

# Brian Wilson

## The Wilderness Years

**Brian Wilson was largely absent from The Beach Boys in the 1970s and 80s, as his mental health deteriorated. We look back at the years lost to drugs, booze and paranoia – and his notorious doctor...**

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

**T**he rock and roll world is filled with tales of once-great artists who either burned out young or who petered away into self-imposed obscurity. But there's a crucial difference between Brian Wilson and other rock casualties like Syd Barrett, Roky Erickson, Peter Green or Sly Stone. For one thing, Brian Wilson came back.

Not that anybody paying attention in the 1970s would have ever thought that a possibility. For much of that decade the one-time Beach Boy leader was lost in a coke and alcohol-addled fog. It's said he didn't get out of his bed for three years. And even friends who saw him could hardly recognise the figure under the duvet, his weight having ballooned to a mattress-punishing 300 pounds.

What's especially heartbreaking about Brian Wilson's wilderness years is how swiftly it happened. He'd never been the most robust of individuals, but a toxic combination of overwork and pharmaceutical indulgence in the second half of the 1960s would threaten his very sanity. At the beginning of the decade he was Phil Spector's biggest fan, playing *Be My Baby* on an almost constant loop. By the decade's end he'd become so paranoid he thought his one-time hero was bugging his house.

For a band that basked in the sun-kissed hedonism of the Californian coast, the irony was that its principal songwriter preferred

the safety and calm of his own bedroom than the frivolity of the beach. The first hint fans had at the lead Beach Boy's staggering vulnerability was from *In My Room*, off the band's 1963 album *Surfer Girl*. Gone was any pretence of being the big man, the chick magnet, the bronzed athlete with the surfboard tucked under his arm, this was the then-21-year-old Brian Wilson baring his soul like no other pop star his age. "There's a world where I can go and tell my secrets to," he sang tenderly, "In this world I lock out all my worries and my fears/ In my room, in my room..." It was released as the B-side to the deliriously upbeat *Be True To Your School* single yet it sounded like it came from a different planet.

**BRIAN FIRST TRIED** cannabis in December 1964 via his friend Lorren Daro. Just five months later he would experiment with acid for the first time, a drug that would prove especially destructive to Brian Wilson's fragile psyche. He started experiencing auditory hallucinations around

**By the decade's end he became so paranoid he thought Spector was bugging his house**

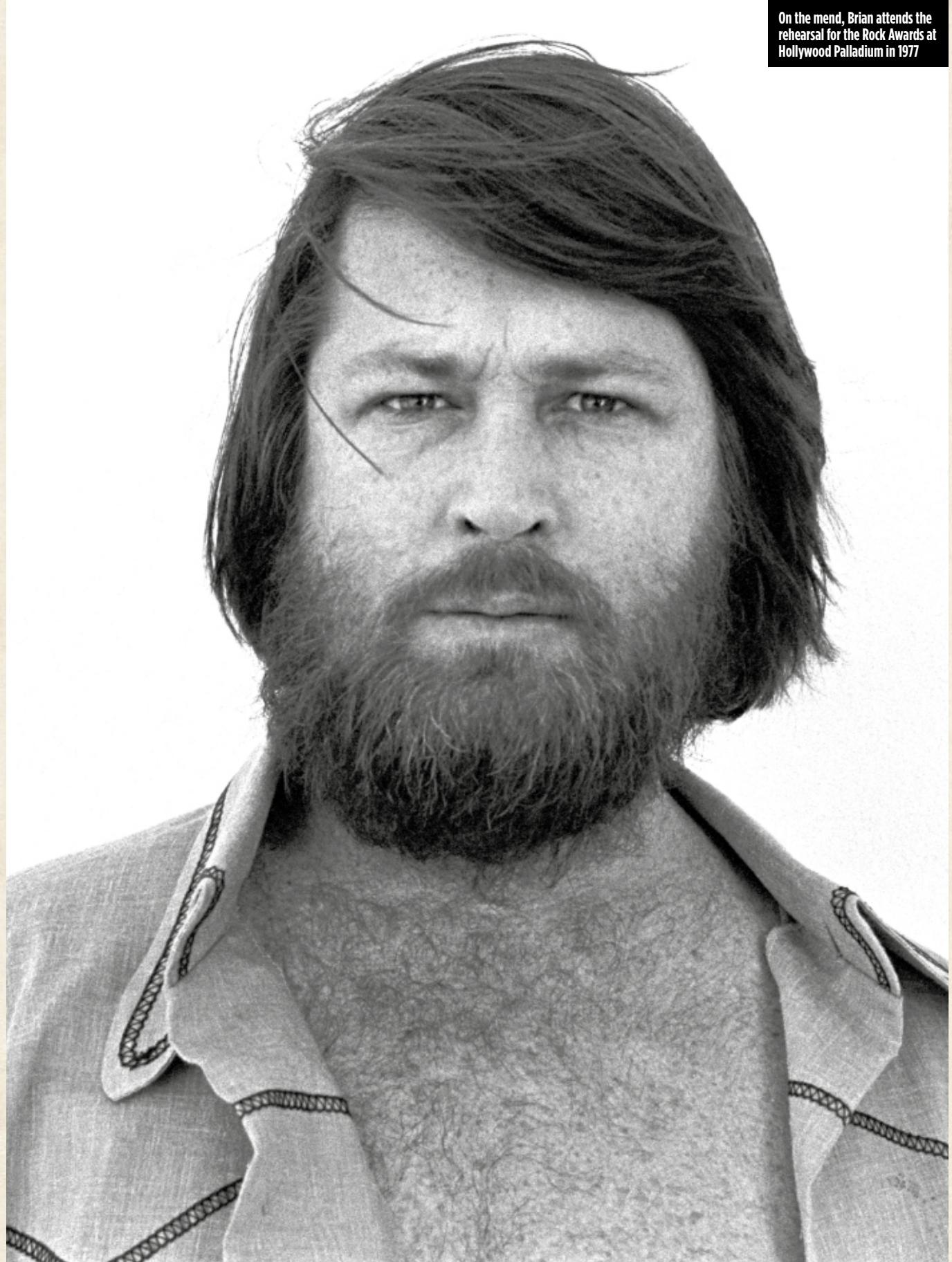
a week after his first tab, a condition that still plagues him to this day. Later, he would describe 1965 as "a year worth of paranoid".

