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Rogues gallery: (from left) Hal Willner, Gavin Friday, Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright and Van Dyke Parks at the November 1999 Harry Smith tribute concert, Brooklyn, New York; (insets) Hal's schemes.

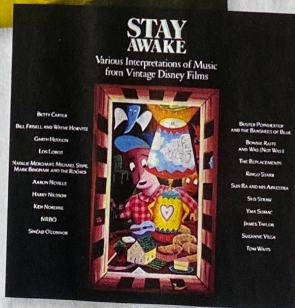
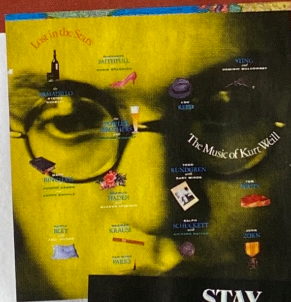
# PROPHET, SEER & SAGE

AngelHeaded Hipster, the forthcoming T.Rex tribute album, was the last to be curated by **HAL WILLNER**, who died on April 7 of COVID-19, leaving his legion of collaborators mourning a scholar-anarchist *sans pareil*. "He wasn't afraid to throw the dice," they tell **DANNY ECCLESTON**.

**T**HE MUSICIANS WHO worked with Hal Willner, the New York record producer, TV music institution and tragic casualty of the current pandemic, fondly remember his flair for taking music to the edge: a place where anything could happen. "His anarchism was what appealed to me," says Van Dyke Parks, the Beach Boys collaborator who contributed to Willner's groundbreaking '80s tribute albums — 1985's *Lost In The Stars: The Music Of Kurt Weill* and '88's Disney music covers LP *Stay Awake* — plus more recent projects. "There was always a sense of suspense with Hal's schemes. Something a little hazardous."

Gavin Friday, the former Virgin Prunes frontman and a veteran of many of the producer's live shows, needs no reminding of Willner's strain of "punk sadism". "He'd pull things on you at the last minute," says Friday. "Like he got me to do *Came So Far For Beauty*, the Leonard Cohen show [in Dublin, 2006], and put me up there with Mary Margaret O'Hara to do Hallelujah — so it's me, and Kate Bush with Tourette's. I said, 'Hal, there's three and a half thousand people out there. The only song they all know is Hallelujah. They're going to fucking kill us.' Hal just shrugged and said, 'It's not like it's *best fucking song*...' That was Hal — he wasn't afraid to throw the dice."

As Friday maintains, Willner "wasn't about the hits". His talent was total immersion in artists and their catalogues. Raised in Philadelphia and schooled at the knee of jazz and R&B producer Joel Dorn, for four decades Willner's day job was organizing the music for sketches on NBC TV's *Saturday Night Live*. *Lost In The Stars* — which featured Parks, Lou Reed, Tom Waits (and Sting) — and *Stay Awake*, for which Parks and Waits returned (the latter for a subterranean take on the Seven Dwarfs' Heigh-Ho) — established a second



career, as the curator of a parallel bohemian universe where Nino Rota, Thelonious Monk and Randy Newman rubbed shoulders with Ken Nordine and Bill Frisell, Yma Sumac and Ringo Starr. Nick Cave, a survivor of 1995's live incarnation of the Kurt Weill tribute, the co-commissioner of Willner's 1999 Harry Smith Project and contributor to 2006's *Rogue's Gallery* — a collection of pirate songs and sea shanties — was a regular.

"Hal's particular talent was in corralling disparate people together," Cave informs MOJO. "The more friction, disharmony and chaos the better. He was the grumbling ringmaster around which so many of us gravitated, and the performances he presided over were equal parts genius and madness. He was truly unique, existing beyond us all on his own screwball planet."

Artists loved him. Even Lou Reed loved him. Canvassing the latter for a role in *Lost In The Stars*, "we had this talk and Lou was

keen to do *My Ship*," Willner told your writer in 2016. "But I had this bizarre notion that he should sing *September Song*. And he got angry, on the phone, and then called back and said, 'That's a good idea. You're a real producer.'"

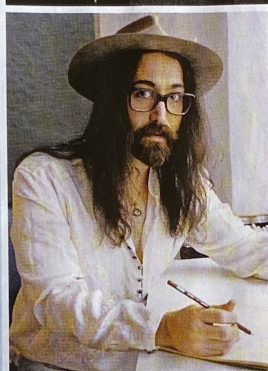
In fact Willner would go on to produce four Lou Reed albums and retain a key role in curating Reed's catalogue after the singer's death in 2013. Other single-artist albums he produced include three by Marianne Faithfull and *Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves*, by Gavin Friday & The Man Seazer, for which Willner recruited his great friend Allen Ginsberg to play harmonium on a twilight cover of Dylan's *Death Is Not The End*.

