

Brian Wilson Was A Musical Genius. Are There Any Left? [C2]

Possiamo affermare che oggi c'è ancora del genio in campo musicale? O veneriamo il passato perché la musica di oggi è tutta uguale?

By all accounts, Brian Wilson was a genius. His **fellow greats** Bob Dylan and Paul McCartney both used the word in their tributes to the creative force behind the Beach Boys, who died last June aged eighty-two. So did John Cale, Mick Fleetwood and Elton John. And so did Wilson's bandmates, who wrote in a **joint statement**: "The world **mourns** a genius today." You may imagine Wilson gradually **accrued** such a **vaunted standing**. Artistic legacy is largely dependent on the longevity of mass appeal, and the fact that the Beach Boys' **opus** Pet Sounds remains one of the most celebrated and beloved records of all time almost sixty years since its release is proof enough of his incredible talent. Wilson's **claim to genius status** began with a 1966 **PR** campaign **masterminded** by the ex-Beatles publicist Derek Taylor. Fortunately, Wilson's **output** justified it, and after spreading like **wildfire** through the British music press the "Brian Wilson is a genius" rhetoric quickly **caught on**, "especially with the UK public", says Wilson's biographer, David Leaf. It has been the consensus ever since. Do we just imagine musical geniuses are **anointed** in retrospect because we no longer have any? It is extremely difficult to argue that any artist of the last thirty years has reached the **trailblazing** standard of Wilson, Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell and David Bowie. The remaining members of those **acts** are all over eighty (with the sole exception of Ronnie Wood at seventy-eight); Stevie Wonder is seventy-five, Brian Eno is seventy-seven, Ralf Hütter, the surviving founder of Kraftwerk, is seventy-eight. The most recent claimants to the musical genius title are generally considered to have been Michael Jackson and Prince, both of whom died relatively young. Soon, the very idea of a living legend will be a thing of the past. In pop music, which **reveres** the new, genius is synonymous with innovation. Obviously, it is no coincidence that all of our unique and innovative musical minds were of a similar generation, starting work in the 1970s — at the very latest — when all the new drum, guitar and keyboard sounds and most resonant, memorable melodies were

there for the taking. Such was the virgin territory before them, the Beach Boys even had the opportunity to sonically codify California, one of the most culturally significant places on the planet. “I guess I just wasn’t made for these times,” Wilson once sang. But if he hadn’t been operating in those lonely years, would he have been considered a genius at all? What is also quite clear is that musical progress didn’t abruptly end half a century ago. There is still **as-yet-unheard** music to be made — **and made it is**, all the time. Generic fusions, formal variations and experimental production techniques are not infinite but they are definitely not exhausted, and some have even coalesced into era-defining movements, as 21st-century genres such as grime, trap and hyperpop prove. The **demise** of the monoculture — due to technology’s fracturing of the media and cultural landscape — means only the most aggressively mainstream and inoffensively **palatable acts** (Adele, Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift) are able to **command** the same level of fame and musical familiarity as their 1960s **counterparts**. Meanwhile, invention has remained **staunchly** at the cultural **fringes** — and if it does get anywhere near the **zeitgeist**, the journey is **leisurely**. This is another reason why musical genius is so **thin on the ground**: the people who do the actual innovating rarely end up **in the spotlight** themselves. This seems especially so in comparison with the 1960s; it is impossible to separate personal achievement from the decade’s **goldrush** — a manic crusade to push pop and rock to its absolute limits. The famous rivalry between Wilson and the Beatles — healthy competition for **the latteri ultimi**”), says Leaf, if not so much for **the former** — accelerated progress and incentivised change. The pressure is also thought to have contributed to the decline in Wilson’s mental health later in the decade. But then comes the more mysterious part. What is so astonishing about Wilson is how many different **groundbreaking** things he did simultaneously. In the studio, “he was inventing a new way of making popular music,” Leaf says. “What he called modular recording — recording bits and pieces of a song and then **piecing it together**.” He also pioneered the idea of one person **helming** all elements of a recorded song: composition, arrangement, performance, mixing, production.

