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HAL WILLNER, AMERICAN VISIONARY

JOHN KRUTH (HTTPS://PLEASEKILLME.COM/AUTHOR/JOHN-KRUTH/) × APRIL 16, 2020

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The coronavirus pandemic has killed thousands of people worldwide, each a tragedy to their friends and families. But the music world has lost some giants, too, including John Prine, Wallace Roney, Ellis Marsalis Jr., Bucky Pizzarelli, Cristina and, last but not least, the beloved music producer Hal Willner. Musician and biographer John Kruth was a friend and collaborator with Willner. He pays tribute here to the man who created tributes—in album and concert form.

Back in the mid-'90s, while writing my first book – *Bright Moments – The Life and Legacy of Rahsaan Roland Kirk*

(<https://amzn.to/34OWwYp>), Joel Dorn, Kirk's producer at Atlantic Records, suggested I interview Hal Willner. I had been a big fan of his brilliant tribute records since the release of *Amacord Nino Rota* (<https://amzn.to/2XDV1KI>) (1981) but didn't realize he got his start working as Joel's minion and as "a lead boy" for the sightless jazz visionary, Rahsaan. So, I called Hal.

"Where do you wanna meet?" he asked.

I suggested the rug-strewn basement of a Soho souk on Prince Street called the Gates of Marrakech. My Moroccan friends were brilliant at pulling together last-minute parties. When I explained to them that our guest of honor had produced everybody from Lou Reed and Marianne Faithful to Sun Ra, Tom Waits and Sting, they threw down some extra rugs and pillows and began cooking up a delicious tagine for the occasion, with a bucketful of sweet tea to wash it all down.



As Willner descended the basement stairs, the jam began right on cue. We all had a great time and a few days later I got a call from Hal. Talking with him on the phone was interesting as he was a great mumbler who often left out key bits of information, assuming you knew what was happening: “I’m doing this thing with Allen [Ginsberg] tomorrow night at the church on Second Avenue [St. Marks – which has had a long history of poetry readings and happenings] and I was wondering if you could bring your Moroccan friends down to play while Allen reads.”

Cool! I admired Willner’s work, loved Allen’s poetry and figured this might be an excellent second date with the lovely blonde painter Marilyn Cvitanic, who luckily gave me a another chance after I nervously dumped the wreckage of my recent break-up on her during our first date at the Whitney.

It also turned out that Marilyn was a fan of Bob Neuwirth and David Mansfield (both veterans of Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue) who were also on the bill. And with a bit more consideration for her side of the conversation and some delicious pastries and coffee delivered to her seat from backstage, things were beginning to look up.

Lateef, who ran the Gates of Marrakech, a little jewel box of an import shop (now long gone) arrived early with a large rug and some pillows and lamps for the stage, and all went well, until Allen began reading his poems about his decadent vacation in Tangier. While I was thrilled to back up Ginsberg, I can’t say the rest of the band felt the same. As Allen reeled off images and memories of smoking kief and having sex with young boys, Lateef and Little Mohammed glared at me.

“Why does he say these things?” Lateef asked afterwards. “Even if they happened, we never speak about them... ever!”

“He’s Allen Ginsberg,” I replied. “That’s what he does!”

That’s what Hal tried to keep alive, the experience that can only be created by removing the safety net. And if something failed, he would say, ‘It’s only music, we’re not doing brain surgery here.’

Eclectic is a word often used to describe Hal Willner’s musical aesthetic. But what inspired this wild mosh of styles that shaped Hal’s unique perspective and led him to create a genre we now take for granted—“the tribute album”—along with his brilliant tribute shows?

“It was a combination of vaudeville, variety and comedy shows and going to Bill Graham concerts where you’d see a mix of The Who, La Belle and the Bonzo Dog Band in one night,” Hal recalled. “But these projects [based on the music of Kurt Weill, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus or Walt Disney’s films] were never meant as an homage or to bow down to the artist.”

Instead, it was a way for Hal and his hand-picked crew of musicians, actors, comedians and poets to interact with the chosen artist’s oeuvre and keep it alive with new and unexpected interpretations, while having a ball in the meantime.

“Hal was always inspirational in his deep love of music – all kinds of music,” multi-instrumentalist/composer Elliott Sharp said. “He loved the intense, the weird, the marginal, the original. His passion for the full spectrum was displayed proudly, and not just worn on his sleeve, but used as a springboard for his bold plans of action to bring this music to a wider audience.”

In the studio, Willner would provide “support and presence, [he was] never intrusive or imposing his vision, instead encouraging, a cheerleader for the extreme,” Sharp recalled fondly.

“I lived for the world of controlled chaos that Hal created. He made that an art form like no one else,” arranger/conductor Steve Weisberg said. “What came from those alchemical experiments always ranged from utter sublime brilliance to the unintended fumble. That’s what Hal tried to keep alive, the experience that can only be created by removing the safety net. And if something failed, he would say, ‘It’s only music, we’re not doing brain surgery here.’ It was about soul and authenticity, not some overly polished, manicured attempt to appeal to the masses.”

