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Hal Willner, strange and brilliant, was the unsung hero behind the musicians you love

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The producer Hal Willner, who has died at the age of 64 CREDIT: GETTY/BILL TOMPKINS

Hal Willner was a great connector. A producer liked and trusted by musicians, he had a genius for putting unlikely elements together in counterintuitive combinations, and getting results more extraordinary than anyone but he could have expected.

He was not a household name but, if you are a music lover, there is a very good chance you have been touched by his work. Tom Waits singing Heigh Ho (The Dwarves Marching Song) on a Disney tribute? That's pure Willner. Leonard Cohen and Elvis Costello paying tribute to Charlie Mingus; Nick Cave and PJ Harvey singing Brecht and Weill; Johnny Depp, Patti Smith and Shane McGowan performing pirate songs – those are the kind of things you heard when Willner was around.

The outpouring of tributes that flooded in following [his death, aged 65](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/culture-stars-have-died-2020-elizabeth-wurtzel-john-baldessari/)

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Willner was a funny guy, making great leaps and far-flung connections in his brilliant conversation, peppered with humour and kindness. Although he only arrived in New York from Philadelphia in 1974 as a teenage studio engineer, he already had something of the archetypal shambling wit and brilliance of New York Jewish comedy. He was music producer for Saturday Night Live from 1981, providing the soundtrack to comedy sketches – scenes filled with surprising juxtapositions often dug out of his own (legendary) home collection.

He only made one album in his own name, Whoops I'm An Indian, a bonkers crate-digging assemblage on which samples of 78 RPM records from the early 20th century collided with jazz, blues, gospel, folk and trip-hop in a scintillatingly mad mash-up (released by Bristol trip-hop eccentric Howie B on his Pussyfoot label in 1998). The U2 frontman Bono was among his many devotees, and once described him to me as “an archivist and sonic activist, an American national treasure”.



Willner, pictured with Kim Cattrall (l), had friends in all sorts of places CREDIT: CINDY ORD/GETTY

Willner produced the soundtrack for *The Million Dollar Hotel*, where Bono was backed by superstars of avant-garde jazz including guitarist Bill Frisell, pianist Brad Mehldau and trumpeter John Hassell. “Without Hal to fly the spaceship, I don’t think I would have wanted the ride,” admitted Bono.

He produced albums for Marianne Faithfull (also currently ill with Covid-19 symptoms), Gavin Friday, Lucinda Williams and Laurie Anderson, and spoken-word adaptations for William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg (where the American beatnik bard is backed by Paul McCartney and Philip Glass). He was Lou Reed’s closest friend, and co-produced all his later albums, including his last major solo works *Ecstasy* (in 2000) and *The Raven* (2003) and his Metallica collaboration *Lulu* (2011).

Willner became most celebrated in the music world, however, for brilliant compilations reimagining songbooks, such as *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* (1988), where you can find Sinead O’Connor stripping *Someday My Prince Will Come* down to its bare essence, Harry Nilsson going zydeco on *Zip-a-dee-doo-dah* and Ringo Starr playing *Pinocchio* with Herb Alpert.

Son Of Rogues Gallery - "Shenandoah"



Other brilliant compilations include *Weird Nightmare: Meditations on Mingus*; *Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen*; two fantastic tributes to the music of Kurt Weill; and two editions of *Rogues Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs and Shanties*, where you can hear Tom Waits and Keith Richards lustily shambling through Shenandoah and feel comfortable that somewhere, despite everything, all is well in the world.

Willner's equally eclectic tribute concerts included the event that inspired the 2006 film *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man* and shows celebrating the songs of Randy Newman, Neil Young, Shel Silverstein, Doc Pomus and the deep American folk music collected by Harry Smith. It was a Willner tribute to Tim Buckley in New York in 1991 that introduced his son Jeff Buckley to the musical world.

And the artists who worked again and again with Willner represent the very best that modern music has to offer. Alongside the usual suspects (Bono, Nick Cave, Tom Waits, Marianne Faithfull, Keith Richards, Lou Reed, Michael Stipe and Sting), his pirate compilations and concerts featured Bryan Ferry, Richard Thompson, Loudon Wainwright III, Rufus Wainwright, Jarvis Cocker, Iggy Pop, Shane McGowan, Dr John, Robyn Hitchcock, Beth Orton, Anohni and Mary Margaret O'Hara. No one assembled a cast as audaciously as Hal Willner. Few could have persuaded so many stars to take such musical leaps of faith.



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I ran across Hal a few times in my travels, in odd situations, bumping into him in Berlin with Lou Reed, London with Marianne Faithful and, most memorably, San Francisco with U2. We were all squashed into a people carrier one starlit night, travelling over the Golden Gate Bridge, along with Noel and Liam Gallagher and Howie B. What a strange ensemble.

The Edge was having a fit of the giggles trying to act as conductor in a conversation between Hal and Liam, neither of whom could understand each other's accent which did not stop them hammering on enthusiastically about the power of song. And then U2's *One* came on the radio, and someone turned it up, and everyone started singing together: "We are one, but we are not the same / We get to carry each other, carry each other." It was like a scene from one of Hal's shows.

Goodbye Hal Willner. You are a loss to music, and the world.

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