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Paul Dano stars as the music legend Brian Wilson in the new biopic 'Love and Mercy.'

PHOTO BY FRANCOIS DUHAMEL/ROADSTAR ATTRACTIONS

The Genius Who Powered the Beach Boys

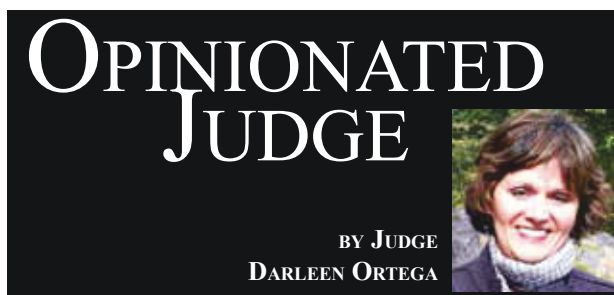
'Love and Mercy' shows singer's darker side

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

An especially complex life story both deserves and defies the telling -- which is why most biopics don't impart more than stick-figure truth. That and the additional problems that what often attracts filmmakers is the fame of their subjects, and that too many writers and directors lack the talent or will to tell a story that chooses its bits wisely and leaves room for the subject's essential mystery.

What I loved best about "Love and Mercy," the new film about Brian Wilson, the man whose genius powered the Beach Boys, is that it felt true -- deeply, complexly true, whether or not it is factually accurate -- yet also left me convinced that I don't and can't know the whole story of Brian Wilson's life. There is mystery here, as there is in every life (though maybe a little more so). This film delves, and educates, and points you toward the mystery, without pretending to solve it.

From everything I've read since seeing it, the film does get the essential facts right -- though you can skip this paragraph if you'd prefer to be in suspense, as I genuinely was. Wilson rose to success as a very young man, writing music for and performing with the band made up of his two brothers, a cousin, and a family friend. His exceptional abilities now seem particularly evident during the period in the mid-1960s when he stopped touring with the Beach Boys and focused on producing their 11th album, "Pet Sounds," which was an artistic departure into more complex and melancholy territory and is now widely considered to be one of the best albums of its era. Wilson was ahead of his time, however, and, burdened by a troubled family history and by mental illness, he increasingly med-



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icated himself with alcohol and a variety of drugs, including LSD. By the mid-70s he had sunk into a reclusive and dissolute existence that nearly killed him.

He came out of that period largely through the assistance of a psychologist, Eugene Landy, who assumed tyrannical control over Wilson's life and finances and even his career. It was not until the late 1980s -- when Wilson met the woman who eventually became his second wife, Melinda Ledbetter -- that she and others eventually helped to free him of Landy's destructive influence.

Fortunately, the filmmakers did not attempt to capture those events in an episodic fashion. Instead, director Bill Pohlad cast two actors to play Wilson at two distinct periods in his dramatic life, and uses those two periods as windows into his larger story.

Paul Dano does his best work yet as the younger Wilson, who heard beautifully inventive musical arrangements in his head which he passionately brought to life in the recording studio. The usual stage focus of most music biopics wouldn't have worked for Wilson, because his genius was most evident in cramped studio spaces --yet the film captures something of the radical originality of the ideas that flowed out of him at age 23 by breaking down the creative process into elements that help you better understand the whole. We watch him directing

each musician toward the specific sound that he intends, down to assembling bobby pins inside a piano to elicit a specific timbre and barking with his dog to evoke accompaniment for "Carolyn, No."

The particularity of Wilson's intentions and his enthusiasm for the act of creation come through in Dano's scenes with mostly older studio musicians and at the piano assembling the scaffolding of the wondrous "God Only Knows." It turns out that I knew this music too well to know it at all -- these scenes made me hear it as though for the first time and set me in search of "Pet Sounds" for music I had not given the appreciation it deserves.

Those scenes of early Wilson also depict the incipient signs of the breakdown to follow. Dano captures Wilson's vulnerability, the anguish of interactions with his despotic father, his youthful ambition, the extent and the limits of his ability to communicate his drive to create sounds never heard before, how he exasperated and frightened those close to him. The wistfulness and sorrow underlying even buoyant songs like "Wouldn't It Be Nice?" make a different kind of sense in this context; the film captures just how true it was that Wilson "just wasn't made for these times."

Director Pohlad's choice to intersperse these scenes of early Wilson with scenes from 20 years later is such a brilliant stroke that it is hard to imagine doing Wilson's story justice otherwise. Rather than attempting to chart Wilson's unraveling, the film plays the two periods as complex countermelodies worthy of Wilson's own compositions, humming with the tension of how the two versions of this man can be the same person. John Cusack as the middle-aged Wilson doesn't resemble Dano--and, in a sense, neither did the middle-aged Wilson resemble

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