Though Brian had absented himself from The Beach Boys' live commitments at the end of '64, the next couple of years saw him hurl himself ever more intensely into his work. *Pet Sounds* and *SMiLE* would become all-consuming obsessions for him as, mostly away from the group, he set about creating his duplet of answers to *Rubber Soul*. But by the time of 1967's *Wild Honey*, he was burnt out. "When we did [that record], Brian asked me to get more involved in the recording end," reflected Carl Wilson. "He wanted a break. He was tired. He had been doing it all too long."

It didn't help that Brian had added cocaine to his already diverse drug diet. Danny Hutton, a friend of Wilson's and one of the trio of vocalists in Three Dog Night, believes this is when his "real decline started". And others were noticing Wilson's odd behaviour. According to journalist Nik Cohn, writing in 1968, Wilson was "increasingly withdrawn, brooding, hermitic ... and occasionally, he is to be seen in the back of some limousine, cruising around Hollywood, bleary and unshaven, huddled way tight into himself".

Friends were alarmed at how often Brian would talk about suicide, and, in mid-'68, he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. His involvement with The Beach Boys was, by this time, minimal and intermittent. ➤

On the mend, Brian attends the rehearsal for the Rock Awards at Hollywood Palladium in 1977



## On one LSD-drenched night Brian played just one note on the piano over and over again

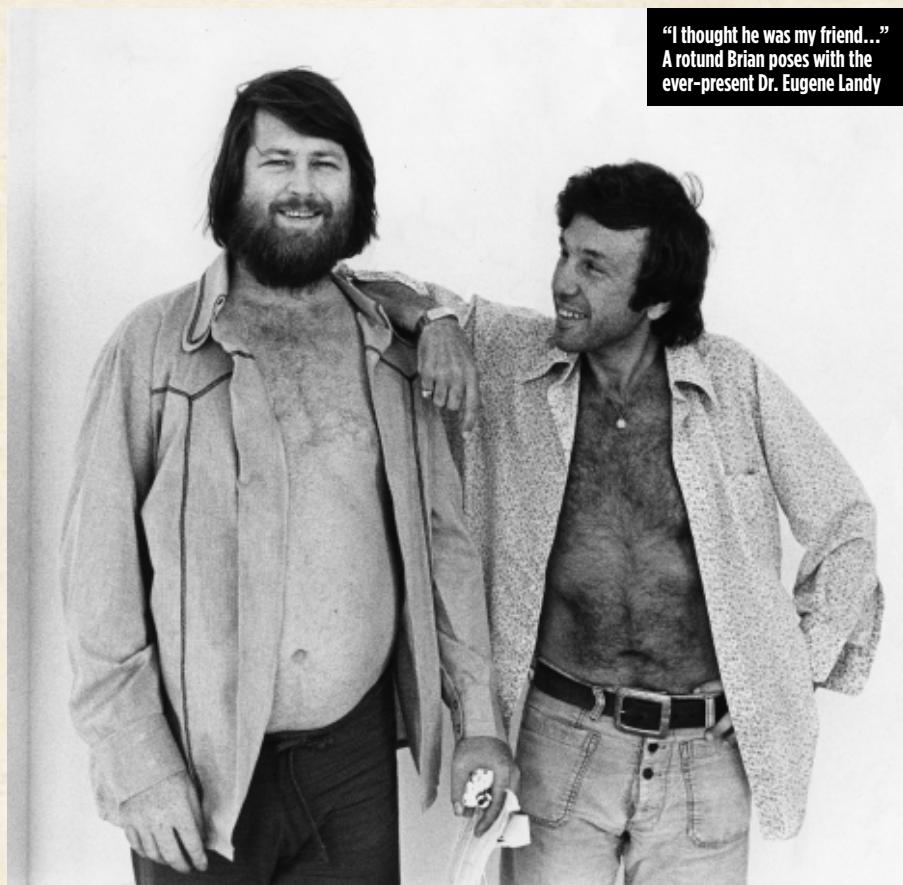
He had little to do with 1969's *20/20* (and indeed isn't even pictured on the cover), despite persistent coaxing from Dennis.

Adding to the turmoil in Brian's life was The Beach Boys' dire financial situation. By mid-1969, the group's funds had been depleted to such an extent that they were considering filing for bankruptcy. In response, Murry Wilson, believing the band's popularity had peaked, decided to sell off Sea Of Tunes, the music publishing company that he and Brian had founded in 1962, to Irving Almo Music for \$700,000 (around \$5 million in today's money). Brian was devastated.

Even during this tumultuous period, he hadn't yet completely withdrawn from making music. In late 1971 and early '72 (while the 'Boys were busy with the *Carl And The Passions* record), he busied himself on an album for his wife Marilyn's group Spring (renamed American Spring soon after) at his home studio in Bel Air, and in 1973 released a duet with Jan And Dean's Jan Berry, *Don't You Just Know*



