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## HAL WILLNER: A REMEMBRANCE

April 18th, 2020 | In [news](https://recordmecca.com/category/news/) | 7 Comments (<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comments>).

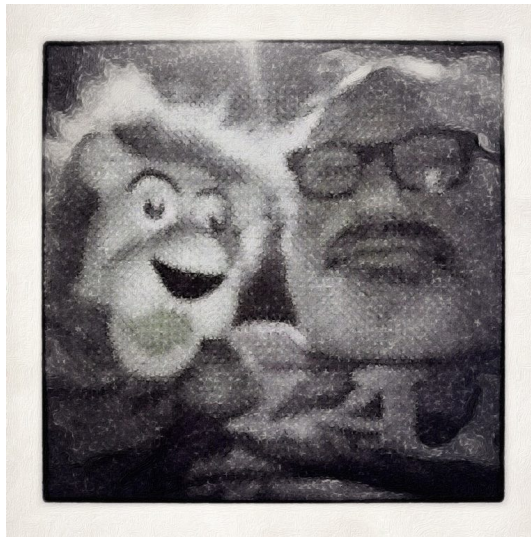
I've been meaning to write about the almost incomprehensible death of Hal Willner (of Covid-19 complications) since his passing on April 7, but to be honest, I couldn't figure out what to say. There have been some high profile [obituaries](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/arts/music/hal-willner-dead.html) and tributes (just google his name). My wife just sent me Elvis Costello's moving [remembrance](https://www.facebook.com/ElvisCostello/posts/10157959501976702?__tn__=K-R) (and that finally got me typing. Like Elvis, I'm taking the personal approach.

No one pays more than Recordmecca for the right material. The rarer the better. Please let us know if you have anything for sale!

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(<http://recordmecca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/image.jpg>).

Hal with Soupy Sales' original Pookie puppet, one of his proud possessions

*[If you don't know about Hal, the extraordinary record producer/impresario/raconteur/eccentric and longtime Saturday Night Live music supervisor, and the man who discovered Jeff Buckley, check out the 2017 New York Times article [Hal Willner's Vanishing, Weird New York](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/nyregion/hal-willners-vanishing-weird-new-york.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/nyregion/hal-willners-vanishing-weird-new-york.html).]*

I first met Hal in 1984, when I was the assistant to A&M Records president Gil Friesen. Part of my job involved turning Gil on to things I thought might be of interest to him. One day John Telfer, the manager of A&M artist Joe Jackson, mentioned Joe was doing a track for a Thelonious Monk tribute album produced by John's friend Hal Willner. At that time, Hal had only recorded a few tracks, and John was helping him

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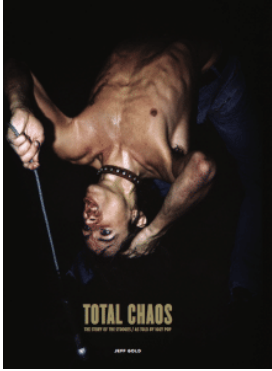
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from Recordmecca's Jeff  
Gold



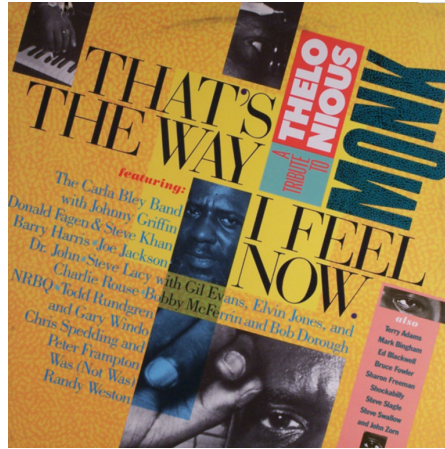
(<http://totalchaosbook.com>).

## LATEST BLOG POST

HAL WILLNER: A  
REMEMBRANCE  
([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/](https://recordmecca.com/willner-a-remembrance/))

find a home for it. Hal had previously produced a Nino Rota tribute album with mostly jazz artists, but this time, he planned to use a more eclectic mix of rock and jazz artists. I was intrigued.

I spoke to Hal to get more details before pitching it to Gil, who like myself was a jazz fan. Though we knew it wasn't going to sell millions of copies, it sounded like a great project, and something we wanted for A&M. Pretty quickly we made a deal for the album—and Hal and I became friends.



(<http://recordmecca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Screen-Shot-2020-04-18-at-6.19.03-PM.png>).

We made three albums with Hal at A&M, and I think they are in some ways his 'greatest hits': *That's The Way I Feel Now – A Tribute to Thelonious Monk* (<https://www.discogs.com/Various-Thats-The-Way-I-Feel-Now-A-Tribute-To-Thelonious-Monk/release/878262>) (1984), *Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill* (<https://www.discogs.com/Various-Lost-In-The-Stars-The-Music-Of-Kurt-Weill/master/102057>) (1985), and the cumbersomely titled (more about that later) *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music From Vintage Disney Films* (<https://www.discogs.com/Various-Stay-Awake-Various-Interpretations-Of-Music-From-Vintage-Disney-Films/master/189968>) (1988). Each is a classic in its own way. Yes, they had big names like Sting, Lou Reed and Tom Waits doing songs you'd never expect, but Hal loved cult heroes like Yma Sumac and Sun Ra, and excelled at putting together oddball collaborations that somehow worked, teaming Bonnie Raitt with Was Not Was, and Ringo Starr with A&M co-founder Herb Alpert and NRBQ's Terry Adams.

