

Jazzing It Up

Herb Alpert, whose earlier pop albums have set sales records, takes a new direction with his latest work

By DON HECKMAN

OK, trivia buffs, who's had not one, but two albums on Billboard's Top 40 charts longer than anything by the Beatles?

Elvis Presley? Nah, sorry, Elvis. Bruce Springsteen? Not even the Boss.

Well, then how about—tah dah!—Herb Alpert? That's right, Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass—believe it. "Whipped Cream and Other Delights" hung around the Top 40 for a remarkable 141 weeks. "Going Places" was only slightly less successful with 107 weeks. And three more of Alpert's Tijuana Brass albums stayed on the chart for at least a year. In 1966, he earned a place in the Guinness Book of World Records by having five albums simultaneously in Billboard's Top 20—a feat unequaled in recording history. What makes it even more remarkable is the fact that all were instrumental recordings.

At 57, Alpert doesn't look like a guy who's survived nearly four decades of the music business. His office/studio at A & M Records (which he founded with partner Jerry Moss in 1962) has the feel of a performer's hangout, with its prominently positioned piano, funky furniture and walls covered with photos of musicians and friends and Alpert's original paintings.

It's the perfect environment for a man who, despite his professional successes, has always been more comfortable with the creative rather than the financial aspects of his work. Moderately tall, tanned, with good cheekbones and a casually elegant manner, Alpert discusses his numerous accomplishments with surprising modesty.

"I've never looked at any album I've ever done as a commercial venture," he says. Then, pausing for a moment to give it some further thought, he adds, "Well, maybe once. It happened at a time when I was enthused by the music that Phil Spector was making."

"I remember walking into a session, and he had two drummers and about 14 guitar players and 32 percussionists, and the room was just jammed with people. Man, that wall of sound was something. So I did a session called 'Little Drummer Man,' using all the same guys, and it was the most contrived thing I've ever attempted."

Alpert shrugs and grins, his point made. "From that time on, I realized I had to just let the thing happen," he says. "give it my



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recording artist and executive

response to the music I'm feeling at the time. And that seems to work best. If there's a formula for a hit record that works, I haven't come across anyone yet who knows what it is. So I figure your best shot is just to be honest and do what you can do."

Alpert's current project, a new release—his 32nd—titled "Midnight Sun," takes him past pop music and hit formulas into the music that has been his not-so-secret love for most of his life: jazz. Though many of the Tijuana Brass

numbers—as well as more recent efforts such as the 1979 hit "Rise" and last year's "North on South St."—were seasoned with jazz sensibilities, "Midnight Sun" is Alpert's first "official foray into jazz."

"I got started in the business with people like Sam Cooke and Jan & Dean and Lou Adler," he says. "But I was always listening to Clifford Brown and Miles and Dizzy, to Gil Evans and Bill Evans. And I liked the fact that there were differences between pop and jazz. I found it could be useful to

sort of juxtapose the two. Some of the stuff I did in the '60s with the Tijuana Brass, for example—like "A Taste of Honey"—I think that's an interesting crossover."

"Midnight Sun" is less a straight-ahead jazz recording than it is a reflection of Herb Alpert's perception of jazz. Always attracted to the lyrical aspects of music, his trumpet playing unfolds in a warm, almost vocalized style. As with Lester Young and Chet Baker (a more directly similar performer), Alpert's playing tends to steer away from harmonic flights of fancy in favor of colorful extensions and variations of the original melodies. Like Baker, he is a soft-voiced, appealing vocalist (he sings on "Someone to Watch Over Me" and "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face" on the new album) whose singing parallels his trumpet work. (In 1968, he had a No. 1 hit with his vocal on Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "This Guy's in Love With You").

"When you get some technical facility and you can rattle off a lot of notes, it's tempting to just fill up a bunch of space," Alpert says. "But there's music in space. There's music that happens in the space between the notes that you don't hear. Miles really taught us that."

"I agree with Lester Young, who thought that the lyric to a song is something a jazz musician should keep in mind. I think a lyric is extremely important. And when I play a song that has a poignant melody, I'm very, very cognizant of that melody as I'm playing it through the horn."

Alpert is also deeply respectful of both the extraordinary complexities and the unlimited creative potential that jazz offers.

