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Underappreciated Giant: Marc Urselli on 'Angelheaded Hipster' and the legacy of Hal Willner

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BY AVERY LOGAN

There are no words to soothe this grief-stricken year. As the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs on, artists everywhere are faced with a responsibility to innovate and inspire with renewed vigor as well as to celebrate and memorialize the legacies of those we have lost. Among those losses was an unsung titan of modern music: producer Hal

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Willner, who passed away on April 7th. A tireless behind-the-scenes figure, the words “eclectic” and “prolific” only scratch the surface of his output, which concluded posthumously this year with *Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex*. It is a sonic cornucopia of immense scale, the likes of which Willner became known throughout an extensive discography of expansive multi-artist concept albums and themed concerts (not to mention his 40-year tenure as the musical force behind *Saturday Night Live*). His ambitious projects never failed to distill a wide conceptual scope and seemingly disparate musical contributors into a cohesive whole, revealing a profound underlying message about music’s connective power.

In sinking my teeth into *Angelheaded Hipster*, I ended up with a browser-full of open tabs rivalling the hundreds of collaborators involved in this beast of a double album. Numerous threads feed into this project from diverse corners of the musical world while reflecting the somewhat obscure, yet pervasive legacy of Marc Bolan’s music. No one could wring divine symmetry from such an entanglement like Hal Willner. Marc Urselli, Chief House Engineer at legendary NYC recording studio Eastside Sound and recording / mixing engineer for *Angelheaded Hipster* was kind enough to offer recollections on Hal’s legacy and the project’s four-year materialization, as well as his own journey from the Italian DIY scene to becoming a first-call NYC recording vet.

PostGenre: Before we get to Hal and this huge project, I would love for you to walk us through your journey from the DIY scene in Italy to working your way up through the upper echelons of the NYC production scene.

Marc Urselli: It started around the mid-90s. I was in various bands and decided to record our rehearsals, so I bought some microphones and equipment and I kept buying more stuff until it

dawned on me that it would be a good career path. I opened my first recording studio at age 17 and started recording a bunch of punk/hardcore bands as that was the scene in the 90s in Italy for the most part. I did a lot of recording for two or three years but I felt I kind of hit a ceiling and needed to expand my horizons. So, I went to New York for an internship in a recording studio, Eastside Sound. The idea originally was to go back to Italy after a 3 or 6 month internship, but New York kind of blew my mind. I just stayed and kept working at Eastside as an unpaid runner / intern, graduated to assistant, eventually to engineer and now chief engineer, so I'm still at the same studio where I started as an intern.

Marc Urselli (www.marcurselli.com)



PG: How are things in the city right now with the pandemic and everything?

MU: It's not as bad as the media makes it out to be. I've seen some memes and some people

making fun of the fact that the violence depicted by the media is nowhere to be seen. I haven't seen violence, in fact, there's an almost festive vibe on weekends because the restaurants had been given permission during the summer months to set up shop on the sidewalks. So when you go into the streets you see them lined with restaurants taking up the sidewalk or even the parking lane – it must be hell if you're trying to find a parking spot. But the result for New Yorkers and pedestrians is that you can walk through the streets and there's this festive mood of restaurant after restaurant. It's not as bad as people make it out to be, but of course, that doesn't detract from the severity and sadness of the whole situation which is getting worse now with winter on the way. I live between New York and London, and London is entering into a new lockdown up until December 2nd.

I'm with Seinfeld; New York will bounce back as it always does. But the festive mood in the streets on a weekend doesn't take away from the fact that all the venues are closed and so people in the arts are struggling. Museums have reopened, which is a good thing, but the hypocrisy of letting restaurants be open at half capacity, or 25% or whatever it is, but not letting concert venues be open is killing the music industry completely... It's a trickle-down effect: if the venues stay closed, the musicians can't play gigs. If the musicians can't play gigs they don't have money to record. I've noticed that on my side of things because I work in a recording studio that reopened on July 1st. We've reopened, but business is slow because people have no money to record. It's going to take time. I don't think we'll be back to any sense of normalcy until probably the summer of next year.

