



What happened when one of the Beach Boys met one of America's most dangerous criminals?

INTERSECTING LIVES DENNIS WILSON AND CHARLES MANSON

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The women stood along Highway 1 in Malibu, thumbs out. Stringy hair, tattered bell-bottoms—hippie chicks. Dennis Wilson, drummer for the Beach Boys and a champion womanizer, loved hippie chicks. Pulling his Rolls-Royce onto the shoulder, he called out, “Wanna come over to my house for milk and cookies?”

Home, for Wilson, was a rented mansion in the hills off Sunset Boulevard, a pleasure palace built to look like a log cabin. The women were awestruck. The pool was shaped like the state of California; peacocks roamed the yard. First they all raided the fridge. Then they got high and had sex.

Wilson took off for a recording session, but when he returned at 3am there was a party going on. The women were still there, along with a dozen others, most of them listening raptly to a short bearded guy strumming a guitar. The guitarist came over to greet Wilson. He was slight, maybe 5'2", but he walked with a predator's gait. Something in his look—those pupils, wide and dark—gave Wilson pause.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

The little guy fixed him with a smile. “Do I look like I'm going to hurt you?”

That's when Charles Manson knelt down and kissed Dennis Wilson's feet.

It was the spring of 1968, and the country was burning. The war in Vietnam was raging, college campuses and inner cities were in revolt, and the counterculture—a bewildering stew of hedonism, mysticism, and violence—was hitting critical mass. Manson, a 33-year-old drifter and ex-con with a gift for manipulating people, was the right man for the season. He had begun building his “family” in Haight-Ashbury the previous year, snaring vulnerable teenagers

and other lost souls with a philosophy that combined Dale Carnegie's hucksterism, Scientology's self-help mantras, and his own brand of mad Jesus Freak hustle. The budding cult leader had moved to LA for the same reason everybody else did: he wanted to be famous.

The 23-year-old Wilson, meanwhile, was tall, tanned, and rich, and the only Beach Boy who actually surfed. Beneath the glamour, he was just as lost as Manson's runaways, haunted by horrific childhood abuse, when his father would beat him with a two-by-four. He was impulsive and undisciplined, and his band mates treated him like hired help, a foot soldier in his older brother Brian's artistic campaigns. So Dennis was always searching for something—drugs, women, transcendental meditation—to plug the gaps in his soul. As one of his four ex-wives put it, “He was really empty inside.”

Manson grokked the situation immediately. The needy drummer, with his money and industry connections, would be his ticket to rock stardom. He went full-guru on Wilson, assuring him that his father's abuse wasn't his fault. As for the boozing and skirt-chasing, the stuff he did to numb the pain? Nothing was forbidden. God and Satan, after all, were one. As Manson preached, “There ain't no thing called wrong.”

Wilson was smitten. His new buddy was creative, spiritual, and possessed of some weapons-grade charisma. His women treated him like a god. The guy had a whiff of danger to him, too. That just made “The Wizard,” as Wilson called him, even more appealing.

It couldn't have been lost on Wilson, either, that Manson oozed a kind of counterculture cred that the Beach Boys, despite their popularity, didn't have.

Their most recent LP, *Pet Sounds*, though it's now seen as a masterpiece, had tanked, and they were struggling to stay relevant. The hippies were the hot new thing. That clean-cut, Jan-and-Dean crap just wasn't cool anymore.

Within a few days, the Family moved in with Wilson. They hung out by the pool, dropping LSD and playing records, the music booming out into the canyon. The guru put his flock of women at Wilson's disposal. Wilson paid for penicillin treatments for the group's rampant gonorrhea, let Manson tag along to Hollywood parties and Sunset Strip clubs, and piled women into his Rolls-Royce to take them dumpster-diving—Manson's preferred foraging technique.

