

Herb Alpert Learns New Tricks

Maybe you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but veteran horn-blower Herb Alpert demonstrates that it's never too late for an aging bull to learn a few fresh grooves.

Alpert, best known for his catchy riffs in the '60s with the Tijuana Brass, has teamed his trumpet virtuosity with the synthesizer beat of 4 young black producers to create a hip-hop driven dance album, North on South Street, that's climbing the R&B charts.

> Alpert: No New Risks

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"I came in with my baseball cap turned around, and we made music together," says Alpert, 56, who has produced more than 2 dozen albums in the course of his career. He is also the cofounder of A&M records, which was built partly on the proceeds of his first big hit, 1962's The Lonely Bull.

Although it would seem a risky undertaking for a man twice the age of most of his competition to enter the crowded dance-music arena, Alpert doesn't see it as that much of a departure from what he has tried to do in the past.

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"I'm always trying to change the backdrop," he explains. "I've always tried to push it a bit, not just be satisfied, repeating what had been done... There's endless ways to scramble up 12 notes to say nothing of all the rhythms available."

This time, the object was to "surround myself with young creative energies [coproducers Greg Smith, Robert Jerald, Jimmy B and Troy Staton] and try to blend in."

The results vary from the danceable title track, North on South Street, to the carnivalesque Jump Street to the snarling Where's Tommy?

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"I just try to make music that appeals to me," says Alpert. "I like these rhythms--hip-hop and the house grooves--when it's done so they make your body move. There are a lot of people out there who aren't crazy about rap music. They just turn it off. Don't even give it a fair chance. I wanted to try to couch it in instrumental music."

Although the musician had a string of hits in the 1960s, including A Taste of Honey, Tijuana Taxi, Spanish Flea (the theme to The Dating Game) and This Guy's in Love With You, his only tune to break the top 5 since then was 1982's Route 101.

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Alpert, who was born in LA and never strayed, is the first to admit that his creative experiments in the past have not always been successful.

"Sometimes you hit it, and sometimes you don't. When you hit it you can touch a lot of people," he says. "Some of the albums, when I look back, I learned a lot from, but they didn't have a thing that touched me. The unique part of [North on South Street], which has happened with only a handful of others through the years, is I find myself playing this one for my own pleasure. Like Rise in 1979, which I play a lot."

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Now that Alpert's tracks are sharing the air with the latest from Ice T and Keith Sweat on R&B radio stations, it also must be satisfying to know that a whole new generation of fans are boogying to his brassy trumpet beat.

"I really don't think about it in those terms. I think if something's good, there will be an audience for it," he responds, then adds, "For a while there I felt a little bit trapped by all that success I had in the '60s with the

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Tijuana Brass because people tend to pigeonhole you."

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In the course of his work day, Alpert periodically will pick up a horn and play it.

"I love the trumpet. It just resonates with my heart," he says. "It's a challenge for me. You never ever get to play an instrument, you never reach that place, there's always something to improve on, to learn, a new technique. I've been doing it since I was 8. It's such a part of me. If I don't do it, I miss it. It's like therapy for me."

--adapted from a story by James Ryan of the  
Billboard Entertainment News Wire

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