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R.I.P. Hal Willner, Music Producer and Saturday Night Live Staffer, Dies of Coronavirus at 64

Famed for eclectic tribute albums and concerts as well as producing SNL's music skits

by [Ben Kaye](#)
 on April 07, 2020, 9:57pm
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[Hal Willner](#), the music producer known for his eclectic tribute albums and producing musical skits for *Saturday Night Live*, has died at the age of 64. [Variety](#) reports that his passing is the result of complications from the coronavirus.

The New York City resident appeared to hint that he'd contracted COVID-19 in a March 28th [tweet](#) featuring a map of the pandemic's spread in the United States. "I always wanted to have a number one — but not this. Pure Arch Oboler with Serling added," he wrote, referencing Oboler's *Lights Out* horror radio program and Serling's *Twilight Zone*. "In bed on upper west side."

Since 1980, Willner had produced the musical skits on *SNL*. He also worked as music coordinator on Lorne Michael's *Sunday Night*, the short-lived weekly music series hosted by David Sanborn between 1988 and 1990.

Outside of his work with Michaels, Willner produced albums for the likes of Lou Reed, William S. Burroughs, Lucinda Williams, Laurie Anderson, Marianne Faithful, and Allen Ginsberg. However, his greatest acclaim came from his various tribute projects, bringing together a wide range of artists for concerts and recordings celebrating a broad assortment of musicians and poets.

His first such effort was 1981's [Amarcord Nino Rota](#), honoring Italian composer Nino Rota's work on Federico Fellini's films. For the project, Willner recruited jazz and pop musicians as varied as Deborah Harry and Wynton and Brandford Marsalis (whose father, Ellis Marsalis, also [recently died](#) from COVID-19 symptoms). A half decade later brought 1988's [Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films](#), which saw Michael Stipe, Ringo Starr, Tom Waits, Suzanne Vega, Bonnie Raitt, Los Lobos, Natalie Merchant, James Taylor, and Sun Ra putting their unique spins on classic tunes from Disney movies.

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There was also his [Weird Nightmare: Meditations on Mingus](#) in 1992, which featured contributions from Elvis Costello, Charlie Watts, Keith Richards, Henry Rollins, Bill Frisell, Chuck D, and Leonard Cohen. Willner would later produce the tribute concert "Came So Far for Beauty, An Evening of Songs by Leonard Cohen", which was captured in Lian Lunson's 2006 documentary [Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man](#) and its [accompanying soundtrack](#).

Willner's final collections were the *Rogue's Gallery* albums: 2006's [Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs, and Chanteys](#) (featuring Nick Cave, Rufus Wainwright, Sting, John C. Reilly, Bryan Ferry, Bono, Jarvis Cocker) and [it's follow-up](#), 2013's [Son of Rogues Gallery](#) (with Iggy Pop, Patti Smith & Johnny Depp, Beth Orton, Michael Stipe & Courtney Love, Tim Robbins with Matthew Sweet, Dr. John). Willner had spent the last few years working on a T. Rex tribute, with U2 and other artists having already recorded their contributions. It's unknown if he'd finished the project or when it might be released.

The Cohen project was far from Willner's only live tribute show. His first was actually 1991's "Greetings from Tim Buckley", the Brooklyn concert which famously helped launch the career of Jeff Buckley. Other such events honored the work of Edgar Allan Poe, blues musician Doc Pomus, Beat Generation hero Harry Everett Smith, Neil Young, Randy Newman, author Shel Silverstein, Lou Reed, and the [recently departed](#) Bill Withers.

In October of 2018, Willner was given a tribute of his own at a charity gala in Brooklyn. Laurie Anderson, David Johansen, and actress Chloe Webb were on hand, while Nick Cave, Bill Frisell, and singer Diamanda Galas delivered video messages. "I've spent the last 40 years as a producer creating things that would make sure this didn't happen," Willner [joked at the event](#).

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