

San Diego Union-Tribune

No bull: Herb Alpert here Friday, Nov. 18

Trumpet star and his singer wife still making music together



Written by [George Varga](#) 9:30 a.m., Nov. 11, 2011

Alpert's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame five years ago came not as a result of his music-making abilities, but to honor the work he and A&M Records' partner Moss achieved with their record label, one of the most successful indie record labels ever.

Launched in Alpert's garage, A&M was initially home to such pop acts as his Tijuana Brass and the groups We Five and Sergio Mendes & Brasil 66. But starting in 1968, A&M fast evolved into one of the hippest labels around, signing singer-organist Lee Michaels, the genre-leaping Sea Train and seminal country-rockers The Flying Burrito Brothers (featuring former San Diegan Chris Hillman, himself a future Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee for his work as a member of The Byrds.)

A&M then signed such hot young English acts as Joe Cocker, Free and Cat Stevens, followed by jazz guitar great Wes Montgomery, Quincy Jones, Supertramp, Peter Dinklage and future North County resident Rita Coolidge. In the 1970s, A&M became the home for artists as varied as Joan Armatrading, The Police, Squeeze, UB40, John Hiatt, Al Green, Janet Jackson, Split Enz, Amy Grant, Soul Asylum and many more.

"There's only one ingredient I looked for in the artists I signed, and it's honesty," Alpert said. "That's why I signed The Carpenters, even though that kind of music wasn't my cup of tea. But when I heard them and met them, and realized that was the music coming out of them, honestly and spontaneously, I realized I needed to sign them."

Hit records aside, it was letting an artist go who they had signed to A&M that first led Alpert and Moss to feel like their young record label was succeeding.

"We were the first to sign Waylon Jennings, back in 1964," Alpert said.

"I produced his first few albums. Chet Atkins heard (Waylon's A&M recording of) 'Four Strong Winds,' which I produced, and he talked to Waylon, which he shouldn't have done, since Waylon was under contract to us. Jerry and I both felt it would be in Waylon's best interest to go with Chet, who was a godfather of modern country music. Waylon had three years left on his (A&M) contract, and I said to Jerry: 'This guy will be a big artist.' And Jerry said: 'I know.'"

"It was at that point we knew we'd be successful. Because we were looking at it from an artist's point of view, not a money point of view where you tried squeezing every penny out that you could. We had integrity. And, as a result, when we started getting really popular as a record label, artists wanted to sign with A&M."

That didn't mean, however, that A&M signed any and every talented act that came their way. To the contrary, Alpert stressed, if a band or solo artist didn't feel right to them, A&M would pass.

"There were a lot of artists that had passion and were doing what they felt was right to do, and we just didn't get it," Alpert said. "It can become personal at some point."

Would that explain A&M's abrupt decision, in early 1977, to drop punk-rock provocateurs the Sex Pistols (now also in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame)? A&M did so just six days after having signed the band -- for more than \$150,000. The band kept their money, which A&M had to write off as a loss.

"I didn't like the energy (of the Sex Pistols)," Alpert said softly. "It was very toxic."

Happily for Alpert, co-heading a top record label also had its perks.

In his case that meant launching the A&M Horizon label in the 1970s. Its roster of artists included such jazz luminaries as guitarist Jim Hall, former Miles Davis saxophonists Dave Liebman and Sonny Fortune, bassist Charlie Haden, trumpeter Don Cherry, Dave Brubeck Quartet saxophonist Paul Desmond and more. Other jazz artists were signed to A&M directly, as was the great Brazilian singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento.

"We had an active jazz label," Alpert said proudly. "I loved (baritone saxophonist) Gerry Mulligan. When I was in high school, I'd go see his quartet with (trumpeter) Chet Baker. I became good friends with Gerry and we signed him to A&M. (Latin-jazz mainstay) Willie Bobo did something for us. So did Chet Baker and Stan Getz."

Fans of many stripes fondly recall A&M Records for the music its artists made. But for many in a generation that grew up in the 1960s and beyond, both the record label and the Alpert-led Tijuana Brass still evoke an enduring image -- not a sound.

That image is the cover photo for the band's 1965 album, "Whipped Cream & Other Delights." It featured model/actress Dolores Erickson, who -- under her unseen bikini -- was largely covered in shaving cream, not whipped cream. That record cover proved so popular that it now has its own web site.

"The cover was our graphic designer Peter Whorf's idea, and he came up with the concept," Alpert said.

"When I first saw it, I thought that maybe the cover was pushing things a little far. But it's pretty tame by today's standards. Obviously, it turned into an iconic cover. After all these years, there are still a lot of people who saw, and remember, the cover -- and never bought the album!"