

Love and Mercy – A film that is sure to get around

Since the outbreak of composer biopics in 1940s Hollywood, films of this genre have since evolved into raw and dark insights into the worlds of many talented yet troubled artists.

Bill Pohlad's *Love and Mercy* is a stellar example of this. Set in two distinct parts of his life, the biopic tells the story of Brian Wilson, the leader and songwriter of The Beach Boys. The artist is both strongly talented and emotionally weak due to a lifetime of manipulation beginning with his traumatic childhood. The film brings to light his father's abuse on him and his brothers and persuades us to apprehend the ugly truth that the bright and cheery style of the Beach boys is all a façade. This realisation is slowly and carefully drawn out. The opening credits contain reconstructed of the band performing live, pursuing an upbeat and fun atmosphere. Aspects of Wilson's mental illness and tension between the band members unfold throughout the film to bring out the character's vulnerability, insecurities and self-doubt.

Much of the film featuring flashbacks of the young Wilson, played by Paul Dano, presents him in both a personal and professional sphere with in depth focus on him composing at the piano and working at his studio, using unconventional recording methods whilst his mental health deteriorates. With scenes alternating between Wilson the artist and Wilson the anxious, the biopic emphasises the importance in acknowledging that there are always two sides to every story. Dano's realistic and touching delivery of a troubled and complex character is one he is used to playing, particularly after portraying Dwayne Hoover in the indie hit *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The older Wilson is portrayed by John Cusack in a manner that closely resembles Dano's whilst simultaneously regenerating his character to highlight this period as one of post-recovery.

Wilson comes across as an ordinary, middle aged man apart from a slightly on-edge personality. First seen trying to buy a car in a shop, both film audiences and the car saleswoman Melinda (Elizabeth Banks), his future love interest, his identity take a while to become explicitly revealed.

The subtleties of the story and characterisation succeed in engaging the audiences with the mystery of Wilson. Viewers experience his own take on his troubled past life; many of the conversations he has with Melinda revolve around his dark family history. Dramatic elements are balanced out with light-hearted and romantic events which include a cliched run on the beach.

The film constantly embodies different moods within the two periods and eventually escalates into somewhat of a psychological thriller. This is first sparked off by subtle clashes between Melinda and Wilson's controlling and manipulative therapist Jean (played by Paul Giamatti).

The detailed exposure into Brian's life makes up for the film's lack of detailed female characters. Although she plays a key role in rescuing him from Jean, Melinda personifies a manic pixie dream girl, one who is there to save him, brighten up his world and of course add a romantic component to the film. Wilson's first wife is seldom viewed in the flashbacks, and when she does appear there is little to say about their relationship. Although his two daughters are mentioned, viewers never get to see them.

The filming style is just as significant in making the film interesting as the story. Elements of innovative film techniques in the 1960s scenes differ from those of scenes featuring the older Wilson and help to create a strong distinction between past and present. The flashback scenes centred around the recording processes incorporate loose and flexible camera movement making the viewers feel like they are entering the studio with Brian. The camera's vintage filter gives the flashbacks a nostalgic feel to them. Using fast camera zooms to focus on the characters speaking adds an element of reality to the scene and grips viewers as a documentary would. Young and old Wilson are connected in the end by a sequence of shots alternating between the two ages, serving as a strong metaphor for his lifelong journey into recovery.

With a deeper focus on his talents as a composer rather than a singer and a distinguished choice of soundtrack, the film helps to bring out the genius of Wilson's song writing and promotes the music of the Beach boys. The easy drift from diegetic into nondiegetic music is used as an aural mood ring and even connects the past and present together. This is not just a film for fans of the group, it is one for drama lovers too. Despite the underlying tragedy of the Wilson family, the film manages to convey an uplifting and heart-warming tale of healing and compassion.