"To me," he says, "jazz is a continuous pursuit—an adventure with endless, endless possibilities. Forget about the fact there are 12 notes, and you can run them upside-down in thousands of combinations, with all the different variations of rhythms and chords, and the things you can play and the things you don't need to play."

"The important thing, beyond all that, is to find your place in it all, your own personal stamp. The reason we love Stan Getz and John Coltrane and Miles and Bird and Benny Goodman is because they have their own stamp. Getz plays one note, and you say, 'Oh wow. Hey, hello Stan, how are you?' Nice to see you again.' Because he has that stamp in his playing."

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Alpert mentions Getz frequently in his conversations, and has dedicated the album to the memory of his "forever friend." The all-star tenor saxophonist, who died last year, worked with Alpert on several A&M projects, most notably the highly praised "Aspanado." Getz's pure jazz spirit clearly had a powerful impact on Alpert.

"Ain't no doubt about that," Alpert says. "To me, Stan was a true jazz magician. He was a spectacular artist, and he lived his art. He was jazz. And that's the way he described it to me. He said, 'You don't just play jazz, man; you play jazz!' Which means so much."

"There are a lot of people who attempt to play rock 'n' roll because they've got the right song and they've got the right drummer and the right bass player," he says. "But they don't know a darn thing about it because they don't live it; and they don't play it every night. And guys try to play jazz because they know the right songs and the right changes. But it's deeper than that. It's *much* deeper than that."

Alpert credits Getz with an orientation that has helped bring his own playing into more vivid focus:

"Stan once said to me, 'You know, Herb, jazz is not about licks, it's not about individual riffs. It's about a beginning, middle and end.' Stan was not very sophisticated

when it came to the inner workings of what he was doing—I mean, he knew his chords, and his musical antennas were as high as anyone's I've ever encountered—but he mostly relied on his instincts. And he had tremendous instincts; they were really uncanny. And he just relied on them to take him where he wanted to go. He always said, 'You know, man, I never played a note I didn't mean.'

"The truth is," he says, "that Stan was totally willing to be himself. He always walked on a tightrope when he played—always taking a chance, always letting it hang out. And that's the way he was as a person. His emotions were right up there—in front."

"So the thing I learned the most from him was, just go for it. Be yourself; rise to your own personal best. That's all you can ask."

Alpert is a native Angeleno who started studying classical trumpet at the age of 8. By the time he was a teen-ager, jazz had become his primary creative activity.

Ironically, and perhaps prophetically, however, he made his first mark in the music with pop and rock 'n' roll. In the late '50s, he co-wrote "Wonderful World" for Sam Cooke and produced "Baby Talk" by Jan & Dean and "Alley Oop" by Dante and the Evergreens.

A&M was formed by Alpert and Moss in the summer of 1962 on minimal finances and a Mariachi-styled recording called "The Lonely Bull." The song sold more than



JOEL P. LUGAVERE / Los Angeles Times

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700,000 units, and the Tijuana Brass and A&M became major players on the popular music scene.

Thirty years later, Alpert and Moss continue to work closely together. "To remain with a good feeling after all this time is quite a tribute to this guy," Moss says. "I couldn't ask for anything more from our partnership. Herb has given me a meaningful life."

A&M is now part of the worldwide Polygram group, but Alpert's schedule hasn't changed much. He still carries his trumpet around with him and practices every day without fail. In the fall, he'll do some touring and start thinking about doing another album, preferably

another jazz album. He'd love to get his wife, singer Lani Hall—who once starred with Sergio Mendes' Brasil 66 and who has strong jazz credentials of her own—into the studio for a new recording.

Most of all, he intends to continue following the personal musical approach that has proven so useful over the years.

"To me," he says, "the idea in the recording studio is not to try to be anything other than yourself, and then let whatever happens happen. It's not a left-brain endeavor. The key is to free yourself to the point where you can let it out and feel good about what you're hearing. 'Cause you know when you're b.s.-

ing. Your neck starts feeling weird.

"When you sell a lot of records, people start looking at you like you're making buttons or something," concludes Alpert. "But I did all the music I did from my heart, whatever happened. I can't say every song I ever recorded was coming from a deep source, but for the most part I tried to make them all special. I tried to ring my own bell, that's for sure." □

Don Heckman writes regularly about music for *The Times*.

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