

Nesuhi Ertegun's Jazz Side of the Atlantic

Strange Rumbblings in Manhattan

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Herb Alpert and his wife,
Brazilian singer Lani Hall,
make beautiful music together

AUGUST 2009 Digital Edition

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August 2009

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For years, Alpert was the undisputed king of instrumental pop. Now, 10 years after the release of his last album, he's back with his wife, Lani Hall, and the appropriately titled *Anything Goes*. By Michael Fagien

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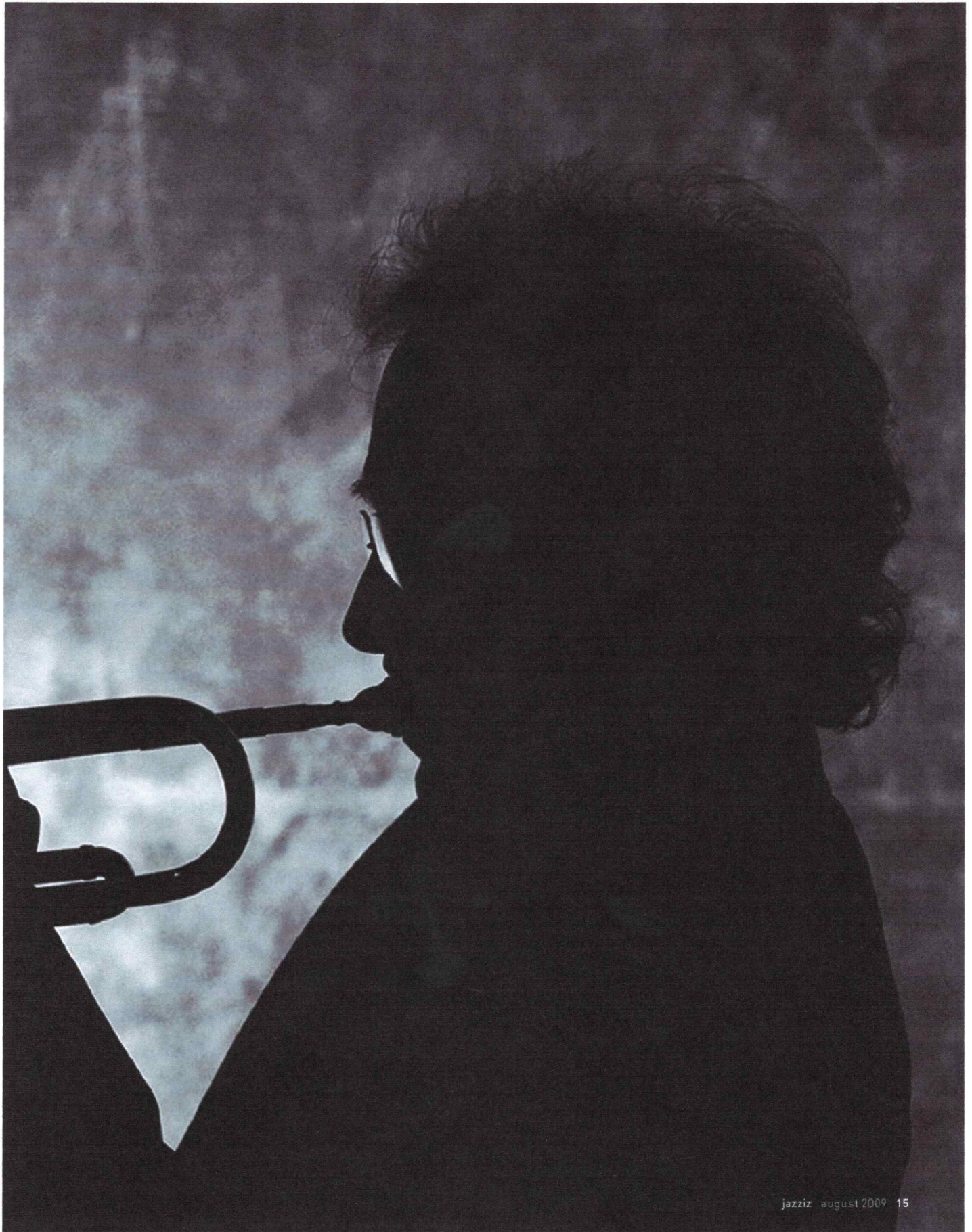
Reviewed: Lynn Arriale, Christian McBride & Inside Straight, Alexander Zonjic, Kurt Elling, Crimson Jazz Trio, Candy Dulfer, and Joe Lovano Us Five.

