

# The Genius Who Powered the Beach Boys

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his younger self. The film wisely avoids answering the question of how Wilson became the lost soul who was wealthy and famous but was not allowed to make the smallest decisions for himself -- yet it provides illuminating glimmers into a story beyond explanation.

The challenges of depicting the later Wilson equal those of depicting his youthful self. How to portray a lovely woman selling Cadillacs who falls for Wilson in the midst of her confusion and occasional alarm over his circumstances? How to make sense of a grown man so damaged and in bondage to a psychologist who controlled his every move? How to depict the difficulty of extracting Wilson from such inexplicable peril?

The scenes of Wilson's later life match the early-life scenes in richness and subtlety. Cusack paints a believable portrait of a man who is clearly damaged and terrified, yet who possesses a sort of beguiling genuineness. And Elizabeth Banks pulls off a miracle in her portrayal of Ledbetter,



PHOTO BY FRANCOIS DUHAMEL/ROADSTAR ATTRACTIONS

John Cusack (left) as an older Brian Wilson and Elizabeth Banks as Melinda Ledbetter, in a scene from the film, 'Love and Mercy.'

who grew to love Wilson under such trying circumstances. Her tenderness and courage make a remarkable kind of sense -- I was genuinely stunned by the authenticity of their interactions. Their scenes together resonate with emotional intelligence; almost everything remains unsaid, unburdened by the usual movie exposition that kills most depictions of genuine love.

Paul Giamatti likewise does chilling work as Landy, which was yet another kind of challenge. Because people as destructive as Landy are so difficult to understand, most films settle for cartoon villains that would never materialize in real life. Yet the elements of Landy's hold over Wilson make real emotional sense here. I was not surprised to read later that both Wilson and his wife have remarked that their real life experiences were much worse than in the film; the film convinces in part by not overplaying its hand.

What emerges resonates beyond Wilson's own story. The two parts of his life depicted here happen to contrast two eras of the California dream -- the relative optimism of the 60s, embodied by boys inventively crooning about waves only one of them had any experience cresting, and a later period when the drive to cash in on the dream seems more tawdry and even dangerous.

Pohlad, who has made his career producing an impressive list of films (including "12 Years a Slave" and "The Tree of Life"), establishes himself as an unusually subtle director. He has elicited a portrait of a soul who, though clearly damaged and burdened by the gifts entrusted to his care, turns out to be remarkably and mysteriously resilient. And this wise and beautiful film sparks love and mercy for an unknowable person, and sends you back to his music for more of the secrets hidden there.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. Find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).



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