

Commencement
2000

Commencement Webcast News

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Herb Alpert's Top Five

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Herb Alpert: Finding the Good Melodies

The popular trumpeter talks about the art of making interesting music and learning about honesty in music from Sam Cooke.

BY ROB HOCHSCHILD

(May 4, 2000) **H**erb Alpert is the ultimate musical synthesist. For nearly forty years, he has let his instincts guide him toward making ear-catching music free of stylistic or historical limitations. Alpert's Tijuana Brass recordings of the 1960s set timeless melodies in a marriage of American and traditional Mexican sounds, while the first song on his latest album quickly shows traces of trip-hop, TSOP strings, and funk. His versatility and ability to incorporate contemporary styles are not mere exercises but natural extensions of his musical vision, as reflected by his recordings' consistent popularity and acclaim. Alpert's 1999 release, "Colors" (Almo Sounds), also earned him a Grammy nomination.

Alpert has lent his adaptability not only to his musical projects, but to his career and life in general. In addition to being a composer and trumpeter, Alpert has worked as a singer, arranger, producer, record company executive, and visual artist. As cofounder of A&M records, Alpert signed top-selling artists like Peter Frampton, the Police, Cat Stevens, and the Carpenters. He has also found the time to launch a philanthropic organization, the Herb Alpert Foundation, which funds projects in education, the arts, and the environment. A donation from the Alpert Foundation established Berklee's Stan Getz Media Center and Library in 1998. The Berklee honorary doctorate that Alpert is receiving this spring is his first such honor.



Speaking over the telephone from his office in Los Angeles,

pieces of music Alpert feels are most important for music students to hear:

1. Beethoven:
"Symphony No. 7."

2. Beethoven:
"Symphony No. 9."

3. Ravel:
"La Valse"

4. Miles Davis:
"Kind of Blue"

5. Itzhak Perlman:
Violin solo on "Theme from Schindler's List"

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Speaking over the telephone from his office in Los Angeles, Alpert was relaxed and talkative. The conversation began with a few questions about Colors, which he coproduced with former Living Colour band members Will Calhoun '86 and Doug Wimbish.

RH: People who know Herb Alpert best from the Tijuana Brass days might be surprised by what they hear on this record. Does Colors represent a departure for you?

HA: Well, not really, I've been doing this kind of thing for a while. I did an album many years ago called North on South Street when I was exploring sounds like the ones I'm using here. I'm always looking for some new way to make an interesting record. I think that's what my strong suit is, making an interesting record.

Did Will Calhoun mention his Berklee days while you were recording this album?

Yeah, he never let me forget it. He's an accomplished musician. He's really a big-time drummer and percussionist. He has all the rhythms down and he knows what he's doing. He doesn't back it into it, he's fully aware of what he's going for.

What was his role on the record?

The three of us really produced it together, Will and Doug and myself, and we would just kick around ideas, try to have fun in the studio, be honest with each other, and see if we could make music that felt good. That's essentially what I go for: music that feels good to me, and hopefully there's another person or a few people that feel the same.

You seem to have a sixth sense for making and supporting music that achieves great commercial success. How did you develop the ability to make music and sign artists that people enjoy hearing?

Before getting into the record business, I used to play parties and weddings. I played with small groups and we had a big backlog of songs that I knew, and I have good relative pitch so if I hear a song, I'm able to play it. Later, I would draw on all these melodies that used to haunt me. When I released "Lonely Bull" in 1962, I had some success from that record, and I got some inspiration from the success and became a little more

confident in making records. Then I just started experimenting with using the trumpet as a vehicle to explore different rhythms and ideas. And I always try to pick on melodies, memorable melodies, because I think that's what people listen to first. I know that's what I listen to first, and if it intrigues me, I'll hang in there for the lyric. If the melody doesn't do it for me, it's "NEXT." I've always tried to find good melodies.

Can you put into words what makes for a good melody?

It's one of those no-brainers, where sometimes you hear something that moves you and you don't know why, like a piece of art. When I get moved, that's my measure, I just stop there.

You started playing trumpet when you were eight years old. Describe your growth from beginner to professional musician.

