

MUSIC

## Hal Willner, longtime music producer and 'SNL' veteran, dies of COVID-19 complications at 64



Music producer Hal Willner, who died from COVID-19 complications at 64. (Clarence Williams / Los Angeles Times)

By RANDALL ROBERTS | STAFF WRITER

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Hal Willner, the Grammy-winning record producer and longtime “Saturday Night Live” sketch music producer, has died from complications from COVID-19. He was 64.

Through his curation and production skills, the New York music connoisseur helped advance the careers of countless artists starting in the 1970s. As a producer, he worked with Marianne Faithfull, Lou Reed, the Neville Brothers, Leon Redbone and dozens more.

Willner described himself in his Twitter bio as the “so-called Music Producer & Saturday Night Live sketch music guy since Raging Bull debuted, Another One Bites the Dust a hit & Kim Kardashian was born,” but that barely captures the effect his enthusiasm had on music culture.

“I’ve been lucky enough (or unlucky enough) to do things in all different areas: records, films, television,” Willner said in [one interview](#). “I started out doing these conceptual projects basically to make the records I wanted to hear, and no more reason than that. I thought something would grow out of it, and it did.”

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He grew up in Philadelphia working at his father’s delicatessen, [he told](#) New York magazine in 2017, but mostly kept to himself. “I was a kid who went around talking to

himself, and used to get in trouble drawing cartoons, and locked myself in my room and went into dream world — I was one of those.”

He added, “I just retreated into television and records, and that was reality for me.”

Willner moved to New York when he was 18 to attend New York University, and got a job as an assistant to the record producer Joel Dorn. A few years later, he formulated a plan to produce tribute albums unlike any that had been issued before.

On a series of loving, genre-straddling collections starting in the early 1980s, Willner delved into his deep Rolodex and booked ace New York musicians into a studio to create tributes to artists including Italian film composer Nino Rota, jazz pianist Thelonious Monk and German composing team Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht.

On the first of them, 1981’s “Amarcord Nino Rota,” he hired ace musicians Steve Swallow, Henry Threadgill, Muhal Richard Abrams and Branford and Wynton Marsalis, as well as Blondie’s Debbie Harry and Chris Stein, to explore the work of new-wave filmmaker Federico Fellini’s longtime collaborator. For “That’s the Way I Feel Now,” he commissioned an array of artists including NRBQ, Todd Rundgren, oddball rock band Shockabilly and more to rework Monk’s music.

Most striking was Willner's ode to the music of Walt Disney's animated films. Called "Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films," he enlisted artists including cosmic jazz traveler Sun Ra, experimental vocalist Yma Sumac, Los Angeles group Los Lobos and rock band the Replacements to re-imagine such songs as "Cruella De Ville," "Whistle While You Work" and "Someday My Prince Will Come." Tom Waits turned "Heigh Ho (The Dwarves Marching Song)" into a forced-labor dirge.

As the compiler of "The Carl Stalling Project: Music From Warner Bros. Cartoons 1936-1958," Willner resurrected the reputation of the frantic, inventive composer Stalling and his scores for "Bugs Bunny" and "Road Runner" cartoons.

In film, Willner either supervised or helped produce music for "Gangs of New York," "Finding Forrester," "Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy" and "Step Brothers," among others. More recently, he worked on the IFC series "The Spoils of Babylon" and "The Spoils Before Dying."

The experimental vocalist Diamanda Galas, who first met Willner when he oversaw booking for the late-night music show "Night Music" in the 1980s, recalled to [the Quietus](#) why artists were so drawn to him: "The man produces records by looking at the

artist, and all he or she has done, and suddenly he knows the songs, the people to call for the arrangements, the musicians from his mammoth selection of musical geniuses.”

Calling him “a visionary,” Galas added that Willner “does not censor his radar because some conventional fool does not understand him.”

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