



R.I.P. Hal Willner (1956-2020)

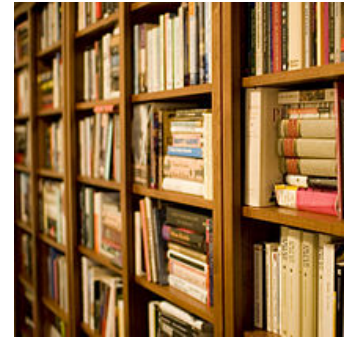
Posted by Sean L. McCarthy | Apr 11, 2020 | News | 0 □ □ □ □ □



Hal Willner, the longtime musical guru behind *Saturday Night Live* who also brought musicians together for cross-genre tributes and movie soundtracks, and who won a Grammy for his efforts, died on April 7. Although he was never formally diagnosed with COVID-19, a spokesperson confirmed that Willner died at home suffering from symptoms consistent with the coronavirus. He died a day after his 64th birthday.

Born April 6, 1956, Willner grew up in Philadelphia the son of a Holocaust survivor, and arrived in New York City as a teenager to attend New York University.

In his Twitter bio, he described himself as a “so-called Music Producer & Saturday Night Live sketch music guy since Raging Bull debuted, Another One Bites the Dust a hit & Kim Kardashian was born. Oy Vey” That’s quite a



Work. Now Orga

No status meeting

nutshell. Because if you wanted to crack that shell? Want to pigeonhole Willner's musical or comedy taste? Good luck with that.

Mikhail Baryshnikov told *The New York Times* for a profile on Willner in 2017: "He's a walking museum. He has a computer, but actually his computer is his brain. Every few days he just surprises you with some bizarre and totally forgotten piece of music or video.



Various items in Mr. Willner's studio. Andrew White for The New York Times

Around him, overflowing the studio shelves, were his muses: busts of Laurel and Hardy, dolls of Popeye and Allen Ginsberg; photos of Lenny Bruce; a music box that played Karlheinz Stockhausen, given to him by Frank Zappa. Puppets of Laurie Anderson and David Bowie faced a bobble head of Tiny Tim and a hand puppet of Pookie, the scat-singing lion from Soupy Sales's TV show. Each, he feared, was an obsession from a world that was slipping away.

"I don't know what inspires people now," he said. "Maybe they don't need to be inspired in that way. Do these last two generations have heroes? I'm not sure they do. I go to Avenue A now and listen to what people are talking about, and it isn't culture. When John Lennon died I couldn't go to work for two days. I wonder if they have someone that they look at like that — an author, a poet, whatever. Those are people who made us what we are."

You can see Willner between Fred Armisen and Bill Hader, from the filming of their *Stop Making Sense* homage for the "Final Transmission" episode of IFC's *Documentary Now!* (thanks to Dan Pasternack, formerly of iFC, for the photo). Always in the middle of the action. Even when that middle might be seen sitting on the floor up against the wall, cross-legged, making a wry joke.

Turns out the penultimate episode of SNL he worked on also involved David Byrne, who was musical guest thanks to host John Mulaney.

ARCHIVES

Select Month ▼

APRIL 2020

M	T	W	T	F
		1	2	3
6	7	8	9	10
13	14	15	16	17
20	21	22	23	24
27	28	29	30	

« Mar May »

FOLLOW US



SHOP. CONNECT. ETC.



Mulaney wrote in tribute to Willner: “Hal, I love you. I liked you in my life so much. When I got horrible reviews you sent me a full email of Lou Reed quotes on how to view critics. It meant so much to me. You changed my way of thinking on how to make stuff. You made what you wanted w/ the people you loved. Bye Hal. P.S. 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.

Michael McKean, whose Spinal Tap got an early boost in Willner’s early years on SNL, wrote: “Hal Willner was one a kind. None there are none of that kind.”

Tributes and testimonials came in from all walks of comedy and music, from Julia Louis-Dreyfus to Jorma Taccone, from Sean Ono Lennon to Vernon Reid.

Paula Pell wrote: “Hal Willner was the gentlest genius at SNL. He bemoaned artists abandoning weirdness and authenticity but never gave up searching for it. We love you forever. Fuck off this disease and especially its enablers.”

Willner worked behind the scenes on several projects with former SNL greats Adam McKay and Will Ferrell, contributing his musical flair to *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, *Step Brothers*, *Bewitched*, and the two IFC Funny or Die miniseries spoofs, *The Spoils of Babylon* and *The Spoils Before Dying*.

“McKay and Ferrell wrote this song for *Talladega* and got Chris Isaak on board. Hal Willner put together the band behind Chris, Will and John. A true masterpiece from all involved,” wrote producer Josh Church.