Well it takes a while to have fun on an instrument, as you all know. When you get to that stage when you can finally play a melody or have a couple of laughs, all of a sudden it takes on a new light. When I entered high school, I was around 15, and I got together a little trio, and we started playing, making music, and all of a sudden, we were getting gigs at the school dances and making 12 bucks for the night. I was having some fun, I was making money, but I had no intention of being a professional musician at that time. But one thing led to another, I was drafted into the army, and I was playing with the Sixth Army band in San Francisco, and I had that experience. I met trumpet players from all over the country, and I felt that I had something. I didn't know what it was. At that point, I was still trying to copy my favorite musicians, and I knew if I was ever going to strike out on my own, I knew I was going to have to come up with my own individual personality on the horn, which I worked on.

How did you go about developing your personality on the horn?

Well, at the time, I hate to admit this, but I had a web core wire recorder. I used to edit with a soldering iron. But I'd listen to myself play and see if it was worth listening to. Then I heard Les Paul and the records he was making with Mary Ford, like "How High the Moon," where he was multi-tracking the guitar. I wanted to do that with the trumpet, so I sold the web core wire recorder and bought a couple of mono reel-to-reel tape machines. I was overdubbing the trumpet on itself and started coming up with this sound that I felt was very interesting, and that was the genesis of the Tijuana Brass sound.

I'd go back and forth six, seven, eight times, and by the eighth time, it was 50% hiss and 50% sound, but nonetheless there was this sound there that was interesting. I liked it. It had a flavor to it. And then I found "

"Lonely Bull," though it wasn't called that at the time. I recorded the song and used this concept on it and it started to fall into place.

Were you building harmonies as you were overdubbing?

No. Sometimes I would just play in unison, and maybe pull out the tuning slide a bit to get the trumpet to oscillate so it wouldn't be a mirror image. I tried to play the second part like I was the second trumpet player, not like I was trying to duplicate the first part. I was trying to be as spontaneous as I could with each part.

Many of the tunes you've recorded have become a part of contemporary popular culture: "Lonely Bull," "Spanish Flea," and "Rise," for example. What does it feel like to know your music has had that kind of impact?

I like that feeling. I was at Harrah's in London, in the '60s, and I was buying some socks and this lady just walked by me and she was whistling "Spanish Flea" and that was the first time it really struck me, 'Wow, man, this is international, the power of radio, the power of a record.' It's quite a thing to be able to create and be exposed in that manner.

At A&M, you signed many artists who went on to incredibly successful careers. What criteria did you use in deciding to bring these artists to A&M?

I was surrounded by great people. My partner Jerry Moss was greatly responsible for a lot of it. We just used our guts. It was a seat-of-our-pants operation. We were not schooled in how to run a record company. I was more concerned with the esthetics, I was concerned with how the place felt, the environment. I wanted it to feel right, I wanted the artist to feel comfortable when he walked on the lot. Years back, before A&M, I had recorded with a major record company. The studio we used was a very sterile environment. At A&M, I had to go beyond the white walls that they had. I tried to make an environment that would be conducive for the artist to create.

As for criteria, we had a wide range of taste going but we were always going for that artist that was a little bit left of center. Cat Stevens wasn't coming down the pipeline, but we knew it was just a matter of time before he would strike. The Carpenters

didn't happen for about a year after we signed them, and everyone thought they were a little too light and fluffy. But when I had heard their original tape, there was something about (Karen Carpenter's) voice that gave me goose bumps. It wasn't necessarily the type of music that I'd listen to myself but I recognized that they were genuine. They were doing the type of music that they loved to make and they were doing it to the max. And that's always good enough for me.

You sold the company in 1989. Do you miss it?

Not at all. At the time we started it, it wasn't something I even thought about. I was more concerned with making my own records. You get a lot of distractions, with the attention and people handing you tapes and other things that are really not part of what I like to do in everyday life. In fact I don't like to judge other artists. I think everyone has their own way of communicating. It's something I've said before: just because I ain't receiving don't mean they ain't sending. I don't like to be in that place.

You've worn many hats in the business and dabbled in many styles during your career. How do you see all these chapters in your career as reflections of you the artist and man?

Well, I think we all evolve as humans, and I'm just going through the garden of life, I'm trying to respond to what I'm feeling at the time. There are only a couple times in my career when I consciously tried to make a hit record, and it backfired, it didn't work. I've always just tried to make a good record.

