



WILSON

DENNIS

PACIFIC

OCEAN BLUE

NEXT

PACIFIC OCEAN BLUES

by David Leaf

It doesn't seem possible that it's been thirty years since Dennis Wilson became the first of the Beach Boys to release a solo album...thirty years since I walked through the door of Brother Studio to interview Dennis about that album for my fanzine, *Pet Sounds*...thirty years since he invited me to sing background vocals with a group of music journalists on "He's A Bum" ...thirty years since I spent the night talking music and life with him at his Venice home.

The man I got to experience a little bit that summer day (and night) was a tremendous life force. It was Dennis' enthusiasm for surfing, cars and girls—for life itself—that first inspired the songs about the Southern California dreamscape, that helped turn the Wilson family music room into the birthplace of the group. Dennis was also vital to the music, an absolute key voice in the harmony blend and a powerful (if unschooled) stage drummer who was the focal point of the girls' screams. In the 1960s, the Beach Boys were a successful recording group. Dennis Wilson was a *rock star*. And he remained one 'til his premature end.





This CD is designed to re-introduce Dennis Wilson, the artist: a remarkable, self-taught and expressive pianist, a balladeer who could break hearts, a rock singer with a sexy growl of a voice, a vocal arranger with an intuitive grasp of how to take Brian's "Four Freshmenesque" stack and twist it to make it funkier, a composer who came out of nowhere to be far and away the second best in the group. Regardless of tempo, a Dennis Wilson vocal exposed his beating heart, and while it sometimes sounded like a jagged nerve, he could also sing so sweetly that you would have no choice but to be seduced.

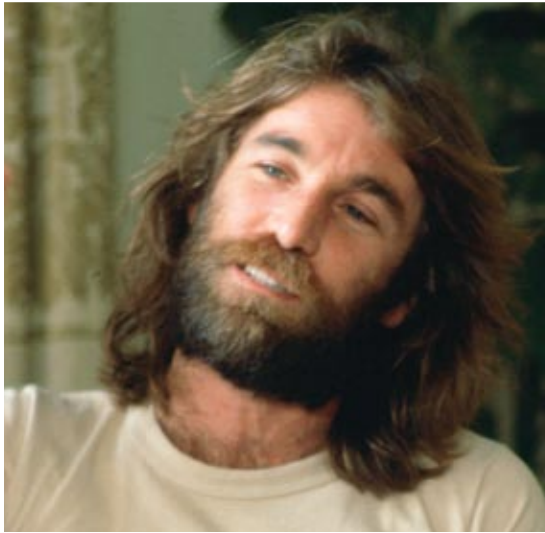
From the very first time Dennis sat down at the piano and became a creator, everything changed for him. Born in a world where feelings could be taken as a sign of weakness, he found in music a safe harbor, a place where he could express his soul. Brian couldn't teach Dennis how he did it, but what Brian had accomplished so moved him that Dennis set out to create his own melodies of feelings...whether they were of love, passion, triumph, loneliness, fear or loss. Listening to his work, you could chart the ups and downs of his loves and marriages, a musical roller coaster of romance gone right and wrong.

Feeling no obligation to write songs that catered to the good-time surface of the Beach Boys image, Dennis wrote of a much darker, more complicated "real" world. Nothing was off limits to him—the Vietnam War, Jesus or just the everyday confusion of the world of fame and fortune that hadn't brought him a moment of peace of mind—those were all subjects for his songs. But most of all, he wrote about love, and that put him in perfect sync with his older brother. Dennis was so physically strong



