



A psychobiographical analysis of Brian Douglas Wilson: Creativity, drugs, and models of schizophrenic and affective disorders

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 18 February 2009

Keywords:

Schizoaffective
Bipolar
LSD
Drugs
Creativity

ABSTRACT

The suggestion of a relationship between creativity and mental disorder has existed for centuries, and has been advocated by many psychological researchers. The present analysis offers a consideration of the nature of mental disorder present in Brian Wilson, an individual recognised as one of the most creative figures in 20th century popular music. Using converging biographical evidence, and the diagnostic program Opcrit, Wilson's diagnosis is concluded to be schizoaffective. Employing details of his drug abuse, various models of schizoaffective spectra are examined, in particular a reconsideration of the LSD model of schizophrenia. The model is shown to be useful for positive schizophrenic symptoms including overinclusion, a potentially key element of creativity. In doing so, this psychobiographical analysis allows examination of potential relationships between mental disorder and creativity, the effects of various narcotics on creativity and various elements of mental disorder, the efficacy of various drug models of psychotic disorders, and the overlap between psychotic and affective disorders.

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1. Introduction to creativity, mental disorders and psychobiography

Precedents for psychobiographical analyses of creative musicians exist, but the area is not as heavily researched as it might be. Studies across various disciplines (e.g. creative writing, music, politics, philosophy) have previously suggested a connection between creative potential and the presence of affective disorders (Andreasen, 1987; Ludwig, 1995). Other work suggests links between creativity and various psychotic traits, but the absence of perfect correlations precludes equating psychological disorder with creative talent (Brod, 1997). More recently, Nettle (2001) has made an attempt to draw these ideas together, suggesting that elements of emotional and psychotic disorders overlap and interact, with both being associated with creative potential. At present though, there does not exist any substantial body of work attempting to methodically validate these ideas. Furthermore, the specific consideration of musical creativity remains underrepresented in extant research.

Wills (2003) examined psychopathology in eminent jazz musicians, and found high rates of affective and psychotic disorders, as well as substance abuse/addiction in virtually the entire sample. The study is somewhat of a rarity in reviewing psychopathology and musical creativity in contemporary artists; literature on the relationship between creativity and mental disorder far more commonly concerns either historical musicians (Post, 1994) or non-musical artists (Claridge, Pryor, & Watkins, 1990). Given the expo-

stantial increase in mass media during the 20th century, a far more intense and accurate degree of analysis is now possible for contemporary artists. The musician Brian Wilson presents an exemplary case for such an analysis, having produced many renowned works, as well as being the subject of a wealth of readily available biographic information.

2. Brian Wilson: an introduction

Brian Douglas Wilson is a composer, arranger, producer, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist, most famous for his work as a member of The Beach Boys. He grew up in a Californian suburb with his parents and younger brothers (fellow Beach Boys Carl and Dennis Wilson). From the establishment of The Beach Boys, Brian took the role of bandleader and creative force behind the group, though he often came up against opposition from his father and manager, Murry Wilson. Relationships between the two never seem to have been particularly warm, especially in light of allegations of physical and emotional abuse levelled at the Wilson patriarch by his children. Brian Wilson remains musically active at present, both in touring and composing new works.

2.1. Creativity and unusual thinking

Sternberg and Lubart (1999) highlight novel ideas, flexible approaches and appropriateness of outcomes as criteria for creative acts. This emphasises that while creative and psychopathological thinking are both unusual, only the former generates ideas that are recognised as meritorious by other individuals. Not all

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psychologically ill people are creative geniuses, and the majority of creative individuals show no signs of mental illness (Juda, 1949). Therefore, especial consideration should be given to Sternberg and Lubart's suggestion that the discriminatory factor of creative value is evident from peer attitudes towards creative products. Creativity can be described as novel or unusual approaches that are appreciated by people other than the creator.

Brian Wilson employed musical techniques that inspired contemporaries both within his field (MacDonald, 1998) and without (Ligerman & Leaf, 2004). At the same time, his work garnered commercial success via a string of high-charting singles and million-selling albums, whilst nevertheless retaining integrity in peer reviews (Rolling Stone, 2003). That Wilson employed novel approaches in composition is evident from his use of unconventional instrumentation and compositional methods, which make heavy use of bizarre and idiosyncratic harmonic progressions (Wegman, 2005). Interestingly, his unusual approach to instrumentation seems linked to strange and emotional associations to sounds, e.g. remarking that the sound of the theremin (a rare instrument, which he championed) put him in mind of 'weird facial expressions – almost sexual' (Wilson & Gold, 1991, p. 82). Unusual thoughts such as these provide the basis for speculation of a link between creativity and mental illness.

