

AT THE STUDIO WITH

Herb Alpert

Tijuana Brass, Right? Don't Ask

By DONNA PERLMUTTER

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — The earthquake last year damaged the three-story contemporary office building Herb Alpert bought in 1993 to house his recording and art studios and philanthropic foundation, but he is pleased with its restoration. His own oil paintings hang on the walls, and an occasional piece of sculpture punctuates the décor. A large spiral staircase leads up to the top floor, which looks out onto palm trees and the Pacific Ocean several blocks away.

Only in a small recording nook on the second floor (with dark wood ceiling panels taken from Rudolph Valentino's house) is there any evidence of the musician and record producer, best known for his 1960's group, Tijuana Brass. In the last 15 years, Herb Alpert seems to have become the kind of show business recluse whose name completes the question, "Whatever happened to . . . ?"

In fact, he was busy quietly putting his imprimatur on everything from theater — he has co-produced such Tony Award-winning plays as "Angels in America" and "Jelly's Last Jam," and David Mamet's new Off Broadway play, "The Cryptogram" — to the record business to giving away \$2 million a year through his foundation, and still discovering and turning the microphone over to a new generation of talent.

Mr. Alpert has come a long way since 1969, when he disbanded Tijuana Brass and quit performing, saying, "The trumpet is my enemy." He did not play publicly



Bart Bartholomew for The New York Times

Through his foundation, Herb Alpert is supporting young artists.

again until 1973. Despite having "the American dream come true," he said he was so burned out that he turned everything over to others and sought help from a trumpet teacher, who restored his confidence.

"What I found," he said as he settled in a club chair in the split-level loft, "is that the thing in my hands is just a piece of plumbing. The real instrument is me, the emotions, not my lip, not my technique, but feelings I learned to stuff away — as a kid who came from a very unvocal household. Since then, I've been continually working it out, practicing reli-

giously and now, playing better than ever."

Mr. Alpert's success came nearly by chance 30-odd years ago, when he drove from Los Angeles down to Tijuana, where mariachi fanfares, a bull fight and a lazy Sunday afternoon inspired him to write a song called "The Lonely Bull."

He quickly propelled that song's hint of Latin rhythms and its subsequent album into the pop music spotlight and, with his partner Jerry Moss, made a \$200 garage-based operation into the largest in-

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Herb Alpert and Tijuana Brass, Right? Don't Ask

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dependently owned record company in the world, A. & M. Records. After a quarter century of promoting such talent as The Police and Janet Jackson, the partners sold A. & M. to Polygram in 1990 for a half-billion dollars.

Mr. Alpert, who just turned 60, is notoriously shy and avoids interviews. When he greets a visitor, he is wearing a black T-shirt under an elegant taupe suit and tinted rimless glasses, and graying, wavy locks frame his face. There are daubs of hot pink oil paint on his black running shoes and leather watchband.

His paintings are abstract canvases in bold colors, done for his own enjoyment. The same could be said for his most recent recording, in 1992, a solo jazz CD called "Midnight Sun" and of the first issues of the new Alpert/Moss label, *Almo Sounds*, featuring new artists in R & B, country and urban music.

He clearly does not expect these to equal his early successes, which earned him 7 Grammy awards, 15 gold and 14 platinum albums, a mention in "The Guinness Book of World Records" for having five simultaneous entries in *Billboard's* 1966 Top 20.

As he poured Crystal Geyser water into glasses, he said, "There are two different audiences now — the old one that thinks I'm going to do Tijuana Brass again, and the new one that knows me by way of 'Rise,' " his 1979 gold album with a slowed-down disco beat and soaring trumpet line.

The reticent Mr. Alpert, who has added real estate and other investments to record producing, is so private that only now, with his latest philanthropic project having just had its inauguration, does he relent and agree to an interview.

His Alpert Awards in the Arts, which grant \$50,000 to each of five young artists in the fields of music, theater, dance, film/video and the visual arts, were presented for the first time on May 5. The awards commemorated the 25th anniversary of the California Institute of the Arts, which is administering the endowment. Mr. Alpert, with great reluctance, had agreed to say a few words at the ceremony, but a few days before the event, he and his wife suddenly left for Europe instead.

"Philanthropy to Herb is simply part of his personal communication with the world, like making music or painting," Kip Cohen, president of the Herb Alpert Foundation, said yesterday. "And he feels a certain urgency about supporting the arts

Weighing in with the Alpert Awards in the Arts.

and education. Receiving thank-you's, though, are not part of the picture, so when he passed on the Alpert Awards it was because he already had his gratification — creating them." Asked about his shyness, Mr. Alpert answers in a soft, uninflected voice: "I never know what to say. Small talk makes me uncomfortable. It's not a need of mine to be stroked and doing an interview — this is very hard for me — means talking about the past, which is not of interest."

That past includes a painful split from his first wife, Sharon Mae Lubin, with whom he had two children, and the period of four years when he wouldn't perform.

He grew up in Fairfax, the Los Angeles equivalent of the Lower East Side, steeped in Yiddish, pickle barrels and halvah. His father, Louis, was a tailor who came to America from a village outside Kiev. But it was his mother, Tillie, who encouraged Herb and his brother and sister in music. He recalled practicing his trumpet all the time, and "the neighbors yelling and my mother yelling back, 'If you don't like it, move.'"

Mr. Alpert avoids the life style of the show business elite: He and his wife of 21 years, Lani Hall, whom he met when she was singing with Sergio Mendes, a group A. & M. recorded, live in a house in Malibu, but he drives an old BMW and is well known for not going to Hollywood parties, networking or entertaining. Their 19-year-old daughter, Aria, studies acting in New York.

Despite his success, Mr. Alpert is the first to admit that he knows "next to nothing about business matters and is raggedy at organization," that it is his partner, Mr. Moss, who has always been the brain in those departments.

But his instincts as a talent scout have stood him in remarkable stead. In the late 1960's, A. & M. produced talent like Procul Harum and Joe Cocker. The next decade saw the Carpenters, Peter Frampton, Supertramp and the Police signing on.

Why does he continue to produce records and play and work so hard? "It feeds me," he said. "It gives me energy. And because I don't stay happy continually I have to keep doing what I'm doing." Indeed, in a phone call after a recording session,

he plays a few dazzling riffs into the receiver — his voice suddenly lively. Even 30 years ago, hard work drove him when he masterminded record production, knowing which material to combine with which "ear candy" and, most important, he said, "how to be the middle man between the tape machine and the artist, how to make that person feel safe when the red light goes on."

He began painting long ago. On tour with Tijuana Brass, "I used to visit museums in the great cities," he recalled; "always being attracted to the modern wing. So, once I bought a small canvas and some paint and had a good time."

Since then, he has done more than

500 paintings and says he doesn't care whether they ever gain critical validation. He is equally sanguine about his relatively low, non-Grammy profile the last 10 years.

"Midnight Sun," featuring ballads done in the style of Chet Baker and Miles Davis, did not sell well and was hardly noticed. He still plays as a sideman for a number of other musicians, Mr. Alpert said, often without credit and always without pay. He readily admits that his projects now exist primarily for his own satisfaction.

He said, "Winning comes down to how you feel about your work — if it's worthwhile, not how many dollars it makes."