"Hal was almost more like a movie director than a record producer," reflects Friday. "He'd get stuck into the lyrics — what you're

Eber Roberts/Getty, Bluedyn Burcher/Getty, Camera Press



Rogues gallery contd.: (left) Bolan, star with stripes; (right) Willner and Nick Cave, the latter curating the 1999 MeltDown, Royal Festival Hall, London; (below) Sean Lennon; (insets) more Willner projects; (bottom) Hal, the "crafty treasure seeker".



**"HAL'S TALENT WAS IN CORRALLING DISPARATE PEOPLE. THE MORE FRICTION, DISHARMONY AND CHAOS THE BETTER." NICK CAVE ON HAL WILLNER**

trying to say and how. He wasn't that interested in the twiddling of the knobs. It was like if Woody Allen produced albums."

**T**HE VAST RANGE OF WILLNER'S MUSICAL interests awed even fellow polymaths. "I wish I knew as much about music as Hal," says Van Dyke Parks, "but I don't. What Hal did was beyond eclecticism; he saw no borders."

"He was this incredibly enthusiastic musicologist," agrees Sean Lennon, a star of *Rogues Gallery's* sequel, *Son Of Rogues Gallery*. "Every time I hung out with him he would send me some kind of playlist of the most obscure stuff. Italian porn soundtracks. Weirder stuff than that."

Friends relished Willner's enthusiasm for the *outré*. Tom Waits, in a long and glowing tribute, called him a "crafty treasure seeker and archaeologist of forgotten islands in popular culture", revealing that "many years ago he bought Jimmy Durante's piano along with Bela Lugosi's wristwatch and a headscarf worn by Karen Carpenter. Some say he also owned Sarah Bernhardt's wooden leg."

One might almost think Marc Bolan too pop or too British to blip on Willner's radar, yet his 26-track T.Rex tribute may be his richest and strangest yet, ranging between the lugubrious elegance of Nick Cave's *Cosmic Dancer* and the rock'n'roll attack of Lucinda Williams on Life's *A Gas*, the slinky groove of Sean Lennon and Charlotte Kemp Muhl's *Mambo Sun*, and Devendra Banhart tracing his wyrd folk roots back to the *My People Were Fair...* vignette *Scenescof*. The variety of approaches throws the strength of the T.Rex songbook, and Willner's mission to extol it, into sharp relief. "I found that Bolan was hardly ever talked about as a 'composer'," writes Willner in his notes. "It was all about what a great rocker he was, how innovative he was... So, the concept for the album became to show Bolan as a composer."

As well as Gavin Friday knew Hal Willner, he was

surprised to learn the subject of his latest, now sadly final, tribute. "It threw me," says Friday, who submits a meditative version of *The Leopards Featuring Gardenia & The Mighty Slug* from 1974's *Zinc Alloy And The Hidden Riders Of Tomorrow*. "I thought he was going to do Randy Newman! But I think it was the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* records that got him. I saw the early albums all over his office."

Sean Lennon feels Willner's fascination with Bolan needs neither explanation nor context: "Hal loved T.Rex. And I love T.Rex and all of my friends love T.Rex! Y'know, Hal had the side of him that understood super-sophisticated music — Kurt Weill, Nino Rota. But there was the side of him that understood the punk and the raw and down and dirty rock'n'roll. He had both sides — maybe both at once."

Lennon agrees a project that takes Bolan's songwriting as seriously as *AngelHeaded Hipster* is overdue (it's also the first album ever to feature him and his brother Julian, who joins Victoria Williams on *The Pilgrim's Tale*). How would he describe what was unique about the Boppin' Elf?

"I feel like he articulated the rejection of all the elaborate, over-produced records that were being made in the late '60s and early '70s," says Lennon.

"He was finding his thing by looking to early rock'n'roll again. My dad certainly thought that when he was making his early solo records, and Marc was thinking along the same lines. There was something in the air.

"Marc had balls and vibe. And guts! All the best musicians have all that along with the sophistication. A foot in both camps. That was Marc, and that was Hal too." **M**

*AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs Of Marc Bolan And T.Rex* is released by BMG on September 4.

