

You are here > Home > Article > One of Hal Willner's Final Interviews

## ONE OF HAL WILLNER'S FINAL INTERVIEWS

September 22, 2020 333admin



### RAY PADGETT IN CONVERSATION WITH THE ACCLAIMED MUSIC PRODUCER WHO BROUGHT TRIBUTE ALBUMS TO LIFE

When I decided to write a book about tribute albums, I knew I needed to speak with Hal Willner. He all but singlehandedly invented the format in the '80s, though, as he was quick to point out, others made it bigger in the '90s. He continued producing tribute albums on and off until his tragic death from COVID-19 earlier this year. His latest, a tribute to Marc Bolan of T. Rex which he was extremely excited about when we spoke in July of 2019, finally came out this month.

There's an entire chapter in my book derived from my interviews with Willner, but here, for the first time, is an extended Q&A of our first conversation.



### RECENT POSTS

[The Ten Most Historically Important Tribute Albums](#)

[What did Leonard Cohen himself think of the covers on I'm Your Fan?](#)

[One of Hal Willner's Final Interviews](#)

[Why I Wrote a Book About I'm Your Fan](#)

[Virtual 'Realities' in The Velvet Rope](#)

### RECENT COMMENTS

333admin on [33 1/3 Open Call Update!](#)

333admin on [33 1/3 Open Call Update!](#)

333admin on [33 1/3 Open Call Update!](#)

Travis Welch on [33 1/3 Open Call Update!](#)

Bud on [33 1/3 Open Call Update!](#)

### ARCHIVES

Select Month



### CATEGORIES

Select Category



## A DISCOGRAPHY OF HAL WILLNER'S TRIBUTE ALBUMS

- 1981: *Amarcord Nino Rota* – a tribute to the composer of Fellini films featuring Blondie, Carla Bley, Wynton and Bradford Marsalis, etc.
- 1984: *That's The Way I Feel Now: A Tribute to Thelonious Monk* – featuring Dr. John, Donald Fagan, NRBQ...
- 1985: *Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill* – featuring Lou Reed, Tom Waits, Sting...
- 1988: *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* – featuring Sun Ra, Ringo Starr, Harry Nilsson...
- 1992: *Weird Nightmare: Meditations on Mingus* – Mingus songs played on eclectic instruments built by composer Harry Partch, featuring Keith Richards, Leonard Cohen, Chuck D...
- 1995: *September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weill* – a sequel of sorts to *Lost in the Stars*, and the first of a number of tribute albums derived from a live concert, featuring Nick Cave, PJ Harvey, William S. Burroughs...
- 2003: *Stormy Weather: The Music of Harold Arlen* – featuring Rufus Wainwright, Debbie Harry, David Johansen...
- 2006: *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man* – featuring U2, Jarvis Cocker, and Cohen himself...
- 2006: *Rogue's Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs, and Chanteys* – a tie-in to the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, featuring Bono, Lucinda Williams, Nick Cave...
- 2006: *The Harry Smith Project: Anthology of American Folk Music Revisited* – featuring Beck, Wilco, Marianne Faithfull...
- 2013: *Son of Rogues Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs & Chanteys* – another sequel, featuring Iggy Pop, Macy Gray, a Tom Waits/Keith Richards duet...
- 2020: *AngelHeaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T. Rex* – featuring Kesha, U2, Joan Jett...

## INTERVIEW WITH HAL WILLNER

**Hal:** Is it all my fault?

**Ray:** Well, you've just anticipated my first question [laughs]. I'd rephrase it, because I love tribute albums, but you do sometimes get credited as the father of tribute albums. Do you think that's accurate?

**Hal:** I hope not. The weird thing is, I don't think my records in particular started this. I think the records that *did* start it were influenced by the ones I did, you know what I mean?

**Ray:** In another interview, you mentioned 1989's *The Bridge: A Tribute To Neil Young*. You mean albums like that, and the bigger '90s ones?

**Hal:** Yes, *The Bridge* and the Cole Porter tribute [1990's *Red Hot + Blue*]. My work affected them and then they sought out to do their own thing. Harry Smith used to talk to me about this. He always told me if you pioneer something, you won't be the one [to make it big].

People are going to look at my earlier records and go, "If that schmuck only had well-known groups on it..." which is what the *Red Hot* record was. Or all independent groups, like Sonic Youth and all, and that's what *The Bridge* did. They catered to a certain audience, which I think is what most of them do and therefore they were easier to sell.

