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## Joan Jett and Hal Willner's Friends Talk About His 'Masterpiece,' the T. Rex Tribute Album 'Angelheaded Hipster'

By Roy Trakin ▾



Luiz C. Ribeiro

When veteran music producer [Hal Willner passed away](#) due to complications believed to be associated with Covid-19 on April 7, a day after his 64th birthday, the music community in New York and beyond was devastated. Willner had been the sketch music producer for "Saturday Night Live" for

decades — the show [paid homage with a moving four-minute video](#) — and he'd produced albums for Lou Reed, Marianne Faithfull, Lucinda Williams, Laurie Anderson and many more.

But his gifts as a producer are perhaps best evidenced in the series of mind-blowing tribute albums he oversaw (although, as we see below, he hated that term), which found artists ranging from Tom Waits — who [wrote a heartfelt tribute](#) to Willner — and Ringo Starr to Keith Richards and Wynton Marsalis paying musical homage to Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Kurt Weill and even music from Disney films.

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His final project turned out to be just such an album: a collection of [Marc Bolan/ T. Rex](#) covers called “Angelheaded Hipster,” out today (Sept. 4) on BMG, that he'd working on since 2016. The album features perhaps his most genre-defying variety of artists to date — from U2 with Elton John on piano (on “Get It On” (Bang a Gong)) to Nick Cave, Lucinda Williams, Kesha, [Joan Jett](#), Father John Misty, Perry Farrell, David Johansen, Peaches, Metric's Emily Haines and even both Sean and Julian Lennon.

Supervising producer Rachel Fox, who left her music law practice in the mid-'90s to become Willner's right-hand legal rep for 25 years, tells *Variety* that he considered the album his "masterpiece."

"Hal hated the word 'tribute' in connection with these albums," Fox says. "He wanted to spotlight Bolan's abilities as a songwriter, lyricist and composer."

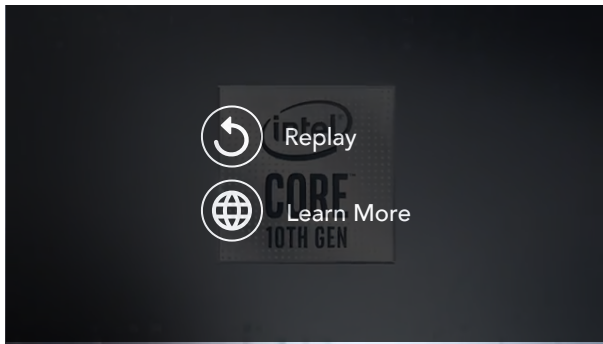
Gary Lucas, a renowned guitarist who first met Willner in 1977 and worked with him often over the years, says, "Casting was always Hal's strength. With his experience at 'SNL,' he could put together all sorts of quirky aggregations very quickly. He'd be like a beatific Buddha or rabbi, standing off to the side, beaming. You wanted to play your best for him."

The Bolan album was the brainchild of The Who's longstanding manager Bill Curbishley and Ethan Silverman, who conceived the project as an album and a "making of" documentary to get Bolan the recognition many fans feel he has long deserved — although he had just one U.S. pop hit with "Get It On (Bang a Gong)," Bolan was an early '70s superstar in England, rising to fame before his longtime friend and rival David Bowie. Bolan even had his own TV show, on which he performed with Bowie just days before his death in a car accident on September 16, 1977, two weeks short of his 30th birthday.



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When BMG A&R veteran Kate Hyman got oversight, she turned to her old friend Willner, whose first move was to have Nick Cave record a chilly version of "Cosmic Dancer" from T. Rex's 1971's "Electric Warrior," the album many consider Bolan's best.



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BMG's Hyman called Willner "the Robert Altman of record producers," who got the best out of musicians and preferred amplifying the artistry of others rather than his own.

"Hal put this very strange group of people in one room, then sequenced the record," she says.

Bolan's music tended to be either '50s-influenced riff-rock or mystical acoustic songs, and "AngelHeaded Hipster" (the phrase taken from Allen Ginsburg's epic poem, "Howl"), finds Willner mixing the two.

"Hal and I were both big T. Rex fans and Marc Bolan was my first crush" says Joan Jett, recruited to play the chugging "Jeepster." Jett lets loose a cathartic Bolanesque yowl midway through the song.

"That's his scream I'm letting flow through me," she says, "but it's also intrinsic to what I do. I don't even think about it — it's part of me. Marc Bolan had a major impact on every aspect of my musician self, especially the look — the androgyny.

"The lyrics are surreal, and the words just sound beautiful together," she continues. "They probably make sense to him, but if you're looking for a message, you have to create your own. I enjoy the sound, the music and the melody for its own sake. It doesn't even have to get any deeper than that."

Metric vocalist/songwriter Emily Haines had known [Hal Willner](#) since participating in his live Neil Young homage in Vancouver back in 2010 (he organized many such concerts, which we won't call "tributes").

"Hal has an incredible ability to see artists for who they really are, and what they bring to the table in surprising ways, as opposed to the limitations that often get placed in terms of genre, type of musicianship or artistry," Haines says. "I was always part of this amazing combination of people."

Haines' epic interpretation of "Ballrooms of Mars," from T. Rex's 1972 album "The Slider," offers a look at the inevitable demise of rock and roll, name-checking Bob Dylan, John Lennon and legendary DJ Alan Freed.

“The song has Bolan looking back on the end of the glam era, that level of self-expression,” Haines says. “I had to channel that character, the sleazy, sexy thing that’s so enticing about rock and roll when it works. He was just so confident and cool.

“The nature of what Hal did was so hard to describe,” she continues. “It was not just a personal loss to his family, but to New York’s mythic downtown music scene — all those mutant weirdos and freaks. [He was] making things happen with different communities, that friction and chemistry. If you were in the city in the ‘70s, it’s something you wanted to hold on to. He was an alchemist, and this album is the perfect example of what he did. He was such a one-off.”

“Hal was like a brother to me,” Rachel Fox says, welling up. “Everything about him was always an adventure: going to his studio, where he had all his ventriloquist dummies and crazy old puppets and a painting by Tom Waits’ daughter hanging on the wall. He was a lovely human being, a very kind man, a mensch. He missed New York in the old days — even, ironically, as it is reverting back to 1978 now [due to the pandemic].”

“I loved the guy,” says Lucas, who was first introduced by Willner to the late Jeff Buckley; the two played together in the band Gods and Monsters and Lucas cowrote two songs on Buckley’s debut album. “There aren’t that many great people in the music business who seem to be doing it more for love than money, and he was one of them. Turning me on to Jeff was a huge turning point in my career.”

“I just hope, wherever he is, Hal can see how people are reacting to this record,” Hyman concludes. “He would’ve loved it. His whole life, Hal fought against the machine, but at the same time, he wanted to be part of that machine, too.”

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