I learned the craft of recording years back when I was working and watching Sam Cooke record. I was party to some of the great recordings he did. I watched the Pilgrim Travelers, one of the greatest gospel groups in the country, and when Sam Cooke said to me, 'They don't care whether you're black or white, they just listen to a cold piece of wax, man, and it either makes it or it don't.' He cut it right down to the quick. He identified what I was looking for, which is it either works or it doesn't, there's no mystery to it.

What else did you pick up from watching Sam Cooke record?

It was honesty. It's the thing we like about the great jazz musicians, they're up on a tightrope, and they're responding to what they're feeling. And Sam was that. He was just a guy that was willing to be himself and expose himself rhythmically and musically. He'd never sing it the same way twice. He'd always

have a little variation on the thing. We were working for a small company at the time, before RCA. The owner of the company came up to Sam at one of the sessions and asked him to put a few additional 'wo-wo's in one of the takes because 'wo-wo' was a big part of "You Send Me."

And Sam said, 'Jack (which wasn't the guy's name), you can't just put in a 'wo-wo' whenever you want. You gotta feel it.' The point is you can't try to be hip, you've just got to be yourself, and that should be hip enough if you're being honest.

Your foundation has generously contributed to arts education and other programs. Why do you feel arts education is important?

I think it's the thing that teaches us to be human beings. Art has been overlooked in the public school system and who knows why, but it's the thing that gets us in touch with ourselves and our humanity. If we can learn the discipline of being an artist, whether you're painting, dancing, sculpting, or blowing into an instrument, it spills over into your life, whether you're going to be a professional or not. If you do something over and over and learn it, it becomes part of you. The further along you get with art, the more you truthful you can get with art, the more truthful you get with yourself, and the more beautiful your art becomes. The goal is to be as honest and open as you can with yourself and if you can do that, I think there's a good chance you can recognize the beauty in others.

What advice do you give to music students?

Have a backup plan. (laughter). Yeah man. That's what I like so much about Berklee. You're not just headlong into music, you're much broader than that there, and I think it's an important ingredient. You have to come face to face with the reality of earning a good living as a musician. The opportunities aren't as great as they should be.

There's one jazz station here in Los Angeles, a city with millions upon millions of people, and the jazz station struggles every month to make ends meet. And if you want to be a great jazz musician, which is really noble, you've got to recognize that you might not be as popular, or sell the amount of records that you would like to sell, or deserve to sell, but you will have a fulfilled life. . . and it might get a little rough.

Do you think the same is true for musicians playing music other than jazz?

I think everyone should have a plan B, a plan C, but above all, you have to follow your passion. Do what you wake up in the morning and get excited about doing. You have to pursue that. But at some point you must be realistic as well.

What can a place like Berkeley do?

Give them a great foundation and a realistic one and a good send off and a terrific start. That's why I'm so enthused about doing whatever I can to help the school.

This is your first honorary doctorate. What does this signify for you?

Well, the only thing I regret is that I never got a college education. I didn't follow through with that, so I guess there's some reward in that regard. Obviously it's a lovely honor and it's nice, but for me, it's the next record that I'm concerned with, or the next painting or sculpture.

What is your next project?

Well, I'm working on an album with my wife Lani (Hall). She's a great singer, she was the lead singer with Brasil '66. We'll be doing standards like "Willow Weep for Me," "Skylark," and "My Romance." I have an art show in New York in November, an exhibit of paintings and sculpture.

Do you think your work as a visual artist has had an impact on your music and vice versa?

I think they spin off of each other. I've been doing it for so long. I've been painting for 30 years and sculpting for probably half that now. I get a lot of satisfaction out of it. I never thought I would display any of the pieces, but about twelve years ago I was getting some great feedback on my work, and so I took a chance and was placed in a gallery here in Los Angeles. So, I'm doing it for me. If someone else loves it, great. It's a terrific bonus. And quite frankly I feel the same way about the music I make. I get a hell of a lot of fun working with great musicians, engineers, and people in the studio. When it's finished, it's sad. Even when the product comes out, there's a little bit of a let down, because the process where I really had a lot of fun is over.