counts of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. Dennis initially refused to testify against Manson, stating, "I couldn't, I was so scared." Instead, he was privately interviewed by prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi, but didn't take the stand because, as Melcher explained, "The



Family members (l-r) Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel and Leslie Van Houten sing on the way to the courtroom

prosecutors thought he was nuts, and by that time he was. He had a hard time separating reality from fantasy."

Dennis' relationship with Charles Manson cast a black shadow over the rest of his life. Asked about Manson in 1976, a pained Wilson told *Rolling Stone*, "I don't talk about Manson. I think he's a sick fuck. I think of Roman and all those wonderful people who had a beautiful family and they fucking had their tits cut off. I want

to benefit from that?" There are some that believe that Dennis' spiralling drink problem during the 70s and early 80s was fuelled by the guilt he felt over his dalliance with Charles Manson.

"For my cousin," Mike Love reflected a few years ago, "to be involved with that and to have the guilt associated with that, had to be a tough burden for him to carry for the rest of his life."

For such a fundamentally decent man as Dennis Wilson, the knowledge that he may have somehow contributed to, or could have somehow prevented, the horrors of that night, must have been overwhelming. He may not have talked about the Manson episode with many people in the years before his tragically early death in 1983, but one thing is for sure, there was likely barely a day in his life after that night when Dennis didn't regret picking up those two hitchhikers and letting Charles Milles Manson into his life.*

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