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MUSIC NEWS

# A Final Bow From Hal Willner, The Producer With The Golden Rolodex

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Heard on Morning Edition

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Hal Willner in 2011. The producer's final project, created before his death in April, is *AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan*.

*Timothy Greenfield-Sanders*

Hal Willner was known as "the man with the golden Rolodex," a music producer who could call Lou Reed, Sting or Marianne Faithful and persuade them on a moment's notice to participate in any number of offbeat projects: tribute albums and concerts of Kurt Weill songs, Disney music and sea chanteys. Willner, who was also a music coordinator for *Saturday Night Live*, died from COVID-19 in April while working on his final project, a tribute to the songwriting of T. Rex frontman Marc Bolan.

Willner's wide-ranging musical tastes had their roots in his childhood, as he told NPR in 1988. "I was born in 1956, so when I was growing up listening to music, my tastes changed all the time," Willner said. "When I was a kid, it was rock and roll. Then it was jazz, then it was folk, then it was classical."



T. Rex singer and songwriter Marc Bolan is the muse of Hal Willner's final tribute project, *AngelHeaded Hipster*.

*Gloria Stavers*

"With the live shows, with the albums, he always talked about casting: 'Who are we going to get to do this song, 'cause this song has to be on the show or on the album,' " Fox recalls. "And of course the label is gonna say, we want this super-famous person and that super-famous person. And Hal would say, 'Yeah, well, you know, we'll get some famous ones.' But he saw it as a story to tell, and the cast would always involve different characters."



Hal Willner, 'SNL' Staple And Acclaimed Music Producer, Has Died

He was a shy, quirky kid from Philadelphia, the son of a delicatessen owner who was also a Holocaust survivor. His father's experience deeply affected Willner, and he turned to music and popular culture to take him to a happier place. The influences he absorbed were remarkable, says Chris Stein, co-founder of the new wave band Blondie.

"His knowledge was tremendous of the culture and of music and of art," Stein says. "Old TV commercials, and The Three Stooges, and just weird old stuff that he was fond of."

Willner arrived in New York at 18 and fell in love with city's gritty glamour. By the time he met Stein around 1980, he was already cooking up his first dream project: a tribute to Nino Rota, who composed the music for Federico Fellini's films.

The resulting album was called *Amarcord Nino Rota*, and it established Willner's reputation right out of the gate in 1981. (It was welcomed back in a reissue in 2018.) It also set the template for his later work with its unlikely cast of collaborators: Muhal Richard Abrams, Carla Bley, Bill Frisell, in addition to Stein and his Blondie bandmate, vocalist Debbie Harry.

Seamlessly blending disparate musical styles and personalities became Willner's trademark. He produced a tribute album to Disney music that paired the Sun Ra Arkestra with Harry Nilsson. Willner's Thelonious Monk album put jazz saxophonist Gary Windo alongside rock musician Todd Rundgren, who says Willner's approach was always about experimentation.

Todd Rundgren - Planet Queen (Official Audio)





*YouTube*

"The idea was, just don't do what you would normally do. Don't ape the original," Rundgren says. "Think as revolutionary as you possibly can. Whatever you did, Hal was likely accept it, as long as it wasn't conventional."

Rundgren is on Willner's final project, *AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan and T. Rex*; the producer put Rundgren together with Steely Dan's Donald Fagen. Willner's long-time manager Rachel Fox, who supervised the completion of the album, says Willner approached each project almost as though he were casting a film or theater production.

One of the artists Willner featured in the *AngelHeaded Hipster* project was Helga Davis, who has primarily worked in avant-garde theater. She first met Willner 10 years ago, when he called her out of the blue.

Willner said he needed a choir, and he needed it in two days. Davis had never heard of him, but she nevertheless scrambled to put one together. Only later did she learn it was for a 30th anniversary show to commemorate the birth of the Solidarity movement.

"I'd never been to Poland before," Davis says, "but I was just so excited to meet this person who was putting this thing together, and that we — six African-Americans — were going across the pond to celebrate this movement." When the concert finally came together, she says, "I understood that we were working with someone who was a completely magical beast."

Virtually every artist who has worked with Willner has a story like this — a moment when he suddenly appeared and brought a sense of magic into their lives. Todd Rundgren says he lost more than a long-time collaborator when Willner died.

"We would spend holidays together. He was at my wedding. I remember being in different parts of the world with him, you know, just hanging out," Rundgren says. "It was, for me, the loss of a family member. It was worse than even losing a friend."

Everyone wanted to talk about Willner: the way he always made artists feel like they were doing him a favor, and realizing after he died that it was the other way around. Beth Orton is on the new album and, like many musicians, worked with Willner for over two decades.

Beth Orton - Hippy Gumbo (Official Audio)



YouTube

"He seemed to understand everyone he worked with better than they understood themselves," Orton says. "He always pulled out the best in people. Or he allowed people to be who they were."

*AngelHeaded Hipster* was slated for release this past May, to coincide with Marc Bolan's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. But the ceremony was postponed by the pandemic and by late March, Willner had already been diagnosed with COVID-19. He died on April 7, one day after his 64th birthday.

He may have been the man with the golden Rolodex, but everyone said he was also a mensch with a golden imagination, and a heart to match.

T. Rex Hal Willner

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