

Herb Alpert at 80: Gently upbeat



Herb Alpert, shown Jan. 3, 2014, in Malibu, Calif., said he enjoys painting and sculpting in addition to playing music. (Nick Ut / AP)



Howard Reich Contact Reporter **Chicago Tribune** September 29, 2015

At this late date, trumpeter Herb Alpert surely has very little left to prove.

With an estimated 72 million in record sales, 15 gold albums, 9 Grammy Awards and a National Medal of Arts (presented by President Obama in 2013), Alpert does not have many peers. That he created the indie label A&M Records in 1962 with Jerry Moss and sold it in 1989 for an estimated \$500 million extends a resume far too long to recite here. Certainly few instrumentalists so deeply indebted to jazz traditions have reached so wide an audience.

Yet Alpert, who turned 80 in March, continues to tour the globe and record his music, his newest album — "Come Fly With Me" — crystallizing the beauty, sophistication and accessibility of his work. Culture snobs may look down on a music as openly optimistic and succinctly understated as Alpert's, but the integrity of his work has been obvious from his first recording with the Tijuana Brass, "The Lonely Bull," a top 10 hit that in 1962 launched Alpert and the band into the pop-culture stratosphere.

More than half a century later, Alpert has reconceived jazz standards and penned several originals on "Come Fly With Me," his gently sighing, pervasively laconic style unmistakable from his first half-whispered notes on the opening, title track. Though only live performance reveals the full character of a musician's work, indications from this album are encouraging, for Alpert sounds as persuasive as he did at the beginning (he plays City Winery Chicago with his wife, singer Lani Hall, on Thursday evening).

"I got a letter from a lady in Germany, when 'The Lonely Bull' was the top 10 (recording) in the country, and she thanked me for sending her on a vicarious trip to Tijuana," recalls Alpert of a recording that captured the mariachi-tinged ambience of the Mexican bullring.

"I was touched by that and realized that, man, that's what I want to do: I want to make visual music and honest music. So that's been my pursuit ever since.

"And how do I hear myself now? Physically I'm playing better than I've ever played, because I'm getting more out of the horn for less effort. I guess that's my 80 years factor that helped to do that."



played a note I didn't mean.'

"To me," Alpert continued in 1992, "that's it. That's what jazz is all about."

Connoisseurs can argue about whether Alpert should be considered a jazz musician, though those who think not would have to explain away the depth of expression of his "Midnight Sun" album of 1992 or the influence of Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Harry "Sweets" Edison and even Bix Beiderbecke on so much of his work.

As for the generally upbeat quality of his music dating to the Tijuana Brass days, Alpert makes no apologies.

"I always try to make optimistic music," he says. "I mean, I'd rather make that type of music than to play the blues all the time.

"Yeah, I want to be upbeat. We've been traveling with our same group for the last nine years, and the thing that I like most about it is when the audience leaves our concerts, they feel good about it, because it's the up side of life."

Which perhaps leads back to why Alpert still finds himself on the road, a way of life he concedes "is not all that great."

"But I love to play," he adds.

"There's a certain magic that comes from creating. I love the mystery of art. You can't really put your finger on why you like a certain dancer or why you like a certain song that you hear on the radio. It touches, you know? And when it touches, it's meaningful to you."

As for turning 80, Alpert says "it scared the (crap) out of me, man. You kidding? I don't know — it goes so darn fast."

But with an exhibition of Alpert's bronze "Spirit Totems" recently installed on the south steps of the Field Museum of Natural History (yes, Alpert also works as a sculptor and painter), he clearly has not slowed his tempo.

"I get to make music, and I get to paint and sculpt, and I'm a right-brained guy, 85 percent on the right side of my brain," says Alpert.

"I will continue to do it as long as I can. It's not only for (the audience). It's for me, as well. Because after playing a concert, I feel (energized). It gives me energy to do it.

"It's a win-win for me."

Not only for him.

Herb Alpert and Lani Hall play at 8 p.m. Thursday at City Winery Chicago, 1200 W. Randolph St.; \$65-\$75; sold out, but there is a waiting list; 312-733-9463 or citywinery.com.

Hyde Park 'Parade'

The most inspiring moment in last weekend's Hyde Park Jazz Festival occurred as the event was winding down. With Saturday's attractions having come and gone, Chicago drummer and visual artist Mikel Patrick Avery on Sunday afternoon offered the world premiere of his "Parade," which opened as a New Orleans-style second line procession, evolved into a collective improvisation on the festival's west stage dance floor and concluded with the musicians parading off into the distance. During several moments, there was almost no distinction between performers and audience, the two groups interacting and intermingling, a communal jazz gathering if ever there were one.

