

Media Funhouse

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Friday, May 15, 2020

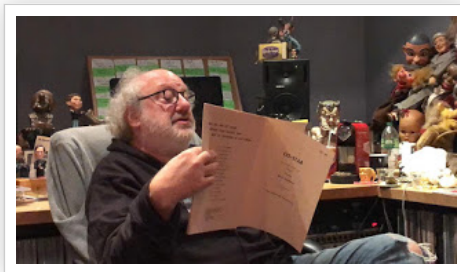
Prince Hal Exits the Scene: Deceased Artiste Hal Willner

The New York City free summer concert series are already cancelling their seasons. This isn't a surprise, given the tenor of the times and the fact that 2020 as a whole will most surely be sunk through the fall (at least) by the pandemic. Even when the world returns to "normal" the summer concerts will never be the same, because a major presence in the programming and production of some of the most memorable of those shows is now gone. His name was Willner (when introducing himself to audiences he tended to leave out the first name) and I had taken to calling him (pardon me, Willie the Shake) "Prince Hal" on this blog.

The records that Willner produced will live on, but the simply stunningly wonderful concerts he put on are now just memories – memories and random photos (and yes, some bits of video and audio generated by fans). Great articles like [this one](#) and especially [this one](#) found his collaborators attesting to the intensity of Willner's fandom for (and knowledge of) music — from traditional folk and country to rock, pop, and his beloved jazz. His talent for blending artists with material in both a series of tribute albums and tribute concerts was his supreme contribution over the past four decades.

His obits discussed his very well-loved (and well-reviewed) tribute albums. His concerts were discussed, but the sheer "volume" of these shows was left out of most obits, which needed (for audience recognition) to focus on his friendships with certain music legends and his work on "Saturday Night Live." The latter earned him a solid, stable paycheck and allowed him to do all the other labor of love projects, so it had its purpose, but it was not where Willner's art lie. That can be found on the albums and most definitely in the array of musicians and performers he recruited for the concerts he produced.

To illustrate, Willner put together sublime rosters of talent for tribute albums dedicated to these musical legends: Nino Rota, Thelonious Monk, Kurt Weill, Walt Disney (music for the studios films), Charles Mingus, Harold Arlen, Leonard Cohen, Harry Smith (from the Anthology of American Folk Music compiled by Smith), and (forthcoming) Marc Bolan/T. Rex. (And let's not forget the spoken-word album where folks such as Marianne Faithfull, Christopher Walken, Iggy Pop, Jeff Buckley, and Dr. John read Poe stories and poems!)



The mad scientist in his laboratory.
(Photo by [Marc Urselli](#).)

He did live tributes to the names above, but the amazing live concerts he produced also included tributes (over a period of nearly 30 years) to: Tim Buckley, Doc Pomus, Neil Young, Randy Newman, Bill Withers, Joel Dorn (productions), Tuli Kupferberg, Shel Silverstein, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Allan Sherman, Lou Reed, George Martin (productions), and Bob Dylan. And, in the spoken-word arena, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, the Firesign Theater, Arch Oboler, Ken Nordine, Del Close, Terry Southern, Hunter S. Thompson, and the Marquis De Sade (!).

Those of us who followed his work tried to see any concert that he had anything to do with — as the years went on some had to be missed for monetary or personal reasons, but the best part of being a Willner fan was that the initial problem was negated in so many sublime cases, since Hal worked in tandem with all three of the main NYC summer festivals at different times, and when it was a labor of love show, the admission fee was ridiculously low (10 or under) for evenings that (no hyperbole) you might well remember for the rest of your life.

I charted my love of Willner's concerts on these blogs beginning in 2008, but had been trying to catch as many of his shows for the seven years preceding that. (I now know that I was a decade late for the picnic, but that never mattered — there was always something new.) I reviewed a bunch of his shows here because I had been so dazzled by what I saw — but also as a sort of aide-memoire, because Willner liked to put surprises in his shows.

