

Hal Willner



Clarence Williams

We are saddened by the loss of producer Hal Willner, who has died from symptoms consistent with COVID-19 at the age of 64. Nonesuch Records President David Bither writes:

I first became aware of Hal Willner when *Amarcord Nino Rota* was released almost 40 years ago ... it was the first of his kaleidoscopic, phantasmagorical tribute records, this one to the great film composer Nino Rota featuring Carla Bley and Michael Mantler, Blondie, Steve Lacy, Bill Frisell, Muhal Richard Abrams, and Henry Threadgill, and an unknown trumpet player

named Wynton Marsalis. “Who would think of putting a record like that together?” I wondered. Little did I know what marvels were yet to come.

I got to know Hal about ten years later as he produced concerts as extravagantly imagined and full of indelible artists as the records he’d made like *Stay Awake* (a record of Disney film music tributes) and *Lost in the Stars* (the same for Kurt Weill)—if considerably longer! One memorable evening at the old St. Ann’s Warehouse passed the five hour mark, as I recall, but it was so full of musical wonders that it was worth the marathon.

Hal would often reference the television show *Night Music* as perhaps his proudest moment: a late night music program hosted by David Sanborn and Jools Holland that fulfilled many of his wildest dreams—as one example, you can find Leonard Cohen accompanied by Sonny Rollins here:

Hal knew more about the obscure corners of American popular culture than just about anyone I ever met—I would often nod knowingly in our conversations even if I had no idea what he was talking about. He was eccentric in the best possible way, beloved by artists and those whose work he championed. We had planned to get together so he could play me some new music he'd been working on just as the virus was beginning to make its presence felt. I am stunned and so sorry that will never happen.

I will not forget Hal's huge, compassionate heart. Our deepest condolences to his wife Sheila and son Arlo ... we send our love.

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Night Music #119 1989 Leonard Cohen, Sonny Rollins, Ken ...



It only ran for two seasons, from 1989 to 1991, probably because it succeeded in every way Hal hoped it might in boggling the minds of late night American television viewers.

Oh yes, and speaking of television, he was music coordinator for *Saturday Night Live* for forty years.

Hal produced two records for Nonesuch: Laurie Anderson's *Life on a String* and Bill Frisell's *Unspeakable*. He also jumped in with both feet when Nonesuch recorded some of New Orleans' greatest artists in the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina for *Our New Orleans*, a project that raised over \$1 million for efforts to rebuild the city.