

Brian Wilson Redeems His Soul in ‘Love & Mercy’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 6, 2015 - 9:48am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Brian Wilson has been called one of the greatest songwriters in popular music history. His tonality and approach towards his best compositions have been studied like Mozart. In “Love & Mercy,” we see that the thing that made Wilson great also had the power to destroy him.

From the beginnings in 1961 of The Beach Boys, the group that Brian Wilson composed for, to about the mid 1960s, Wilson’s output was incredible, with an ear towards creating songs that layered voices and instruments in a way that still defies logic. But his talent and subsequent popularity came with a price – the instability of Wilson’s sensitive nature made drug use, depression and isolation a by-product of his success. In “Love & Mercy” – the title taken from a 1988 Brian Wilson song – screenwriters Oren Moverman and Michael Alan Lerner, and director Bill Pohlad, pay homage to the artist that is Brian Wilson, by telling his truth in this operatic film. Actors Paul Dano (younger Brian) and John Cusack (middle age Brian) portray the songwriter in two crucial eras of his life, and provide a glimpse into how we’re all victims of our own circumstances.

The Beach Boys hit the American scene with perfect timing. Their peer audience, one of the largest birth generations in the country’s history, were just coming of age, and the power of their consumerism was focused on the evolution of rock and roll. Brian Wilson and his bandmates – brothers Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, cousin Mike Love, and friend Al Jardine – came out of Hawthorne, California, with a surf sound that sold millions of records.



John Cusack as Brian Wilson in ‘Love & Mercy’

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

But that pop music sound wasn’t satisfying Brian Wilson (Paul Dano). He sought a new light, and in 1965 began work on “Pet Sounds” – his album masterpiece – while the rest of the band toured. This story coincides with an older Brian Wilson (John Cusack) in the 1980s, under the care of therapist Eugene Landy (Paul Giamatti), drugged and lost under a umbrella of psychosis. It takes a car dealer named Melinda (Elizabeth Banks) to begin the process of redeeming Wilson’s soul.

How often can a life be explored in two distinct and important stages? Brian the Artist is encapsulated by Paul Dano, but there are shadings in the story that are leading towards Brian the Lost Being, magnificently brought to light by one of John Cusack’s best performances. Both men honor Brian in their own way, by understanding his unavoidable downside, but it’s also a story as old as show business itself, how the soul of the artist gets no care if other people are depending on his output for their livelihood.

Another way that both Dano and Cusack honored their subject – who by the way cooperated fully with the production – was in how they studied the nuances of what makes him tick. This is a necessary element in portraying a real person, trying to get to the purpose behind the facade that a person puts on to society. There is a thesis within this film that Brian tried his best, gave his talent in the best way he knew how, but the forces outside that talent demanded more, ultimately, then he could give. In his subsequent breakdown, there was a need to be taken care in the way that Eugene Landy accomplished, but in the end it was the wrong approach, and again more than Wilson could endure.

The supporting cast is critical in delivering the subtleties of how Brian was trapped, and Bill Camp as his authoritarian father Murry, Elizabeth Banks as his avenging angel Melinda (Wilson’s eventual wife) and Paul Giamatti as the Svengali-like Landy all honor the subject and story with their precise contributions. Camp and Dano have a life-encapsulating scene as father and son, as nothing Brian could do would satisfy Murry, and that pain stretches all the way to Cusack’s interpretation of Brian’s eventual redemption.



Paul Dano as Brian Wilson in 'Love & Mercy'

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

As much as the film is a glimpse into the difficulties that Brian Wilson faced – and it is unblinkingly honest about them – it is also a celebration of the passionate blossoming of song style in this consciousness. The “Pet Sounds” recording sessions are an exposition of wonder, and it works emotionally if you’re a fan of the album, like being present at the birth. It’s probably impossible to understand how expansively Wilson created his American soundtrack, unless you grew up in the era, but the film’s glimpse into that time is fun (recreating The Beach Boys beginnings) and telling regarding Wilson’s overall journey.

No one can determine, or sometimes reach, the inner turmoil swirling within a lifetime. What some people find inconsequential or amazing (fame), another, like Brian Wilson, might find impossible. The lesson of “Love & Mercy” is that every action that occurs, comes with an equal – and sometimes opposite – reaction. How do we find our redemption? God only knows.

“Love & Mercy” continues it’s release in Chicago on June 5th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring John Cusack, Paul Dano, Elizabeth Banks, Paul Giamatti and Bill Camp. Written by Oren Moverman and Michael Alan Lerner, based on the life of Brian Wilson. Directed by Bill Pohlad. Rated “PG-13”



[Click here](#) [22] for the HollywoodChicago.com interview with Brian Wilson for “Love & Mercy”



[Click here](#) [23] for the HollywoodChicago.com interview with John Cusack for “Love & Mercy”



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