

Banging a Gong: Inside Producer Hal Willner's Final All-Star Tribute Album

U2, Kesha, Lucinda Williams and more tell the story of the late producer's tribute to T. Rex and Marc Bolan

By **DAVID BROWNE**



Lou Reed, Michael Putland/Getty Images

Kesha had just finished previewing her new album, *Rainbow*, for industry types at a Los Angeles recording studio three years ago when she encountered a stout, bearded guy with a “friendly, happy” vibe in the hallway. “You must be an artist,” he said, referring to her bright-red Nudie suit festooned with images of sea creatures.

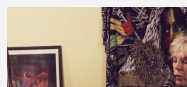


she soon learned he was a producer named **Hal Willner**, and he immediately recognized her name when she introduced herself. Willner told her he was working on an album paying tribute to the late British rocker **Marc Bolan** and his band **T. Rex**, and the two began “geeking out,” in Kesha’s words, about Bolan’s music. To her surprise, Kesha soon found herself singing one of Bolan’s songs, “Children of the Revolution,” with Willner overseeing the session. “It was so serendipitous,” says Kesha. “The universe put me in its line of fire.”

The pairing of a pop singer, a cult figure, and a producer known for his idiosyncratic tastes was classic Willner. Over the course of his decades-long career, Willner held down an impressive day job — selecting the music for *Saturday Night Live* skits since the early Eighties — while also assembling a series of eccentric tribute albums, where he recruited everyone from Keith Richards, Lou Reed, and Tom Waits to Chuck D, Sun Ra, and **Lucinda Williams** to tackle the music of Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Kurt Weill, and Disney films.

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Willner’s T. Rex project, ***AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex***, out Friday, continues that quirky legacy. Kesha’s hard-rock version of “Children

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John Misty's gorgeous "Main Man," Peaches' electro-pop "Solid Gold, Easy Action," and contributions by Beth Orton, John Cameron Mitchell, Perry Farrell, **Todd Rundgren**, Sean Lennon, and many more. The album also includes two versions of T. Rex's signature glam-rock hit, "Bang a Gong (Get It On)" — one by **U2** and another by David Johansen,

in full Buster Poindexter lounge mode.

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As with Willner's other projects, the result is a kaleidoscopic and almost cinematic salute to a cult hero. "Hal started calling it his White Album," says his manager, Rachel Fox. "That was his favorite Beatles album, and he felt that this was the culmination of his whole career of doing these albums and multi-artist soundtracks and concerts. He felt that it just really came together with this one. He felt it was his greatest work."

It would also be his last: On April 7th, the 64-year-old Willner died in his Manhattan home of complications from COVID-19. "I didn't know he was sick," says **the Edge**, who texted and emailed with Willner about a week earlier about the final mixes for U2's



Although Willner had begun work on the album four years ago, *AngelHeaded Hipster* arrives at a moment when Bolan is on the crest of a new wave of appreciation. T. Rex's biggest and only hit in America was "Bang a Gong (Get It On)," from 1971's *Electric Warrior*; he died in a car crash six years later. This November he'll be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the same month that a new documentary, *Children of the Revolution*, will be released. The film includes footage from the *AngelHeaded Hipster* sessions along with new interviews with Bolan friends like Elton John and Ringo Starr. "He never really got the acclaim he deserved," says Who manager Bill Curbishley, who briefly worked with Bolan and is co-producer of the film along with its director, Ethan Silverman.

Although Bolan had limited impact in the States during his lifetime, he was a superstar in Europe, and one of his appearances on the U.K. TV show *Top of the Pops* made a huge impression on a young Edge. "To see this otherworldly creature performing on TV, with glitter under his eyes and makeup, was quite something," he says. "And *Electric Warrior* is unbelievable, right up there with some of the best albums in rock & roll history. The hooks and melodies and lyrics are amazing. His songs have the freedom of rock & roll and the discipline of great songwriting, which is what we as a band always aspire to."

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T. Rex Bang A Gong (Get It On) Live 1971



It was Curbishley and Silverman who initially conceived the idea of album of contemporary musicians covering Bolan's songs. They first approached producer Tony Visconti, who had worked on some of Bolan's albums, but when that plan didn't pan out, Willner was enlisted by his friend and longtime colleague Kate Hyman at BMG.

Seventies hard rock and glam weren't necessarily genres one would first associate with Willner. Born in Philadelphia in 1956, he moved to New York in 1974 and began working for producer Joel Dorn on albums by Bette Midler and Roberta Flack. In the early Eighties, he landed the *SNL* job and also put together his first **tribute album**, a collection of jazz covers of music from Fellini films that included Blondie's Debbie Harry and Wynton Marsalis.

Later, Willner produced records for Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull and came to embody a certain hipster sensibility himself. As the Edge says, Willner's tastes tended toward "the music of tortured souls and forgotten geniuses." After the U2 guitarist became involved in a post-Katrina charity project for New Orleans, Willner sent the Edge an iPod full of classic Big Easy music, from Dr. John to more underground local talents. "It was an amazing thing," he says. "And such a sweet response. It was typical Hal."



school, and while he wasn't an expert on Bolan's music, the concept intrigued him. "He decided to approach him as a songwriter, and he listened to every single song he ever wrote," says Fox. "He immersed himself in Bolan and said, 'This guy is really interesting—he's a great poet.' He thought, 'There's something here and let's do this.'"

Higher-ups at BMG floated a few bold-faced names for the project, like Lady Gaga, but superstars were rarely Willner's first call for such records. "That's one of the things that always bugged Hal," Fox says. "Everyone wanted names, but he wanted a creative vision. Some famous people would fit, but lesser-known people would fit in as well." Adds Rundgren, "It was more about finding combinations of people and starting a process. He worked with Robert Altman, who had a similar process to Hal's, putting actors together and getting them to ad-lib."