Not the usual ones you find at a concert ("wow, that music legend just came out to join the musical legend we came to see!"), but more sneaky, subtle ones that you would remember even longer and for better reasons — like the fact that a music legend was



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Sisterly Menace: Deceased Artiste Ann Prentiss

Sometimes an obit's juiciest, strangest details are contained at the end. For instance, I was referred this week (by friend M.

Faust) to th...

doing such a beautiful job covering a song, that a duet was occurring that had to be processed before it could even be understood (check out the episodes of Hal's "Night Music" on YouTube for examples of these sort of musical fusions both weird and miraculous), and the single most sublime mindfuck, the introduction of a new performer who "must" be remembered. I would include among these the first time I heard and saw Antony (now Anohni) perform at a Willner show (the Leonard Cohen tribute) and any number of songs done by the devoted instrumentalists and vocalists who made up his "ensemble" for his live shows.

I didn't write here about the last two Willner shows I saw because they were reviewed in the New York Times and were in essence more "organized" — although there was still an unpredictable strain in them, best exemplified by Chloe Webb wearing a horse's head wandering throughout Town Hall in one (a Hunter S. Thompson tribute) and Triumph the Insult Comic Dog doing a cover of a folk standard in another (a salute to Dylan's 1963 set at Town Hall).

The Willner shows I did write up here were these:

- Two tribute shows: for Joel Dorn, at Lincoln Center and for Bill Withers, Prospect Park, Aug 2008
- The marathon benefit for Tuli Kupferberg at St. Ann's Feb 2010
- A panel on Andy Kaufman's musical obsessions (with guest panelist Willner and an assortment of his friends) June 2013
- Four shows from his first residency at the Stone, Sept 2014
- Four shows from his second residency at the Stone, June 2016
- Lou Reed daylong celebration at Lincoln Center, Aug 2016

There are memories I have of other Willner shows, but I think the best way one can find out about Hal's work is to visit a newly published website that stands as a tribute to his work. [Engineer-producer-mixer-sound designer Marc Urselli](#), who worked side-by-side with Willner for more than a decade, has done great work in putting together people's memories of the man, plus a discography of the albums he produced (each represented with a Spotify playlist) and a detailed list of the concerts Willner produced. [The homepage for the site is here.](#)

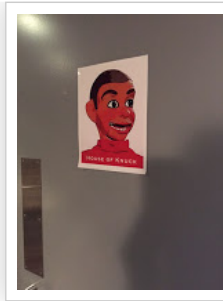
Full disclosure: I prepared the concert list, working from a number of sources (including contemporary reviews, the performers' own websites, the archived records of certain venues, and even the above-mentioned blog entries). I never knew Willner — I had two short conversations with him, in which I simply asked him a few questions and thanked him for all the shows of his that I had seen. (He was nice enough in private Facebook chat to thank me for the blog entries on the Stone shows.)

The assemblage of this list was my concrete thank-you to a producer who didn't just mount a bunch of really cool concerts — he opened his viewers up to new artists, gave us renewed respect for old ones, and when putting on shows in much smaller venues, got to spread his infectious sense of fandom and his utterly apt knack for mixing talents both young and old with the most amazing material. (From the initial information that has surfaced about it and the debut track by Nick Cave, his last project, the long-gestating tribute double album "AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs Of Marc Bolan and T. Rex," will continue in this vein. It will be released in September.)

The only downside to any of this was that I've been curious for years if Willner was recording the live shows he produced for some future release project. The answer is, very sadly, no. There were some concerts recorded — some venues do it as a matter of practice and there were some that were organized with eventual DVDs in mind. In the latter category, we do have the documentary *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man* and the box set of *The Harry Smith Project* concerts (and the solo performer shows, like Marianne Faithfull's *Blazing Away* and *Lou Reed's Berlin*). But for the most part, the copyright issues, possible contractual problems, and even the small sizes of some of the venues made it unfeasible to record the shows.

As a neat bonus to this discussion I point you toward a video clip that was posted after Willner's passing by videographer Sebastian Sharples. The vid shows how Hal went about figuring out in what order the performers would appear, in this case for the first of the "Harry Smith Project" shows, which took place at the South Bank Centre in London for the July 1999 Meltdown Festival. We see Hal assigning index cards to each act and the song they will do, and then sitting on the floor and moving the cards around until he gets the order he likes. Having seen his shows, I can tell you — he liked changing moods (putting something upbeat after something sad) and also throwing surprises in the middle of shows rather than the obvious place (the end). He did it all masterfully.

