

REVIEW: A GRAMMY® SALUTE TO THE BEACH BOYS



By John Tilden — Exclusive to ESQ online

Summer's Gone:

This 'Grammy Salute' can't help but evoke memories of The Beach Boys' own *25 Years Together* special from 1986 and the 2001 *All-Star Tribute to Brian Wilson*. Like those, it brought together a mix of great voices, fans, and conveniently-available stars for a highly enjoyable ninety minutes of performance. This one (as promised in its promotion) focused more on hits and well-known songs with only a couple of exceptions.

Surviving Beach Boys members Brian Wilson, Mike Love, Al Jardine, David Marks, and Bruce Johnston were featured guests but did not perform or speak live during the show. It was wonderful to see cuts to the Boys throughout the show enjoying the performances.

The two-hour event also included live appearances and song introductions by John Stamos, Jimmy Jam, Drew Carey, and Harvey Mason Jr. (the head of the Recording Academy), Tom Hanks, Bruce Springsteen, and Elton John supplied taped testimonials.

Other artists that have received similar ‘salutes’ with standalone shows include The Beatles, Paul Simon, Prince, and Elton John. This salute is timely enough to celebrate over sixty years of The Beach Boys as a group.

The first thing this production did right was to assemble a stellar band that supported most of the performances. Looking at the backgrounds of some of the house band members, I saw a linkage of Boston connections with the Berklee College of Music running throughout the band. Many notable performers from Jellyfish, the Brian Wilson Band, and the Paul McCartney Band filled out by a modern-day ‘wrecking crew’ of seasoned studio musicians let this band hit all the right notes and measure up to the demanding performance a Beach Boys salute deserves. (I’ve listed the band members at the end of the article as they truly deserve the recognition.)

Of course, the heart of how well any tribute show like this comes off rests with the marquee performers and the songs they picked. First up was Little Big Town with “Help Me, Rhonda.” I don’t have much to say about this one except it was pleasant and a decent upbeat starter to the evening.

Next, John Stamos introduced The Beach Boys who sat watching from the balcony in their box. I am not sure if we’ll ever see the surviving Beach Boys performing together again, something that I was personally hoping for in this *Salute*. Following this, Weezer performed “California Girl.” Rivers Cuomo’s voice is suited well for the song and Weezer did admirably on the backing vocals.

Jimmy Jam introduced John Legend’s performance of “Sail On, Sailor” referencing the iconic cover of Ray Charles from the 25th anniversary special. With that in my mind, I felt sorry for Legend as there’s no denying he has a good voice, but to me, it didn’t have the emotional backing I wanted. Next up was Hanson with “Barbara Ann.” It’s a fun song and they obviously had fun singing it. I’m surprised it wasn’t placed at the end of the show to have everyone on stage with it as a high-energy finale. Brandi Carlile had an interesting take on “In My Room.” She shifted the song into a slightly different arrangement on the melody to suit her voice and her familiar collaborators ‘The Twins’ blended nicely with her. Charlie Puth was next with “Wouldn’t It Be Nice.” His lead vocals were pleasant, but the house band really elevated this one.

Michael McDonald and Take 6 were strange bedfellows with “Don’t Worry Baby.” Michael took most of the vocal leads with Take 6 providing the backing vocals and harmonies that were on point. McDonald’s grittier voice lent a fresh take on the song that I enjoyed. Claude McKnight of Take 6 doing a verse seemed forced into the song to give them their due spotlight.

Norah Jones was next with “The Warmth of the Sun.” It had a wonderful lead-in from The Beach Boys in voiceover talking about how the song was composed. Jones sang it with interesting jazz interpolations on the piano. Her voice was well-suited to this song, and I found myself wishing she’d been involved in another performance during the night.

Mark Foster’s lead for “Do It Again” with Foster the People reminded me visually of 1967 Ringo Starr, but he was a good choice for a song mixing what were originally Mike and Brian lead vocals. The band’s arrangement added just a touch of electronica to the song, and it worked well. We were then treated to a clip from the ‘Campfire Singalong’ from the 1989 *Endless Summer* TV special about how “Surfer Girl” was created, leading into Lady A’s performance. It was pleasant, but hearing the Boys do it right before didn’t help it stand out for me.