I started as a kid. I'm 63, I was born in 1956. Comedy and music were brothers in arms. We had variety shows like The Smothers Brothers. It was perfectly natural to see George Carlin next to The Doors. Look at the shows Bill Graham did, Led Zeppelin with Raanan Roland Kirk opening. That's something that went away. That's how I got into this. Thank golly I found the Firesign Theatre records, Stan Freberg records, all that. They were like music.

It was typical to hear albums [that were like] variety shows. Look at The Beatles' *White Album* as an example. You had jazz into rock into this, and it was funny here and it was avant-garde there. Record producers then were still staff producers; eclecticism was like a prerequisite. You can go back to the Sinatra records on Capitol, all songs about airplanes.

**Ray:** How did that impulse find its way onto your early tributes?

**Hal:** When I wanted to make my first album, I had this fantasy of doing movie music from Fellini films. Basically, to show it in another idiom, another way. I did with that as we did almost all of them. The whole reason I wanted to do these in the first place wasn't to make tributes, really. It's making records I wanted to hear.

The Rota started out as basically a jazz record. During that process, I met Debbie Harry and someone told me about Bill Frisell before he was known. It ended up getting in the rock press. I'm going to meet A & R people and all that for gigs. They were saying, "Well what's your next idea?" I didn't have one.

The idea just came to me when I went to a tribute concert for Thelonious Monk, and there were all these jazz purist types there who used to put Monk down in the day. I wondered where was NRBQ, Donald Fagen?

So then I had a series. I was already deemed a "concept record guy" or whatever it was. A friend of mine came up with Kurt Weill, which was the first one with vocals. Then it really got nuts with the Disney record.

**Ray:** Those two are in a way maybe a little more like what would come later, they do have more household names, stars on them. Was that your intention, to get away from the jazz stuff into the more pop world?

**Hal:** No. If you look at the first one, the Rota with Blondie, that was during the peak of their career when they're on that, Donald Fagan was huge there. I always knew I had to have a balance. Even going down the line to Kurt Weill, we had Sting and Lucinda Williams [on the one hand]. John Zorn who was not really known at the time, or Elliott Sharp. They're all a mixture. I don't think any of them had one particular type of music throughout it.

**Ray:** Are you producing the sessions in person? How do you get that cohesive sound?

**Hal:** I'm there for almost every [session]. Maybe on two of the records, one track, someone does something and then sends it to us to mix. It's just bringing my dream fantasies and records I want to hear.

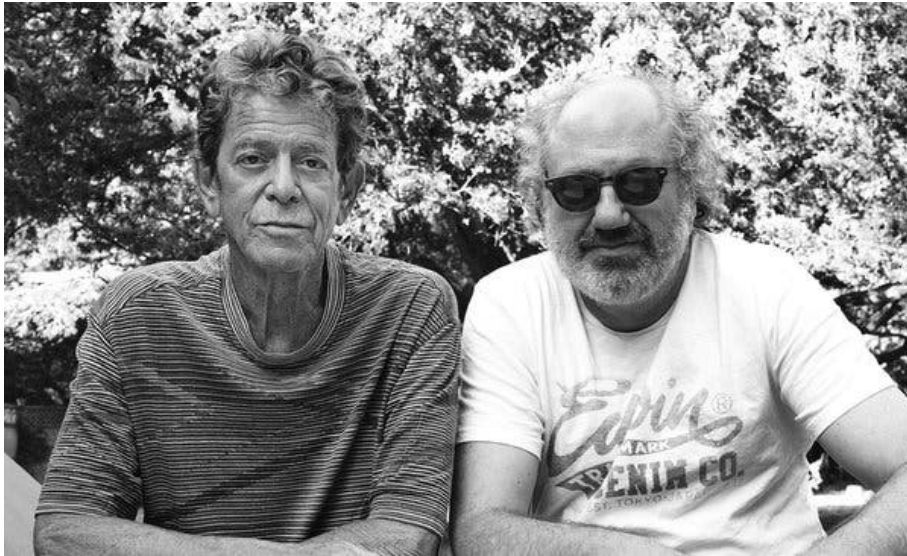
I find the people that maybe understand [my ideas] the least that are often the artists on the record. Sometimes the artists don't totally get it. But some do. You'll see the ones that have been repeated on these records, a number of times, Carla, Dr. John, Tom Waits. I got to work with Robert Altman years later and he works in a similar way. He looks at his casts and he allows people to do what they do, not telling them how to act. But he was the framework of it.