On top of that, he did something lyrically radical. He transformed pop into an “emotional autobiography,” says Leaf. “He was determined to put his feelings on to the recording tape and share it with the world,” which at that

time was very much not the norm. Many of pop's canonical artists were similar: Dylan didn't just **single-handedly** make popular music a **vessel** for poetry, he also infused it with an all-new attitude and emotional palette (cynicism, **disgust**, rebellion), while **conflating** his previous **folk fare** with rock to create an entirely new sound. Dylan's decision to go electric has become emblematic of the musical genius's requirement to shock. Even Pet Sounds, an **onslaught** of **loveliness** disturbed the band's record label with its **leaps of progress**, says Leaf. Nowadays, pop music is only really controversial where it **overlaps** with sex and violence; it is practically impossible to sonically surprise the listening public. The prospect of the end of musical innovation is something students and lovers of guitar music have already had to make peace with — at this point, nostalgia is inherent to the genre. Just as **selling out** became a respected career move, explicit derivation is now an artform in itself; in recent years Beyoncé has stayed **at the forefront** of pop by essentially becoming a kind of musical historian. There is one thing that does feel **jarring** about the **slowed pace** of musical progress. Technological advancement has always been **woven into** sonic novelty — the advent of synths (which Wilson also anticipated,) for example, or sampling. Considering technology has accelerated in unimaginable, terrifying ways over the past twenty years, you'd think that might be reflected in the pop **zeitgeist**. Instead, we have a chart **stuffed** with tracks that essentially could have been made at any point in the past fifty years. Perhaps the late 20th century — and particularly the 1960s — created a sort of natural selection of music: we found the combinations of notes and rhythms that appealed most to the western human ear and that is what we have continued to **rehash**. Surely, then, this is a problem artificial intelligence may be able to solve. This is technology determined to get to know us more intimately than we know ourselves. What better way to continue the **quest** for novel pop perfection that Wilson embarked on sixty years ago? In theory, it could supplant human creativity. In actuality, AI is unlikely to **wrest** control of pop's soul from humans. That's because musical innovation, and even **catchy** melodies, have ceded importance to the **branding** of people. **If Swift's gargantuan success is anything to go by** — which it probably is — pop's future depends on the carefully **honed** appeal of an individual human personalities, not what they can do on a keyboard (the

musical kind.) Swift's approach to her public image and the music business in general is **groundbreaking** in its own way, even if her music isn't. We will be mourning her as a cultural figure at some point, but a musical genius? That would take some real cognitive dissonance. It seems unlikely we will do so with anyone by the end of this century; we have no currently **minted** visionaries, although time will tell if anyone retroactively earns the title. What is certain is that as the pop canon continues to **splinter** into thousands of smaller, personal **rosters**, we will be losing musicians who mean everything to some people, but not — like Wilson — something to almost everyone. Published in The Guardian on 14 June 2025. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **leaps of progress** = salti in avanti, progressi
- **splinter** = frantumarsi
- **counterparts** = equivalenti
- **loveliness** = amorevolezza
- **helming** = dirigere
- **overlaps** = sovrapporre
- **at the forefront** = all'avanguardia
- **PR** = relazioni pubbliche (public relations)
- **trailblazing** = pionieristico
- **On top of that** = inoltre
- **If Swift's gargantuan success is anything to go by** = se serve da esempio
- **joint statement** = dichiarazione congiunta
- **vaunted standing** = prestigiosa reputazione
- **masterminded** = orchestrare
- **demise** = scomparsa
- **slowed pace** = ritmo più lento
- **groundbreaking** = rivoluzionarie
- **single-handedly** = solamente
- **anointed** = consacrare
- **fringes** = margini
- **selling out** = vendersi
- **catchy** = orecchiabili
- **mourns** = piangere
- **reveres** = venerare
- **onslaught** = ondata
- **stuffed** = imbottita, piena
- **minted** = coniare
- **opus** = capolavoro
- **goldrush** = corsa all'oro
- **staunchly** = fermamente
- **the latter** = questi ultimi
- **vessel** = veicolo, mezzo

- **conflating** = mescolare, unire
- **as-yet-unheard** = non ancora ascoltata
- **and made it is** = e viene fatta, e viene prodotta
- **piecing it together** = mettere insieme, assemblare
- **quest** = ricerca
- **caught on** = prendere piede
- **in the spotlight** = sotto i riflettori
- **rehash** = riproporre
- **rosters** = elenchi
- **claim to genius status** = l'affermarsi come genio
- **command** = dominare
- **folk fare** = quota folk
- **jarring** = stridente
- **woven into** = intrecciare
- **fellow greats** = colleghi illustri
- **the former** = il primo
- **output** = produzione
- **zeitgeist** = spirito del tempo, clima culturale (tedesco)
- **leisurely** = piacevole
- **thin on the ground** = scarso, raro
- **branding** = marca
- **By all accounts** = a tutti gli effetti
- **wildfire** = a macchia d'olio
- **accrued** = accumulare
- **palatable** = gradevoli, accettabili
- **wrest** = strappare, sottrarre
- **honed** = affinare
- **acts** = artisti
- **disgust** = disgusto, ribrezzo