As expected, none of these were runaway bestsellers that spawned hit singles. But they got great reviews, found an audience, and I think turned a bit of a profit. And we loved Hal and were happy to be involved in supporting great projects like these.

Hal was anything but a traditional record producer; he was more like an alchemist. A typical 'producer' might suggest changes to lyrics or an arrangement, or ask a musician to play a part differently. It seemed most of Hal's work was done before entering the studio. He'd figure out which songs he wanted for an album, and then cast them, with a 'lead' performer, and supporting musicians. Hal relished mixing it up, teaming James Taylor with jazz musicians Branford Marsalis and John Scofield, or 'word jazz' poet Ken Nordine with guitarist Bill Frisell. I was in the studio for a few of his sessions, and his vibe, there and elsewhere, was pretty relaxed. He got everyone together and let the magic happen, maybe making a gentle suggestion, or asking for another take. And it worked! Those records sounded great then, and sound great now.

As many have noted, Hal was an endearing oddball and a master raconteur. Here's just one great Hal story.

Hal decided his next album would be a tribute to songs from Disney movies—"I Wanna Be Like You" from Jungle Book, "Heigh Ho" from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" from Song of the South, etc.

He was pretty far along with recording when he came to see me to talk about the album cover (by this time, I'd been promoted to vice president of marketing and creative services). We were excited about the project, and Hal casually let slip that the people at Disney, ahem, might not be sharing our enthusiasm. In fact the lawyers at Disney viewed their copyrights and trademarks as sacrosanct, their holy grails, and weren't into some weirdo New York record producer putting together a tribute album with a bunch of musicians they'd never heard of. I'll never forget Hal telling me the Disney business affairs lawyer he met with had a sign on his desk that said, in reference to Disney's most important character, "Don't Mess With the Mouse".

That explains the legalese of the album title: *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films*. This was not to be mistaken for a Disney project. I remember a particularly tense meeting with Hal, the Disney and A&M lawyers, and our marketing staff, where we learned we could absolutely, positively use NO images from any Disney anything on the album cover or in any marketing materials. Great, we thought—a Disney based project, and we could barely use the name Disney in marketing or even describing it.

Happily, a few days later, while perusing fine art catalogs looking for inspiration, I had the miraculous good fortune to find a painting by Rodney Allen Greenblat that matched the album's vibe and title perfectly. Hal liked it and somehow we were able to license it. Phew.



(<http://recordmecca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Screen-Shot-2020-04-18-at-3.44.02-PM.png>).

Hal popped up in major events in my life too. In 1984, I met my future wife, Jody Uttal, at my friend Steve Martin's house (the filmmaker, not the comedian; Steve later became one of Hal's closest friends.) Literally minutes into the first conversation Jody and I ever had, we discovered we both knew Hal.

Four years later, Jody was pregnant with our first child, Ella. The day before Jody's due date, Sting was headlining the Forum. We planned on going, but our contingency plan was to give the tickets to Hal and Steve, who checked in with us throughout the day. Eventually Jody started having contractions, and Hal came and got the tickets; he was the last person we saw before heading to the hospital (thirteen years later they both came to Ella's bat mitzvah, but that's another story.)

And then Hal became our (occasional) neighbor. In 1998, I left the world of record labels, and our trips to New York (and hangs with NY-based Hal) became less frequent. A few years later, we moved from Santa Monica to Venice, and a few years after that I was stunned to run into Hal around the corner from our house. It turned out he had rented a guest house about a block from us, to use as his west coast base (I believe he had it until the end).

Hal had a incalculable number of friends and projects, not to mention his wonderful wife Sheila and son Arlo, and his 'day job' at Saturday Night Live— so he didn't make it out here as often as he liked. But when you'd least expect it, Hal would materialize with no warning. Sometimes there would be a text or a call, but more often than not, we'd hear a loud banging on our window, open the shade, and there would stand Hal. He'd come in, and we'd start right back up, usually for at least an hour or two. I'll never forget the last time—my wife called from downstairs that Hal had dropped by. I came down to find Hal, fresh from a swim at the nearby beach, in swim trunks and flip flops and nothing else, dripping wet. His rickety bicycle was parked in our yard. I went upstairs and got him a t-shirt, which I told him he could keep. It's such a great image to have for our last Hal sighting.