**Ray:** If it's someone you haven't worked with before, how are you picking the artists? Do you know they're a fan of Disney movies or Leonard Cohen or whatever it is? Are you reaching out to a large group of people and seeing who says what? How do you curate the roster?

**Hal:** It's changed with each project. As of late, I've been doing stuff like — we have a quick one that's pretty big coming out, which is the Marc Bolan music. The concept behind that was largely to get him his due as a songwriter, which he's never had. It's always as a rocker. You never hear him talked about as a composer. In that case like, I'll get very specific ideas. We started with Nick Cave doing "Cosmic Dancer." Then I called around that night. Maria McKee was around. She came in and we figured it out that day.

I'm enjoying doing that more now, having a core group of musicians and having people come in to do like three tracks a day. By this point, I know people. "Do you want to come in and do a song?"

As we approach artists, sometimes they think the idea is great even though it's not an obvious one like Lou Reed doing "September Song", Carla Bley doing "8 1/2". Then sometimes they'll have their own idea. I don't like the word "no" on any of my albums.



Lou Reed and Hal Willmer

**Ray:** What do you do when two artists want to cover the same song?

**Hal:** It didn't get to that point.

**Ray:** It's never happened?

**Hal:** It's very rare. On the [Marc Bolan] one, we do have two artists cover the same song, but they're very different. U2 with Elton John did "Bang a Gong" and David Johansen did a version.

I love to approach subjects that I don't know everything about or I don't know much about. I like learning. [With Kurt Weill.] it was a subject I don't know much about. I only knew *Threepenny Opera*, *Mahagonny*. It's a great way to learn about it and then your audience is going to learn it with you. It's discovery, and then not totally knowing what you're doing walking in. It's fascinating that way, and then you become an expert on this stuff.

I stopped doing these kind of records for a while because it seemed to get kind of ridiculous. There was a certain period where there were zillions of them being done. I was competing for artists, and I'm going, "Hey, this is weird." "Oh, he signed to the Buddy Greco tribute." It just was getting unfun.

**Ray:** You did a bunch of live tribute shows in the interim, only a few of which got turned into albums – Leonard Cohen, Harry Smith. Why those and not the rest?

**Hal:** Someone was interested! [laughs] I never approached live things like they are going to be albums. It's a live show, it's different.

**Ray:** I was reading about that Randy Newman one you did a decade or so ago. I'm a big Randy Newman fan, so I was bummed that one didn't turn into a proper album. The lineup was amazing. Elvis Costello, Vic Chesnutt, Victoria Williams...

**Hal:** Randy himself, it was his idea to do a record. And I don't think he was totally comfortable with the artists that were chosen. I have a joke that I say: "If the artists or whatever whose work we're looking at here likes the project, then we did not do a good job."

Some of the people supported the stuff. Leonard Cohen supported. He was even in the film of that, but he didn't come to any of the shows. I understand that.

Bill Withers was at his [show], but I don't think most of the night was up to his taste. I had people like Henry Grimes, an avant-garde jazz guy doing his thing. But in the midst of this craziness, I had Cornell Dupree play "Grandma's Hands" solo. Withers got out of his chair – and he hasn't sung in public in forever – he jumped on stage and started singing with him.

Some of the best ones you never hear about again. We did one that was incredible for Shel Silverstein in Central Park. That was spectacular.

**Ray:** Do you always have the tributed artists involved in some capacity? Do you get their approval?

**Hal:** You can't have them against you. We did a version of the Disney tribute live a number of times. Disney was not, as you can imagine, the most supportive of that project, but they let it happen. They wouldn't let me use the album cover I wanted to use, which was a Ralph Steadman portrayal of Disneyland with families leaving the castle and they're all miserable.

**Ray:** How often do you turn down an offer to do a tribute album or concert?

**Hal:** A venue calls, says they want to do a benefit, I'm not going to ever pass on the chance to put a bunch of people on a stage that you never saw on that stage before together. When something you never saw before is working, and it's something that will never happen again, it is a feeling one gets that you can't describe.

[One favorite] is that one of the Harry Smith shows. We're doing a Van Dyke Parks arrangement of "Fishing Blues." They had Dave Thomas singing it, from Pere Ubu. There was Percy Heath from the Modern Jazz Quartet on bass. Phillip Glass is sitting at the piano. Then you got Beck and PJ Harvey watching from one side of the stage and Elvis Costello from the other. You're looking at this and you're going, "This is working." It's just goosebumps city.

