



Hal Willner working at EastSide Sound with Oren of Elysian Fields listening back

Photo by Marc Urselli

# The Angel Headed Hipster

By Marc Urselli

## Part 4: Hal Willner

April marks the first anniversary of Hal Willner's passing—the producer who brought us *Angel Headed Hipster: The Music of Marc Bolan and T. Rex*. Hal tragically died of Covid 19 complications just one day after his 64th birthday, and this series on the making of *Hipster* is a testimony to the work Hal and I did on it. I had the chance to work with Hal on many sessions, albums, concerts and tours during the last ten years of his life, and I was fortunate to call him my friend. We were kindred spirits who saw eye to eye on how music should be recorded, mixed, enjoyed, and revered. A bottomless fountain of knowledge, Hal was an eclectic listener and lover of music. Tom Waits described him as a “crafty treasure seeker and archeologist of forgotten islands in popular culture.”

Despite being two peas in a pod when it came to organically conjuring beautiful music, we were opposites when it came to how we planned for things. I tend to be organized and plan for everything; Hal loved spontaneity and thrived in a bit of chaos. In sessions, he'd add musicians and instruments, introduce new ideas at the last minute, and he'd often invite multiple artists to a session to see who would show up and what could happen. Sometimes they'd collaborate; other times, they would watch each other in awe and offer support from the control room. Once, he put together a U2 session in New Orleans on a 72-hour notice. Trombone Shorty was invited to participate, giving us the only U2 song ever to have a trombone solo! Another time he called me from Los Angeles (I was in New York) less than 48 hours before booking a session with Nick Cave, and also inviting Maria McKee to the studio. We ended up recording two sessions with the same rhythm section in the same studio on the same day. On another session in New York, he called Joan Jett, Lucinda Williams and Beth Orton, and we ended up tracking three songs with them on the same day with the same backing band.

### The improbable matchmaker

Hal was a sketch music producer at *Saturday Night Live* starting in 1980. He also produced the 1988-1989 TV show *Night Music*. Hal was a wizard when it came to putting together artists who seemingly might not fit together, and anyone who watched *Night Music* knows what I'm referring to—think Conway Twitty, Kronos Quartet and The Residents sharing a stage! Many of these artists became Hal's friends, and he coaxed them into collaborations that on paper should never have worked, but were incredible!

“Hal was our visionary, our ringleader, always working against reason itself, armed with a deep love and bottomless knowledge of music, an incredible generosity and reverence for those forgotten and discarded, an eccentric and screwball vision, and a perverse love of chaos, and who produced some of the most moving and unforgettable spectacles.” —Nick Cave

Every Hal Willner production I've ever been involved with was as exciting as it was chaotic. I blindly followed through the storms he would conjure with unexpected happenings, improvised situations, extemporaneous beauty and ultimate spontaneity. However, organization was not his forte. His modus operandi consisted of last-minute changes and additions that could drive you crazy, but I learned to go with the flow. One of the many lessons I learned was that it doesn't have to be planned out perfectly to work magically. It also taught me to adjust my methods for preparedness, and I chaos-proofed what I could so that I could roll with the punches and enable Hal in whatever idea he concocted. As his collaborator and technical right hand, my job was to make his whims possible. To give you an example: every time we would get ready for a session or a show, I'd prepare an input list with two to three times the amount he had asked for. If he told me there would be two guitar players, I'd prepare for three.

If he mentioned a string quartet, I'd be ready for at least six to eight players, with plenty of microphones, mic stands, music stands and everything else. There pretty much was never a time when Hal didn't add something or someone at the last minute. After getting caught unprepared the first time, I quickly learned to be over-prepared every time!

### Nod and smile!

To make matters worse, Hal was a mumbler. I often had no idea what he just said, but I nodded in approval because I didn't want to seem unprepared, and I also didn't want to make him repeat himself. This eccentric, all-knowing oracle and village sage often gave you clues that you would have to decipher and interpret. After his passing, I was relieved to find out I wasn't the only one who didn't always understand those clues.

"Every story he told was followed by several inaudible and impossible to decipher remarks, (as if he was heckling himself) that were only intended for him." —Tom Waits

"His obvious love for old schtick and the references that he mumbled incessantly made me realize that there was a lot more to this guy, and that I had no idea what he was actually talking about half the time." —Marcus Rojas

### Eclectic tastes

I often felt ignorant and inadequate when Hal would make a musical reference that I wasn't familiar with. I would try to tell myself that he had 20 years of age and experience on me and that he was probably referring to something that didn't make it across the pond (I grew up in Europe in a time before the internet). The truth was that you'd need to spend lifetimes devouring music from every genre, and you'd still only know 10% of what he knew, even at a young age.