Right time, right place

With the right song, Herb Alpert was long the undisputed king of instrumental pop. Now, 10 years after the release of his last album, he's back with his wife, Lani Hall, and the appropriately titled *Anything Goes*.

By Michael Fagien







AFTER FIVE NO. 1 HITS, 28 albums on the *Billboard* charts, eight Grammy Awards, 14 platinum and 15 gold albums, it's apparent that almost everything musician, singer, producer, record executive, painter, sculptor and restaurateur Herb Alpert touches turns into precious metal.

Make no mistake, Alpert, a soft-spoken gentleman who claims he's not a businessman, is as sharp as they come. From the early days, when he turned his enthusiasm for the sounds of a bullfight into the Tijuana Brass — a cool, mariachi-flavored jazz-rock band — Alpert has succeeded at things that many others doubted. When rock hit hard in the '70s, and Alpert signed the soft Carpenters to his A&M Records (Alpert is the label's "A," while co-founder Jerry Moss is its "M"), everyone thought the golden boy had finally lost his Midas touch. But when he shelved his own recording of friend Burt Bacharach's "Close to You" and asked Karen and Richard to take a stab at it, music history was made again.

When they saw that it was time to move on — after mega hits from the Police, Sting, Joe Jackson, Sergio Mendes, the Carpenters, Joan Baez, Burt Bacharach, Cat Stevens, Peter Frampton, Sheryl Crow and others — Alpert and Moss sold their label to PolyGram for a reported \$500 million. Not surprisingly, Alpert, 74, now spends his time doing whatever he wants, be it painting, sculpting or simply hanging out with his wife, Brazilian singer Lani Hall, with whom he's just recorded *Anything Goes* (Concord). On his website (www.herbalpert.com), Alpert explains, "I'm trying to reduce my life to just things that I like to do, like doing some concerts with Lani. Making money is not my goal; having fun at this age in my life is."

Anything Goes is the first album of new music the trumpeter has released in a decade. It's also the first full album he's recorded with Hall and the first for a label that he doesn't co-own. Furthermore, in a career that now spans more than five decades, *Anything Goes* is as close as Alpert has come to releasing a straight-ahead jazz album. That might strike some as strange, considering that over the years he's signed and produced some of the greatest jazz players, from Stan Getz to Gato Barbieri. In addition, he's helped subsidiary jazz labels like CTI, Delos, Denon and Windham get on their feet. Ask Alpert about jazz, as I did, and he'll tell you straight up: "I'm a closet jazz musician. I love jazz."

Michael Fagien: There have been very few jazz trumpeters/singers who've made it big. Why do you think that is?

Herb Alpert: I don't know. Man, it ain't what you do; it's the way you do it. Look at Louie Armstrong, who probably was the greatest at it. The thing he did in 1935 where he was playing and singing "Ain't Misbehavin'" — it was beautiful. Obviously the guy didn't have a great voice, but, wow, could he communicate! And I think it's all about communication. Chet Baker had a way of communicating. When he sang and when he played, it was like there was no difference. It was like he was singing through the horn.

So, technique aside, do you see yourself more like Chet Baker or Louie Armstrong?

Oh, I don't see myself at all as a vocalist. I can interpret a song if it's in the right range. And when I did "This Guy's In Love with You" — is that what you're referring to?

Yes.

We did that for a TV show, and it wasn't designed to be a single record or a record that I thought would make any noise. But I recorded it at Gold Star. Burt Bacharach did the arrangements. Pete Jolly was one of the piano players, by the way. And we did the track, and then I put on a sample vocal just to see how my voice was gonna work on the track. So I go back into the control room. Larry Levine was the engineer. And there was like about seven or eight or 10 people that stayed after the session, musicians that were working on the date.

I walk into the control room and they said, "Don't touch a thing, man. Don't touch it." I said, "Don't touch what?" They said, "Don't re-sing it, man. It was perfect." And it was just one of those things where the song was right and the times were right for that to happen.

I think it's all about intent. I think if you're going to be an

artist in this world, with so many great musicians, your intent has to be there. When I signed the Carpenters in 1970 or so, it wasn't a particular music that I was going for or what I would listen to on a daily basis, but their intent was so right. I mean, the sound of her voice, Richard's enthusiasm for what they were doing, and they were doing exactly the type of music that was coming out of them.

