

EVENT

Video Viewing Room: A Tribute to Hal Willner

THE KITCHEN
512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY

Hal WILLNER

Vernon REID -
“LIVING
COLOUR”

Currently Showing

May 22–Jun 19, 2020

Free

A Tribute to Hal Willner



Last year around this time, The Kitchen hosted an [evening performance](https://thekitchen.org/event/anozni-she-who-saw-beautiful-things-special-performance-cast-party) (<https://thekitchen.org/event/anozni-she-who-saw-beautiful-things-special-performance-cast-party>) within an installation by ANOZNI, featuring the artist singing with friends Laurie Anderson, Bill Frisell, and Shahzad Ismaily. Such a wonderful ensemble taking the stage at once by

Miles Davis- Night Music with David Sanborn



To see Marcus Miller on Night Music in 1989 featuring Miles Davis, Hank Ballard & The Midnighters, Djavan, Carl Perkins 1955 tape, Marcus Miller, and Zahar, click here (https://youtu.be/uRvO_GJgnZM) .

Arto Lindsay

I knew Hal for many years, but I really got to know him last fall when I was in New York. After dinner with Laurie Anderson, Hal and I took long walks. He had a million stories to tell, and he was an amazing story teller. Which is maybe why he ended up being quoted throughout his life talking about his inspirations. We always read about him describing the experience of seeing unusual concerts like Rahsaan Roland Kirk and another band like, say, Pink Floyd, on the same night. But when people would ask him about his approach, “Where did you get the idea?” he’d just say, “Well, when I was growing up, everybody did this, you know?” It’s true that in the late ’80s a number of musicians—like Vernon [Reid] and [John] Zorn—were starting to curate music and would deliberately make these really eclectic bills. It was like, “Let’s see if the audience can draw a connection between a Noise band and torch singer, or whatever.” It wasn’t so unheard of. But for Hal, it wasn’t even such a downtown New York thing. It was also a Fillmore thing! And he brought it to TV.

I went several times to Night Music just to hang out and watch the show, because I lived nearby. It was very “music scene.” It was totally chill. The atmosphere was down to earth and about musicians, and there was never a star who tried to throw the fear of God into anyone. I remember that I was there one time when Al Green was on, and I walked up to him at the end and said, “Hey, man, let me shake your hand, I’m your biggest fan.” And he was like, “What do you mean, shake my hand?” He gave me a huge bear hug instead, which was crazy because however smooth his singing was, this guy was built like a football player.

My experience was the same when Hal invited the Ambitious Lovers to do Night Music. That show was like the height of our fame. Everybody watched that show on TV, so it had kind of an impact. People would recognize us on the street for a little while. But even then I remember how nice the scene onstage was when we played. Youssou N’Dour was also on that night. When we got off the stage, that band came running into the dressing room and they said, “The guitar!! What’s that guitar?” And then later I ended up on a couple of other projects with Yussou.

Night Music was also interesting for being just a TV show. You get up, you play. And then there were the famous jams, where folks like Leonard Cohen and Sonny Rollins are up there together. This is where things got different. Everybody always gives that as an example of how “relaxed and natural” the show was. But you see it on TV, and you can see that shit was not relaxing, or natural. But it worked. You know, you don’t have to pretend it’s something it isn’t for it to be great. And Hal brought that together.

Kitchen's archive and collection, in fall 1978 the Video Viewing Room began to feature curated programs of artists' videos. To see a hand-drawn floor plan that shows where the Video Viewing Room was located within The Kitchen's space at 59 Wooster Street circa 1984, click [here \(http://archive.thekitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1984_KitchenStaff_SeatingChart.pdf\)](http://archive.thekitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1984_KitchenStaff_SeatingChart.pdf) .

