

# Herbie rides again

HERB ALPERT, head of A&M, painter, trumpeter and all-round nice guy, is back with a new LP that features Janet Jackson and the Jam/Lewis production team. ALAN JACKSON meets the man who sacked the Sex Pistols in '76. Picture: A. J. BARRATT

His office is not like any other room you'd hear talked about as an office. Herb's cave, his wife calls it affectionately. No matter that outside the Los Angeles light is mid-afternoon bright. Here inside all is pools of shadow, a subterranean world of comfortable disarray just one step down from the sidewalk.

As your eyes grow accustomed to the semi-darkness you begin to pick out some of the individual items that contribute to this crowded interior. There are the expected photographs and citations and trophies, his professional equivalent of a game hunter's mounted heads, and there are the records and tapes and hardware that show this is a room where work gets done. In and among the accumulation of shapes and sizes are the large and splashy canvases of his own paintings. "I expect people told you to admire my pictures," Herb Alpert notes without malice, and indeed they did.

You could hardly say that the A&M Records lot, to be found just off Sunset Boulevard in the former Charlie Chaplin film studios, is an empire built on fear though. Alpert founded the company 25 years ago with his friend Jerry Moss - A for Alpert, M for Moss - as a reaction to the dehumanising experience of being just another young hopeful on CBS's American roster. They worked out of Alpert's garage and 'Artists First' was their unofficial motto.

Today the circumstances are grander (A&M is one of the world's most successful record companies and is still growing) but the basic premise remains the same. An unremarkable black saloon occupies the parking space marked H Alpert and an open-door policy exists towards favoured callers. Not too many years ago it might have been Sting or Carole King or Karen Carpenter crossing over his threshold. Nowadays it's as likely to be Barry White or Iggy Pop or Janet Jackson. This afternoon it's just me.

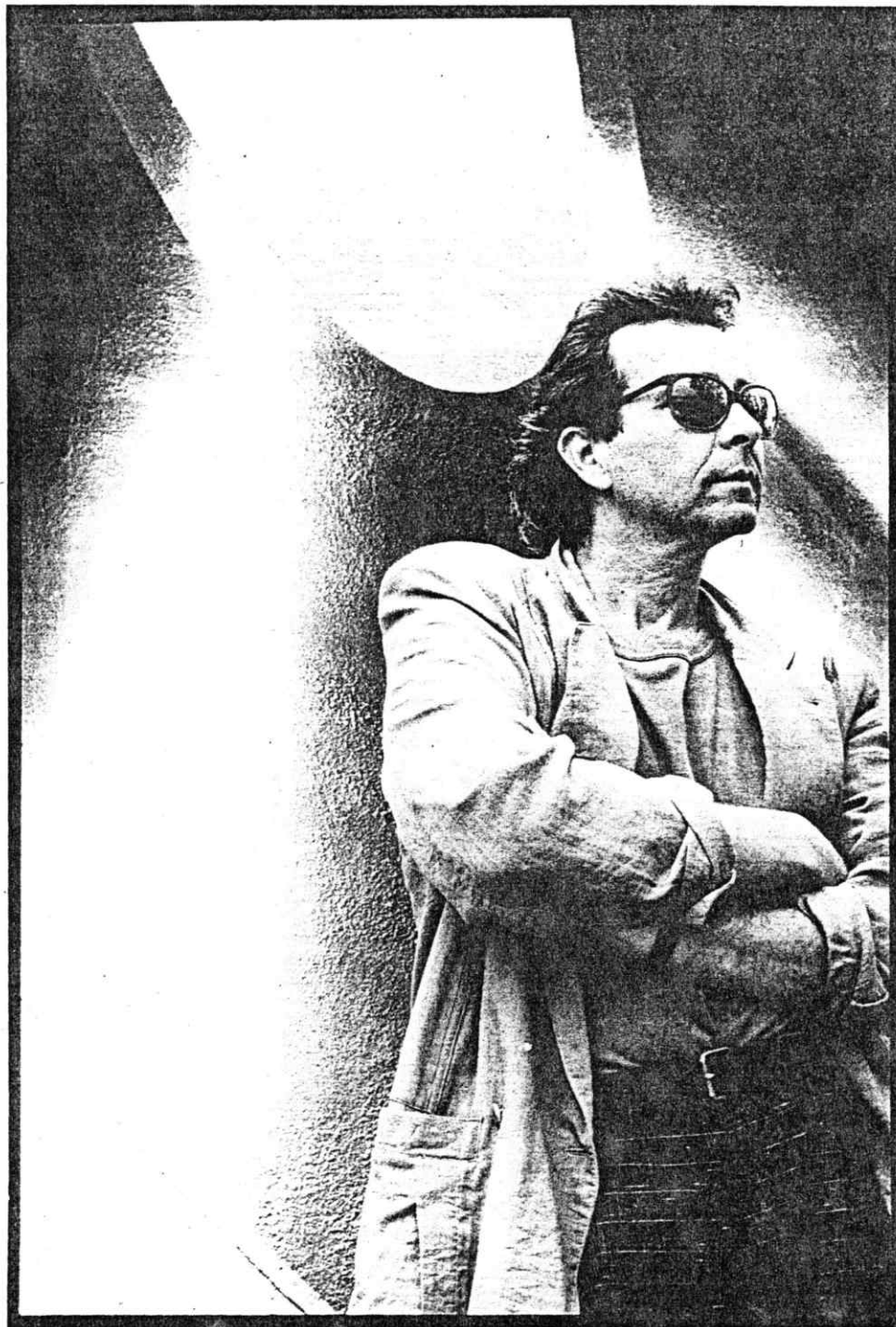
That said, the greeting is understandably less effusive. But I'm perfectly willing to take this as a good sign, for it's often observed that Herb Alpert is a shy and modest man and as such he avoids the instant buddy-isms of a city where most strangers are prepared to be your best mate during business hours. Before settling somewhat awkwardly into a friendly-looking chair he looks around his office and, in deference to my Englishness, picks up a cricket bat that is leaning against the wall.