When you hear a great artist, their honesty is there and their intent is there. Miles had it every moment. There are a lot of really good artists out there that fake it a bit. They have the technique, they have the sound, they seem to have all the goods, but their intent is a little askew. They're not into it. Ray Charles was into it. You know, he could sing "Come to Jesus" and, whatever it was, it didn't matter. Man, his intent was so pure.

In your early professional career as a musician, you were essentially the leader of a group that could be described as a mariachi-flavored cool-jazz rock band. I can only imagine — before you had your own label — what record execs must have thought of that. Do you remember any trials and tribulations when you were forging this new fusion?

Yeah. I was recording for RCA Victor for a year, before A&M. And while I was in the studio, recording a song, I had this idea that I wanted to do a trumpet solo. They signed me as a singer, by the way. Anyways, they said, "No, you can't do it. It's against union regulations." Oh, OK.

So I was listening to the playback in the control room and I went over to the console. I wanted to hear a little bit more bottom end, so I put my hand on the console and lifted the bass up, and the engineer slapped my hand. He said, "Man, don't ever touch that thing again." I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "This is a union house" and blah, blah, blah.

At that point, I was thinking, *Wow, isn't that interesting.*

Man, shouldn't this whole thing revolve around the artist? I mean, doesn't the artist kind of point the way at a label like RCA? Apparently not.

And then I was looking around the studio and it was really not a comfortable scene. It was white on white on white, and it was very sterile and just didn't have a feel. And I thought, *Man, if I ever have a chance to have my own studio or recording company, I would certainly do it differently.*

That was an important experience for me. And also I'm not taking full credit for the sound of the Tijuana Brass because I was kind of bouncing off of what the guitar player was doing.

Les Paul?

Yes, what Les Paul was doing with multi-tracking his guitar. I had a little studio in my garage with a couple of tape machines, and I started fooling around with overdubbing the horn several times. I'd go to the point of ending up with eight or nine passes, and I'd end up with a lot of hiss, but there would be a sound. On the trumpet, that was interesting, and I thought it had some validity.

When I used to go to the bullfights in Tijuana in the springtime, I got excited about a group of trumpet players that kind of announced the events as they would happen. And I got excited about the feeling of that whole thing — not the sound of what they were doing, but just the feeling. And then I saw an amazing bullfight once with Carlos Arruza, and one thing led to another. I had a song that a friend of mine had written that was like a haunting melody. And we adapted that. My partner gave it the title "Lonely Bull," and we were off to the races.

When you released the single "The Lonely Bull" in 1962 on your newly formed A&M label with Jerry Moss as your partner, did you have an idea of where you wanted the label to go and what kind of artists you wanted to sign?

No, we weren't thinking about longevity; we were just putting out a record. In that particular period of time, there were a lot of little record companies operating out of the trunks of cars. And you could do a demo and take it to a radio station, and if the program director happened to like it, he'd say, "Yeah, I'll put it on." It would happen like that.

"The Lonely Bull" caused an immediate reaction in Los Angeles and San Francisco. And we thought that instead of turning it over to another company, we'd hang onto it and see how far we could take it. This was around August 1962. Then the distributors that we'd lined up wanted to have a "Lonely Bull" album, which we did. And that did rather well.

So we thought we'd just see how far we can take this and reinvested the money we made from "The Lonely Bull" and the The Lonely Bull album. And little by little we started developing the roster. It just kind of happened gracefully. We didn't have this big, you know, major plan.

And the beautiful part of the whole company was that it started on a handshake. My partner, Jerry Moss, and I had a handshake on our deal, and that was it. There was no contract signed, no nothing until we sold the company many years later.

That was the first time we ever signed anything. I was very fortunate to have a partner like Jerry Moss.

I've read a lot of things about you and Jerry. And it sounds like Jerry took more of the business role and you took more of the A&R producer/musician role. Did that situation ever create any major conflicts or was your relationship always harmonious?

There were a couple of times when we'd disagree. But that was OK. We were always friends, and we were always straight and always upfront with each other. And there was nothing that could have caved us in because we both loved the business and loved making great records and giving people something for the money that they were putting out.

What made A&M different back then?