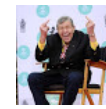
We also see him watching footage of the older Harry Smith (an unusually eccentric gent who was an immensely talented filmmaker and archivist) and sitting with the Meltdown guest director for that year, Nick Cave.



The door to Willner's studio. (photo by the terrific singer-songwriter [Mary Lee Kortez](#))



A younger Willner, with Milla J., Robbie R., and Bono. (circa 2000)



"Mean Jerry": the underside of Deceased Artiste Jerry Lewis

"I live in a selfish, selfless kind of a cocoon. You cannot get by in this world, apparently, if you are a courageous, honest crusader

an...



Catch It While You Can: 'The Uncle Floyd Show' online

The notion that "everything is on the Internet" is a comfortable fallacy for those who want to cut ties with their "physical artifacts"

(...



Where have you gone, Donut Man?

I've had a few Easter traditions on the Funhouse TV show, for my "Easter blasphemy" episodes. One of the most bizarre

(recommended m...



Vintage Stand-up Comedy: my new favorite blog

I am a junkie for several things, among them novelty songs and comedy albums. The novelty tunes I'll go into another time, but as a comedy-L...



The 'announcer's test' and the nonsense lyric

Summer is the season for silliness (and, evidently, alliteration). There is no greater place to discover purebred, 100% silliness than in n...



What's in a Name? Deceased Artiste Allen Goorwitz (aka Allen Garfield)

His face rings bells for anyone who watches (and reveres) the great American cinema of the early Seventies, now a long-gone phenomenon. (...)



When 'Eraserhead' spanked Jerry Van Dyke's daughter

In researching a piece of footage that relates to recent Deceased Artiste Jerry Van Dyke, I found the mind-boggling piece of video

found b...



Prince Hal Exits the Scene: Deceased Artiste Hal Willner

The New York City free summer concert series are already cancelling their seasons. This isn't a surprise, given the tenor of the times an...



'Lost' films found 2: Harry Hurwitz's 'The Comeback Trail'

In the world of cinephiles Harry Hurwitz's *The Projectionist* (1971) is regarded as a treasure, a beautifully rendered tribute to

the joy...

Labels

'Lost' films found (4)

"A Hard Day's Night" (1)

"All Night With Joey Reynolds" (2)

"Anna" (2)

"Antichrist" (1)

"Around a Small Mountain" (1)

"As It Occurs to Me" (1)

"Bad Book Club" (2)

Hal 1999



And so the shows will remain a memory to those who saw them. And we do have the photos and those bits of audio and video that fans chose to snag. If the list (link below) of the performers who participated in the Willner shows was spelled out (if those hundreds and hundreds of names could even be verified), the resulting roster would testify to the depth and breadth of Willner's musical knowledge and his many, many enthusiasms.



Willner with one of the many super-talented folks he paid tribute to. He's your man...

For the time being, there is this list, which I'm proud to have worked on. If you spot any shows produced by Willner that were left out, write to me at the Funhouse email address (found on [the Funhouse site](#)) and I'll send on the information to Marc. (Please supply particulars of the show— theme/performer, venue, city, and month/year)

The loss of Willner is a very big one to the music community (and fans, for he was a giant one himself, of so many things). But the music he gave us will continue, both in the grooves and in our memories.

Here is the full(est) list of the concerts Willner produced — 33 years of a master-producer's life. <http://haltribute.com/hal-willner-live-productions-shows-chronology/>

Posted by [Media Funhouse](#) at [8:56 P.M.](#)
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- ["Phantom of the Paradise"](#) (1)
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- ["The Devils"](#) (2)
- ["The Donut Hole"](#) (1)
- ["The Extra Girl"](#) (1)
- ["The Goon Show"](#) (1)
- ["The Incredibly Strange Film Show"](#) (1)
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