Better days: Brian returned to live duties for the 'Brian's Back' campaign around 15 Big Ones



"I thought he was my friend..."  
A rotund Brian poses with the ever-present Dr. Eugene Landy

*It*. Yet outside these sporadic bursts of productivity, he was unravelling. The death of Murry Wilson in 1973 pushed him even further into an abyss (Brian was so cut up about it he didn't even attend the funeral) and his behaviour became so erratic that, at one party where Alice Cooper and Iggy Pop were present, the Stooges singer, who was no stranger to narcotic excess, exclaimed, "I'm leaving! This guy's nuts!"

Though Brian was spending more and more time in bed, in those moments when he did see people, the meet-ups were more often than not fuelled by chemicals than iced tea. Micky Dolenz of The Monkees recalls one LSD-drenched night with himself, Wilson, John Lennon and Harry Nilsson where Brian "played just one note on a piano over and over again."

**BY 1975, BRIAN'S** drug intake had bellied to such an extent that the family finally decided to take action. Despite his lack of involvement in his old band's live shows he'd been salaried as an active partner of the touring Beach Boys band for a decade. But all that money was doing was funding his prodigious drug habit. Something had to be done.

And this is where Dr. Eugene Landy enters our story. As a psychotherapist, Dr. Landy was radical, even by Southern California's often whacked-out standards. A high school dropout, one of his first jobs was as manager for future soul sensation George Benson. Later on, after studying psychology at the University Of Oklahoma, he became the go-to shrink to the stars, treating such celebs as Richard Harris, Rod Steiger and Gig Young. The Wilson family were intrigued by the intensity of the 24-hour regimen Landy offered his patients, where he would micromanage their lives alongside a team of counsellors and doctors. Only something that extreme, the family figured, could get Brian out of his slumber.

It was October 1975 when Landy signed on to become Brian Wilson's personal psychotherapist. He took little time in diagnosing Brian as a paranoid schizophrenic (though that reading was later debunked by fellow professionals) and, after a while, Landy's round-the-clock monitoring appeared to be working. Brian's new regime included being woken up by having cold water splashed over him as well as a rigid daily schedule of diet and exercise. Landy even padlocked the fridge.