Video Viewing Room: A Tribute to Hal Willner is made possible with the support of the NYC COVID-19 Response and Impact Fund in The New York Community Trust; annual grants from Lambent Foundation Fund of Tides Foundation and Howard Gilman Foundation; and in part by public funds from New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

The Kitchen Blog



(/system/images/BAhbBlSHOGZmSSJFMjAyMC8wNi8wMS8xM18wNF80NV84MDBfU2NyZV06-01%20at%201.08.35%20PM.png)

The Kitchen Stands In Solidarity (/blog/138)

Jun 01 2020

Dear Friends, The Kitchen stands in solidarity with protestors throughout the world calling for justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery, amongst countless others whose lives have been taken at the hands of police brutality and white supremacy. We believe that Bla...[Read On \(/blog/138\)](#)



(/system/images/BAhbBlSHOGZmSSi9MjAyMC8wNi8wMS8wOV8yNi8yM184NI9DaHJpc3F

From Our Artists: Recent Projects Online (/blog/131)

Apr 17 2020

In an effort to support our artists during this moment in which concerts, exhibitions, album releases, book launches, and other events are cancelled or postponed, The Kitchen is compiling weekly selections of projects that you can engage with from home. Each week, we'll highlight a Kitchen artist...[Read On \(/blog/131\)](#)



(/system/images/BAhbBlSHOGZmSSi5MjAyMC8wNS8yMS8xNi8yNF8zMV8xMTNfUG9zdGN

From the Archives: koosi-ja (/blog/136)

May 21 2020

"From the Archives" is a series that spotlights The Kitchen's history. As a complement to our Archive Website, these posts offer focused reflections on the artists, exhibitions, events, and institutional practices that have defined and shaped The Kitchen since its founding in 1971. This From t...[Read On \(/blog/136\)](#)

[Read More on The Kitchen's Blog \(/blog\)](/blog)

The Kitchen *center for art, video, music, dance, performance, film and literature.*

Join our mailing list



[submit](#)

2020 The Kitchen. All Rights Reserved

Follow us:

<https://www.facebook.com/thekitchenNYC>

<http://barbariangroup.com>

[512 West 19th Street New York, NY 10011](#)

<http://goo.gl/maps/lWpbZ> | (212) 255-5793

Ambitious Lovers - Copy Me + Admit It [1989]



Youssou N'Dour - Tonight [Sunday Night Live USTV]



Al Green - Night Music 1989



Leonard Cohen / Sonny Rollins - Who By Fire - Night Music



*To see Arto Lindsay in **Ambitious Lovers** on Night Music in 1989 featuring Youssou N'Dour, Ambitious Lovers, Marcus Roberts, and George Duke, click [here](https://youtu.be/FdZOcwFuLss) (<https://youtu.be/FdZOcwFuLss>) .*

Sonny Rollins

Hal's vision was intense. It was great working with him.

Sonny Rollins at Night Music Show 1989 - Kim



To see Sonny Rollins on Night Music in 1989 featuring Leonard Cohen, Sonny Rollins, Ken Nordine, and Was (Not Was), click [here](https://youtu.be/CUsg3WXJ2Cc) (<https://youtu.be/CUsg3WXJ2Cc>) .

Kim Gordon

After we'd signed to a major label, Geffen, we were asked to be on this show called Night Music. We were newbies to the whole major label thing and skeptical of everything mainstream, except late-night TV shows and getting to play on them. Hal Willner we knew by reputation to be a cool guy, but we had never met him. We were told he really wanted us to be on. There was—as with everything Hal curated—an eclectic grouping of people on this Night Music. The Indigo Girls, Diamanda Galas, Daniel Lanois, and Sonic Youth. Also the Late Nite band was there and maybe we were supposed to integrate them into our song?

We also brought Don Fleming along as our faux keyboardist/manager. We didn't have a manager at the time, and I guess we decided to be playful about the whole thing. Hal humored us and let us do what we wanted. We played "Silver Rocket" and then for the finale of the show we did a cover of The Stooges "I Wanna Be Your Dog" (at that point it was the only cover we knew). Everyone played with us except Diamanda Galas—maybe a wise choice on her part. But we hung out and it was great getting to know her.

Sonic Youth - I Wanna Be Your Dog Live on Michelob Presents...



At the time our A&R person wanted Daniel Lanois to produce our record but all we could think of was “we don’t want to sound like U2.” We gave him one of our tuned guitars to play. I remember it being completely chaotic, and at the end Thurston went up with some big shears and cut all the strings off the guitar that Lanois was playing. I’m not sure what he thought, but by then the credits had rolled out...

