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Reviews

**An Educator's Perspective on the Film, *Tom Dowd & The Language of Music*, produced and directed by Mark Moorman, 2003.
Distributed by Palm Pictures, available on DVD.**

<https://doi.org/10.25101/5.10>

A Confidence Man Revealed

I'm one of the lucky ones. I can actually tell my students that on a fall evening in 1997 I got to meet and shake hands with one of the true giants of the twentieth-century recording industry—Thomas John Dowd. He was presenting a lifetime achievement award to my friend, engineer Al Schmitt, one of a long line of storied Dowd protégés. The admiration between the two recording masters was palpable, and standing between them backstage, the feeling can best be described as love. That intense feeling is one that is shared over and over throughout Mark Moorman's outstanding ninety-minute documentary, *Tom Dowd & The Language of Music*.

At its heart, this is a simple love story. Dowd, who passed away in 2002, found a way to create the ultimate environment, both artistically and technically: one that allowed an unbelievable range of artists such as Eric Clapton, Aretha Franklin, John Coltrane, Bobby Darin, Ray Charles, Thelonius Monk, and The Allman Brothers Band to achieve their most notable recording accomplishments. For that, he earned their eternal admiration and respect. Dowd represented a perfect balance between a passionate man of music and a technological revolutionary. It's safe to say that from Edison's invention of recording in the late nineteenth century, up until the latter twentieth century, there have been few, if any, whose imprint on recorded music is greater.

As an educational tool, the film is unparalleled for showing future generations of musicians, producers, and engineers the path to true greatness as an engineer or producer. Dowd's secret, if there was just one, was that no matter who he worked with, they trusted him implicitly as he brought out their finest musical achievements. In the words of Eric Clapton, "When I started out I didn't have any interest in 'background-boys' like Tom. [That changed] later when I'd seen how musically proficient he was [...] he really [did] know music much more than I had any grasp of. So in those days whenever I had an idea or wanted to record something, I would always

think of Tom first, above anyone else. He was like a father.” For those seeking to master the art and craft of recording, there can be no higher praise. Simply put, great artists must have ultimate confidence in those whom they entrust to help them realize their art. Dowd was the master confidence man when it came to nurturing great music.

More importantly, from an educational perspective, he was a well-rounded, caring thinker, a far cry from some of the self-absorbed producers of today. This comes through loud and clear in many of the Dowd narratives Moorman interweaves throughout the dozens of clips featuring musical legends reminiscing about their relationships to their esteemed colleague.

As a teenager, Dowd’s native intelligence in science was recognized and he was invited to work at Columbia University as part of the team developing the theoretical foundations for the atomic bomb. In 1946, he left military service. Upon finding out that he would have to re-enroll at Columbia as a freshman, and be forced to learn pre-1940 science (after he had basically helped rewrite the rules of physics and chemistry as a Manhattan Project team member) he opted out of academe and instead found his calling in the music recording industry.

Dowd’s various talents are further articulated in two interviews with Southern rock icons, The Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd. Both cite numerous examples of his amazing listening skills, boundless enthusiasm, and unrivaled innovation (he invented the use of the modern channel fader and revolutionized recording by popularizing eight-track recording a full ten years before the Beatles recorded *Sgt. Pepper’s*). He had the ability to draw musicians further up the musical ladder, helping them achieve heights they may not have thought possible.

A talented musician in his own right, Dowd played piano, tuba, and bass. He could dissect an arrangement, instantly catch intonation problems, or suggest a new part that would turn a faltering song idea into a worldwide hit. The understated anecdote about his “Western movie” Indian drum beat (BUM-bum-bum-bum) suggestion for Cream’s classic *Sunshine of Your Love* is worth the price of the DVD by itself.

Importantly, filmmaker Moorman also includes footage about Dowd’s relationship with Stax Records and their integrated group, Booker T. and the MG’s. Dowd rightly points out that in the 1960s, the MG’s were not allowed to play in their hometown of Memphis or the South because of the strict prohibition of interracial acts. When he brought them to New York, and later London, they became internationally acclaimed. This sensitivity,

be it musical or personal, is another hallmark of the truly great in the area of arts production.