That vision became clear as the project commenced in 2016. "Hal made albums as if he were casting a movie," says his wife, Sheila Rogers. "He didn't say, 'Who are the biggest names I can get?' He would think about who could interpret a song well. I started hearing the music in the background and he would get very excited." Rogers recalls him exclaiming, "Nick Cave's going to do 'Cosmic Dancer' and it's going to be beautiful!"

In the end, most of the musicians who participated came from Willner's contacts and impressive Rolodex. "Most of time with these sorts of things, it's 'Have your people talk to my people,'" says the Edge. "Hal had a way of cutting through all of that. You'd get a direct call or email: 'Hey, whatcha doing? Why don't you come down and play on this?' And it would always be interesting. It would never be something you wouldn't want to be involved with."

Willner had first worked with Lucinda Williams on her 2007 album *West*, where she found him to be an unusual, sometimes hard-to-read character. "He was somewhat eccentric, but so are a lot of brilliant people," she says. "He reminded me of a mad scientist in a laboratory, like the absent-minded professor or something. The wheels were constantly turning for Hal." When she was in New York for a trip, she cut a version of T. Rex's "Life's a Gas" — suggested by her husband and manager — on the same hectic day that Willner produced contributions by Jett and Orton.

The project wound up taking Willner nearly two years, and sometimes around the world. Working with jazz players and Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, Rundgren cut a rendition of the surreal "Planet Queen" during one day at a Brooklyn studio. "As an older man, there was a sense of ridiculousness built into it," says Rundgren. "There was such a creepy vibe every time I sang, 'Give me your daughter!'" he laughs. "Yet at the same time the song is so silly and nonsensical. Hal had a keen sense of the ridiculous."

Willner had known and worked with U2 for over a decade, dating back to a collaboration with Bono on the soundtrack of Wim Wenders' *The Million Dollar Hotel*. After Willner approached them about the Bolan record, Bono expressed his interest in "Bang a Gong (Get It On)" by singing the chorus into his phone and texting it to Willner. During a day off in their 2017 tour schedule, the band convened with Willner in New Orleans to cut the song, complete with a wild solo by local master Trombone Shorty. Then, at Adam Clayton's suggestion, they all flew to the south of France to have Elton John — who had known and played with Bolan — overdub a piano part. (Bono later took Willner to a Jay-Z and Beyoncé show, and Willner recruited the Sun Ra Arkestra to accompany U2 on "Angel of Harlem" when they played the Apollo in 2018.)

meal with Rundgren, Willner said his favorite then-cast member was Leslie Jones: “He said she was like a real old-school performer who could just snap into it and become entertaining.”) Williams last saw Willner when he invited her to hear some of the finished album in New York. “He was saying they started with 14 songs and the last I heard they were to 32,” she says. “Classic Hal. He was enjoying it so much he couldn’t stop.”

AngelHeaded Hipster was completed in 2018, but due to various scheduling and contractual issues involved with so many artists, the album’s release was delayed several times. At one point, it was scheduled for the fall of 2019, but when everyone involved learned that Bolan would be inducted into the Hall of Fame, the album was pushed once more, to 2020. Although he told colleagues he was worried that the album had been delayed so many times, Willner was gearing up for its release: Among other things, he was hoping to organize *AngelHeaded Hipster* listening parties for fans in various cities.

To the end, Willner had his hands full. He’d been approached about a tribute album to George Harrison, and although those plans were never nailed down, he had become obsessed with the music of new-jazz groundbreaker Kamasi Washington and wanted to work with him on a future outing. He was in the early stages of preparing a new TV show, *Le Grand Music Hall*, that would pair disparate artists in similar ways as his classic late Eighties late-night music series *Night Music*; the pilot episode was scheduled to be filmed around the time he passed. He had also been approached about having at least one documentary made on his life. “All sorts of things were shaping up,” says Fox. “That he should die at that moment was just unbelievably tragic.”

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In the larger scheme, Willner’s friends sense a void left with his passing. “There’s no one to replace him,” says Rundgren. “We’re not going to have anyone who is able to do what he did — thinking the way did, building relationships with musicians and building that level of trust and making them go out on the tightrope and fulfill his crazy ideas. He was always fully aware that failure is on one shoulder and success is on the other. And if there wasn’t the possibility of failure, then there wouldn’t be the same possibilities for fun.”

In This Article: "Angelheaded Hipster", hal Willner, Kesha, Lucinda Williams, Marc Bolan, T. Rex, The Edge, Todd Rundgren, tribute album, U2



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“When he said Nick Cave, I was like, ‘Oh my God, I’m out of my reach here.’” But during her recording of “Children of the Revolution,” she found Willner to be supportive. When she needed to reach inside herself and let out a scream during the song, he told her, “I know you have this sound in you, keep trying.”

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“By the fourth or fifth time, it sounded pretty cool,” she says. “When you’re in a room with someone who wants you to win and is so positive, it encourages you to take it to some other level you hadn’t done before. He brought out the best in me.”

The presence of a modern pop act like Kesha alongside more typically left-field choices like Peaches, John Cameron Mitchell, and Marc Almond of Soft Cell seems surprising, but not to Rundgren. “[Willner] was a lover of music, but not a particular genre or generation,” he says. “He told me that when Bjork first went solo, she did some work with him, and he was impressed with the purity of her voice. I was kind of surprised that he managed to make that connection with her so quickly, but he would do that. He had favorites in every generation.”