

Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass
Christmas Album
(Shout Factory, 2005)

Surely you recall this group's distinctive instrumentals. You remember "The Lonely Bull," "A Taste of Honey," "Tijuana Taxi," and of course, "Spanish Flea," better known to most folks as the TV theme music for **The Dating Game**. Well, during their heyday, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass also recorded a Christmas album. Originally released on A&M records in December 1968, its sound will transport you to the seemingly simpler days of the 1960s, when pop music of all sorts existed back-to-back on Top 40 radio stations. Overall, the ten songs on this album have timeless appeal.

The recording begins with a snappy version of "Winter Wonderland," followed by some south of the border flair exhibited in "Jingle Bells." That direction is furthered with "Las Mananitas," which features a mandolin and those signature dual trumpets. This selection previously appeared as the flip side of the 45-rpm single "Whipped Cream" in 1965.

"My Favorite Things" is performed in the style and with the pacing of "A Taste of Honey." According to the accompanying booklet, this song got regular radio airplay and was a crowd favorite during the 1968 holiday season. (Remember: **The Sound of Music** had hit the movie theaters just three years earlier.) I don't remember hearing it on the radio back then; but I was probably more focused on listening to my Monkees albums at the time.

Most of the songs begin with an oohing choral introduction or transition. These voices were dubbed in after the instrumental tracks were laid and provide a fuller sound as a result. Occasionally these vocals foreshadow other holiday melodies that don't even appear on the album, thus adding a mischievous flavor to the mix.

Alpert sets aside his trumpet to sing two tunes: "The Christmas Song" and "The Bell That Couldn't Jingle" (the latter, a Burt Bacharach-Larry Kusik creation). He's not a bad vocalist. After all, 1968 was the year "This Guy's in Love With You" spent some time at the top of the charts. Its success must have paved the way to include these two songs here.

Use your imagination when you listen to "Sleigh Ride." You'll hear the horse slow down to deposit its passengers at a destination; then it will take off again, down a snowy lane. Later it seems to have joined a holiday parade, complete with a high measured step. When that moment's passed, the sleigh is off in a flurry again. What's ironic is the total omission of the traditional trumpeted neigh to conclude the song. The clip-clops and the snapping whip are gone as well. But for a band that features trumpets, this is an odd decision and one that will no doubt jar seasoned Christmas music aficionados. Perhaps Mr. Alpert has a personal rule that brass instruments should perform only music and not imitations of animal utterances.

In contrast to that animated selection, “Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow” has a lovely lounging-by-the-fire feel, with the nice and unexpected addition of a slow melodic saxophone and later, a lazy trombone solo. The pace picks up once again with “Jingle Bell Rock,” which is about as bouncy as it can get. The last refrain takes a surprising but delightfully bawdy turn.

The album ends with “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” the familiar melody that J.S. Bach arranged and attached to his Cantata No. 147. This is probably the weakest selection on the recording. One wonders about the choice to include it, since all the other tunes are secular and contemporary and not at all “churchy.” The steady melody line of near-constant triplets favors fingers on keyboards or here, the loo-ing voices of the chorus. The arpeggios don’t quite translate as smoothly to the trumpet, possibly because of the pitch intervals and the adjustments required of a brass player’s embouchure. Thankfully most this particular performance is loo-ed by the chorus.

Nevertheless: offering a tad more than 30 minutes of music, Herb Alpert and his friends will add a little zing to your holiday CD lineup. This is definitely a re-release worth picking up.

Reviewed by Corinne H. Smith

Artist’s web site: <http://www.herbalpert.com/>