



Hal Willner, longtime 'Saturday Night Live' music producer, dies after showing COVID-19 symptoms

Patrick Ryan | USA TODAY

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Hal Willner, a music producer best known for his work on "Saturday Night Live," died at his home Monday of complications related to coronavirus. He was 64.

Willner's representative Blake Zidell confirmed the news to USA TODAY, writing that Willner had "symptoms consistent with COVID-19," although he was not formerly diagnosed.

The Grammy winner alluded to his illness on Twitter less than two weeks ago, tweeting a map of COVID-19 outbreaks across the United States.

"I always wanted to have a number one - but not this," Willner wrote, adding that he was "in bed" on New York's Upper West Side.

A day later, Willner showed support for fellow musician John Prine, who was recently hospitalized with coronavirus.

"Sending love to John Prine who is in critical condition with COVID-19," Willner wrote on Twitter. "John is a music giant. His songs are as good as it gets and he's a spellbinding performer."

"SNL" veterans including Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Paula Pell, Chris Kelly, Jorma Taccone and John Mulaney paid tribute to Willner on Twitter.

"Absolutely devastated to get this news about my weird and lovely pal, Hal," Louis-Dreyfus wrote. "We are heartbroken."

"I liked you so much in my life," Mulaney said in his remembrance. "You changed my way of thinking on how to make stuff. ... You loved life completely and lived it intensely and I know you would find it funny that it took a global pandemic to take you away. I am going to miss you a lot."

Willner joined "Saturday Night Live" in 1980, where he picked and oversaw music for sketches for 40 years. He was still working at "SNL" when the famed comedy series aired its last episode, hosted by Daniel Craig, last month before going on hiatus.

Outside of "SNL," Willner was a record producer best known for his work producing albums for Lou Reed ("The Raven," "Lulu," "Ecstasy"), Marianne Faithfull ("Strange Weather," "Easy Come, Easy Go") and Laurie Anderson ("Life on a String.")



Filmmaker Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, left, and music producer Hal Willner in New York in 2014. Willner died Monday from coronavirus-related complications.

Cindy Ord

Willner was particularly close to Reed: The duo first collaborated on the ex-Velvet Underground frontman's "Lost In The Stars: The Music Of Kurt Weill" in 1985. He later oversaw a remastered box set of Reed's solo albums after the rocker's 2013 death of liver disease.

“(Reed) wanted another voice - a buddy, a partner - and that other voice happened to be mine," Willner told Magnet, an alternative music magazine, in 2017. "I'm also not just a record producer but rather an all-around collaborator, a one-stop shop. But with him, you came ready to work. He taught me to focus, really focus. You did your job. Bear with him. Listen hard, then harder. Follow his lead and call the shots when they needed to be called.”

Willner was also famously known for organizing tribute albums and concerts, recruiting artists such as Ringo Starr and Bonnie Raitt for a 1988 Disney compilation album, and the likes of Kesha and Joan Jett for a tribute album honoring T. Rex's Marc Bolan.

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