PG: Let's dive into the album – it's such a mammoth project and I know it was Hal's baby for years and years. I wanted to ask you about the workflow division – what your role was versus his role in more of that "producer" kind of chair.

MU: The word producer has been misused for years now. Making a beat in the bedroom does not make you a producer. Hal was a real producer in the sense that George Martin was a producer, or Rick Rubin is one. These are people that can take a project from start to end and look at the overall arc of the project and all the elements and factors that come into making that project. My role was to make sure that Hal could do all of that without having to worry about any of the technicalities around that, because obviously a lot comes into play when you're recording an album over four years in multiple countries all over the world. My main job was to record and mix and make sure everything sounds amazing. But there's a lot of other things that go into it, such as file management, keeping track of all the session details, making sure every time you do something it's backed up in multiple locations, traveling with microphones and hard drives etc. Plus, sometimes booking studios or hotels if we had to go somewhere – those duties I was sharing with Rachel Fox who was Hal Willner's manager/lawyer. Hal considered this his "white album," and I second that and feel the same about it in my own discography.

Kesha - Children of the Revolution (Official Video)



PG: So you were playing the role of both recording and mixing engineer?

MU: Yes, I was the recording and mixing engineer on the entire project. I flew around the world with Hal. We went to many different locations; most of the record was cut between Los Angeles and New York, but we did other sessions in Chicago, New Orleans and France. We definitely got around.

PG: How do you go about getting a consistent, unified album sound concept when you're working with a huge roster of guests and in different locations? How did you and Hal talk about shaping that?

MU: We didn't really talk about it, Hal just trusted me to do that. I've worked with Hal for many years before this project, so it's not like Hal just hired me and hoped for the best – he knew he

could trust me because we've done other albums and productions together. As for the overall consistency of the sound, I appreciate the comment, because that's part of my job, but it's kind of intrinsic in the fact that I'm giving the album a certain style by being the same person across all the sessions. So, to a degree, I would use similar microphones on things, even though it was different studios and preamps. All the sessions were done on analog consoles and for the most part they were Neve consoles. We always ensured that the best equipment was being used. Even though there are other variables in play, I was the constant across all those sessions and my leaving that kind of imprint on the sound is what gives it consistency.

PG: We should circle back – how did you first meet Hal and begin working with him?

MU: Hal was Lou Reed's producer and one of his best friends. I had worked with Lou for seven years before he passed. I met Hal through Lou, probably 15 years ago when I started working with Lou. We did a bunch of productions together where the artist was Lou and Hal was the producer. Also a lot of live tours. And then Hal started hiring me for his live sound productions. Just like his records are multi-artist concept albums, Hal had amazing multi-artist concept shows. We did one [about Bob Dylan's first concert at Town Hall](#). We did another one [about Hunter Thompson's Kentucky Derby](#). There's so many that Hal did throughout the years.

New York Shuffle - Video 2



PG: I read that he was doing that in the studio and then budgets started to shrink so he turned to the live setting, is that right?

MU: I don't know if that was the reason but it is certainly possible. I think Hal was just being asked to put together casts of characters that would otherwise seem unlikely. People would ask him to do things knowing that was one of his greatest talents.

PG: Let's talk about the inspiration for this project, Marc Bolan. I didn't realize what a huge influence he's been on so many different artists, and I was wondering what Hal's relationship with his music was that drove him to put so much time and energy into this project.

MU: Well, I'm not ashamed to say that, like you, I was not fully aware of the impact that T. Rex had on music in general. If you get yourself a physical

copy, which you should, besides being able to read through the incredible list of credits, you will see that the physical product has two sets of liner notes: one written by David Fricke, senior editor at Rolling Stone magazine, and the other by Hal. If you read those liner notes, Hal will say that he wasn't fully aware of the impact that T. Rex had. When he started downloading and listening to everything, he realized that not only was Marc Bolan a great rocker, a great performer, and a great influence on the styles of people like David Bowie, but also was a great songwriter and lyricist.