Near the end of the film, Dowd comments that most people believe him to be a mega-millionaire due to the vast catalog of hit production credits associated with his name. He mildly states, “Nope. Ninety percent of the records I made were pay for hire,” meaning his estate earns not one cent in royalties when you hear Clapton’s *Layla* or Aretha’s *Respect* on the airwaves today. This was before the day of the three-to-four percent producers’ royalties calculated back to record one sales. But there is not one ounce of remorse in Dowd’s statement. It’s clear to students that his payoff wasn’t in the form of so-called “bling”—it was in the lifelong respect and relationships that he enjoyed his entire career, a treasure more precious than gold.

The final lesson I hope students learn from this film is taught through the words and images that demonstrate how invisible truly great producers and engineers must be. Helping artists to shine and connect with their audiences should be the producer’s sole *raison d’être*. In the words of legendary producer Phil Ramone, who cites Dowd’s influence on the art of producing, “so the star is the star, and the crew, everyone else, is there for them. You have to be prepared [as a producer] that your name is on the back of the record—if you’re lucky.”

If we hear and understand music as a true language of its own, Tom Dowd was certainly one of the finest interpreters of that language in modern times and as such, has much to offer our students today.

Keith Hatschek

KEITH HATSCHEK heads the Music Management program in the Conservatory of Music at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Before joining academe full time, he was a part-time instructor at San Francisco State University’s Music and Recording Industry program for seven years. He has been employed in the music industry for more than thirty years as a musician, recording engineer, producer, recording studio owner and manager, and finally as founder of his own music technology marketing and public relations firm. He lectures frequently around the country on music industry careers and consults with a number of music industry companies.

He is the author of the book *How to Get a Job in the Music and Recording Industry* published by Berklee Press (2001). His forthcoming

title *Golden Moments: Recording Secrets From the Pros* is a compendium of insightful conversations with more than sixty leading recording engineers and producers illuminating the technical and aesthetic facets of record-making. It is due to be published by Backbeat Books in late 2005. He contributes frequent essays on the music industry to various print and online publications. Professor Hatschek's professional affiliations include Voting Member and past chapter Vice President of the Recording Academy, an Associate Member of the Audio Engineering Society, a NAMM-Affiliated Music Business Institution (NAMBI) member, and Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association (MEIEA) member.

***Beautiful Dreamer: Brian Wilson and the Story of SMiLE*. David Leaf, Producer/Director, Rhino, 2005.**

<https://doi.org/10.25101/5.11>

This two-disc package of *SMiLE* features several pieces including the documentary *Beautiful Dreamer: Brian Wilson and the Story of SMiLE* and a 5.1 Surround Sound live concert performance of *SMiLE*. Also included are several extras such as recording outtakes, extra interviews, performances, a photo gallery, and a music video. This review focuses on David Leaf's documentary.

There have been several films that have tried to capture the essence of Brian Wilson during the *SMiLE* period including Don Was' *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*, *Endless Harmony: The Beach Boys Story* and *The Beach Boys: An American Band*. However, it is Leaf's documentary that truly encapsulates both the history and contemporary struggles of Wilson during a thirty-seven year personal journey to complete this album.

We have all heard the stories: a kid from Hawthorne, California—deaf in one ear, abused and controlled by his father—co-writes, produces, and arranges twenty-three top-ten hits by the time he is twenty-one. Two years later, he goes on to make *Pet Sounds*, one of the most revealed art-pop records of all time. After *Pet Sounds*, Wilson embarks on his most ambitious effort yet, “a teenage symphony to God” entitled *SMiLE*. Then Wilson suddenly abandons the project and slips into a thirty-year depression;

SMiLE remains a mythical piece of music until 1995. So what is the real story? David Leaf attempts to resolve this equivocal question in his film.

Beautiful Dreamer portrays Wilson as a genius in the long lineage of American composers like Gershwin, Porter, Bacharach, and Bernstein. There are several key players on the DVD paying homage to Wilson, including Jimmy Webb, Burt Bacharach, Sir George Martin, Elvis Costello, Roger Daltrey, Rufus Wainright, David Anderle, and Danny Hutton. However, the most interesting dialogue and warmth is found in the conversations and interchanges between Wilson and Carol Kaye and, separately, with collaborator Van Dyke Parks.