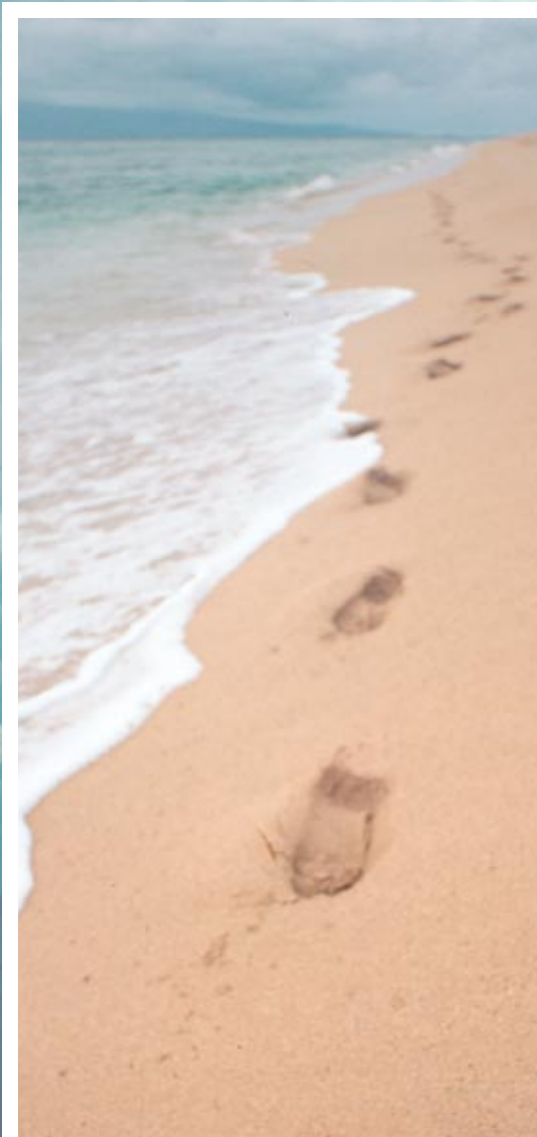
that he was not afraid to show his emotions or follow his passions. If you didn't like it, what were you gonna do? Challenge him to a fight? Not a great idea...Dennis was, at heart, a Southern California surfer punk, and if you challenged him, the response was immediate. And all of that...the strength, the fear, the anger and heart...found its way into his music.

If you've been listening to the Beach Boys reissues during the past two decades, Dennis' vital place in Beach Boys musical history is clear—listen to late Sixties/early Seventies gems like "Little Bird," "San Miguel" and "Forever" and get a sense of his growing songwriting skill...listen to *Sunflower* and imagine what it would be like without his songs (including "Slip On Through" and "It's About Time")...revisit *Carl And The Passions* (e.g. "Cuddle Up") and *Holland* (e.g. "Only With You") and hear how he could take center stage musically.



I first saw Dennis Wilson onstage at the Westchester County Center in suburban New York. It was a Beach Boys concert, Thanksgiving eve, 1967. The opening acts were the Soul Survivors and the Strawberry Alarm Clock, and my only memory of the Beach Boys portion of the show is that they sang very well and the concert was very short. Maybe 30 minutes. Over in a blink. The next time I saw the group, it was four years later, the *Surf's Up* album was causing a stir and their concert at Georgetown University lasted nearly three hours.

If memory serves, even though one of Dennis' hands was bandaged (he spent much of the night up-front, at a microphone), he played a song or two solo (perhaps "Barbara") at the piano, and at one point in the concert, he got so stirred up by the audience's response that he



ripped off the bandages and jumped behind the drums. It was a perfect example of the spontaneity with which he lived his entire life, onstage or off.

Of course, I knew nothing of that. I was just a fan. And prior to moving to Southern California, I went to see the Beach Boys a lot—at Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, Jersey City, Nassau Coliseum, Roosevelt Raceway—if they played within driving distance of New York, I wanted to be there. Some of the shows were great, others routine, and on occasion, inspiring. I remember at one show in Maryland, Dennis played two new songs at the piano, long-lost pieces like “I’ve Got A Friend.” For forward-looking audience members, these were choice moments in the evening, proof there was still creative life in the band.


When I moved to California in 1975, Dennis was the first of the group I met. It was a Monday in early November, and I had just exited the unemployment office at 5th and Broadway in Santa Monica. I crossed the street heading north, not realizing that I was perhaps no more than fifty feet from the entrance to Brother Studio. Heading towards me was Dennis. As a friend described him, “he walked like a big cat, gracefully embracing the animal within himself, a fire at his core that made him as beautiful as a tiger.” I, of course, didn’t see any of that. I just saw DENNIS WILSON. I couldn’t believe it. I went up to him and introduced myself, told him I had moved to L.A. to write a book about his brother, Brian. Dennis laughed, a full-throated roar and said, “Good luck.”