Hal always wanted to see my latest musical finds (I collect and sell rare records & music memorabilia). In the past few years I remember a deep dive into a huge jazz memorabilia collection I'd bought, and a previously unknown Lenny Bruce tape. Lenny was one of Hal's heroes, and he helped me figure out where and when the tape was recorded

I never visited his famous NYC studio, but from the photos, his Venice guest house looked pretty similar. Every surface was overflowing with precarious piles of cds, books, ephemera, things falling off tables, a huge chaotic framed print on the wall, inscribed to Hal by his great friend Ralph Steadman.

Here's a text exchange from a few years ago:

Me: Are you around? “

Hal: Yes-but I got a fucking acting gig as a Jerry Rubin character in “Documentary now”! Strange – you around this weekend?”



[http://recordmecca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IMG\\_1068-scaled.jpg](http://recordmecca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IMG_1068-scaled.jpg)

Hal as a “Jerry Rubin character”

Hal was very close with Lou Reed, who I'd worked with at Warner Bros. Records in the 90s, and who could be very difficult. He was also friendly with Gail Zappa, Frank Zappa's wife, who had a similar reputation. In a

text conversation, Gail's name had come up, and Hal wrote "So weird that I got on well with people that no one else did and didn't get on with people that...well..."

I think that was a reference to the more mainstream music business. Hal kvetched about how, despite all the acclaim his projects received, he'd never get hired by major artists to produce their albums. I'd remind him that he'd staked his territory as someone who made wonderful art projects, not million sellers, and as fantastic as his projects were, the mainstream record labels craved million sellers.

He knew, but...

In my modern Buddhist worldview, people live on in those they loved, taught or in some way touched. It's a tragedy he's gone. I can't imagine what it's like for Sheila and Arlo. Jody and I send them all our love. But the incredible outpouring of love and appreciation for Hal and his work shows just how much he was valued. And how much he'll be missed. I think he would have been blown away.

Happily Hal left a lot of tangible work behind (including a fine Mingus tribute and most recently, two various artist compilations of sea shanties). This is music that absolutely would not have existed if not for Hal's passion, creativity, and vision. So let's celebrate his time on earth, listen to the records he made, and remember the late but absolutely great Hal Willner.

Jeff Gold

If you haven't seen it, here's the star studded Saturday Night Live tribute to Hal.

### Hal Willner Tribute - SNL



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[← Fake Sealed Records With Hype Stickers Proliferate on Ebay \(https://recordmecca.com/news/fake-sealed-records-with-hype-stickers-proliferate-on-ebay/\)](https://recordmecca.com/news/fake-sealed-records-with-hype-stickers-proliferate-on-ebay/)

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### COMMENTS

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04/18/2020 at 8:33 PM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20061>)

David Handelman says:

Wonderful, Jeff. Vivid and captures him well.

Maybe you know the answer to a question about Stay Awake that has always perplexed me.

Why did Hal decide to put combine so many of the songs into medleys? There are twice as many songs as track numbers. It seems the same effect could have been made just by sequencing them?

It's not a complaint, just curious.

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20061#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20061#respond))

04/20/2020 at 10:19 AM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20068>)

recordmecca says:

From the liner notes, I think it was because most of the songs were very short, with only a chorus and maybe one verse.

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20068#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20068#respond))

04/19/2020 at 3:32 AM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20062>)

Marc (<http://haltribute.com>) says:

Beautiful memories Jeff.

I've put together a a site to collect all of Hal's remembrance's so Sheila and Arlo have it all in one place so I'll add a link to yours. Thanks for sharing.

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20062#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20062#respond))

04/19/2020 at 6:45 AM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20063>)

Nuno Robles says:

A beautiful tribute. Thank you for sharing your memories. I really liked to read this.

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20063#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20063#respond))

04/19/2020 at 8:52 AM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20064>)

James McElwee says:

Fantastic Jeff...thank you for the great stories and the link to the New York Times 2017 piece

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20064#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20064#respond))

04/19/2020 at 10:38 AM

(<https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20065>)

Jeff Gold says:

Thanks to you both. Very sad but an incredible legacy Hal left

REPLY ([HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20065#RESPOND](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20065#respond))

gloharris (<http://No%20website>) says: [willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20067](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/#comment-20067))

I saw Hal at a lecture , and book signing for John Corbett’s book last spring in newyork city. He spoke with reverence of the New York of yester year...we had spoken about getting together for lunch...and catching up. I’m thankful we saw one another then as we just never quite connected for the lunch. Hal loved my late husband, drummer, beaver harris and produced “well kept secret” featuring beaver harris and the late pianist don pullen in the 80’s on then shemp ” a dubious concept of deep creek productions.” I loved hal, his quiet humility and always remembering beaver in our conversations. “well kept secret” was reissued on CD by Hal and john corbett out of Chicago two years ago!!  
RIP, halwilner

[REPLY \(HTTPS://RECORDMECCA.COM/NEWS/HAL-WILLNER-A-REMEMBRANCE/?REPLYTOCOM=20067#RESPOND\)](https://recordmecca.com/news/hal-willner-a-remembrance/?replytocom=20067#respond)

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