**Ray:** Are you picking every one of these artists or some being assigned to you by this hierarchy?

**Hal:** Some of the times I have ideas, sometimes I'll run into someone on the street during the process of the record and go, "Hey, what are you doing?" You want to be on this album?" That's the kind of things that happens. You know that young singer Børns? He heard about the [Marc Bolan] record and contacted us. We working in the studio with him and Kesha was in the next room. She barged in and said, "I want to be on this."

Nick Cave has been on my things for years. Joan Jett who's on it, she wanted to do it. I didn't know her, but she worked with our musicians. The record company also arranged for Perry Farrell to be on it. I knew U2 and Emily Haines. Sometimes we booked a session around a certain artist and then found out who else was around. In one day, we did Beth Orton, Lucinda Williams, and Joan Jett. The same session with the same band.

**Ray:** Do you have a sense of the landscape of tribute albums now? You talk about the '90s when it just became an overwhelming amount. Is your sense that it's died down a little, become a little easier to get artists for yours?

**Hal:** I don't listen to many I actually like. The one of Stephen Foster [2004's *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster*], I thought that was very good. But again there was one that was done for the reason of making a great record. There was no other agenda, [like] trying to raise money for something. Whoever made that record really just wanted to make a great record. Then you had Mark Kramer who made a tribute band of a band that never existed, The Rutles [1990's *Rutles Highway Revisited*]. That was very funny.

**Ray:** Do you have any others in the pipeline or that you are thinking about?

**Hal:** George Harrison was offered and I said yes. I find so many of George Harrison's great songs from the later part of his career nobody knows. After *Living in the Material World*, no one knows them. The productions on all those records may not be the right kind of production. This was a guy who searched out world music. He was an experimenter early in that. I would have thought, why didn't he work with Alice Coltrane? That's basically the idea there, to bring that to light. I would love to take some of his great guitar solos and have them arranged for horns. That kind of stuff.

**Ray:** It's just interesting talking about deliberately pushing people to cover more lesser-known tracks, or in some cases, the whole albums are around someone who's like Marc Bolan, not known as a songwriter. Whereas so many tribute albums, it's the opposite. If you're doing a tribute album to Duran Duran, some people will make sure to only the hits, or you could do it for George Harrison, you make sure people only cover the best-known songs. It's interesting to me that you, to some degree, have the opposite impulse.

**Hal:** I'll bring up the *White Album* again. They had "Wild Honey Pie," right? Which was great. There's all of us who actually didn't take off the needle when "Revolution 9" came on. That's where the avant-garde thing comes in and the experimental. Always make sure there's something like that on the tribute, if not more than a few things.

**Ray:** In terms of your personal memories of making these, do you have any favorites, least favorites, which ones do you look back on more or less fondly?

**Hal:** I always will say that Nina Roto is probably the best one because I didn't know what I was doing. Everything was innocent. Then again, the first session of the Disney record was a Van Dyke-arranged session in Burbank for a 50-piece orchestra. The artists that day were Ringo Starr, Harry Nilsson, Herb Alpert, and Yma Sumac. Same room. It's hard to get past that one.

Of course, some friendships were made through it all. Watching Tom Waits' "Heigh Ho" come to life was something. The Harry Partch instruments, having them all there. I try to do something new with each one.

---

**Hungry for more insights into the making of your favorite tribute album? Order your copy of Ray's book today!**

📄 Article

« Why I Wrote a Book About I'm Your Fan

What did Leonard Cohen himself think of the covers on I'm Your Fan? »

## RELATED POSTS

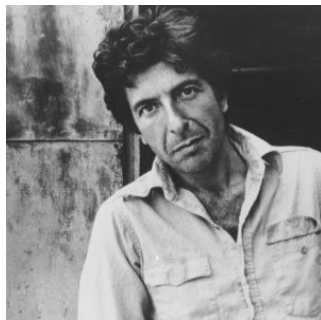


📅 September 24, 2020 👤 333admin

Comments Off

### THE TEN MOST HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT TRIBUTE ALBUMS

Ray Padgett on the covers that shaped the tribute album as we know it today I...



📅 September 23, 2020 👤 333admin

0

### WHAT DID LEONARD COHEN HIMSELF THINK OF THE COVERS ON I'M YOUR FAN?

Ray Padgett on how Cohen viewed the tribute albums he inspired From Judy Collins in the...



📅 September 21, 2020 👤 333admin

0

### WHY I WROTE A BOOK ABOUT I'M YOUR FAN

Ray Padgett, a leading expert on cover songs, on his 33 1/3 about Leonard Cohen and...

LEAVE A COMMENT