



Hal Willner in 2007 Photo by annulla (Creative Commons)

The news that music producer Hal Willner, 64, had passed away Tuesday from complications related to COVID-19 hit me pretty hard. In these perilous times, we are seeing the virus' monstrous death-toll creep into the realms of familiar public figures and prominent musicians. And while beloved Grammy Award-winner John Prine died from the virus on the same day – a terrible loss in its own right – we were at least alerted that he had been gravely ill and admitted to the hospital the week before. Willner's death seemed a bolt from the blue, a terrifically unfair removal of a talented conceptualist who certainly had more to do.

Willner's name may not be familiar to most. But you might be familiar with his contributions to music culture via his role as a music producer for *Saturday Night Live* (mainly as the sketch producer). Being a music fan of omnivorous tastes, he was the perfect person for such a job, bringing together the right combination of interesting music and comedic potential.

This cross-genre approach to music is most clearly expressed in the various acclaimed tribute compilations he produced over the decades. Beginning in 1981 with a collection of new versions of scores from frequent Fellini collaborator Nina Rota performed by contemporary jazz artists (and Deborah Harry of Blondie, for good measure), Willner put together a series of similar musical mash-ups. They included interpretations of Thelonious Monk, Kurt Weill, Charles Mingus, Leonard Cohen, and Edgar Allan Poe, as well as more thematic albums celebrating the music from Disney movies, Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and sea shanties. All of these works were performed by an astounding array of musical talents from throughout the pop, jazz and classical worlds, including Tom Waits, Nick Cave, Sting, Charlie Haden, Lou Reed, Chuck D, Los Lobos, Wynton Marsalis, Marianne Faithfull, Sun Ra, Henry Rollins, Bryan Ferry and many others.

This work led to individual production jobs for individual artists' records, including long-standing relationships with the likes of Reed and Faithfull, as well as soundtrack contributions. In addition to albums, Willner would also produce live concert events with similar themes, featuring a similar batch of diverse performers; I had the pleasure to see one of his Halloween Poe-themed shows up at UCLA in the early 2000s, which was my introduction to Antony & the Johnsons.

As a teenager in the mid-1980s, my discovery of his 1985 compilation, *Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill*, completely expanded my appreciation of music beyond the New Wave tracks I would hear on the radio. The album not only presented me with a bunch of jazz and classically-trained artists to discover — alongside contributors like Reed, Faithfull, Stan Ridgway of Wall of Voodoo and Richard Butler of the Psychedelic Furs — but it also drove me to a new-found appreciation of Weill's German musical theatre work of the 1920s and 1930s. Ever since, this idea that pop music is interdisciplinary and can be informed by the past, as well as via other artistic forms, has been a credo that I have fully embraced. And I thank Hal Willner for setting me on that road, and I lament the fact that we will no longer have him around to travel such ways with us.

Some of my personal favorites from Willner's career:

Marianne Faithfull - As Tears Go By (1987)



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