Willner also received a Grammy nomination for his soundtrack to Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York*, and before that, worked with Robert Altman on the soundtracks for *Kansas City* and *Short Cuts*. Willner produced albums for Marianne Faithfull, Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, and Lucinda Williams, and brought musicians together on collaborative efforts for the likes of Disney movies, the music of Kurt Weill, and more. He was working on a new compilation of T. Rex songs when he died.

Elvis Costello, writing about Willner on Facebook, noted:

”It is my belief that beloved people always dwell in the present tense.

Not very long ago, Hal and I sat for a while listening to a wonderful record that he was making with an extraordinary cast based on the songs of Marc Bolan. His studio was like a living collage of his love of music, art and other fascinations; record albums, artwork, puppets, tiny books of arcane facts once owned by Stan Laurel were among his wonders.

SUBSCRIBE TO PODCAST

Google Podcasts

Android

by Email

RSS



After the new record was over, we listened to a few selections from an album by the actor, Albert Finney, made for the Motown label. Only a few people probably know this record even exists, Hal would be among the even smaller group of curious souls who sought out an actual copy.

Listeners are sometimes confused by the role of a record producer, as many of the most successful or infamous producers apply their own vision to the music like a veneer or lens through which the original intentions may be only dimly perceived.

Hal's approach better resembled the beautiful chaos of a childhood chemistry set, in which all of the substances and elements were mixed with joyous but determined abandon to render coloured smoke, a delightful explosion or something of unlikely and uncommon beauty.”

And now, for something completely Willneresque, here's a bit that closed out an episode of Night Music (aka Sunday Night), the series hosted by David Sanborn in the late 1980s and executive-produced by Lorne Michaels, which of course, Willner made happen.

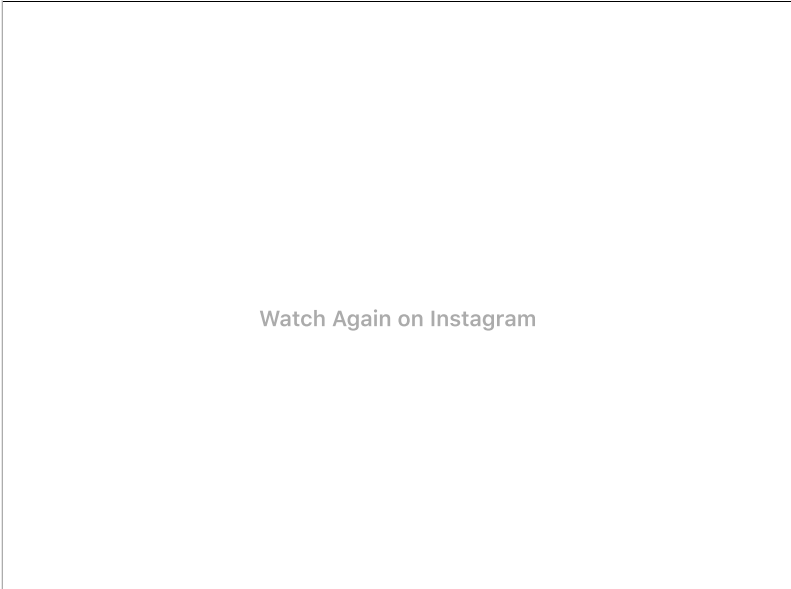
Willner gets the last word.





willnerh
2,808 followers

[View Profile](#)



Watch Again on Instagram

[View More on Instagram](#)

721 likes

Add a comment...

Cool, indeed. Rest in peace, Hal.

SHARE:

RATE:

PREVIOUS

NEXT

R.I.P. Eddie Large (1941-2020)

R.I.P. Michael C. McCarthy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sean L. McCarthy

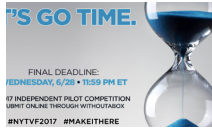
Editor and publisher since 2007, when he was named New York's Funniest Reporter. Former newspaper reporter at the New York Daily News, Boston Herald and smaller dailies and





community papers across America. Loves comedy so much he founded this site.

RELATED POSTS



Today is the deadline for Independent Pilot submissions to 2017 NY TV Festival

June 28, 2017



Ricky Gervais on returning to stand-up after six years “if you don’t count the Golden Globes”

April 26, 2016



Drew Hastings faces court trial in allegations he committed felonies as mayor of Hillsboro, Ohio

August 2, 2016



This Week at The Comedy Cellar will premiere Oct. 26, 2018, on Comedy Central

October 9, 2018

Trackbacks/Pingbacks

1. Saturday Night Live: At Home edition | The Comic's Comic - [...] For more on the life and career of Hal Willner, read my obituary of him. [...]

Leave a reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

COMMENT

NAME *

EMAIL *

WEBSITE

POST COMMENT

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.