In '62, during that period, there were a lot of companies that would get a hit record, and then they'd add nine fillers and put out an album. We never went that route. We always felt like every cut was important. And after "The Lonely Bull," I got the idea that if we're really going to be in this business, I wanted the quality to be great. So we hired a quality-control person — Marv Bornstein — who was listening to every master that we put out. And I think it did a lot for our integrity.

Obviously the music scene in the '60s was very different than it is today. There were a bunch of hits that became the fabric of pop culture at the time. You had the Beatles, Elvis, Sinatra. Did you ever feel like the great music that you were putting out might get lost amongst these giants?

I never thought about that once. In 1968 we did a fundraiser with Barbra Streisand and Harry Belafonte at the Hollywood Bowl. And I was thinking, *Man, how am I gonna compete with these giants?* You know, they've had all this success and adulation, etc. I knew I had to do something really a little different. So I came up with this idea of coming down from the top of the Hollywood Bowl — from the low-rent seats — in a white suit, singing "This Guy's In Love with You." And anybody who saw that concert, that was probably the only thing they could remember. It was one of those moments. And everybody tried to talk me out of it; my manager and everybody said, "It's too dangerous, don't do it, security's not good." I said, "No, I think it's gonna be the right thing to do."

What were some of the movie soundtracks you were doing back then?

Well, Bacharach called and said he wasn't happy with the way things were going while he was in London working on *Casino Royale*. And so he asked me if I'd put a horn on it. He sent me the tape, and it was a rush deal. I had to finish everything within three days, which I did, and rushed it back to him. And that was the theme song of *Casino Royale*.

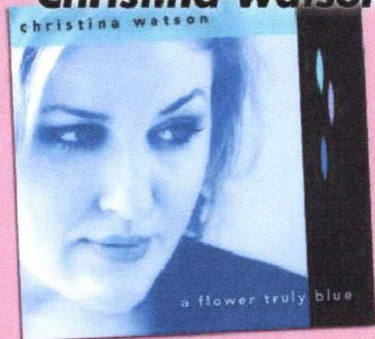
Lani sang on one of the Bond soundtracks.

She did "Never Say Never Again." Sergio Mendes and I

"And then I saw an amazing bullfight once with Carlos Arruza, and one thing led to another. I had a song that a friend of mine had written that was like a haunting melody. And we adapted that. My partner gave it the title 'Lonely Bull,' and we were off to the races."



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I left. I completely lost confidence in doing it and I dropped it. [The song appears on Shout Factory's 2005 release *Lost Treasures*, a collection of rare and previously unreleased Alpert tracks.] I put it away in the drawer. And then, when the Carpenters were searching around for songs ... because they went a year or so without much success and everyone around A&M was wondering why I signed them and why. They were just too soft, they didn't fit the mold. The PR department really didn't know what to do with them until I gave them "Close to You." Actually I had them record it two or three times because I thought the first one was not as good as they could do. Obviously when the record came out, it was a big monster. And then it went from "why did you sign them?" to me being a genius.

Well, it's one of my favorite songs of all time. It's so beautiful.

Yeah, it's beautiful. And it's not just Karen; it was Richard, who did the arrangement and really understood how to get the most out of her magnificent natural talent.

There seems to be a jazzy side to some of your pop artists, whether it's Joe Jackson or Sting or Jeffrey Osborne. Do you think that's because of your taste and maybe what you look for?

Not necessarily. ... To me, jazz is the real deal. It's the one that allows artists to express themselves. And that type of freedom that we hear in Sting, who's an elegant performer ... I mean, he's funky and elegant at the same time, but he was a jazz bass player. And he has that sensibility about him. It flows in a real natural way out of him. I think he's the kind of artist that we always gravitated towards. I mean, Cat Stevens, even though he wasn't a jazz artist, per se, had that unpredictable quality about his music. And Joe Jackson as well.

There was one artist in particular that I believe, had he remained on A&M Records, would've been as big as Sting.

I know who you're gonna say: Gino Vannelli.

Absolutely.

Yeah, Gino had something. He's a talented guy.

I've stayed in touch with Gino pretty closely over the last 20 years, and he admits that he made some really bad decisions that cost him dearly.

I think if he had stayed with us, it would've worked out. It was unfortunate because, like I said, he's a really talented guy. His brother Joe is very talented and writes a good song.