Living in Los Angeles in the late '70s, I saw the Beach Boys in concert frequently, but the last time I saw the



Wilson brothers onstage together, Dennis was clearly in decline. Then, when I first saw the group after his death in April, 1984—at the Meadowlands Arena in New Jersey—thirty seconds into the show, one could feel his absence. I never went to a Beach Boys concert again. For me, without Dennis onstage, it just wasn't the Beach Boys.

While Dennis' impact and importance in Beach Boys recorded history hasn't been overlooked, the simple fact that it's been a quarter century since he appeared onstage with the group means that an entire generation of fans have come of age never having seen him, never having experienced the charismatic presence of the irresistible boy/man whose sheer enthusiasm for the *idea*

A vintage airplane is flying in the sky above a body of water. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The water below is a deep blue-green color, with some white foam visible in the foreground. The overall scene is serene and evocative.

of the Beach Boys embraced the audience with the spiritual love that Dennis understood was embedded in the music. When he came out solo for the encore and sang “You Are So Beautiful” to the audience, you knew he felt it and meant it.

Without that in-concert moment, with the absence of his physical presence and the sheer passage of years, the power of Dennis’ commitment to the Beach Boys and his individual artistry has seemed to slip away, taken out by the undertow, the waves he made in the studio a distant memory.

“Celebrate The News,” Dennis wrote in 1969, a song that was the b-side for the appropriately and ironically named “Breakaway.” Both are sentiments very appropriate to this release. Finally, fortunately, here in one package for the very first time is the absolute best of Dennis’ mid-1970s solo work...his justly-acclaimed solo album *Pacific Ocean Blue*, available on CD for the first time this century...as well as a second CD full of the best of the unreleased material that Dennis recorded for *Bambu*, his never-completed, never-released second album...tracks and songs that indicate that like his older brother Brian, Dennis had a lot to say. Sometimes, life just got in his way.

— *David Leaf*

(Award-winning writer David Leaf has directed or co-directed such acclaimed films as “Beautiful Dreamer: Brian Wilson & The Story of SMiLE” and “The U.S. Vs. John Lennon.”)





DENNIS WILSON

CHRONOLOGY OF A SOLO ARTIST

by Jon Stebbins and David Beard
(Expanded Liner Notes)

By the dawn of the Seventies Dennis Wilson had emerged as a surprisingly prolific source of songwriting, arranging and producing talent. “He could do anything,” insists Brian Wilson. “His vibe and touch were energetic, graceful and beautiful.” While many were astonished at the unexpected sensitivity and intimacy Dennis’ music revealed, others perceived his emotionally raw songs and permanently hoarse voice as a square peg in the perennially sweet Beach Boys realm. A dozen of his songs were scattered across a half decade’s worth of the group’s albums and b-sides, and one solo single (credited to Dennis Wilson and Rumbo) was released in the U.K. Predictions of a Dennis Wilson solo LP surfaced in the press in 1971 and then quickly vanished without a satisfactory explanation.

In 1973 he introduced a gospel-tinged rocker to the Beach Boys live set titled "River Song" which symbolized the expansive sonic direction his music had evolved toward. "Dennis used to play 'River Song' for me a lot," remembers family member and sideman Billy Hinsche. "He used to explain to me how he heard it in his head, as far as the ultimate arrangement goes." It was a much heavier sound than the Beach Boys were known for, and in a way it was the track that signaled liberation for Dennis.

As 1974 unfolded the Beach Boys' popularity had only marginally recovered from its late Sixties nosedive in the United States. According to Grammy®-winning producer James Guercio it was Dennis who traveled to his Caribou Ranch in Nederland, Colorado and approached him to help resurrect the group's career. Guercio remembers, "He said, 'Jim, we need your help. Will you come see the band? Is there anything you can do for us?'" Guercio went on to play a crucial role in resurrecting their box-office appeal, while serving as part-time Beach Boys manager and bass player. "It was during that touring experience when I spent time with Dennis and encouraged him to finish his songs and complete the works," reflects Guercio. While the mega-selling compilation *Endless Summer* prompted the band's push into a nostalgic direction—and Guercio's revamping of the group's live presentation enhanced that perception—Dennis' multiplying bundles of progressive songs simmered on the Beach Boys' backburner. A forward aesthetic simply didn't fit the oldies environment of the group's 1976 release *15 Big Ones*, which further motivated Dennis' leap into the role of solo artist.