The drummer also tried to get his friend a record deal. Most of Manson's songs were three-chord folk rip-offs, but Wilson saw something in him. His lyrics were like nobody else's, coming on like hippie murder ballads or dispatches from the void:

*I'm scratching peace symbols in your tombstone
I'm scratching peace symbols in your mind
I'd like to know how'd you get there
Can't you hear, oh can't you hear up here*

Opinion was decidedly mixed. Neil Young was impressed enough that he lobbied Warner Bros. on Manson's behalf, but the other Beach Boys hated him. They nicknamed him "Pig-Pen," after the *Peanuts* character who trailed a dust cloud behind him, and refused to sign him to their new label.

Wilson went to bat for Manson anyway, booking studio time, once, in brother Brian's home studio. The sessions were disasters. Manson, consistently out of tune and resistant to instruction, just didn't have the chops. At one session he pulled a knife on the recording engineer.

By the summer's end, Wilson was sick of hosting the Family. They had run up huge tabs in his name, and one of them had crashed his Mercedes. In all, he estimated, they had cost him \$100,000. Worse, Manson was getting scary. One day he put a knife to the drummer's throat. Wilson called his bluff, spitting, "Do it!"

Soon Wilson moved out, and the Family returned to the decrepit ranch it had been squatting in, in the San Fernando Valley. That fall, the Beach Boys recorded one of Manson's songs—a tune about mind control given to Wilson on the condition that he left the lyrics intact. Whether as payback or because the words were too gnarly for radio play, Wilson tweaked them into a standard-issue love song. He renamed it "Never Learn Not to Love," and didn't even credit Manson. The guru was livid. He still hoped to score a record deal, though, so he didn't retaliate.

Things got heavier as 1968 bled into 1969. Manson foretold a coming race war—the details of which he claimed to have divined from the Beatles' "Helter Skelter"—in which blacks would rise up and murder all the whites. The Family began stockpiling weapons and prepping a hide-out in Death Valley so it could ride out the apocalypse.

Manson's rock-star dreams died that summer, when he blew a long sought-after audition with one of Wilson's producer friends. To his followers, Manson spun this failure as a sign that *Helter Skelter* was beginning: they just needed to kick-start the bloodletting.

The bodies soon began piling up. Over two consecutive nights that August, the Family killed nine complete strangers, including the actress Sharon Tate. On the second night, they scrawled the words

HELTER SKELTER

When Manson heard the Beach Boys' "Never Learn Not to Love," which used some of his lyrics, he apparently went to Wilson's house with a loaded gun and left a single bullet as a threat.

"Helter Skelter" [sic] on the refrigerator in the victims' blood.

When word broke of Manson's arrest, Wilson was frightened, and tried to keep a low profile. Manson had shown up at his door a few months earlier, demanding \$1,500. When Wilson refused, his erstwhile guru had threatened to kill Wilson's seven-year-old son. Prosecutors came looking for the tapes of one of Manson's sessions, but Wilson said he had destroyed them: "The vibrations connected with them don't belong on this earth."

As for his time with Manson, he swore, "As long as I live, I'll never talk about that."

The years passed. The Beach Boys slid into hackery, playing corporate gigs and Republican campaign rallies. Wilson's addictions spiraled out of control. Just after Christmas in 1983, he began drinking at gam on a friend's boat, which was docked in the same slip that had held Wilson's yacht before financial troubles had forced him to sell it. Wilson dove into the water, over and over, searching for mementos he had thrown overboard years earlier. Eventually, he quit coming up. He was 39.

From prison, Manson claimed to have cursed Wilson for stealing his song. While he probably never shook Manson's shadow, Wilson had plenty of his own demons. Even so, he'd managed to pull himself together to record a solo album, *Pacific Ocean Blue*, in 1977. It's a transcendent work, sweet and hard-edged in equal measure, shot through with sadness. He sang:

*All things that live one day must die, you know
Even love and the things we hold close
Look at love, look at love, look at love
Look what we've done. ●*