To those around him, Brian appeared more stable and engaged, and the change in his demeanour was so pronounced that The Beach Boys felt confident enough for him to take the wheel of their 20th album, *15 Big Ones*. That Brian was working with The Beach Boys again was such a big deal that a full-throttle media campaign was orchestrated around his return, tagged ‘Brian’s Back’. It proved premature. If the group thought they were getting the Brian Wilson of 1966, they were way off-beam. With Landy big-brothering his every move, Wilson appeared tragically short on inspiration and, in the event, around half the songs on *15 Big Ones* were covers. Even the new tracks like *That Same Song* and *Susie Cincinnati* proved underwhelming.

**ALL THIS TIME**, Brian was under sustained surveillance by Landy and his employees, which included a nutritionist, a physician and various others whose jobs it was to make sure that Brian didn’t fall off the wagon. In his lengthy piece for *Rolling Stone*, journalist David Felton painted an disturbing picture of how Brian was treated, to all intents and purposes, like a child by this police-like support network. At one point, during a meeting with *Saturday Night Live* producer Lorne Michaels and comedians Dan Aykroyd and Jim Belushi, Landy scolded those present for sharing beers with Wilson. “When you come next Monday, no beer, no food, no anything,” he told them sternly. “Brian’s on a diet.”

Felton also illustrated another incident, when, backstage at the television special *The Beach Boys: It’s OK*, Brian, then 34, was literally barred from eating lunch, with Landy’s hired hand, a 19-year-old named Scott Steinberg, blocking him in the middle of a corridor. “No, Brian,” the teenager told him like a teacher telling off a naughty schoolkid, “you forfeited your lunch when you snuck upstairs and ate that hamburger.”

“But I’m hungry!” Brian pleaded.

“You should have thought of that before you ate that hamburger,” came the reply.

The Wilson-Landy relationship finally came to an end, of sorts, in December 1976, following a dispute concerning Landy’s fee. Only Landy would re-enter Brian’s life again six years later, after the Wilson family contacted him once more after Brian OD’d on a combo of alcohol, cocaine and various other psychoactive drugs. If Brian thought



## “Okay, Mr Wilson, here’s your wave!”

**In 1976, Brian took part in a memorable comedy skit with Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi**

As part of the media blitz for *15 Big Ones*, *Saturday Night Live*’s creator Lorne Michaels crafted a one-off TV special around the group. Titled *The Beach Boys: It’s OK*, it was planned to mix live concert clips with comedy skits. Using his well-stocked address book, he roped in *SNL*’s John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd for the show-stealing comedy sketch where, dressed as California Highway Patrolmen, they march into Brian Wilson’s bedroom and order him to go surfing. “Brian,” says Aykroyd sternly, “we have a citation here for you sir under Section 936A of the ‘California Catch A Wave Statute’. Brian, you’re in violation of Paragraph 12: failing to surf, neglecting to use a state beach for surfing purposes, and otherwise avoiding surfboards, surfing and surf.” Ordering him out of bed, they then take him to the beach and, after Aykroyd barks, “Okay, Mr Wilson, here’s your wave!” an awkward, hesitant Brian ambles into the ocean, surfboard in hand.

“He was not happy about it,” Michaels reflected to *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2006. “It was almost a baptism.”