In later years, Wilson's song-writing and arranging skills developed to such an extent that he was consistently named as one of the most creative and influential figures in popular music in the latter half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, as his fame and musical prowess progressed from the year 1964, so too did a range of psychological problems, including heavy drug use. Wilson has been (at different times and by different individuals) said to suffer from unspecified schizophrenia, paranoid schizophrenia, depression, schizoaffective disorder and bipolar depression. Part of the scope of this analysis is to examine how valid these diagnoses were and how any symptoms he shows might best be conceptualised. This is of particular importance in trying to identify characteristics of mental disorder that may impact on creativity when we consider the vast heterogeneity of symptoms present in schizophrenia and related disorders (Buchanan & Carpenter, 1994), of which schizoaffective disorder is an example (Gershon et al., 1988).

2.2. Consideration of sources

Though various accounts have been given of Wilson's life, these have not necessarily all been reliable: parts of his 1991 autobiography (Wilson & Gold, 1991) have latterly been criticised by biographers and the Wilson estate as being largely ghost-written, supposedly editing details so as to portray Wilson's then psychiatrist/business manager Dr. Eugene Landy in a better light (Carlin, 2006). Though these remarks are oriented more towards how Landy's techniques and business decisions are described in the book (mostly in the second half), it is possible that there is also some fabrication of accounts of Wilson's mental states and biographical details. At the time of the book's publication Wilson was still under the care of Dr. Landy, who was later proven to have taken an exploitative measure of control over Wilson's life. Accordingly, any information used in this analysis has been included only when referred to by two or more biographical sources, and all information from the autobiography has been treated with especial scrutiny, bordering on scepticism. Sources used were: Wilson and Gold (1991), Carlin (2006), Gaines (1995), Ligerman and Leaf (2004), Abbott (2001), Webb (2001), Whitworth (2004), Gabel (2000) and (sparingly, and where appropriate) the liner notes to the re-issued albums by *The Beach Boys* (2000–2001): 'Pet Sounds', 'Smiley Smile/Wild Honey', 'Sunflower/Surf's Up', and 'Beach Boys Party!/Stack-O-Tracks'.

3. Accounts of Wilson's psychological disorders

3.1. Nature and onset of hallucinations

Potentially psychotic aspects of Wilson's disorders are straightforward enough to identify: he suffers from auditory hallucinations, and has also held various paranoid beliefs and delusions. He first reported hearing indistinct voices and screaming in his sleep in 1963 (at age 21), reporting that he was able to stop himself from hearing them as long as he kept working and producing music. This claim ties in with Wilson's reports that at about this age he felt 'a compulsion' to write music constantly, becoming sick and anxious when he did not do so (Ligerman & Leaf, 2004; Wilson & Gold, 1991, p. 72). Compulsion to write music may also be an early indication of safety behaviours and attempts to regain control of his environment, given that Wilson has often made reference to experiencing anxiety in the presence of others, as well as reticence in engaging in interpersonal relations.

His strange behaviours deepened with time: by 1964, he would often become obsessed with tiny details (e.g. counting the number of tiles on a floor, the number of peas on a plate, the number of stitches on an aeroplane seat), and by 1966 he would conduct important conversations only in his home swimming pool, as he believed his house was filled with hidden recording devices. More overtly psychotic symptoms gradually worsened as Wilson entered his mid-twenties, particularly his auditory hallucinations which went from indistinct recollections of hypnagogic experiences to fully formed speech that reminded him of critical remarks made by his father (Carlin, 2006). As Wilson grew older, the voices he heard grew more frightening: in 2004 he reported that when he experienced them, they would threaten to kill him and his family (Ligerman & Leaf, 2004).

Though these hallucinations are clear indication of some sort of psychiatric disorder, there is conflicting evidence regarding Wilson's drug use relative to the onset and development of such symptoms. His autobiography claims that he was hearing hallucinatory critical remarks in the second person by 1964, though more recent interviews place the beginning of these episodes *after* he had first used d-lysergic acid diethylamide-25 (LSD) in 1965. This distinction is crucial, given the ambiguous relationship that LSD has with psychotic symptoms: in a review of literature on the drug, Strassman (1984) emphasises that no causal link between LSD use and subsequent development of psychotic traits has been established, but this argument is somewhat undermined by the review's concession that drug experiences may act as precipitating factors in the incidence of schizophrenic episodes. Considering drug use is prevalent among sufferers of schizophrenia and related disorders (Soyka et al., 1993), the specific nature of potential effects here is difficult to resolve, and it is unfortunate that currently no definitive source of information exists on when Wilson began experiencing verbalised auditory hallucinations relative to his first LSD experience.

Having said this, Wilson began using marijuana recreationally in 1964, with his use gradually increasing, especially following his retirement from live performances in 1964. Cannabis seems to play some role in the development of psychosis, be it a primary effect of the substance or a secondary effect due to subjective cognitions associated with its use (Hall & Solowij, 1998). Such effects have yet to be conclusively proven in normal individuals, though the drug has been shown as an independent risk factor for psychosis (Andréasson, Allebeck, Engström, & Rydberg, 1987; Caspari, 1999) in individuals with predispositions towards mental disorder (Linszen, Dingemans, & Lenior, 1994). Wilson may have had such a predisposition: despite an absence of reported unpleasant hallucinations prior to 1965, he consistently reports a curious subjective experience of constantly hearing music ('musical hallucination', cf. Sacks, 2007), dating back

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