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50 Years of A&M Records: An Interview With Herb Alpert

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photo courtesy of The Herb Alpert Foundation

A Conversation With Herb Alpert

Mike Ragona: Herb, how are you today?

Herb Alpert: I'm good, Michael. Nice being with you.

MR: Nice being with you too. Fifty years. I think the first thing we should do is get everybody updated as far as the story and the legacy of A&M Records. It all started in a garage fifty years ago in California, right?

HA: Well, the record company itself didn't actually start in the garage; the idea started in the garage in West Hollywood. Jerry and I were going to bullfights quite regularly in the Spring of 1961 and 1962, and I got this idea to kind of capture the feeling of those moments. That's when it came to mind.

MR: "The Lonely Bull"?

HA: It was a song written by a friend of mine and I adapted it to this idea, and then Jerry came up with this idea of "The Lonely Bull" and that was it. The actual recording of the song happened at a professional recording studio. A&M started with "The Lonely Bull" and that was it. We started reinvesting the money and we had some other artists. We had moderate success, but nothing really took hold until around 1967 with other artists. The Tijuana Brass, for the most part, was doing rather well.

MR: Early on, A&M had Sergio Mendes, Chris Montez, We Five, etc., that are, of course, represented on the new collection *A&M 50: The Anniversary Collection*. Herb, when you look at this release, you have to be going, "Boy, am I proud!"

HA: Well, I was pretty impressed when they put the CD package together. I couldn't believe it when I actually heard all the artists that were represented. But as I look back at it, I think, "Gee there are a lot of artists that aren't even on that package that probably deserve to be on that record as well," but there's only so much room.

MR: Yeah, that's right. Now, the beautiful thing about your label is that it had a reputation for being one of the most successful "indies" over its long run, and very artist-friendly. And the label's evolution is pretty amazing. Personally, I can remember The Carpenters being one of A&M's major acts early on, though over the years, A&M had everyone from The Police to Sheryl Crow.

HA: Well, I signed The Carpenters in 1969. Their first album didn't do much. It was about a year before the Carpenters really took over with "Close to You"

MR: And it's fair to say that the money that came from the sales of Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass albums and singles funded the initial A&M Records?

HA: Oh, there's no doubt about that. From 1962 till probably about 1966, when we signed Sergio Mendes and we got the We Five, who had a number one record, it started to open up. We got a little more daring. Joe Cocker and *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and some of the great groups from Europe like Supertramp and of course Peter Frampton came along with Humble Pie, and then he soloed. So yeah, we evolved slowly.

MR: The record industry took a major financial hit at the end of the seventies, and it became financially challenging for every label. But right around then, you came through with your hit "Rise," which was another huge record for the label. Do you have any fond memories connected with that recording?

HA: At that particular time in history for A&M, we were sinking. The ship was bringing on some water, so "Rise" certainly helped out. There was a transition where a lot of independent distributors were returning a lot of stock. They were inundated with all sorts of records that were not being sold. It was getting harder and harder to compete with the major labels who were willing to throw around millions and millions of dollars for signing new artists, so we had to be very careful with how we were spending our money at that point. But Rise did help us soothe the storm.

MR: I think one of the most impressive periods for A&M was the eighties. You guys were responsible for breaking acts like The Police, Human League, UB40, Split Enz, Squeeze, and so many others, helping to establish the new wave genre. But you did something similar in the seventies when A&M evolved into a major rock label with acts like Styx, Supertramp, Joe Cocker, and so many others. It's interesting that the image of A&M changed over the years and yet the essence of it did not.

HA: Well, I think the advantage that we had, Michael, is that it was just Jerry Moss and myself, so when we heard an act we liked, we'd sign them on the spot. We didn't have to have a room of people voting "yes" or "no." We were always very conscious of finding artists that were not necessarily the "beat of the week," but had something very special to say in their own unique way, such as Cat Stevens. I think that was our strong suit. Money was not the object, we were just thinking about recording great artists and letting them find themselves and find their audience.

MR: Herb, you have a reputation both personally and with the label A&M for helping to nurture artists--Joan Armatrading is a good example--and being loyal to them, letting them grow from album to album. That almost seemed like a philosophy, and your contracts were also known to be very artist-friendly. You were very conscious of that, weren't you?

HA: Absolutely. I think that's what most artists are looking for. I had an experience recording for a major label prior to A&M and I had a very negative experience, quite frankly, and I took everything I learned from that and put it into A&M.

MR: Normally, I'd save this question for the end of the interview, but I'd like to ask it now relative to what we just discussed. What advice do you have for new artists?

HA: Well, you have to be passionate about what you're doing, you have to be prepared, and luck plays a big part in it, obviously. But if you're prepared for what you'd like to do with the rest of your life and you're putting in the time and are passionate about what you're doing, you have to just stay with it. There's no magic formula for how to get through the maze.