An essential element of Dennis' growth was Brother Studio in Santa Monica. Designed, owned and operated by Dennis and younger brother Carl (after Brian opted out), it became a seamless extension of Dennis' art, allowing him creative carte blanche only three blocks from the Pacific Ocean. After hearing several of Dennis' promising tracks, Guercio signed Dennis to a solo record contract on his Caribou label and asked for three LP's worth of material. Dennis went to work, enlisting longtime friend and collaborator Gregg Jakobson as his co-producer. In March of 1976 Brother Studio veteran Stephen Moffitt hired a youngster named John Hanlon to supplement a crew that included the multi-faceted engineer Earle Mankey and studio manager Trisha Campo. During Hanlon's first week at Brother they gathered around the Clover mixing console and brought the faders up on four titles already in progress: "River Song," "Rainbows," "Pacific Ocean Blues" and "Holy Man." Three of them created the initial foundation for what would be the first solo LP by a Beach Boy, while the fourth became a legendary lost classic.

Among the first new recordings for the album—initially known as *Freckles*, and then *Pacific Ocean Blue*—was an ambitious track called "Time"; it revealed a genre defying sound palette. "Time" wound from melancholy piano ballad, to dark confessional, to operatic drama, to blue jazz with Brian Wilson-style undertones, to slamming electro-rock in about three minutes. Its painfully direct lyrics were clearly inspired by Dennis' new wife, model/actress Karen Lamm, whose fiery influence is felt within the majority of the *POB* tracks. "Karen and Dennis had been fighting and making up and fighting etc.," recalls Dean Torrence. "I think they liked it. They weren't comfortable unless the relationship had an edge to it





and felt tentative." Lamm was seen as a divisive and destructive presence by many in Dennis' circle. At one point she famously hurled a brick through a window at Brother during a session; on a different occasion she pulled a handgun on Dennis while he played the piano. But for all the agitation and conflict she brought to the proceedings there is no doubt she fired Dennis' creativity with a palpable romantic tension that seared into his newest songs. From the giddy bliss of "You And I," to the narcotic dreamscape of "Moonshine," and the hopeless resignation in "Thoughts Of You," Dennis recorded the truth in real time as it was occurring in his daily life. "People would start talking about notes, parts, the melody or the rhythm and he would say, 'I just want the truth,'" says Earle Mankey. "That's all that mattered to him."



As the *POB* sessions gained momentum Dennis proved he could literally go it alone by playing nearly all of the instruments himself on many of the tracks. He started with inventive chord progressions played on the studio's Steinway grand piano, Fender Rhodes electric keyboard or Hohner clavinet. He constructed basic tracks around drum patterns performed by himself or sideman Bobby Figueroa. "I remember him being very empathetic... there was a lot of freedom there, and doing your own thing with him guiding you in the right direction," says Figueroa. Dennis then methodically layered in Moog bass lines, synth string ensembles, Hammond organ, massive bass harmonicas, and even added primitive but effective tuba, trombone, cello, marimba, glockenspiel and zither parts himself. "He picked up whatever instrument was lying around the studio and found a way to get something out of it, and work it into his music," said the late Karen Lamm in 1999. Dennis also utilized a core



of familiar Beach Boys sidemen, session pros and in a few cases his own engineers Mankey and Hanlon to supplement his instrumentation before topping off his unique arrangements with hired sections of woodwinds, brass and strings. "The album's sounds were huge," says Hinsche. "They were big and bold in a way that I hadn't heard before." "He would always go for the deep, deep, deep tones," says Mankey. "Dennis wasn't happy until you could feel the vibrations way down inside your bones."

Vocally the tracks displayed a few choice Beach Boys-style harmonies but relied more on epic choral elements instead of close blends. For backing voices Dennis used whoever happened to be around, and luckily his brother Carl was a regular presence. The most controversial element within the otherwise lush *Pacific Ocean Blue* framework is Dennis' incredibly raspy lead voice. "Somebody forgot to tell him he wasn't a great vocalist," laughs Jim Guercio. "You're going to hear passion, pitch variations, timbre variations, etc., that are sitting out there naked, but there's so much emotion and creativity behind it; it works." Earle Mankey relates, "He worked very hard on his vocals, very hard." With Dennis' voice it's always an acquired taste; some people insist those scorched pipes are precisely the thing that sets *POB* apart and truly make his songs great. Brian Wilson's opinion is unequivocal: "He had a very expressive voice, and he should be remembered as a great singer."