"Like this?" he asks, swinging it around his ears as if he were on a baseball field.

"No, like this," I say, bringing it down to nudge the carpet. I don't believe that he doesn't already know this, but I appreciate the pretence for the nose-rubbing, tail-wagging gesture I suspect it to be.

The success of, the very existence of, a dance record produced by Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis and featuring Janet Jackson's vocals, yet bearing the unmistakable stamp of a 50-year-old horn player has to be something of an anomaly in our charts. Herb Alpert is now selling to record-buyers too young to even know that he's not supposed to be hip, and he appreciates the joke. "Yo Julio," he has a young guy greet him in the video for 'Diamonds'.

This newly-regenerated career began for



him when, while at high school, he discovered the part-time earning potential of trumpet playing. Shortly afterwards, in the late 1950s, he entered into a songwriting partnership with Lou Adler which, among other, less favourably remembered compositions, resulted in the Sam Cooke hit 'Wonderful World'.

"We were hired to do a company called Keen Records right after Sam's success with 'You Send Me', so from then on we were privy to the great Sam Cooke recordings... I was truly witness to a genius. The guy was not only an amazing person, but also his talent was staggering. He had his own very personal way of approaching a song, lyrically, vocally, rhythmically. He could turn complete rubbish into the highest prose."

Herb Alpert's still handsome face breaks into a grin at the thought, and admits that the version of 'Wonderful World' that Cooke left to posterity wasn't quite the one that was originally handed to him. "Sam juggled it around a bit and I'll say without hesitation that he totally improved on it," he says cheerfully. "It was a very lucky break for us."

Lucky in two ways, for not only did Cooke provide Alpert and Adler with an international and enduring success as songwriters, but he also passed on a wisdom that was to stand them in good stead in the industry...

"Basically, it was that you have to be an individual in this business, you have to have your own stamp. As a copyist you may find success for a few brief moments but it will soon wear thin. No one wants to see or hear a carbon copy of someone else."

"As a performer that was something important for me to learn. I'd been through periods of trying to be Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie or Harry James or whoever else caught my ear, only to realise it wasn't going to work. Even if I'd been able to emulate them perfectly, who would have wanted to hear it? Sam made me see how important it was to strive to find my own identity."

To say that Herb Alpert achieved that goal with the Tijuana Brass is something of an understatement. The multi-layered trumpet sound and relentless jollity of his like 'The Lonely Bull', 'Spanish Flea' and 'A Taste Of Honey' is almost as central to the sonic picture of the '60s as the work of The Beatles or The Rolling Stones and sold in similar quantities. In one week in 1966 the Tijuana Brass had five albums in the Top Twenty, all on the A&M label and collective sales now stand at something approaching 80 million records.

At first it was Alpert's trumpet alone that created the Tijuana sound, but its extraordinary appeal eventually led to a *bona fide* group being assembled. For many listeners, starved of access to the real, indigenous music of Latin America, the cocktail bar sounds of the Tijuana Brass, of Astrud Gilberto and of A&M signings Sergio Mendes and Brazil 66 were accepted as the authentic sounds of an entire continent. Almost a 'Gracelands' situation, you might say. Were Herb Alpert and his peers focusing international attention on a hitherto ignored culture or were they exploiting it, diluting a Latin sound for mass consumption? Herb is too polite to register surprise at this theory.