Luckily Hal didn’t hate us for the joyous mess and after that he asked us along on several projects, the William Burroughs record being one. I can’t say I remember much about specific interactions with him that night except that he was incredibly sweet and easy going and didn’t seem surprised by anything we did. I feel like he was the first person to support us in the mainstream. Of course it took someone as special as Hal, who was drawn to the dark edges and saw the whole picture.

I’ll miss his sweetness and brilliance, and his intuitive imagination. Most of all the chance to work with him again and just hang and laugh.

To see Kim Gordon in Sonic Youth on Night Music in 1989 featuring Diamanda Galas, Indigo Girls, Daniel Lanois, Aretha Franklin 1968, Sonic Youth, and Evan Lurie & His Tango Band, click [here \(https://youtu.be/a_TbpPacq60\)](https://youtu.be/a_TbpPacq60) .

Vernon Reid

Hal was such a raconteur, and he had such an interesting take on American music. He was really into the nooks and crannies and untold narratives of American music. He liked to play with people’s expectations, and to have unusual different people doing different things with the cannon. That was one of things that I appreciated about him.

He had a way of bringing together people from completely, wildly different walks and getting them to do his stuff. He had a gift for using novelty and the arcane to his advantage. He went where the weird was. He would go down these rabbit holes, and he had a way of leveraging the weird and just intriguing people to go down the rabbit hole with him.

I thought Night Music was kind of this playground—this space for “let’s put this person with that person and see what happens.” Hal managed to carve out this moment where strange sonic bedfellows could happen and be presented to the American public on a major network. That was like a magic trick. He managed to do it until the suits turned around and said, “hey, what are we doing?” The fact he did that and got away with it was extraordinary—he was able to keep the wolves at the door and maintain it for at least a couple of seasons.

I think Night Music affected listeners and young artists that saw it. We need our impresarios, like our Hal Willners. The bills they put together change people’s perspectives and their lives, you know. Artists do what they’re doing. But to combine people to create the strange bedfellows scenario is crucial because American music is about the people from across the tracks that aren’t supposed to be consorting with one another. American music doesn’t work in silos or advance in silos.

We did one take. It was ok, but I think Hal heard something. Maybe we were a little nervous. Maybe we could do it a little better. He lay down on the floor in the midst of us. He didn't say anything. Not a word. Just lay down on the floor. Somehow this cleared the way.

Then we played it again and it was light years better.

That day I met

Mary Margaret O' Hara. She was amazing. Carla and Rufus Thomas were on the show too. Rufus and I sat next to each other getting make up before the show. I can't believe I was sitting there talking to Rufus Thomas.

The Kinks were on that show!!

Wow.

I treasure every moment.

One of many extraordinary adventures.

Sometimes I think I must be dreaming.

I can't believe these things actually happened.

I've been blessed.

Whatever it is I am now, Hal has been, is, and will always be a huge part of it. Incalculable.

— April 23, 2020

Bill Frisell Group - Little Brother Bobby [Sunday Night Live - 19...



To see Bill Frisell on Night Music in 1989 featuring Sting & Fareed Haque, Kinks Tape, Carla & Rufus Thomas, Bill Frisell Band, and Mary Margaret O'Hara, click [here \(https://youtu.be/Nxtm7mw0wcc\)](https://youtu.be/Nxtm7mw0wcc) .

Selections from Night Music

Night Music #104 1988 Dr. John, Mavis Staples, Jeff Healey



Night Music #210 1989 Diamanda Galas, Indigo Girls, Daniel L...



Night Music #116 1989 Carlos Santana, Lyle Lovett, Hank Willi...



Night Music #120 1989 Lou Reed, John Cale, Harry Connick J...





1:34

[Cookie policy](#)

Night Music #203 Elliott Sharp



To see Elliott Sharp on Night Music in 1990 featuring Nona Hendrix, Pops Staples, Ivo Papasov, Adrian Belew, and Elliott Sharp, click [here \(https://youtu.be/wiz7-lhyjl\)](https://youtu.be/wiz7-lhyjl).