The revealing scenes with Wilson at the piano are the highlight of the first half of the film. We get to witness the motifs of *SMiLE* flow effortlessly from Wilson's fingers. Wilson also concisely explains why he shelved the project.

Leaf attempts to show us how *SMiLE* is a link in a chain of divinely inspired experimental art music along with *Rhapsody in Blue* and *The Firebird Suite*. He even employs a fascinating clip of Wilson singing *Surf's Up* on a 1967 Leonard Bernstein television special, *Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution*.

The film is quite humorous in parts with collaborators reminiscing about Wilson's eccentricity and silly pranks. Whether it's writing piano songs in a huge sandbox, setting up an Arabian-style tent in the front room of his Bel Air mansion, or hosting vegetable-eating exercise sessions, Wilson was definitely out there.

The second half of the film grows a little cumbersome as Leaf follows Wilson's band as it prepares the live rendition of *SMiLE*. Watching the songs come alive in rehearsal is inspiring. However, having to watch exposé after exposé about Wilson's depression and nerves gets tiring and the continuous spurring by band members to get out of the chair and sing could have been trimmed. And how could a camera magically appear in every important scene in Wilson's life? Perhaps some staging was involved in this part of the film.

Applications

Why is it important to ask recording students to watch this DVD? For one, it is a history lesson that spans thirty-seven years. Most students think of the Beach Boys as the "bubblegum" surf pop band of the 1960s and are not familiar with Wilson's legacy.

Secondly, Wilson can inspire students. His creative spirit was at its height in 1966 with his sandbox antics and his masterful compositions, arrangements, and productions. Watching Wilson perform *Good Vibrations* with Carol Kaye or compose *Wonderful* in a modular recording style (which Wilson invented) can demonstrate how a true innovator operates in the studio. This unfiltered look at the creative process reveals how to create musical works of art in the recording studio—not with Auto-Tune—but with true musical and technical skills.

Students see, through Wilson, how drugs may boost a career in the short run, but also drag one down the long road of depression and paranoia. They can see the dichotomy between being a touring musician and a studio rat. And they can see the true collaborative process in the interchange between Wilson and Van Dyke.

Students can learn how a young, visionary artist must take chances with a creative work. Leaf's film acknowledges that none of Wilson's friends had the vision to understand what he was doing. The Beach Boys disliked the record and Capitol would not release it. Yet thirty-seven years later, the album garnered three Grammy nominations and a "Best Rock Instrumental Performance" accolade.

Finally, students can gain from this film by absorbing Wilson's incredible spirit that persevered through periods of inexhaustible creativity and decades of darkness to finish what many consider a musical masterpiece. Leaf's film is a true gift for fans and students alike. As most of today's pop music longs for creativity and meaning, it is promising to see a film that portrays an artist who, like Van Gogh, "feels deeply and tenderly."

Dave Tough

DAVE TOUGH, MBA is Instructor of Music Technology in the Entertainment Industry Center at the University of North Alabama. He has worked for Capitol Records, Warner Chappell Music Publishing, BMG Music Publishing, TAXI, and served as a consultant for WEA. Prior to coming to the University of North Alabama, Mr. Tough was Assistant Professor of Music Business at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He has also served as an adjunct professor of recording technology at UCLA and Belmont University. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from the University of North Texas, a Master of Business Administration from

Pepperdine University, and an ADR certificate from Pepperdine School of Law. Mr. Tough is currently pursuing a doctorate degree in education at Tennessee State University.

His research interest is in the area of recording arts curriculum development. In addition to his university teaching, Mr. Tough has produced, engineered, and written for several independent artists in Los Angeles and Nashville. He has also written commercials for several area businesses. Tough operates his own music publishing and production company, Real Life Music (www.reallifemp.com). He is a member of The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS); The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association (MEIEA); and serves on the Audio Engineering Society (AES) committee in Nashville, Tennessee.

Robin Meloy Goldsby. *Piano Girl: Lessons in Life, Music, and the Perfect Blue Hawaiian*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005.