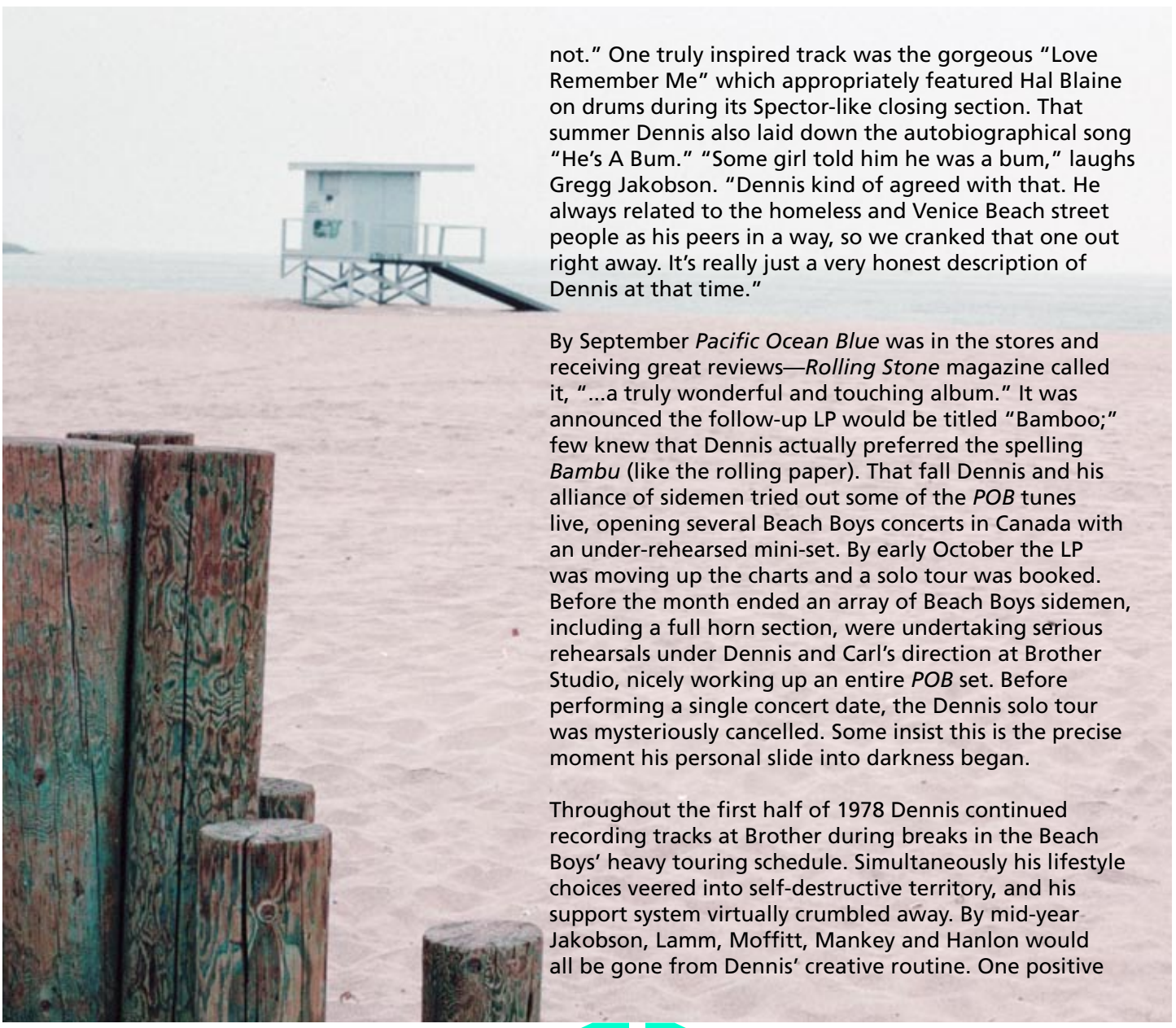
One of the LP's most touching tracks materialized when Dennis resurrected elements of a previously recorded track known as "Hawaiian Dream," adding a heartbreaking but hopeful lyric built around the line "Farewell My Friend." This song was in memory of Otto

"Pop" Hinsche, Billy's father, who had passed away the previous May. "Pop died at the UCLA Medical Center... in the arms of Dennis," says Billy. "He then called to inform my mother, Celia, and me of our loss." Dennis' way of grieving was to pour his feelings out on tape. "It was something very personal to him," says Billy. "It was almost something he recorded in the still of the night. He didn't broadcast [or] share it like he did with his other songs. He kind of kept it to himself."