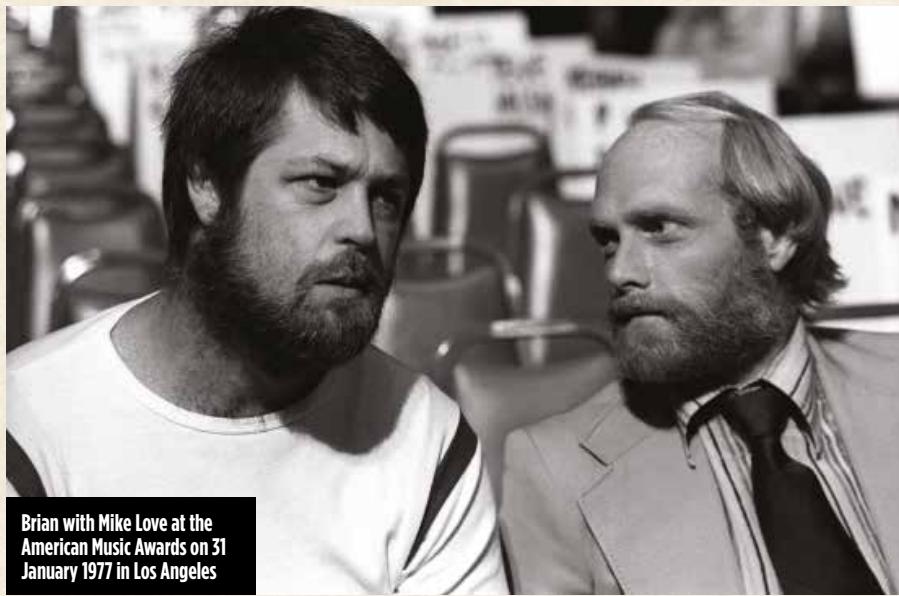


it was hardcore before, it soon became clear that was Landy with the boxing gloves on. This time, it was bare knuckle, as Landy demanded that Brian be formally discharged from The Beach Boys. Bereft, Wilson was told that the only way he could ever rejoin is if he agreed to see his former therapist. Under duress, he agreed.

Landy didn’t come cheap. Between 1983 and 1986 he charged the Wilson family \$430,000 a year, and, when he upped his fee, Carl Wilson was forced to sign away a quarter of his brother’s publishing royalties. This time, Landy put Brian on a military-style diet and exercise regime, which resulted in slimming him down to a healthy 185 pounds.

Explaining his unorthodox approach, Landy wrote that “[The goal is to] totally disrupt the privacy of [the] patient’s [life], gaining complete control over every aspect of their physical, personal, social, and sexual environments.” In an interview, Landy was surprisingly candid at the level of control he exerted over his famous patient, saying, “I influence all of [Brian]’s thinking. I’m practically a member of the band ... [We’re] partners in life.”

**WRITING IN HIS** 2016 autobiography, Mike Love reflected, “Neither his brothers nor his mother nor I nor most anyone else could reach him. Landy controlled all access and appeared to control Brian’s career as ➤



Brian with Mike Love at the American Music Awards on 31 January 1977 in Los Angeles

well... We wanted Brian to be part of the group, and the funny thing is, Brian wanted that as well."

Although Landy had relaxed his grip enough for Brian to contribute to the band's eponymous 1985 album, his involvement with The Beach Boys dissipated almost completely after its release. Brian was still writing occasionally, however, even with Landy forever in tow, and, in 1986, after seeing Brian perform an a cappella version of *On Broadway* at the Rock And Roll Hall

Of Fame, Sire Records' Seymour Stein offered the ex-Beach Boy a solo record deal. Stein imposed one condition, however, that he appoint his own co-producer to help Brian stay on-task, choosing Andy Paley, a Wilson fan who'd made his mark working with Madonna, Elton John and Jonathan Richmond. Wilson then made a condition of his own – that Landy be installed as the album's executive producer.

Paley was shocked at the level of control Landy exerted over his patient and recalled

one incident in the studio that epitomised their dynamic: "He was saying something like, 'Brian, don't you think the lyrics would be better if Alexandra [Landy's wife] fixed them?' And Brian said, 'No, I like them the way they are.' Then the guy's like, 'Well, what did you tell me last night when I said you could have that milkshake if you switched the lyrics?' And then Brian said, 'Oh, okay. The new lyrics are better than the old ones.'"

While it was well-reviewed, the self-titled album, which was released in July 1988, failed to do the skyscaping numbers Stein had hoped for, partially due to Landy not freeing Brian up enough for the promotional duties the record needed. Yet the LP did bolster interest in the former Beach Boy, and certainly the public, whose image of Wilson was still of him grossly overweight and having to be forced out of his bedroom by the off-duty Blues Brothers, were pleasantly shocked by this newly slim-line and sharply cheek-boned model.

But if 1988 was a good year for Brian, it was a catastrophic one for Landy. In February 1988, the California Board of Medical Quality Assurance charged the doctor with ethical and license code violations stemming from the improper prescription of drugs and various unethical relationships with patients. Landy denied the allegations, of course, but later admitted to one of the seven charges which accused him of wrongfully prescribing drugs to Wilson. Though Landy was instructed to surrender his psychological license, his relationship with Brian continued through a business arrangement they'd made the year before, when they'd set up a company, Brains And Genius, a venture where each member would contribute equally and share any profits from recordings, films, soundtracks, or books.

Landy continued then to be a presence in Brian's life until 1990, when the Wilson family discovered that Landy had been named as a chief beneficiary in a 1989 revision of Brian's will, collecting 70%. This time, enough was enough.