Bill Frisell

Hal was my friend.

It's been almost 40 years now.

I can't imagine this world without him in it.

My friend Marc Ribot said it's like waking up one day and the Empire State Building is gone.

I don't know what to say.

I wish I could call Hal right now and ask him.

He would know.

He had a way of looking at things from a different angle.

He saw things in me that I didn't know were there myself. He'd open a door and give me the opportunity to go through it. I never knew what was going to be on the other side. Sometimes I was afraid. He led me into uncharted territory. He trusted me and had no doubt that I'd find my way. He always encouraged me and had faith in me.

I'm thinking now of the Night Music show.

I had recently started my own band. Not many folks knew who we were. But...

Hal invited us to come play on this nationally televised TV show.

He had that kind of trust. We could go on there and play our own original music full force. No compromise. He must have known we could handle it. Then he had the idea for Hank Roberts, Dave Sanborn, Don Alias, Fareed Haque, and myself to play the Bill Withers song "Ain't No Sunshine" with Sting.

Pere Ubu with Debbie Harry "Waiting For Mary" Night Music (1...



Night Music 12-2-89 Ray Manzarek, Jean Luc Ponty, Chuck Ja...



Night Music 12-9-89 Pixies, Al Green, Sun Ra, Syd Straw



Images: 1) Program for Hal Willner and Vernon Reid/Living Colour at The Kitchen, February 19, 1987, detail. To view the full program, click [here \(http://archive.thekitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Program_Willner_Reid_ItsNottheMeat_1987.pdf\)](http://archive.thekitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Program_Willner_Reid_ItsNottheMeat_1987.pdf). 2) ANOHNI and Hal Willner at The Kitchen, 2019. Photo by Tim Griffin. Courtesy of ANOHNI.

The Video Viewing Room series makes recent video works and archival performance recordings available online for one month at a time. This initiative revives The Kitchen's longstanding Video Viewing Room—a dedicated space within our buildings from 1975 through the early 1990s. Functioning at first as a resource facility where visitors could watch their own tapes or view videos from The

itself could be called a rarity. But perhaps even more improbable that night was a puppet show presented by another friend of the group who was responsible for bringing them all together—Hal Willner.

On first blush, the idea of placing such towering figures of downtown music alongside one's own Punch and Judy show does not come intuitively. Yet that night Willner, as was his reputation, underlined with disarming simplicity just how and why this combination was effective—conjuring through his puppetry the vaudeville, TV, and road shows of decades past, making clear how that evening's scenes had rich and continuous roots in another era's common gatherings. Such folksy power to tap into the deepest reservoirs of culture is what made Willner himself—who passed away last month after battling with COVID-19—the stuff of folklore.

For The Kitchen, where Willner had previously performed and was a board member during the late 1980s and '90s, his signature approach of bringing together musicians seemingly from the farthest reaches of the artistic landscape had a lasting impact. As much as he informed aesthetic perspectives here—and helped shape The Kitchen's community and scene—that role was also one he played for the entirety of New York City. Such influence within a broader landscape was perhaps most readily evident in his work for the television program Night Music, where he was music producer roughly around the time he was first involved with The Kitchen.

To celebrate and salute Hal, both friend and figure, we asked a number of artists from The Kitchen's community who appeared on that show to recall their experiences. May we all carry on in your spirit.

— Tim Griffin, Executive Director and Chief Curator, The Kitchen, May 2020

Marcus Miller



AWESOME: Bootsy Collins & others - Healing Power | Night M...





To see Vernon Reid in Living Colour on Night Music in 1989, click [here](https://www.facebook.com/LivingColour/videos/1499472130188159/) (<https://www.facebook.com/LivingColour/videos/1499472130188159/>) .

Christian Marclay

Christian Marclay on Night Music



Christian Marclay, Tribute to Hal Willner

03:29



To see Christian Marclay on Night Music in 1989 featuring Todd Rundgren, Taj Mahal, Pat Metheny, Christian Marclay, and Nanci Griffith, click [here](https://youtu.be/KKo1iWILP_0) (https://youtu.be/KKo1iWILP_0) .

Elliott Sharp