<https://doi.org/10.25101/5.12>

Jacob Slichter. *So You Wanna Be a Rock & Roll Star: How I Machine-Gunned a Roomful of Record Executives and Other True Tales from a Drummer's Life*. New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

<https://doi.org/10.25101/5.13>

Blair Tindall. *Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs, and Classical Music*. New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005.

<https://doi.org/10.25101/5.14>

These three books explore a portion of the broad spectrum of challenges involved in making a living in music. Goldsby is what is generally called a “lounge pianist,” Slichter was a drummer for the one-hit-band Semisonic, and Tindall was a freelance oboe player in the classical music jungle of New York.

The three writer-musicians had different aspirations from the beginning. Goldsby *enjoys* sitting in a lounge and noodling for a group that varies from polite dinner guests to depressed alcoholics. Slichter’s band had a brief go at the big time for MCA, which Slichter not so fondly describes as the “Music Cemetery of America.” Tindall wanted to land an orchestral job with a major symphony, and although she did indeed sub regularly with the

New York Philharmonic, she ultimately became reconciled to playing Broadway shows, occasional jingles, and chamber music gigs.

The most intriguing aspect of the three books is the commonalities that faced these three musicians—despite the profound differences in their musical training and ambitions. Along the way each writer informs us about the nature of his or her chosen path. Tindall freely confesses that most of her gigs came from romantic relationships with other oboe players. Her entire musical lifetime has been a quest to find a reed that enables her to play up to her high standards. She doesn't reveal whether anyone ever tried to help her in this Don Quixote-like quest. Throughout the book she shares odd and interesting aspects of the classical music world. For example, in a piano-violin duo concert, Itzhak Perlman earned more than thirty times the \$1,000 fee that Tindall's friend Samuel Sanders received for his services. Along the way we find that classical musicians are just as eccentric and competitive as their colleagues in the pop world, and just as likely to indulge in drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex. I doubt that this will come as too much of a shock to our readers. Of the three musicians, it is Tindall who burns out, moving to a career in journalism and limiting her playing engagements. Along the way she portrays the realities and hardships of auditioning for a symphony job, something she did on a number of occasions.

If Tindall is somewhat bitter about her unsuccessful lifelong quest for a symphonic gig, Jacob Slichter is more bemused at the chaotic world of rock and roll. Slichter is self-effacing in describing his musical abilities as a drummer, but he quickly catches on to the way the rock and roll business operates. The band goes through the honeymoon period with its label, and makes a series of expensive but ineffective videos. Nothing seems to be happening. The band's first album sells only fifty thousand copies, leaving them heavily in debt to MCA. The label isn't crazy about the next one either, but Nancy Levin, the new head of radio promotion for MCA, believes that *Closing Time* is a smash and she gets it played on KROQ in Los Angeles. Everyone's dreams come true—the song is a major hit. The bad news, of course, is that the band is unable to follow up with another hit, and the videos have cut so much into its royalty fund that the band derives no financial benefit from the record. Semisonic ultimately breaks up, although they remain friends, and Jake has written this enjoyable and very credible book.

It was very intriguing to find that Robin Meloy Goldsby actually enjoys her work as a lounge pianist. It has taken her to all sorts of fancy hotel

piano bars and international resort gigs. Ultimately she married a bass player and now performs in Europe. Along the way she endures a stalking, insults by strange saloon habitués, and various romantic miseries before finally finding a husband and a niche in European society gigs. This book is an interesting study because while most musicians want to be listened to, a lounge pianist is basically musical wallpaper—the human face of Muzak. For the relatively unambitious musician, this is a low-pressure endeavor. The most consistent annoyance is that the maître d’ invariably asks the pianist to “turn it down,” no matter how softly she may be playing. Some customers seem to have a similar reaction. If the musician can get over that aspect of the gig, it isn’t that difficult a job. The downside is that there are few occasions when anyone is really listening.

All of these books are fun to read, and represent an entertaining take on the reality of the life of a working musician.

Dick Weissman

DICK WEISSMAN is an active performing musician and composer who has written eleven published books about the music business. His most recent book, *Which Side Are You On? An Inside Story of the Folk Music Revival in America*, is published by Continuum.

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