Brian's mother Audree, plus daughters Carnie and Wendy, as well as brother Carl, contested Landy's control of Brian, pursuing legal action in May 1991. The ruling was finalised on 3 February 1992 when Landy was barred from contacting Brian ever again. The following December Landy was



Tyrant or saviour? A healthier Brian pictured with Dr. Eugene Landy in the late 80s

## **It's unlikely Brian will ever return to full health but his darkest days are behind him now**

fined \$1,000 for violating the order when he visited Brian in June for his 40th birthday.

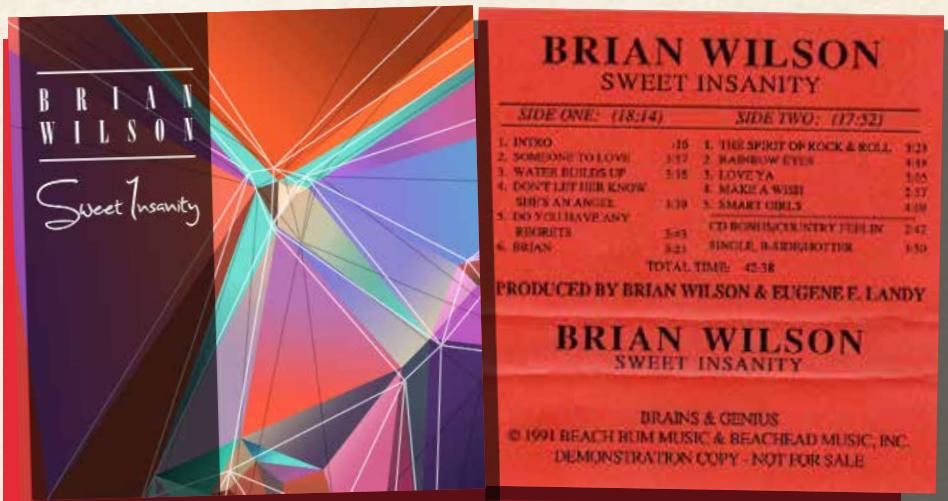
**DR. EUGENE LANDY** died in 2006 and remains a controversial, complicated figure in The Beach Boys story. "He was very tough and egregious and scandalously expensive with Brian's money," said Mike Love, before adding, "but I have to give credit for saving Brian's life... He was the only guy we knew who could handle Brian."

For his part, Brian appears to have mixed emotions of the man who dominated his life for 15 years. "I thought he was my friend but he was a very fucked-up man," he reflected in 2015, "I still feel that there was benefit. I try to overlook the bad stuff, and be thankful for what he taught me."

During their time together Landy even exerted control over Brian's love life – it was he who put the kibosh on Brian's relationship with car saleswoman Melinda Ledbetter in 1989. It was only in 1992, with Landy out of the picture, that Brian and Melinda reconnected, marrying in 1995.

It's unlikely that Brian Wilson will ever return to full health, but his darkest days appear far behind him now. Today, he has two adopted daughters, Daria and Delanie, and his productivity in the last 30 years is beyond anything anyone would have thought possible in the 1970s and 80s. He's even conquered his once-crippling stage anxiety and regularly performs live, sometimes with The Beach Boys, but more often on his own, backed by a comforting stable of backing singers and musicians. "I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't met Melinda," Brian told *The Daily Telegraph* in 2014. "She gave me my life back."

Certainly one of his oldest friends attributes his present happiness as much to Melinda as the absence of Landy. "His life turned into a better place, when he got a life companion," Van Dyke Parks points out. "Well, for better or worse, but certainly for richer not poorer, he's had a great life." \*



## **Virtual Insanity**

**Brian Wilson's follow-up to his eponymous debut album remains unreleased over 30 years later**

Following the release of the *Brian Wilson* album in 1988, Landy and Wilson began working on a follow-up. Initially titled 'Brian', the record was made up of 13 songs, including one (*The Spirit Of Rock & Roll*) featuring Bob Dylan and Jeff Lynne. But the record, by then renamed *Sweet Insanity*, was eventually rejected by Sire. Wilson claimed that the master tapes had been stolen, which prevented an official release, though that story doesn't hold much weight, as the songs have been available on numerous bootlegs since the 1990s. Despite five of its songs being re-recorded over a decade later for Wilson's 2004 album, *Gettin' In Over My Head*, the original version of *Sweet Insanity* remains one of the most intriguing lost albums of The Beach Boys' career.