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Hal Willner, Philly-born producer and 'Saturday Night Live' music director, has died at 64

by Dan DeLuca, Updated: April 7, 2020



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Hal Willner, 64, a wildly creative, Philadelphia-born record producer known for high-concept all-star tribute albums and a longtime music director of *Saturday Night Live*, died Tuesday, April 7, at his home in New York City. His representative confirmed that Mr. Willner's symptoms had been consistent with COVID-19, though he had not been diagnosed.

On March 28, Mr. Willner had posted a map of the United States on Twitter that showed the concentration of the virus in New York. He commented: "I always wanted to have a number one — but not this," adding that he was "in bed on upper west side."

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The composer Philip Glass said, "Hal was the spirit and model of a new kind of world between artists and the public. I participated and attended many of his productions, and he was one of a kind. It's hard to imagine how things are going to go forward without him."

[David Dye of WXPB-FM \(88.5\) wrote on Twitter](#): "I'm going to call him the most independent thinker in music. This is a loss that brings personal pain."

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Mr. Willner grew up in Northeast Philadelphia and Bala Cynwyd, close by where his father, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor, owned Hymie's Deli in Merion.

"I was a music fan from the day I was born," he said in 2006. "When I was 8, I actually saw the Beatles at Convention Hall. When I was 12, my mother took me to see the Cream at the Electric Factory," then at 22nd and Arch Streets.

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Harold Willner

Before leaving to attend New York University in 1974, he got his schooling at WDAS, the Philadelphia radio station then in its FM free-form heyday.

“You had [old-time rock-and-roll DJ] Hy Lit in the morning,” he said, “and Michael Tearson playing Hendrix, Captain Beefheart, Dr. John. Then there was the Gene Shay folk show, and they’d play the Firesign Theater and old Orson Welles radio shows at night. I never loved a radio station like that again. ”

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In the liner notes for *Rogue’s Gallery*, a 2006 collection of sea chanteys featuring Bono, Lucinda Williams, and Nick Cave, Mr. Willner recalled Shay’s playing a song called “Blood Red Roses,” which he said sounded like “a bunch of mental patients.” He convinced Sting to cover it on the album.

After he graduated from NYU, he got a job as assistant to Joel Dorn, the Philadelphia-born WDAS alum and legendary record producer. As a result, he said, “I got to meet John Hammond and Nesuhi Ertegun and Tom Dowd — these great producers who weren’t musicians, but framed the artists and their careers.”

He went into the production business himself with his *Amarcord Nina Rota* project that matched the Italian composer with jazz artists Wynton and Branford Marsalis as well as Debbie Harry of Blondie. His goal then and always was “to make records that I want to hear.”

He continued to do so throughout his career, while also scoring the live broadcasts of *SNL* starting in 1980. Mr. Willner produced albums by Marianne Faithful and his close friend Lou Reed. He brought imaginative projects to life, like the 1988 Disney song collection *Stay Awake!* that featured Sun Ra, Los Lobos, and the Replacements, or the 2016 Williams Burroughs tribute, *Let Me Hang You*.

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The surprising juxtaposition that no one else would ever have thought of was a Willner specialty.

“He’s an instigator,” the musician Steve Earle said in 2006. “He’s pretty close to a genius.”

“He’s like [film director] Robert Altman,” Todd Rundgren added the same year. “He gets a certain kind of cast together, and he gives you a framework. And then he lets it happen in a remarkably unmanaged way.”

“If it’s not dangerous, how can it ever be great?” Mr. Willner wondered in 2016, explaining his musical philosophy. “I always figure, if I don’t know about something, that’s a great way to get into it. Because you research it yourself, and the audience comes along with you in surprise.”

Mr. Willner is survived by his wife, Sheila Rogers; son Arlo; his father, Carl; and a sister.

No memorial plans have been made at this time.



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Dan DeLuca | [@delucadan](#) | ddeluca@inquirer.com