

(Commissioned by *MOJO Magazine*, UK – author, **Scott Paton**)

Brian Wilson – Concert Review

Ann Arbor, Michigan Michigan Theater *March 9, 1999*

Set List: *The Little Girl I Once Knew / This Whole World / Don't Worry Baby / Kiss Me Baby / In My Room / Surfer Girl / California Girls / Do It Again / I Get Around / Let's Go Away For Awhile / Pet Sounds / South American / Surfin' USA / Back Home / Wouldn't It Be Nice / Sloop John B. / This Could Be The Night / Lay Down Burden / God Only Knows / Good Vibrations / Imagination / Help Me, Rhonda / Be My Baby / Caroline, No / All Summer Long / Barbara Ann / Fun, Fun, Fun*



Try naming another artist that carries more baggage of collective expectation than Brian Wilson. Ever since his aborted '67 masterwork, *Smile*, collapsed under the weight of its own ambition, fans have anxiously greeted any new offering from the reclusive composer with drawn breath and fingers crossed. While even Wilson apologists would admit that Brother Bri has yet to produce a consistent body of material comparable to his mid-'60s heyday, there have been enough flashes of brilliance over the past three decades to justify the continued anticipation.

Rarer still have been his forays onto the stage. From the over-hyped "Brian Is Back" campaign of the late '70s to the present day, Wilson's live appearances have consisted of little more than token cameos at the occasional Beach Boys show, or a song or two at industry functions. So it was with no small surprise to learn that Brian was staging the first-ever, full-blown solo tour of his nearly 40-year career.

A large random sampling of concertgoers at the first night's show revealed the event to be nothing less than a pilgrimage of sorts for a majority of those in attendance. Fans filed into the theater in giddy anticipation, boasting of cross-country drives and last-minute international flights to witness the historic event. As the lights dimmed, there was a palpable air of suspense in the room, a super-charged mixture of excitement, hope and goodwill and, to be sure, a measurable touch of anxiety as the crowd awaited its wayward hero. Tweaking the drama even more was a 23-minute documentary that delighted the

diehards and served as a formal introduction of the Wilson legacy for any uninitiated tag-alongs in the room. As the film concluded, the screen rose and the band kicked-off with a crackling arrangement of "The Little Girl I Once Knew", one of Brian's slightly more obscure, yet finest, mid-sixties productions.

As Wilson and the band segued from one Beach Boys classic to another, it quickly became evident that the one individual in the theater not caught up in the joyful delirium was Brian himself. Painfully shy in most social settings, he had no doubt hurdled a massive case of stage fright just in showing up. Nevertheless, his general air of detachment from the proceedings was disconcerting at best. Anecdotal comments on his choice of musical selections would have been worth the price of admission alone, but stage patter was virtually non-existent. Surprise selections like the two instrumental numbers from *Pet Sounds* were introduced as "songs without vocals". And the poignant juxtaposition of "Lay Down Burden", Brian's recent elegy for his brother Carl, and "God Only Knows", the late Wilson brother's signature vocal piece, went by without remark.



Backing Wilson on this initial four-city tour is a crack 11-piece group assembled by his co-producer Joe Thomas. Members of the troupe include the alt-pop band the Wondermints, and the unit certainly served up some of the most faithful re-creations of Wilson's music ever to grace the stage. The net effect, however, of such shimmering instrumental and vocal support served chiefly to reduce Brian to a guest-starring role in his own homage—*Brianmania!*, if you will.

Enlisted for this tour is guitarist Jeff Foskett who, for years, toiled in the Beach Boys' road band, replicating Brian's original vocal parts. Despite the fact that Wilson was acquitting himself quite nicely this evening, Foskett would step up to the mike and begin singing in unison or take over the melody line altogether. Seemingly non-plussed by this arrangement, Brian would occasionally drop out of the vocal mix altogether and content himself with banging away at the piano. Wilson's sweet tenor and falsetto may have been burnished by time and excess, but as evidenced by his recent and underrated *Imagination* LP, this 56-year-old is still capable of jaw-dropping vocal performances. Pulling back the safety net on stage might draw out a little more of that latent magic.

Poll a thousand Brian Wilson fans and you'll get a thousand different fantasy set lists. The vast majority of the show consisted of tunes dating from 1963 to 1966—only a trio from the intervening 30 years and three from his latest album. Conspicuous in their absence were songs from the *Smile*-era (no "Heroes & Villains"?!), the *Beach Boys Love You* LP and his first solo disc. Wilson did toss in his two favorite Phil Spector numbers and closed out the show with a very typical Beach Boys'-style encore. (Could we please swap "Barbara Ann" for "When I Grow Up" or "'Til I Die"?)

At any rate, almost any criticism of a Brian Wilson concert seems like carping. For so long, who could have hoped that a healthy, happy and productive BW would be staring at the new millennium, let alone from a concert stage? The studio has always been his oyster and it will be forever thus. One need only screen some vintage video of early-'60s Beach Boys shows to see that Brian had that uneasy, furtive look even back then. What has prompted him to trod the boards at this late date is anyone's guess. But late in the midst of this seemingly uncomfortable exercise came the evening's true shining moment and, perhaps, the answer to that question. Awash in the adoration of a truly loving audience, for just a second or two, the mask of self-consciousness and doubt slipped away, and Brian Wilson positively beamed his delight.