MR: Was there a point, maybe after the huge success of acts like Janet Jackson and Sheryl Crow, where you decided, "Okay, I put in the time with my label, I'm going to pass it on to other people"?

HA: People were interested in buying A&M; they came in with an extremely generous offer. We thought that because of the way the business was at that particular time, with maybe three major companies owning everything--three major corporations--like I said before, it was getting harder and harder to compete with them because they were willing to throw billions of dollars around to sign various artists. And I had a little sniff of filesharing and what could possibly be very damaging to the record industry. It just felt like the time was right. It wasn't like we lost interest in music or what we had accomplished, it was just a timing situation.

MR: You saw the writing on the wall.

HA: Right. Exactly. I was into computers very early and I just felt that was going to be extremely dangerous. I said to Jerry, "I think it's time to head for the hills."

MR: I remember you and I had a conversation way back when I think I was pitching you something and I mentioned "radio" and you said, "Well how do you take into account radio? How do you get anything played?" And that's really the truth, when you look at how intensely playlists have shrunk. So what do you do with a product now other than work YouTube, all the social media...

HA: Yeah, well I think if you know how to get through the internet, you've got a really good shot because the exposure is unbelievable. When you see some of the hits on YouTube where there are nine hundred and forty million people, it's unbelievable the exposure you can get if you just hit the right button. Radio is getting tough because they're just darn selective in what they're willing to play, and the truth of it all is that there's a lot of great artists out there, a lot of great young artists that deserve to be heard and it's just a matter of being very smart in how to get your particular product out there.

MR: I wonder how the new Jerry Mosses and Herb Alpert would approach things. Let's say they're coming into age now and they want to do something, not from a garage, but their computers. I wonder what they would do now to parallel the kind of success that you guys had.

HA: I don't know if we would have that type of success if we had started today. Timing plays a big part. We were very lucky, we were prepared, we had the right concept. When we started in 1962, there were a lot of record companies that would have one hit record and then they'd do a bunch of fillers for an album. So you'd have one great side and then you'd have nine songs that you really didn't want to hear, but they were selling them as an album. We were very conscious of making each one count, making the public know their money's worth. Right from the get-go, after "The Lonely Bull," we hired a quality control person who made sure all the product that was coming out was as pristine and clean-sounding as they could be.

MR: Now, the perception is that Jerry handled all the business and you handled all the creative.

HA: Well, you know, I'm a right-brained guy. I spend a great deal of time sculpting, painting, and playing the trumpet and making music, so business is not my strong suit, although my instincts are really good when it comes to people. I would be involved in the

weekly meetings, the financial meetings, but my eyes would kind of glaze over. I was very involved in the broad brushstroke of A&M, not the everyday nuts and bolts and inner workings of the company.

MR: We have to get into the artistic side of Herb Alpert. I love the quote from Wynton Marsalis, and I would say this of Herb Alpert the man in addition to the artist. "He gets right to the point of what he's playing." You get right to the point of what you're saying as well. (laughs)

HA: Oh, well, I try to. I think the important ingredient for every artist is to be as honest as you can be, to express yourself in the most direct and honest way. I think if you're sensitive to that, you can hear artists that are just trying to get your attention without exposing what they're really feeling.

MR: You've had your fingers in a lot of creative pies. For instance, I don't know if a lot of people know about your investing in Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* or even *Angels in America*.

HA: Well, that would be sidecar issues of me investing in Broadway.

MR: Let's get to the philanthropy. You have The Herb Alpert Foundation that invests in young musicians' futures, and you also invest in the arts through this organization.

HA: Yeah, I love trying to help kids reach their full potential as a creative artist, and "dot dot dot" without prejudice.

MR: Does this go to the individual as far as investments or does it go to college scholarships? How does it work?

HA: We're involved in a lot of different organizations, which for the most part, have already been established, and we feel that they just need a little helping hand to take it to the next step.

MR: And there's UCLA's Herb Alpert School of Music, which has a variety of courses including ethno-musicology, music and musicology. Herb, what is the crown jewel to all of this?

HA: My wife, Lani Hall. She's my crown jewel. We've been married for thirty-nine years now. Lani was the lead singer with Brasil '66. That's how we met in 1966 and I ended up producing the original Sergio Mendes record. She's been a great blessing in my life. That's my crown jewel.

MR: Beautiful. So you see this thing lasting?

HA: Our relationship?

MR: Yes. I'm making a bad joke.

HA: No, it's not a bad joke, it's gonna last through eternity.

MR: You know, you probably don't think of yourself as being cosmic, but I love your quote on how you listen to an inner voice with a lot of this.