"At 35, Willner's conversation is a bleary mumble of black-humored bons mots, and his Lower East Side apartment... looks like a pop culture archaeological site, spilling over with boxes of old vinyl records, comic books, framed jazz photographs and racks of videotape." —Richard Guillatt (writer).

Those of us fortunate enough to have visited his New York office on 9th Avenue or even his home in Los Angeles witnessed it—records everywhere, in the thousands! I marveled at the diversity of influences and the variety of genres all surrounding him in those spaces. You'd see the most obscure records from the past sitting next to the latest thing on the charts. He didn't work with many hip-hop/rap artists, but one day at his office I noticed that he had the latest Kendrick Lamar album, and it was sitting right next to a Scott Walker album and some strange record from India. In the studio, Hal never abused or showed off his extensive musical knowledge.

### Nudging the art

Hal was primarily hands-off in the studio, but he could nudge things in a particular direction by uttering just a few words. He often wanted to be in the live room with the musicians, so I always set up an extra set of headphones for him. He didn't do this because he wanted to speak up or push in a certain direction; in fact, he very rarely said anything. He wanted to be present in the act of creation, feel the vibrations and be *within* the art.

### Master of psychology

Hal was not a musician. He didn't play an instrument (although he loved making music with his iPad). He didn't know how to read or write sheet music. He also wasn't well versed in microphones, consoles or DAWs, yet he was a *real producer*, like George Martin, Rick Rubin, Quincy Jones, T Bone Burnett. Hal understood music and the people that made the music. He understood that *music is the people*. He was a quiet observer and a master of psychology. He loved seeing where musicians could take things, and he let them go there—setting people free and not tying their hands behind their backs.

"Hal would often make these mumbled suggestions that would make all the difference." —Doug Wieselmann.

When Hal felt something wasn't quite right, he would make a subtle, humble suggestion that would effectively change the session's direction. Producing is more about psychology than you'd think.

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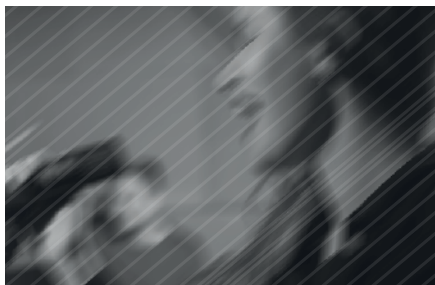
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# Session Log



## The concert that never was

One of the greatest Hal Willner productions I had the pleasure of being involved with was a concert that never was: in July 2018, we did two days of rehearsal for the *Nino Rota Amarcord* show at Lincoln Center that sadly was rained out. The concert was meant to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the album by the same name, which was the first album Hal produced and had just been re-released digitally by the Corbett vs. Dempsey label. Inherently it was also a celebration of Hal's 40-year career, and a lot of the original cast was present, including Bill Frisell, who got his first gig in New York thanks to Hal and that very record.

"It was so amazing just to hang out and hear what Hal had to say. His mind was going, going, going. All the time. Just trying to keep up with the enthusiasm that he had for things was tremendous."  
—Bill Frisell.

## Tribute

Although he didn't love the word 'tribute', Hal pretty much created the 'tribute album' concept with multi-artist albums paying homage to composers such as Kurt Weil, Charles Mingus and others. He was influential in Jeff Buckley and Martha Wainwright's careers, and over the years he produced albums for Marianne Faithfull, David Sanborn, Gavin Friday, Lou



Hal Willner mixing at EastSide Sound

Photo by Marc Urselli

Reed, Laurie Anderson, Bill Frisell, Lucinda Williams, Tim Robbins and even Metallica. Over four decades, Hal changed the lives of so many musicians (and listeners) along the way.

Hal also made a *huge* impact on my life, my way of working, my understanding of music and my love and renewed commitment for music that's organically played by humans interacting together. Hal Willner was a great mentor to me, in ways I've only begun to grasp after his death. I hope to honor his legacy by continuing in his footsteps with a commitment to musical quality and the spirit of collaboration and unity throughout diverse genres and seemingly distant worlds.

### Thank you, Hal!

In addition to our year-long behind the scenes look at *AngelHeaded Hipster*, to honor his memory, I created [www.haltribute.com](http://www.haltribute.com). There you'll find the only complete discography of Hal's vast body of work along with beautiful and touching tributes, articles, and quotes that musicians, poets, writers, and friends alike have written in the wake of his passing. ➔

*Marc Urselli is a Grammy® Award-winning engineer working out of New York City and London. Read about his current projects and past successes at [www.marcurselli.com](http://www.marcurselli.com)*



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