“In the entertainment industry, in rock and roll, Hal Willner is what stood between dull mediocrity and living lineage. Between raw imagination and rote capitalism. Between burning passion and constant bullshit. We lost that wall” – Penny Arcade

Jazz/funk trumpeter/bandleader/composer Steven Bernstein (Sex Mob and Millennial Territory Orchestra) recalled his thirty-year friendship/collaboration with Hal Willner as “life altering... Hal saw something in me that no one else did. He gave me opportunities to create music at the purest and highest level possible. He assumed I could do something, and his confidence in me gave me the path to get it done. When we first got to know each other, I would sit with a pen and paper while we talked on the phone, so I could figure out who all these references were – the poets, comedians, directors [he revered].”

Catching up with Hal Willner was no easy task. The man always had a full plate. He constantly bounced between coasts, juggling Hollywood soundtrack work with his day job of over three decades, producing music for skits on *Saturday Night Live*, while producing albums by Lucinda Williams, Marianne Faithfull and Lou Reed (Hal first collaborated with Lou on 2000’s underrated *Ecstasy*, until his death in 2013) as well as teaming up with the silver-haired, whip-smart Janine Nichols on a plethora of tribute shows dedicated to everyone from Allan Sherman, The Firesign Theater, to Leonard Cohen, and Tim Buckley’s music (which led to his son, Jeff Buckley’s discovery).

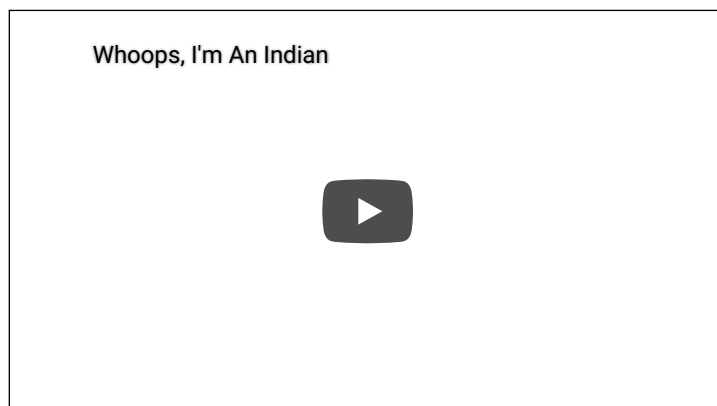
New York Shuffle - Video 1



One place you were certain to find Hal (when he was in town) was at the House of Nyuk, his tiny studio in Hell's Kitchen. The small office was made even smaller by a sprawling collection of surreal puppets, dolls and models of everyone from Dracula to W.C. Fields, Jerry Mahoney, Jimmy Durante, Satan and Carol Channing, along with piles upon piles of records and books. Like the laboratory of any mad genius, it was an environment that only he could thrive in.

"Working with Hal could be best described, as Oliver Hardy used to say to Stan Laurel, 'Another fine mess you've gotten us into!' But in Hal's case, 'fine' ultimately meant 'magnificent,'" Steve Weisberg imparted.

"What we have lost in losing Hal Willner, senselessly to Covid-19, cannot be summed up in a sound bite but I will try," performance artist/playwright Penny Arcade said. "In the entertainment industry, in rock and roll, Hal Willner is what stood between dull mediocrity and living lineage. Between raw imagination and rote capitalism. Between burning passion and constant bullshit. We lost that wall. There is no one to replace him. Luckily, it will take more than one lifetime to go through all the work he left behind."



Hal's art opened doors and created community for every plaid, polka dot and stripe of musician, actor, poet, and technician around the globe. When Willner suddenly passed on April 7, 2020 (one day after his 64th birthday) from complications from Covid-19, the tragic news sent a shock of despair worldwide. Hal not only left behind his bereaved wife, TV producer Shelia Rogers, their teenage son Arlo, a younger sister, Chari McClary, and his father, Carl, a holocaust survivor who is 95, but a fantastic feast of friends as well along with music lovers everywhere.

Back to Steve Weisberg again: "Anyone lucky enough to have been a part of a Willner show felt a close comradery by the end of it, like we'd all been in the trenches together, cheering each other on, doing amazing things that could never be repeated."

"Hal was my friend. It's been almost 40 years now. I can't imagine this world without him in it," said Bill Frisell, (whose lilting guitar illuminated "Juliet of the Spirits" on Willner's debut album *Amacord Nino Rota*). "He had a way of looking at things from a different angle. He saw things in me that I didn't know were there myself. He'd open a door and give me the opportunity to go through it. I never knew what was going to be on the other side. Sometimes I was afraid. He led me into uncharted territory. He trusted me and had no doubt that I'd find my way. He always encouraged me and had faith in me. Whatever it is I am, he has been, is, and will always be a huge part of."

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Suggested Listening:

Amacord Nino Rota

Lost in the Stars – The Music of Kurt Weill

The Lion for Real – Allen Ginsberg

Weird Nightmare: Meditations on [Charles] Mingus

Closed on Account of Rabies – Edgar Allan Poe

Hal Willner- "Take No Prisoners" Live (Lou Reed cover)



Books by John Kruth (https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/367003.John_Kruth)