HA: Oh, I've been directed by my inner voice. I was playing in Germany in 1968, and I had an out of body experience. I was not that happy. I was going through a divorce with my first wife and all of a sudden, I found myself sitting in the third row looking at myself on stage, and I was thinking, "Why is this guy that's on stage so comfortable and when he gets off stage or he's in the middle of a crowd or a party or he's talking with ten people, he's not that comfortable?" So I went on the pursuit of finding out what I'm all about. At that point, when we finally got back home, I was willing to give it all up just to seek and find. I was willing to sell my part of A&M, throw my trumpet in the ocean, and find out what am I doing here?

MR: You retrieved your trumpet from the ocean, though, didn't you?

HA: Well, it took a while, but I did, and it's been great. It's not that my life is humming all the time, but I certainly have a better understanding of who I am and where I'm going and what I want to do.

MR: And that affects your creativity. But that has always affected your creativity, hasn't it, listening to this inner voice? When you get on the trumpet, do you sometimes not know what's coming out next, and then it's just coming out and you're going with it?

HA: You put it perfectly. I'm basically a jazz musician and one of my big theories is "don't think, just respond, just play, this is the key," and I was actually doing this early on, and I didn't realize how I was doing it. But even with The Tijuana Brass--and I'm serious about this--I never played the songs before I recorded them. There's only one song, "Zorba the Greek," that I had to learn because it was very technical, but other than that, when I recorded "The Lonely Bull" on down to the rest of the catalog--because I played all the trumpets on The Tijuana Brass records--I never rehearsed the songs. So I tried to keep that spontaneity from the first take to the second take to the third take. It was always a little bit looser. The groups that tried to emulate my sound, they would take what I played verbatim and they played it back and it sounded to me very stiff and I was just blowing in the breeze.

MR: When you collaborated with other artists, let's say Hugh Masekela or Janet Jackson or others, did you have to become more structured in those environments?

HA: With Janet Jackson I did because Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis produced the record and I was kind of going along with their musical sensibilities, so I was listening to them.

MR: Looking at your paintings and how you approach them, does that come from the same source too?

HA: Oh, absolutely. It comes from a blank canvas and I just kind of improvise until my body says, "You've finished." I've been experimenting with a few different things now. I've been painting with...are you sitting? Organic coffee. I have a series of paintings with organic coffee and, more seriously, I've been doing these large totems, bronze eighteen foot black totems. And then I just hit on this idea of doing an homage to the native people of North America, who we obviously shamefully took advantage of, doing this series called Blood Totems that would have to do with what we did to the native people when we all arrived.

MR: Is it like your music after the fact? Do you absorb them when you're done, to see what you've done?

HA: Sure, I try to look at them like an audience. "Is this worth anyone else seeing?" I look at them, I work from that point of view, but as far as the music goes, when I finish it, that's it. It's done. If people happen to like it I'm flattered, if they, don't that's okay too. Believe it or not, Michael, I don't read reviews or articles that have been written about me. Rarely, I have. I think I got off of it years back in the early sixties. We were playing at The Greek Theater with The Tijuana Brass and the band sounded really good and I felt pretty good that night and I saw a review the next morning in the paper that said, "Herb Alpert looks like Rex Harrison trying to sound like Miles Davis." That was the last time I looked at reviews.

MR: Oh, God. Hey, another quote associated with you is Miles Davis'. "You hear three notes and you know it's Herb Alpert." That is really true. Like you said earlier, you hear people try to play the songs that you recorded, but they just can't get it. There is an essence of Herb Alpert on these records that you can't get elsewhere.

HA: You know, I think everyone should strive for that. It's all about your own particular personality. In the late sixties, I was thinking about doing a show, and I'm sorry I didn't follow through on it. But I was going to have a trumpet on a stand--one trumpet--and I'd have myself, Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Harry Champion, all these trumpet players that were recognized by people pick up that same horn and play it, and they'd be totally amazed because that particular horn would sound different by each artist. Music comes from the inside. If an artist is able to expose themselves from that point of view, then it's a whole different experience.

MR: Herb, with eight Grammys, fourteen platinum and fifteen gold albums, having sold 72 million albums worldwide and having, of course, number one records, what do you feel like when you look back at that kind of career, and also fifty years of A&M records? The pride must be off the charts.

HA: You know, certainly, I feel good about things that have happened in my life, and with respect to music, I think the thing I'm most proud of from an ego point of view is that I'm the only artist to have a number one record as a vocalist and as an instrumentalist.

MR: Oh, can we also go into that story? Can we go into "This Guy's in Love with You" and what prompted you to do the vocal?

HA: Well, I was doing a television show for NBC and the director, Jack Haley Jr. suggested I sing a song. I said, "Well if I can find the right song I might give it a shot. So I called a friend of mine by the name of Burt Bacharach, have you heard of him?"