In early April 1977 Dennis and Gregg Jakobson constructed a 12-song sequence that placed "Farewell My Friend" as the LP's final song. Before April had ended Dennis added a final masterful touch to the LP, finishing off a track titled "End Of The Show" by adding Bruce Johnston on backing vocals. "It was almost like a wrap party, that final session with Bruce and everybody. Dennis knew he'd made a great record and it was like a celebration," remembers John Hanlon. To make room for "End Of The Show," now the LP's natural closer, "Farewell My Friend" was moved into the third to last position. Up to that point that spot had been slated for the magical "Tug Of Love," which was pulled from the *POB* lineup at the last minute and has remained unheard by the public until now.

As summer 1977 approached, and with *Pacific Ocean Blue* mastered and awaiting its release date, Dennis kept writing and recording at a prodigious pace. "Dennis tended to want to record at a moment's notice at 10 or 11 p.m. at night," remembers Hanlon. "He'd want to get into the studio to record when he felt it; he wanted to capture a moment. He wanted to record when the muse hits and to record at any other time is a complete fucking waste of time. To record forcefully when you're not into it is a joke, and a lot of people do that...Dennis did





not." One truly inspired track was the gorgeous "Love Remember Me" which appropriately featured Hal Blaine on drums during its Spector-like closing section. That summer Dennis also laid down the autobiographical song "He's A Bum." "Some girl told him he was a bum," laughs Gregg Jakobson. "Dennis kind of agreed with that. He always related to the homeless and Venice Beach street people as his peers in a way, so we cranked that one out right away. It's really just a very honest description of Dennis at that time."

By September *Pacific Ocean Blue* was in the stores and receiving great reviews—*Rolling Stone* magazine called it, "...a truly wonderful and touching album." It was announced the follow-up LP would be titled "Bamboo;" few knew that Dennis actually preferred the spelling *Bambu* (like the rolling paper). That fall Dennis and his alliance of sidemen tried out some of the *POB* tunes live, opening several Beach Boys concerts in Canada with an under-rehearsed mini-set. By early October the LP was moving up the charts and a solo tour was booked. Before the month ended an array of Beach Boys sidemen, including a full horn section, were undertaking serious rehearsals under Dennis and Carl's direction at Brother Studio, nicely working up an entire *POB* set. Before performing a single concert date, the Dennis solo tour was mysteriously cancelled. Some insist this is the precise moment his personal slide into darkness began.

Throughout the first half of 1978 Dennis continued recording tracks at Brother during breaks in the Beach Boys' heavy touring schedule. Simultaneously his lifestyle choices veered into self-destructive territory, and his support system virtually crumbled away. By mid-year Jakobson, Lamm, Moffitt, Mankey and Hanlon would all be gone from Dennis' creative routine. One positive

addition was the talented Beach Boys sideman Carli Munoz who became heavily involved in constructing tracks for Dennis' new LP. "He was really into my music," says Munoz. "Then he asked me to produce a record for him. I suggested that we co-produce because I didn't feel as though I was ready to produce [on my own]." Together they tackled Munoz's ballad "It's Not Too Late" and turned it into a chilling masterpiece. "Dennis and I flipped out over this song," says Munoz. "He wanted everything in it. He wanted strings, a choir, etc. We had a whole string section. It's beautiful and uncanny that we got Carl to sing the chorus. It became the sweetest thing...the perfect combination of voices."

Adding to Dennis' growing difficulties was Carl's decision to take a straighter personal path, meaning he was less involved with Dennis socially and creatively from this point forward. "It's Not Too Late" in a way represents a fork in the brotherly road. "Dennis protected Carl, and Carl protected Dennis, both in different ways," says Munoz. "I can't tell you how emotional it was for Carl to come in and pour his soul out; it became a true reflection of the situation." Soon Carl ended his business partnership with Dennis at Brother, and within months the studio was sold to cover increasing debts. More than anything the loss of Brother Studio signaled trouble for *Bambu*.