When people talk about Marc Bolan they talk about his influence on style because Bowie borrowed a lot from him in terms of glitter and androgynous modes of dressing on stage, or even people like Slash, who borrowed the top hat from Marc. He was always influencing styles, but he also influenced the music a lot and his lyrics are very on point. So if you look at it from that perspective, it gives Marc a whole other weight, and that's what Hal started doing. Hal decided to start looking at him as a songwriter and a lyricist. The first song we did for this record four years ago was the one with Nick Cave doing "Cosmic Dancer," and I remember that at the end of that session, Hal turned to me and said to me – I'm paraphrasing, something along the lines of – "it's clear to me now that this record will be about Marc's words and Marc's songs." Nick Cave's performance kind of helped solidify that thought for Hal.

Nick Cave - Cosmic Dancer (Official Video)



PG: Marc's a really interesting underground figure, kind of analogous to Hal in a sense. In the same way that I didn't know much about Marc, I also didn't know much about Hal. Of course, there's Saturday Night Live [where Willner served as producer for the show's musical skits for four decades prior to his passing from COVID in April of 2020]. But I never knew he produced *Night Music* where David Sanborn would often host a wide range of artists. Nor that he had this huge array of concept albums and things. What's one Hal project that you think maybe doesn't get enough credit that we should go back and check out?

PG: Well, I think none of Hal's projects got enough credit. I think he made incredible records that didn't get enough credit. He made the one about Disney [Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films (A&M, 1988)] which was amazing. He made another about Kurt Weill [Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill (A&M, 1985)] that was great. He did two records of sailor songs [Rogue's Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs, and Chanteys

(ANTI-, 2006) and *Son of Rogues Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs & Chanteys* (ANTI-, 2013)] which I really, really enjoy. I really love those records. And he produced a lot of records of people individually, including a bunch with Marianne Faithful.

It's interesting, after Hal died, I decided to create a little website for him where I collected all the tributes that people wrote for him. [You can check this out at www.haltribute.com](http://www.haltribute.com). Initially, I created this to collect all the tributes so that Hal's wife Sheila and his son Arlo could check this out later. Obviously they were grieving and I wanted them to be able to not miss out on any of the beautiful things people were saying about Hal. But the site turned into this archival project for me where I discovered all of these things about Hal that I didn't know even after knowing him for years. That includes what a massive discography he had. [If you look at the discography page on the site](#), you'll find that he had produced records for 40 years.

In fact, since you asked me, one of my favorite records of Hal was his very first record, which he did 40 years ago. It's called *Amarcord Nina Rota* (Hannibal, 1981)]. It's the music of Nino Rota, the Italian composer who composed the music for movies like *The Godfather*, Federico Fellini movies and stuff like that. [This record was actually re-released two years ago on CD by Corbett Vs Dempsey; initially, it was only available on vinyl](#). It's a fantastic record. I believe it's also the first appearance of Bill Frisell on a record. Hal was instrumental in discovering Bill Frisell and in helping the careers of many musicians, like Jeff Buckley. He was a huge influence on a number of musicians' careers.

Amarcord Nino Rota

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6. Debbie Harry + Various Artists: La Dol...

00:00



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5. Bill Frisell: Juliet Of The Spirits

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PG: Frisell shows up on *Angelheaded Hipster* as well, is that right?

MU: Yeah, Bill played on a bunch of the tracks. There's 150 musicians on the album. It is so many that really the only way to see who plays on which track is with the physical copy.

PG: This project seems so well-aligned with Hal's ethos of being beyond genre and category. Was that part of his personal philosophy, to try to bridge all these different things and deliver this message about the universality of music?