I thought Gino's swan song was his last album for A&M, *Brother to Brother*. The production, the musicianship, the compositions, the execution, the solos and everything on that album — it was pure brilliance.

Yeah, and it's not guesswork, either. I mean, he actually knows what he's doing. He's good.

When you did "Rise," it was kind of the launch of a new phase of jazz popularity and of incorporating jazz into pop. Did you see that coming?

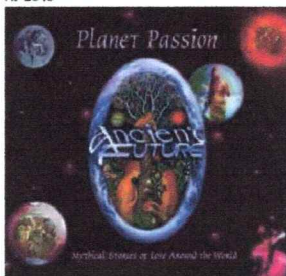
I kind of backed into "Rise." I went into the studio because my nephew Randy — who goes under the name Randy Badazz — wrote this song with a friend of his. Randy was under the impression that I should take all the old evergreens — "Taste of Honey," "Lonely Bull," "Whip Cream," etc. — and do disco versions of those before anyone else did them in that genre, and see if that would feel good. I was very reluctant to do this because I just felt like, leave those classics alone and goodbye.

Nonetheless we did go into the studio, and I think the first one we tried was "Taste of Honey" at 120 beats per minute. And bang, bang, bang — the minute I heard it, man, I got nauseous. It was like, no, I can't do this. This isn't working. But I had the musicians in the studio, and I said, "Randy, this is not working for me. We have to take a left turn on this one."

So they had this tune that I always liked and they wanted to do that as a disco thing at 120 beats per minute. I always liked the melody of "Rise" so I said let's slow this baby down and finally

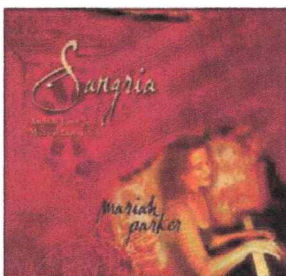
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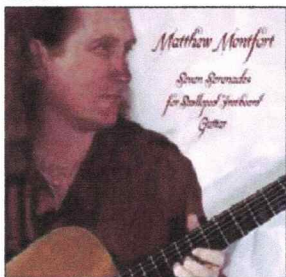
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found the groove that I liked. It was at 100 beats per minute. So we recorded it. Believe it or not, it was not tracked. It was done live in Studio D of A&M.

That's how "Rise" came about. I was tremendously excited about it when I heard the playback in the studio. And I walked up to Julius Wechter, who was playing on the date, and who was a dear friend who had played on a lot of the Tijuana Brass records. I said, "Julius, man, what do you think of this?" And he said, "I hate this thing. I think it stinks." He was more of a traditionalist.

Now, on the jazz side, you produced the last two albums by one of my favorite saxophonists, Stan Getz. And he appeared on your last album for A&M.

I did Barbieri, too. That was an interesting experience for me. That's passion personified. I mean, it's feast or famine with Gato. In the studio working with him, he would either be like a beginner playing or it'd be like, "Holy shit, man! How'd you come up with that?"

That's funny because he played four shows at my club. One show was absolutely brilliant and, for one of the other shows, you would've thought it was a totally different artist. After 15 minutes, he walked off stage.

That's not unusual, though. I had an eye-opener with Miles Davis. I don't remember the year, but he was playing in Los Angeles on a Friday night, and it was Miles, Coltrane, Cannonball, Philly Joe Jones, Paul Chambers and Red Garland. And it was like the most spectacular jazz experience I've ever had. It was just one of those nights, and I called all the friends that I thought would love jazz. Next night, Saturday night, it was the worst thing I've ever heard. Miles would play a solo then walk off into the kitchen, and it was just unraveling. It was like such a wide span between the two nights. I guess that's one of the beauties of jazz.

And probably like Gato, he wasn't angry or anything. He was just done.

Stan Getz was another thing, man. I did the first album with Stan when he

was totally clean, no drugs, no nothing. ... And he was quite nervous because he didn't know whether he could play or not without all the additives. But the guy was brilliant.

You know, I told him I didn't want to produce his album. He said, "But I want you to do it." I said, "Man, I've heard horror stories about you. I don't want to get involved." He goes, "But I've changed, man. I've made amends." This was the last four years of his life. And he was a prince. I mean, we turned out to be like brothers. I loved this guy. He wore his emotions really close to the surface. You knew exactly what he was feeling and thinking, and he was just a wonderful human being. Down deep, the guy was great.

