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# The News-Times



## Music News

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### Brass or no, Herb Alpert keeps making things happen in the music world

By Sean Piccoli

Sun-Sentinel, South Florida

In 1962, Herb Alpert saw the performance that would change his life.

He went to a bullfight - and was so moved by the spectacle, he returned home and took up his trumpet to re-create what he had seen and felt sitting above la plaza de toros.

The result was "The Lonely Bull," a title shared by the first album and first hit single from Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. The group's blithe, Latin-over-easy lilt was a taste of things to come: In the decade of Twiggy, Apollo moonshots and "The Dating Game," T-Brass hits like "Whipped Cream," "A Taste of Honey" and "Tijuana Taxi" would fill a million miniskirt-chasing cocktail parties and space-age bachelor pads.

It was a sound that imbued non-hippie '60s culture with the bubbly glow it retains, like reruns of "Laugh-In" or "Love American Style," today. It also launched Alpert, who turned 62 in March, on a remarkable career. Artist, producer, executive, philanthropist - he has prospered in every role.

It might be argued that the poor, dumb bull executed before Alpert's eyes 35 years ago gave its life for his.

Alpert is celebrating the release of his 34th album, "Passion Dance (Almo Sounds)," backed by a new eight-piece band. He hasn't recorded with Tijuana Brass in 14 years. "The Lonely Bull" and the dessert-frosted sweetie on the cover of "Whipped Cream and Other Delights" are vinyl-age relics.

But the sound follows him, still.

"I would have quite a few people ask, 'What happened to Tijuana Brass?'" Alpert says in a telephone interview from his Southern California home.

"I've been recording all along," he says in a soft, meditative voice, "ever since the Tijuana Brass' last concert, which was - I don't even remember when. People, I guess, stopped

listening to the radio and didn't realize I was doing other things."

"Other things" hardly describes it. Subtract the Tijuana Brass from Herb Alpert's history, and he has still accomplished enough to fill several lifetimes.

Alpert was born March 31, 1937, in Los Angeles into a working-class household where the hobbies practically foretold the young man's career.

"My father was from Russia and played mandolin," says Alpert. "My mother was born in New York but her roots were Romanian. She played violin. My sister, Mimi, played piano. And my brother, Dave, was a professional drummer. So we had a little combo at the house."

Alpert took up trumpet at age 8 and practiced constantly, through high school and his two years at the University of Southern California. He left USC to enlist, played with the 6th Army Band at the Presidio, and finished his hitch determined to break into music.

He started behind the scenes. Alpert and a collaborator, Lou Adler, managed surfer boys Jan & Dean and produced the duo's 1958 Top 10 hit, "Baby Talk." Alpert and Adler also co-wrote, with the late crooner Sam Cooke, the pop classic "Wonderful World."

Alpert himself signed with RCA records in 1960, under the stage name Dore Alpert, and released his first single, a vocal number called "Tell It to the Birds," in 1962. That same year, Alpert and a new business partner, Jerry Moss, started A&M Records, the label that would release the Tijuana Brass' smash recordings.

By 1966, Herb was the word. The albums "The Lonely Bull, Vol 2.," "South of the Border," "Whipped Cream and Other Delights" and "Goin' Places" all sold spectacularly. "The Dating Game" chose the bouncy "Spanish Flea" as its stick-in-your head theme. Other artists, like Al Hirt on Java, copped that T-boppin' sound.

In April 1966, the Tijuana Brass had four albums in the Billboard Top 10, a feat unequaled to this day - not by the Beatles, not by Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, Garth Brooks or goo-goo instrumentalist Kenny G.

Not even the hippies could stop Herb Alpert. He scored his first No. 1 single in 1968, not playing trumpet, but singing the Burt Bacharach-Hal David number "This Guy's In Love With You."

A&M, for its part, was pulling down \$50 million annually, a breathtaking amount in pre-stagflation, pre-oil embargo times, when albums cost just a few bucks apiece. The company rolled with the changes, always signing the right acts: the Carpenters, Carole King, the Police, Suzanne Vega, Soul Asylum, Janet Jackson, Bryan Adams and Soundgarden.

The midwestern punks in Soul Asylum even paid a tribute of sorts, releasing a 1989 EP, "Clam Dip and Other Delights," which depicted one of the band members - a la "Whipped Cream" ... - slathered in dip with fish parts and other detritus poking out of the slimy pile.

Alpert could afford to be amused - but he wasn't.

"I didn't take to that stuff," he says. "I think it's just people showing a lack of imagination by capitalizing on something they didn't do. I wasn't tickled by that."