Drew Carey came on stage to have the night’s tribute to Dennis with high energy and humor and he introduced “Do You Wanna Dance” even ‘as originally done by Bobby Freeman,’ covered by Dennis’ lead. Fall Out Boy matched the high energy of the introduction, and it was a lot of fun to see the band. The super-energetic percussion did make me think of Dennis tossing his hair around and having fun. Harvey Mason, Jr., had some nice words about how The Beach Boys brought people together through the power of music. This led to Brian and Al’s voiceover about the creation of “Sloop John B” which then segued into its performance. Beck had a good lead vocal, and the backing band did a wonderful job on this song recreating a Beach Boys’ arrangement. “Caroline, No” was next with beautifully understated backing to LeAnn Rimes’ note-perfect vocals. It was a nice choice to have the single cello accompaniment spotlighted in the arrangement.

Brandi Carlile spoke about Brian Wilson’s ‘courage’ in how he produced by way of introducing Mumford & Sons featuring Sam Grendel. Their performance of “I Know There’s an Answer” blew me away and is one of the few I think I’m going to replay. It wasn’t note-perfect but the sheer heart of it including Grendel’s use of the contrabass recorder reimaged it for me as a new song. It was the worthiest salute of the evening. Andy Grammer was next up with “Darlin’.” The backing band was in full force and Andy gave a strong vocal—I noticed at one point early in the song he pulled the monitor out of his right ear so there might have been a sound issue for him, but he gave a good performance. He yelled out “I love you guys” at the end while looking up at The Beach Boys’ box.

Norah Jones acknowledged Al, David, and Bruce before introducing St. Vincent with “You Still Believe in Me”. She had a good voice for the song and the backing band had an arrangement echoing the original record. My Morning Jacket continued with a fun performance of “I Get Around.” We next heard the voices of Brian and Carl (from the *American Band* documentary), Mike, then Dennis with audio and video of “Their Hearts Were Full of Spring” in the background to highlight the band’s harmonic blend, leading into Pentatonix’s arrangement of “Heroes and Villains.” This performance was simply masterful. They were a great choice, and each band member brought their voice to the spirit of Brian’s original arrangement. This is another one I’m going to be re-listening to and honestly wishing it was longer!

John Stamos came out for another introduction, calling out David Marks’ guitar licks and introducing Luke Spiller and Taylor Momsen for “Surfin’ USA”/“Fun, Fun, Fun.” There was a good rock vibe with this pairing of singers, and it was a nice merging of the two songs. They looked like they were having fun during this high-energy performance.

Audio of Brian in the studio creating “Good Vibrations” with video of the band and musicians led to Jim James and Beck performing it. They were fine leads on this song with great backing. Extra credit to Jim James for nailing the high parts!

Brandi Carlile and John Legend ended the show by praising Carl Wilson’s vocals and performing “God Only Knows”. I think it may be her style, but Carlile tended to shorten words in the verses. They were an interesting pairing for the song; Carlile went into outright country twang at times with Legend’s R&B crooning as counterpoint. That they are both good technical singers was the only thing that saved the pairing-up for me. I can never help but miss Carl when I hear anyone do this song, so I suppose it’s not truly fair to them either.

All in all, this show was a pleasant time with a few standout performances. It was great to see The Beach Boys smiling, singing along, and basking in the evident love in the room, but as a long-time fan, I was left wanting at least a little of the real deal and a little let-down we didn’t get it as fans.

CBS Presents a Grammy Salute to The Beach Boys is available now on the Paramount+ streaming service. You can find some unofficial clips from those that attended on YouTube by searching the phrase ‘Grammy Salute To The Beach Boys.’

[Read David Beard’s review of Grammy Salute To The Beach Boys HERE](https://esquarterly.com/2023/04/12/review-cbs-presents-a-grammy-salute-to-the-beach-boys/)
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