I was very fortunate to meet Stan, actually about the time of *Apasionado* [1990]. He was playing in Florida, and I sat next to him at the bar and we just talked. And after all the horror stories I had heard about Stan, I couldn't believe it was the same man.

He was a gentle guy. Everyone thought of this guy as this musical genius, which he was. But it didn't affect him at all. He didn't know how great he was.

A&M was sold to PolyGram in 1989. Because it was such a labor of love, I imagine it was hard to let go. But, in fact, the timing was pretty good.

Well, it was time to do it. And to tell you the truth, the day we signed the papers officially was a sad day for me. I shed a couple tears on that one. But after that, I was relieved. It was a little bit more than I needed in my life at that time. Not only was I the "A" of A&M with 500 employees, I was one of the stars on the label, which made it really tough to have an everyday experience because there was too much attention coming in my direction. I didn't enjoy that. Looking back, I'm glad we had that experience, but I wouldn't want to be in the music business right now.

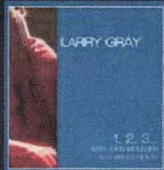
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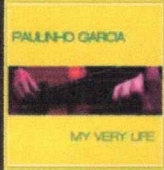
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A&M. What's going on with Almo these days?

That was really Jerry's idea. He wanted to get back into it. I helped support him with that, but I wasn't involved. He signed Garbage and we did rather well with them. Imogen Heap was another artist that had great potential and still probably does.

But like you said, the business has really changed.

Yeah, it's changed completely. There are four major labels. And the way of making music and the way of delivering music is so different than it was. You don't need big studios any more. I'm in Hawaii at the moment, and I have a little laptop. I could record right into that if I choose to and probably come up with a similar feeling that I had at the big studio at A&M.

What do you think about the future of pop music and even jazz with all these technological changes, not only with regards to the production of music, but also to the distribution of it?

I think it still always goes back to "it ain't what you do, it's how you do it." A lot of this technology, I think, is getting in the way of a lot of artists. I remember in the last few years of A&M, there was a rock 'n' roll group recording in Studio D. It was just a four-piece group. And they had finished recording and they were ready to mix. And I said, "This should be rather easy, man. It's gonna be a couple days." He says, "No, not really, because we have the drums on 30 tracks." Thirty tracks?

I think this is what happens to a lot of artists that get confused about perfection. They think it has to be letter perfect. It all kind of sounds alike to me now.

Let's talk about your wife, Lani.

Great artist. Lani's a great, great artist.

She appeared on some of your music and video productions and vice-versa. But this is the first album you actually did as a duet. What took so long?

Well, a few years back, we said why

don't we get a little group together and see if we can have fun playing. And that was our pursuit. We called Michael Shapiro, who we had known for years and who plays with Sergio. We played with Sergio at the Hollywood Bowl on his 40th anniversary. [Editor's note: This was the June 2006 concert celebrating the 40th anniversary of Mendes and Brasil '66]. We did three or four songs with him and had a good time. And Lani and I felt that if we could get a small group together and do some songs — maybe some standards and some Brazilian songs that we could fashion in our own style — then it might be fun.

So we got Michael to suggest some musicians. And we had fun at the first rehearsal. It was a good time playing. I love to play the horn. I started playing when I was 8, so it's always a challenge for me. And I'm a closet jazz musician. You know, I love jazz.

This album reminded me of what a British critic said on a DVD about the making of Steely Dan's Aja. He said, "The thing about Steely Dan that's great is they love jazz and they play some jazz, but they don't play too much jazz."

Well, that's true. ... I think jazz is a feeling. It's a freedom. It's a feeling of happening at that moment.

I'll tell you one of the things I did with the Tijuana Brass. This is a believe it or not story. Except for "Zorba the Greek," which I had to work out because it was very technical, I never once played any of the songs I recorded before the sessions. And when it was time to record, each time I tried to bring a little of whatever I felt at that moment to it. So it wasn't worked out. And people that tried to copy the group, they would do it verbatim. They'd take the notes and they'd try, in a stiff way, to reproduce what I was doing in a loose way.

So it's about the spontaneity.

I always kept that spontaneity. That's the way I hear music. I think it has to be of the moment. If it's not, then it becomes stiff, and it becomes another thing.

Well, like the title of the album, "anything goes."

Yeah, anything goes. ▲