

Love and Mercy

You might presume that a movie about the Beach Boys' creative intellect Brian Wilson would carry a title from one of their classic surfin' numbers. Yet no, it's not to be, and in Bill Pohland's brilliant and ingenious new movie, that makes perfect sense. For this is not a straightforward pop music biopic—like the recent “Jersey Boys” or “Get on Up”—but a nuanced examination of a struggling artist brought back from the brink of madness and suicide, a man who definitely needed “Love and Mercy” to survive.

Hardcore fans of the Beach Boys oeuvre of the early 1960's might be disappointed if they expect a parade of the group's hits. In fact, the early Beach Boy catalog is dispensed with quickly in a lively credit sequence that shows them at the apex of their bouncing, candy-striped fame. Because this isn't really a story of the group but of Wilson himself, the key creator of their sound. And that story is told in two roughly equal, interlaced parts, one showing the young Wilson (Paul Dano) on the brink of a stunning breakthrough concept album “Pet Sounds” (1966) which redirected popular music and also on the brink of a ghastly breakdown which affected him for decades. The second part, taking place in the late 1980's, features the mature, troubled Wilson (played by John Cusack) and his fight to escape a paranoid, overmedicated state and find a new life with his girlfriend Melinda Ledbetter (Elizabeth Banks).

The two parts are carefully calibrated to each create their own tension. With Dano we witness his ethereal connection to the music in his head and his drive to recreate it on the page. We also see his alienation from his band, which, especially represented by lead singer Mike Love (Jake Abel), wants to just churn out the hits. However, his musical different drummer begins to compete with more ominous signals in his brain that isolates him from everyone he knows. Dano is winning, touching, and wholly convincing as this self-taught soul squeezing tricky harmonies from a fevered brain.

With the more mature Wilson, we have a John Cusack in one of his best roles in years. Even from his early years, Cusack has specialized in mostly bright, earnest young men with a cocky aspect. Here his Wilson is a caged being, enslaved by the voices in his head and his controlling psychologist, Dr. Eugene Landy (Paul Giamatti, in a chilling turn while wearing a frightening wig). Wilson's reaching out to the winsome Melinda is stumbling and off-key, a tic she finds puzzling at first yet ultimately endearing. This second part of Wilson's life becomes a race to save Wilson; with the committed Melinda using any tactics she can to rid Brian of Landy and his lurking entourage.

A word about Elizabeth Banks as Melinda. This is an actress with both beauty and range who doesn't get enough parts to test her talents. In “Love and Mercy” she finds an appropriate role, one that allows her to underplay Melinda beautifully as a sensitive and magnanimous soul, so genuine you come to really believe she would commit to salvaging a wreck like Wilson.

The two different time strands play out in a cloudless, sunlit Los Angeles, the LA that the Beach Boys celebrated as “Fun, Fun, Fun,” but that here serves more to cast a blazing light on one man's creative dysfunction. Pohland, better known as a movie producer, stages some very effective set pieces to tell his story, which was co-written by

Oren Moverman and Michael A. Lerner. One such is the lovely and delicate first meet-up between Brian and Melinda inside a Cadillac she hopes to sell, where looks and silences mean as much as the modest dialogue of the scene. Another shows the ecstatic gestation of Wilson's imagining one of the Beach Boys greatest hits, "Good Vibrations." Another is a complex and fabulous montage near the end of the picture, with a swirl of images that sum up all that has gone before in Wilson's fertile but disordered mind. The real Wilson, by the way, was consulted extensively on the film and approved his depiction in it.

To note: people who knows Brian Wilson's work will be aware that the film's title "Love and Mercy" comes from a tune Wilson first recorded on a solo album from 1988, a song of which he himself said "is probably the most spiritual song I've ever written." Amen.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 120 mins.)

(June 2015)