MR: Yeah, sort of. (laughs)

HA: So I asked him, "Burt is there a song that you think I might be able to handle? Maybe one that you find yourself whistling in the shower, or tucked away in the drawer some place, or you recorded but you didn't like the blah blah blah?" He sent me a demo of "This Girl's in Love with You," which was recorded by Dionne Warwick, and I liked the melody. I felt I could handle it, and I called Hal David to see if he would change the gender for the show, and he was amenable to that. I flew to New York and he changed it and as I was leaving Hal's place, I asked him the same question I asked Burt: "Is there a song you find yourself whistling in the shower," and three days later, he sends me "Close to You" and that was the door opener for The Carpenters.

MR: Right. By the way, Herb, I believe The Carpenters had a huge impact on music for a while there.

HA: Oh, yeah. Karen had a magnificent voice. Her voice touched. When I auditioned them, I heard a tape and as I used to do in my office, I'd just close my eyes, sit on the couch and listen to a tape, without judging it, just to see if I could feel it. Listening to their tape, it felt like her voice was sitting right next to me. So I called them in, had a conversation with them, and realized that this was the music that was really close to them. They were passionate about making the music that they loved. I'm basically a jazz musician with a classical background, so that's not the music that I would normally listen to, but I was touched by their sincerity and their passion for it and it certainly paid off in the end.

MR: I was blessed enough to work at Universal years ago, as you know, and I got to work with you on your *Greatest Hits* album and also many Carpenters compilations and what an education I got from that experience and Richard as well. I mainly worked with the A&M and Geffen catalogs and a couple of others, but A&M was so beautiful. You have created an environment and people who have gone out into the world who became fine people, it's almost like you didn't just guide artists and have that kind of creative environment for the artists, you also had an output of amazing people. I knew maybe some of the people toward the end, Richie Gallo, Barry Korbin, Robin Kirby, Michele Horie...what beautiful people. Personally, from my experience working with these really fine people and the A&M catalog for a few years, I would say you guys did an amazing job with A&M overall, from people to product.

HA: Well, Michael, thanks a lot. I think you lead by example and a lot of these people realize that Jerry and I were really passionate about what we were doing. We were trying to put out good records and package them properly and have an honest product out there. It's touching when you can feel that kind of sincerity.

MR: Yeah, and you guys certainly attracted the right people.

HA: Well, we did attract the right people, and there was a point where A&M was so hot that artists were calling us wanting to record for us. A really poignant story is that in 1964, I was the first one to record Waylon Jennings. I did several records with him, and there was one record that Chet Atkins heard, called Four Strong Winds, which I did with Waylon, and he made some overtures to Waylon about recording for RCA when he got out of his A&M contract. At that time, I wanted to take Waylon just a little bit more pop and Waylon wanted to be a country artist. So he told us about what happened with Chet Atkins and Waylon had about three years left on his contract with us. He told us about it and we thought in his best interest, we would let him out of the contract and let him sign with Chet. This was before we moved to the Chaplin studios--we had a little place on Sunset Boulevard--and Jerry signed the release. I looked at Jerry and I said, "This guy's going to be a big artist" and Jerry said, "I know it," and we let him out. I get goosebumps just retelling the story, but at the time as well, thinking, "Man, if we could do that, we could treat the artists with that much integrity, we're going to be very successful."

MR: Yeah. That story provides the paradigm that you set up for the company that lasted so many years. A marvelous feat, Herb. All

right, I guess we should be wrapping things up, but can you go into one more Burt Bacharach story other than the one about "This Guy's in Love with You"?

HA: Burt's an extraordinary artist. He's continually going. In fact, he's leaving next week for Japan. He's doing a series of concerts with the group he takes over. Let's see...I was in Las Vegas. He was doing a show with Dionne Warwick and the show lasted about an hour and a half and they played hit after hit after hit. It was amazing, and after the show finished, I was thinking, "Hey, man, he forgot about ten songs that I loved." He had an amazing career. He's a very unique artist, a very unique guy, and he's a wonderful human being. I love him. (**NOTE:** This interview occurred about three weeks ago.)

MR: I should also mention something so many people believe which is when you took over the Charlie Chaplin property, you created one of the great recording studios there, A&M recording Studios.

HA: Well, that was another passion. We tried to emulate some of the studios that we'd seen around the world. It took a while to really get it into the shape where it ended up, but we had some great people working on it. Vincent Van Hoff was the acoustician, the one who designed the acoustics. It's been a great ride. I have no complaints. I appreciate the kind words that you've thrown my way and I wish you well.

MR: Herb, I appreciate your time, your foundation, your artistry, your paintings... I think that's a whole other discussion we could have.

HA: Hopefully, more visual.

MR: (laughs) We'll have to figure out something. You have contributed to the culture in so many wonderful ways and continue to contribute through your Herb Alpert Foundation investing in young talent. Only the best, all the best, Herb. You're an amazing human.

HA: Hey, man, I really appreciate the words and I wish the same for you. Thanks so much Michael.

MR: Thanks a lot, Herb.