"Prior to 1962 I was totally oblivious to Latin music," he says, sinking his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "I had never listened to so much as three minutes of *mariachi* music in my whole life. But then I went to a bullfight for the first time and I was completely affected by the mood. There were trumpets blowing, people yelling, women were tossing their bras into the arena, people were drinking wine out of leather bottles... I simply translated all of that into a sound on 'The Lonely Bull', A&M's first record. Whatever I borrowed from the culture became confused in the name. People saw Tijuana Brass and assumed that it was some kind of exotic Latin music, but it was just my interpretation."

That may or may not prove the point, but if anything it helped to put a millstone around Herb Alpert's neck. The Tijuana sound made him a rich man - advance sales of his albums habitually ran into the millions - but they placed him on a treadmill, destined to churn out more and more of the same to a dwindling audience unwilling to accept any artistic developments.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, because it's something I've never said to anyone before," he says, "I always had this creepy feeling that, despite all the success I've had, despite A&M and everything, I'd end up playing my old hits in some lounge in Las Vegas, 30 people this year, 10 the next, always trying to recreate the past."

It hasn't happened. Every now and then a

different Herb Alpert record has come along to thwart expectations. In 1968 it was his vocal version of Burt Bacharach's 'This Guy's In Love With You'. In 1979, after a long lay-off, it was his dance hit 'Rise'. And now, after a steady succession of well-received and increasingly jazz-inflected albums during the '80s, there's 'Keep Your Eye On Me', an album which has opened up an entire new market to him and which, in A&M silver jubilee year, is recreating the kind of success he enjoyed at the height of his Tijuana powers.

**You think of A&M and you don't think 'dangerous'. You think of Carole King and 'Tapestry', you think of Cat Stevens, of 'Frampton Comes Alive'. And you think of the millions of records The Carpenters sold before Karen died of heart failure after fighting back from anorexia. She was just 19 when she and brother Richard first found success on the label, so were her problems related to celebrityhood and the fraternal link?**

"Possibly they were triggered by the things that happened to her in such a short space of time, but I think it was something she already carried with her," he says, uneasy to be covering ground that is obviously still emotional to him.

And then you think of 1976 and A&M's decision to sign up Carpenter sound-alikes the Sex Pistols. It was a business relationship that lasted all of... well, five weeks. So short-lived in fact that A&M demos of 'God Save The Queen' are currently fetching under-the-counter prices of around £300 in London. Did the short-term nature of the association demonstrate any, er, unhappiness on the label's behalf at the *musical direction* the Pistols were taking?

"We recognise that there are all sorts of tastes out there and it's nice to make everything available. For instance, we've just started our classical line and..."

Excuse me, about those Sex Pistols... should I assume you disapproved of the signing?

"There are certain artists who, in all fairness, I think I have felt funny about signing."

So weren't you happy with the Pistols decision?

"Not really - especially after I met them."

After you met them?

"Yeah, they were very rude and it's not the sort of association I feel happy with. I don't think of this business as a place to make money but as a place to have fun and put out some good records, and I enjoy it when we work with people who are of the same mind."

So are you saying that your meeting with them was enough to convince you that they should be dropped?

"Not necessarily. If I wasn't going to have to deal with them personally it was OK with me. But I don't need to have to rub shoulders with people who go out of their way to be intentionally negative and rude."

What did they do when you met them, Mr Alpert, Sir, please?

He smiles and lets me know that we should move on to other topics. Did John Lydon crap in Herb's trumpet? We'll never know.

Patience is a virtue, but it can also pay commercial dividends. It's worked for A&M recently with artists as outwardly against-the-tide as Suzanne Vega and Rosie Vela. It's put Iggy Pop back on the charts and, if Alpert's hunches are correct, it will be shortly launching the long-absent Barry White, a recent signing, on the comeback trail. And then there's Janet Jackson. Who would have thought from hearing her first two A&M albums that she had 'Control' inside her? Was it a combination of Janet's success and the 25th anniversary that encouraged Herb to get hip and, for the first time ever, to relinquish production controls - Jam and Lewis for four tracks on his current LP?

"No, it wasn't just commercial considerations. Like, I'd love to have a hit record, especially in the anniversary year, but the last thing I want is for it to seem that I'm buying Janet Jackson sing on two tracks isn't a big plus for me, but I honestly don't think it's the catalyst to the record happening."

The recording industry, like everything else, goes round in circles and if you hang on in long enough you'll be hot again. With even jazz reviewers finding room for praise in the 'Keep Your Eye On Me' write-ups (there have been more than one or two parallels drawn with latterday Miles Davis), Herb's not just got his cake. He's bought the bakery.