MU: Definitely, definitely. I don't know if it was a conscious choice. I don't know if Hal was saying "I intend to bridge genres." I think it was just normal for him because he listened to so much music. Hal is one of the most eclectic music lovers that I've ever met. I remember I used to go to his studio to visit him, and if you looked around his studio you would see thousands of vinyl records all over. The diversity of those records was baffling. You would see hip hop next to jazz next to experimental music. Everything was there,

new and old. You would go there and see the latest. One time I went there, I think it was just after Kendrick Lamar won a Grammy two or three years ago. I walked in and was surprised to see this Kendrick Lamar record sitting there, obviously, Hal had picked it up. It's quite amazing.

Hal Willner Tribute - SNL



PG: Beyond the *Angelheaded Hipster*, what's next for you? What do you have in the works?

MU: I'm working on a lot of different things right now. I work closely with John Zorn who's an amazing New York composer. John is one of the most prolific people I work with. To give you an idea of how much he creates, last week we were in the studio for 7 days and during that time, we've made three new records. Two are with Bill Frisell, Julian Lage, and Gyan Riley, which occupy the space between classical and jazz. The third is a metal record with one of Zorn's bands called

Simulacrum with John Medeski on organ, Kenny Grohowski on drums, Matt Hollenberg on guitar, and special guest Brian Marsella on Rhodes. So very diverse! There's another eclectic person for you! Other than the sessions that I do in the studio, and I always do different kinds of sessions of all genres, the things that I'm working on now are two records that I'm producing that are going to come out next year. One is a new record with my quartet with film director Jim Jarmusch, Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth, and a Hungarian drummer named Balasz Pandi.

[Lee Ranaldo / Jim Jarmusch / Ma...](#) [buy](#) [share](#)

by Lee Ranaldo - Jim Jarmusch - Marc Urselli - Balazs Pa



2. Bergelmir

00:00



PG: Ah, y'all have new stuff on the way? I checked out that one record you put out.

MU: Yeah, that was two years ago on the Austrian label Trost records. We're making a new record which is coming out soon. Then, the thing that I'm most proud of which I've been working on for years and is finally seeing the light is a record I'm producing – talk about bridging genres, this is why Hal and I got along so well. We both saw no borders and no limits between genres, we were both interested in bringing genres together. So for me, one of the ways I did this is I produced this record which brings together throat singing with doom metal players. Throat singing is a technique where you create overtones with your vocal cords and doom metal is obviously a sub genre of slow metal. So I brought together doom metal players from

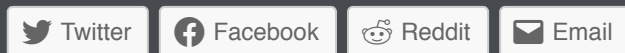
mostly Europe and the U.S. with throat singers from Tuva, Mongolia and Siberia and all these remote places where this is a technique that they employ. It took me years to do it but finally it's coming together. I'm talking to a label now and it should come out next year. The record is going to be called *SteppenDoom*, like *Steppenwolf* but with the word "doom" instead of wolf.

PG: Why *Steppenwolf*? What's the angle there?

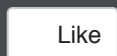
MU: Well, the "steppe" kind of scenery is what's common amongst the areas where throat singing comes from. A lot of the Mongolian throat singers are actually nomads who live in tents and move around with their horses, their sheep, their eagles, and whatnot. So "*SteppenDoom*" has been the working title, I think I'm going to go with that.

Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex is now available on vinyl, CD, or digitally.

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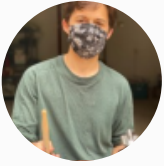
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Avery Logan

Avery Logan is a Boston-based drummer and music educator. An alumnus of Betty Carter Jazz Ahead, he has ranged from performances with Jason Palmer, Samora and Elena Pinderhughes, and Dayna Stephens to backing standup comedy gigs with Rob Schneider. He is passionate about the new wave of creative improvised music and its vitality in the shifting social fabric of the 21st century.

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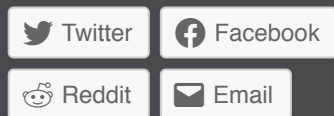
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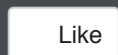
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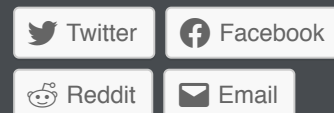
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