

Brian Wilson at the Highline Ballroom

By Jim Bessman
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Brian Wilson played the Highline Ballroom last night as part of its sister club's month-long Blue Note Jazz Festival, and though the two-set show featured his entire current *Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin* album of Gershwin standards, it wasn't jazz, really, but no less demanding--and rewarding.

The Beach Boys' beloved creative genius brought a 12-piece band of multi-instrumentalists/vocalists--and a local female string section--and all lived up to his contention that it's one of his best bands ever.

The Gershwin album, which was conceived under the aegis of his hero George Gershwin's estate, led off the second set--the first being a breathtaking recreation of Beach Boys classics ranging from the ultra-romantic 1963 ballad "Surfer Girl," his first composition, to the symphonic "Heroes And Villains" of 1967. While Wilson's ability to sing his signature falsetto vocal leads and harmonies is long gone, guitarist Jeff Foskett was downright spooky in mimicking it on hits like "Don't Worry Baby" and "Wouldn't It Be Nice."

Special mention, too, goes to keyboardist Darian Sahanaja, another standout singer, who did the late Carl Wilson good on "Darlin'." Brian Wilson, ironically, has settled into many of Mike Love's lead vocals, and while he doesn't have the strength of Love on car hits like "Little Deuce Coupe" and "Shut Down," it doesn't really matter: Gershwin didn't consider Fred Astaire the best singer around, yet it was Astaire who introduced such Gershwin gems as "They Can't Take That Away From Me"--which Wilson performed as part of his Gershwin segment.

Having been deeply affected as a toddler by Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," Wilson opens and closes *Reimagines Gershwin* with a vocalised version of the tune, then gives a pronounced Beach Boys flavor to the rest of the album's contents--even employing a "Good Vibrations" theremin sound to "Summertime" and "Love Is Here To Stay." It didn't get anyone singing along at the Highline, but

Wilson's Gershwin performances were no less exquisite than his letter-perfect Beach Boys recreations.

The show was the first of a three-night stand, and he finished it big with the sing-along Beach Boys hits "Help Me, Rhonda," "Barbara Ann," "Surfin' U.S.A." and "Fun, Fun, Fun."