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Hal Willner, Music Producer and Longtime 'SNL' Music Supervisor, Dead at 64

Producer behind Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull staged numerous tribute albums and was pivotal in the career of Jeff Buckley

By **DAVID BROWNE**



Hal Willner, the veteran music producer and longtime 'Saturday Night Live staffer, has died at age 64.

Clarence Williams/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

Willner started and compiled a series of on-beat and creative all-star tribute albums — died Tuesday at the age of 64. A rep for Willner confirmed the producer’s death to *Rolling Stone*. While a cause of death has yet to be announced, a source close to Willner tells *Rolling Stone* he was suffering from symptoms consistent with the coronavirus.

“There was no one else like Hal in the music business — curator, archivist, alchemist, thaumaturge, magus, mentor and magician, and all of this tempered by the dry and mischievous humor that infused all of his work and his passion,” Sting tells *RS*. (The two worked together on *Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill* and *Rogue’s Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs, and Chanteys*, both typical Willneresque projects.) “I always looked forward to our meetings, to hear the latest flight of his unbounded imagination, to marvel at his courage, his eclectic bravado and his ability not to care about what is or isn’t ‘hip’, and of course that’s the essence of ‘hip.’ Hal was that essence, and we’ll miss him terribly.”

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In a music business dominated by polished producers and executives regularly chasing hits, Willner always stood out. His eclectic tastes ran from jazz and R&B to indie, and only Willner would think of compiling a salute to the music of Walt Disney movies that included Tom Waits, Bonnie Raitt, Sun Ra, the Replacements, and James Taylor. He could look and sound like a ruffled hipster gnome, but few producers were alert to the adventurous possibilities of music as Willner.

“Absolutely devastated to get this news about my weird and lovely pal, Hal,” tweeted Julia Louis-Dreyfus. “We are heartbroken.” Vernon Reid of Living Colour called him “one of a small handful of the great archivers, & contextualizers of REAL Americana.”

“We love you, Hal — thank you for everything,” Cat Power posted upon on news of his death.

Born in Philadelphia in 1956, Willner arrived in New York in 1974 and soon began working for producer Joel Dorn on albums by Bette Midler and Roberta Flack. In 1980, he had the idea of producing an album of jazz covers of music from Fellini films. Soon enough, he had recruited Blondie’s Debbie Harry and Chris Stein, along with the likes of Wynton Marsalis, for the album *Amarcord Nino Rota*.

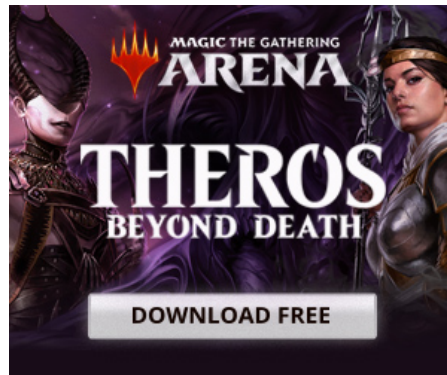
That acclaimed project would be the first of many. For similar tribute albums to Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, and the Disney project, Willner recruited the likes of **Keith Richards**, Sting, Ringo Starr, Elvis Costello, and Iggy Pop.



albums by Lou Reed (*Ecstasy*, *The Raven* and *Lulu*) and Marianne Faithfull (*Before the Poison*). Willner and Reed were especially close, and Willner oversaw a box set of Reed’s solo albums released after Reed’s death. “We were kind of best friends,” Willner said in 2017. “He didn’t like to be alone. There was not a night that he didn’t go out. He knew all about restaurants and plays, bands. He’d be at any club. He did not accept that he was going to die. Bowie did. Leonard [Cohen] did. Lou just ranted. He just loved being alive.”

Willner also played a pivotal role in the career of **Jeff Buckley**, when he invited Buckley to a 1991 tribute concert in New York for Buckley’s father Tim — an event that introduced the younger Buckley to the New York music community and effectively launched his career.

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Willner, who had an impish charm and was beloved by many in the business, had most recently produced a tribute album honoring Marc Bolan and T. Rex that included contributions from Nick Cave, Kesha, Father John Misty, Lucinda Williams, and Joan Jett. He lived in New York with his wife, former *Rolling Stone* writer Sheila Rogers, and their son Arlo.

“Hal had this black book of contact information for everyone—musicians, actors, comedians,” says Williams, who worked with Willner on her album *West* and also sang on the *Rogue’s Gallery* collection. “He could call up these people any time of day or night. And if they were available, they’d say, ‘Sure, no problem.’ People were drawn to him. He had that brilliance combined with an almost child-like quality. He wasn’t about the business or success or making money. It was about the joy he found in what he did.”

In This Article: hal Willner, Jeff Buckley, Keith Richards, Lou Reed, obit, Obituary, RSX



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