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A Month After His Death, Taking Stock Of Hal Willner's Legacy



Philip Fagan Former Contributor ⓘ

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I write about media culture, theory, and history with a focus on the offbeat and avant-garde.



NEW YORK CITY, NY - JANUARY 19: Hal Willner and Lou Reed attend Dinner Celebrating the Opening of LOU REED NEW YORK Photography Exhibition hosted by HERMES at Steven Kasher Gallery on January 19, 2006 in New York City. (Photo by Joe Schildhorn/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images) [-] PATRICK MCMULLAN VIA GETTY IMAGES

As music fans around the world mourned the passing of legendary folksinger-songwriter John Prine on April 7, another Coronavirus-related death on the same day similarly marked the end of an era for the American music industry. Maverick producer, event organizer, and all around

“showman” savant Hal Willner had just turned 64 the day before his passing in New York City.

A visionary record producer, engineer, and eclectic live event organizer, Willner consistently collaborated with a stable of the most progressive and offbeat recording artists operating on the outer edges of the mainstream establishment: Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs, Nick Cave, Leonard Cohen, Elvis Costello, Marianne Faithfull, Bryan Ferry, Gavin Friday, Bill Frisell, Allen Ginsberg, Dr. John, Leon Redbone, Lou Reed, Stan Ridgeway, Sonic Youth, Tom Waits, and John Zorn, to name but a few. In the process, Willner became the rare music producer who was also considered a singular artist by peers and fans alike. “A Hal Willner Production” inscribed on any release became required listening for a generation of musos. In a 2017 interview, Willner told *The New York Times*, “You create a strong framework, and you let people do what they do inside the framework, and watch over it. If it sounds good, let it go. A lot of producers don’t do that.”

An experimental jazz musician by nature, Willner’s lifelong project involved taking the inherently avant-garde nature of the “concept album” to its fullest potential as cinematic soundscape. Choosing artists and themes close to his heart, he conjured a string of startling tribute albums devoted to his own beloved obsessions and featuring his unique roster of cutting edge musicians. *Lost in the Stars* (1985) and *September Songs* (1997) featured Cave, Faithfull, Reed, Waits, Zorn and others riffing on the Weimar Republic cabaret decadence of Kurt Weill, while *Stay Awake* (1988) took a similar approach by exploring the inherent weirdness of old Walt Disney film music. Willner’s many other productions included similar tributes to Nino Rota’s Fellini film scores, modern jazz pioneers Charles Mingus and Thelonius Monk, the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Warner Brothers cartoon soundtracks, and the work of underground filmmaker, folk music collector, and occultist Harry Smith. In 2006, Willner issued *Rogue’s Gallery*, the first of two sprawling compilations of old seafaring and pirate songs recorded by an epic roster of his favorite contemporary artists. Weaving dreamlike tapestries

from a collective musical unconscious, such works paid loving tribute to the legacies of both their conceptual topics and the legendary artists helping Willner render homage on the recordings.

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In the 1990s, Willner collaborated on and produced spoken word albums for the aging Beat writers William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg, with live recording sessions and subsequent remixes accompanied by the likes of John Cale, Bill Frisell, Phillip Glass, Lenny Kaye, King Khan, M. Lamar, Paul McCartney, and Sonic Youth. An engaging and skilled writer, Willner was also known for the insightful liner notes he penned for own offbeat conceptual tribute compilations as well as releases by The Band, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, Marianne Faithfull, Roland Kirk, Kris Kristofferson, and Lou Reed. Additionally, Willner worked behind the scenes on a number of film soundtracks for notable directors like Robert Altman, Tim Burton, Julian Schnabel, Martin Scorsese, Gus Van Sant, and Wim Wenders.

Willner's distinctive trademark tribute albums were also manifested in the various live events he spearheaded. Over the years, he assembled his usual rogue's gallery of musicians to stage live tribute events connected to his eclectic compilation recordings. In addition to concerts related to his Burroughs, Ginsberg, Poe, Rota, Smith, and Weill projects, he also staged elaborate star-studded music and multimedia concerts as tributes to cultural innovators like Leonard Cohen, Doc Pomus, and the Marquis de Sade among others, and often produced solo concerts for his friends and regular collaborators as well.

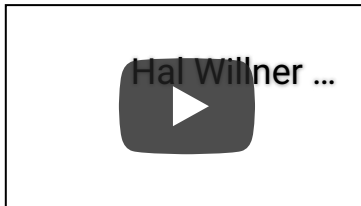
As avant-garde as his projects often were, Willner was also a creature from another time, or at least some imagined past. He had the affable air and storytelling gift of an old-school Vaudevillian or carnival barker, and was obsessed with the esoterica of previous eras of music, technology, and popular culture: The ghostly transmissions of early radio and broadcast television, the crackle of obscure old 78 records, circus sideshows, obscure midcentury jazz and folk bohemias, antique toys and ephemera from the earliest days of popular culture. Like so many of his haunting projects, Willner was at once a creator who mined the past and an eccentric pioneer ahead of his own time.

The last two decades of the late Lou Reed's career saw Hal Willner acting as the edgy New York art rocker's co-creator. In addition to their many collaborations on Willner's conceptual compilation works, Reed worked with the production and engineering maestro on eight solo releases beginning in 1999, a prolific period for Reed that included career highlight *Ecstasy* in 2000. *The Raven*, a very cinematic and very Willneresque conceptual double album from 2003, simultaneously celebrated the writing and legacies of both Reed and Edgar Allan Poe and explored the common themes of all three artists with an A-list of special guest stars. Reed's final full-length record of original material was *Lulu*, a collaboration with Metallica produced by Willner and released in 2011. Reed's pal and longtime collaborator David Bowie proclaimed the album the best of his career.

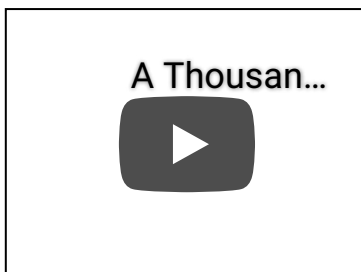
When Reed was booked as keynote speaker at the 2007 South by Southwest Film and Music Festival, he brought Willner along with him as the man most suited to interview him about his storied career (The festival also presented the premiere of Reed's arthouse concert film *Berlin*, for which Willner had produced the music). Since Reed's passing in 2013, Willner had continued to oversee the remastering and rerelease of Reed's back catalogue and continued his series of collaborations with Reed's widow, multimedia artist Laurie Anderson. In 2016, Willner worked with Anderson to present what

may have been his most emotionally challenging tribute show, an all-day salute to their soulmate Reed in the New York City they loved.

In addition to his more progressive left hand projects, Willner was also the longtime music director for Saturday Night Live, and the April 11 “stay at home” iteration of the broadcast featured a moving tribute to Hal that highlighted the man’s essential kindness as well as his long friendship and many collaborations with Lou Reed.



Reed would have been 78 on March 2. In the coming weeks, I’ll occasionally be writing about the unexplored relationship between Lou Reed and the cinema, an aspect of his career that was intensified by his long collaboration and friendship with the great Hal Willner. For now, put on some Willner and Reed recordings, turn up the volume, and get lost in the stars.





Philip Fagan

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I am a writer, filmmaker, media professor, and film programmer currently living through a global pandemic in Austin, Texas.

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