Soul Asylum moved to another label.

Alpert and Moss - the "A" and the "M," respectively - would eventually sell their little founding company to entertainment giant Polygram, in 1990, for a reported \$500 million. They stayed on as executives until 1993.

Alpert is always quick to credit Moss' canny business sense for the label's success, assigning himself the role of visionary or spirit guide. He produced albums and singles - for Sergio Mendes, Chris Montez, Baja Marimba, Waylon Jennings and Pete Jolly. He was so hot during the '60s and '70s, in particular, that his name often preceded the name of the artist he produced, as in, "Herb Alpert Presents Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66."

Asked why he was drawn to Latin music in the first place, the Russian-Romanian-American Alpert insists, "I can't really say that I was."

"I was trained classically," he says. "I liked jazz - I still do. I saw a bullfight in 1962 that touched me and I tried to translate that experience into a sound, into a feeling. And then my partner came up with the tagline 'Tijuana Brass.'"

Critics dubbed the Alpert sound "Ameriachi" - American homage to Mexican big brass. Alpert shrugs off the label.

"I never listened to Mariachi music," he says. "What I was trying to do was like a salt-and-pepper shaker - a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little oregano."

Whatever it was, audiences were pouring it on everything, while some critics heaped derision on Alpert, calling him an easy-listening phenomenon.

"I can't honestly say I don't care 100 percent" what critics think, Alpert says. "Some part of me cares. But I still go about doing what I do the way I feel best. That's where I had the most fun. I think of myself as a jazz musician."

The '70s saw Alpert flexing his pure jazz chops on more experimental albums with acclaimed South African trumpeter Hugh Masakela. The Tijuana Brass hung up its spurs in 1975 and would not record again for nine years. But Alpert scored a solo instrumental hit in 1979 with "Rise," the album and single.

He went on to work with R&B hitmakers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. He notched an R&B hit in 1987 with "Diamonds," sung by Janet Jackson. He traveled to Broadway, co-producing "Jelly's Last Jam," starring Gregory Hines. He also became one of the entertainment industry's most prolific engines of charity. A foundation bearing his name gives more than \$2 million annually to various causes. Alpert also has helped raise \$36 million in the past several years for Special Olympics with a series of Christmas albums -

an accomplishment in which he takes special pride.

Alpert and Moss formed a new label, Almo Sounds, in 1995, and signed a deal to have it distributed by powerhouse Geffen Records. Almo artists include platinum-selling dance-rockers Garbage and country-politan singer Gillian Welch.

Alpert himself released a jazz album, "Second Wind," on the label last April. It was his first recording in four years.

"I took that hiatus because when Jerry and I left A&M Records, I wanted some time," he explains.

It was not as if he had anything left to prove. Alpert has sold 72 million albums worldwide. He is widely respected - even the critics took kindly to "Second Wind," giving him his due as a jazz musician. This week, the Billboard Latin music conference, held in Miami, gives Alpert a lifetime achievement award.

He has also raised a family, and counts his wife, singer Lani Hall, as one of his life's greatest blessings. Hall can be heard on "Passion Dance," providing vocal samples for "Beba" - a song written by Alpert's new band mate, bassist Oskar Cartaya - and for the Stevie Wonder composition "Creepin'."

"Passion Dance" is not a Tijuana Brass reunion, but it echoes that old troupe, percolating with brassy, bopping melodies and undulating Afro-Cuban beats. Alpert calls it "an urban-groove dance kind of thing" and says the inspiration came from another public spectacle - not a bullfight, but a Latin music show he attended last August at the Hollywood Bowl.

"Every now and then they would hit a particular groove that had 18,000 people dancing," Alpert recalls. "And so I was curious as to what that rhythm was - what was that buzzer that went off in everybody's heads."

He hopes he's hit it with "Passion Dance."

"I keep trying to stretch," he says, attributing the breadth of his accomplishments to a combination of passion and curiosity - both of which, he says, are still engaged whenever he picks up a trumpet.

"I've been doing it since I was 8, and making records is probably the best experience I have," he says.

Today, old Tijuana Brass recordings have caught on as part of the nostalgia-feeding neo-lounge craze. "The Lonely Bull" can be heard as a sample on the rap song, "Tres Delinquentes" by the hip-hop group Delinquent Habits.

Alpert enjoys all the refracted glory, but doesn't give it a second thought.

"I honestly don't," he says. "I think if I did, it would just get in my way. It's really sweet when I hear certain stories. But just like everyone else, I'm trying to wake up every

morning with a good feeling, and be passionate about what I do every day."

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