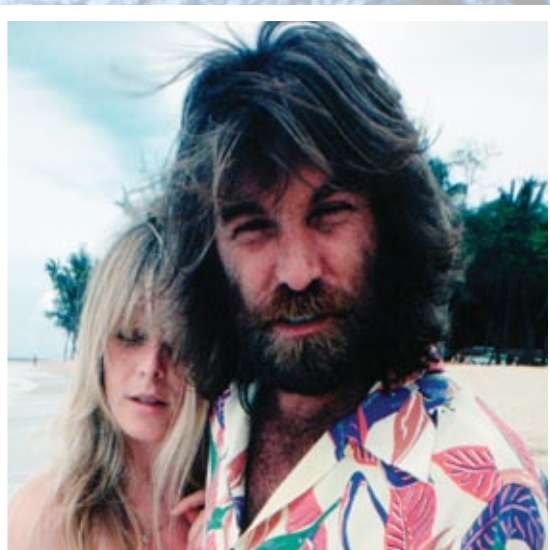
While Dennis and engineer Tom Murphy continued work on the project at a host of other locations, the continuity of environment and pure sound of Brother could never be replaced. Murphy, whose positive and patient makeup were essential under worsening circumstances, built a makeshift studio in his home and remained devoted to Dennis and his music. "It was right on Venice Beach," recalls longtime friend and promoter Fred Vail. "The thing I remember most is how



cramped it was inside. Everywhere I turned there were musical instruments, amplifiers and cables running here and there. The grand piano was in the dining room. Drums were set up in the living room. Guitar amps were scattered about in hallways, in the bedroom, in closets. If I recall, the recording/mixing console was in the kitchen!"

Before long Munoz had joined the ranks of the disappearing. "Those were the days when Dennis was living in Venice and he was around terrible influences. I got away because he was really going downhill. He rebelled so much that he became a bum. He was attracted to the low road." On September 29, 1978, after a nearly incoherent session in Hollywood for the rambling "Time For Bed," Dennis checked into a Century City hospital to detox. The results had no lasting effect.

Though saddled with a worsening substance problem, Dennis' intention was to finish *Bambu*. Between November 1978 and January 1979 he engaged in recurring overdub sessions for the slippery track "Love Surrounds Me" at a half-dozen studios (a Beach Boys-sweetened version ended up on their *L.A. Light Album* released in March). It was at one of these sessions that Dennis met Christine McVie of Fleetwood Mac, and within weeks the couple was cohabitating at her Coldwater Canyon estate. The creative potential of this partnering was hinted at when Christine added her lilting voice to "Love Surrounds Me," demonstrating something that certainly could have been great on a larger scale. The couple wrote together, even working out a short set as a duo that witnesses described as fantastic. The *Los Angeles Times* announced their first joint performance at a Hollywood charity benefit in mid 1979. Like so many things in the final years of Dennis Wilson the appearance was cancelled at the last minute.





As the Seventies ended Dennis worked sporadically with Tom Murphy attempting overdubs and mixing on *Bambu* tracks. "It just became very sad and difficult because Dennis was pretty messed up; he'd erase things that I thought were really good," says Murphy. "But I had no control over the situation; I just tried to support his attempts at working on his music as best I could." Even though the end wasn't pretty, the impact of Dennis' great solo work deeply affected those who recognized its uniqueness and depth of heart. "If you didn't know Dennis personally and you really wanted to know the essence of Dennis you could listen to *Pacific Ocean Blue* and tell a lot about who the human being was," says former Beach Boys manager Jerry Schilling. "Dennis' music to me was hauntingly beautiful. That's almost a contradictory term. Just talking about his music right now I can hear his music immediately. That tells the longevity and how powerful it really was. The haunting part that you could hear through his music...[sigh]...the troubled soul that he had...to talk about Dennis is pretty heavy."

"Everything that I am or will ever be is in the music. If you want to know me, just listen."

Dennis Wilson, September 1978

Jon Stebbins is the author of the biography *Dennis Wilson – The Real Beach Boy* www.thejonstebbins.com

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