

Hal Willner, music producer, 64



Hal Willner in 2014. (Photo by Al Pereira/WireImage)

"Hal Willner passed away the other day. He got the coronavirus and died from complications like thousands and thousands of others tragically have in these past months.

I was lucky enough to know Hal Willner from 'Saturday Night Live,' where he was the music supervisor, and from the many movies I did with him through the years like 'Anchorman,' 'Step Brothers,' 'Vice' and a dozen short films.

Hal was a creative force, producing records for the likes of Lou Reed, Lucinda Williams, William S Burroughs, Laurie Anderson and working with filmmakers like Robert Altman, Gus Van Zant and Wim Wenders.

But what Hal really meant to the creative community is hard to put into a resume or bio. He was really a stylistic tollbooth operator who connected musicians and creative people from incredibly disparate backgrounds.

His most popular album was 'Stay Awake,' a collection of Disney songs interpreted by the likes of Sun Ra, The Replacements, Tom Waits and Betty Carter to name a few. But Hal didn't care about 'popular.' What made Hal so great besides his sweet collaborative nature, was that he was unapologetically weird. His entire life was a face-first dive into the unknown. He believed weird was as essential to mankind as love or the light bulb.

The first live show I saw of Hal's was a tribute to Allen Ginsberg at St. Mark's church in the mid-'90s lower east side. Kim Deal from the Breeders played guitar behind comedian Colin Quinn, who read a sort of stand-up poem about the contradictions in our society. "Gang bangers wear shower caps while housewives wear sweatsuits and gold chains." Quinn rasped while Kim Deal shredded out the chords of Now I Wanna Be Your Dog. And then while Allen Ginsberg read his poetry he was heckled violently by his friend and fellow poet Gregory Corso from the upper balcony of the church. 'Shut up you old queen!' Corso yelled.

And amidst it all Hal smiled. It wasn't about record sales or TV ratings for Hal. It was about this.

I was lucky enough to perform in one of Hal's legendary tribute shows. This particular one celebrated Ken Nordine and Del Close. I sat next to Laurie Anderson who read Nordine's word jazz mini stories while playing violin, and I got to read the old comedy record 'How to Speak Hip' with 'SNL' producer Steve Higgins. Hal greeted all the performers and musicians as well as the audience with a warm smile and his sheepish 'Can you believe we're doing this?' shrug.

But amidst all this creativity and world traveling with some of the greatest artists of the past 50 years, the thing that most excited Hal was clearly his son Arlo. Every time I would see him he would tell me how he and Arlo were watching Laurel and Hardy together or how Arlo was really truly making him laugh. And through the years when Hal became a father I swear every time you would see him he would look younger and more healthy.

I don't think Hal would ever say he was happy. Who the hell goes around saying they're happy besides Disc Jockeys and Time Share Salesmen? But he was.

Because Willner was the son of Holocaust survivors. And you always had the sense that Hal was living the exact life the monsters of the 1940s didn't want anyone to live: creative, strange, and amoral in the most moral of ways.

"You have to be honest to live outside the law" Bob Dylan once wrote.

And Hal really didn't have a clue how to be anything but honest."

-- *Adam McKay, Academy Award-winning writer and director*