

Herb Alpert returns to Ohio after 40 years for one, special show

By Michael Sangiacomo, The Plain Dealer January 11, 2019

KENT, Ohio - The last time trumpet legend Herb Alpert was in Northeast Ohio was not for fun, he was having a heart operation at the Cleveland Clinic. But on Nov. 8, he returns for his first concert in Northeast Ohio in more than 40 years.

Tickets are evaporating fast for this show by the 82-year-old artist and co-founder of A & M Records at the intimate 650-seat (and acoustically perfect) Kent Stage. He'll perform with a back-up band and vocals by his wife, Lani Hall, former singer with Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66. The attraction is Alpert himself, who makes the music sound so smooth and effortless, and joyful.

Back in the 1960s, before the rise of rock at the end of the decade, Alpert and his Tijuana Brass made instrumentals an important part of music with songs like "The Lonely Bull," "A Taste of Honey" and "Tijuana Taxi" others. And just when listeners got used to the vocal-less sound, he threw everyone for a loop by singing "This Guy's in Love With You" in 1968.

How did that happen?

"Well, we did a tv show ("The Beat of the Brass") and the director thought it would be interesting for me to try to sing a song," Alpert said in an interview from his home in California. "I asked Burt Bacharach what he had, and he sent me a song he wrote for Dionne Warwick. I really liked it and I said I would give it a shot."

The performance is different from the typical, polished songs of the day. There is a delightful faltering in the vocals that only adds to its sincerity. Music lovers agreed, it shot to number one and stayed there for a month.

Alpert started out in the mid-1950s behind the scenes at Dore Records, producing Sam Cooke, Jan and Dean and others. He broke out on his own in 1962 with "The Lonely Bull," and to everyone's surprise, it was a hit -- the first of many.

After he made his fortune with the Tijuana Brass, he and partner Jerry Moss started their own label, A & M Records, in a garage. The label gave the world acts like Cat Stevens, The Police, Supertramp and many others. When asked which act he was most proud of, he answered quickly: The Carpenters.

"I signed them and people in my own company said 'these kids are too cute, too soft,' but I saw something there," he said. "We had them record 'Close To You,' and it was not good. Karen was playing drums, which I talked her out of. More importantly, we brought in The Wrecking Crew (legendary West Coast studio musicians) who gave it a deeper, richer sound more in tune with the audience. That was all it took, the doors were busted wide open."

He never stopped recording and performing. Alpert seems unaffected by his huge tour, one that would exhaust performers a quarter of his age.

"We're doing 45 dates, and we have been performing around the world for 11 years," he said. "I perform because I love it. People get pleasure out of hearing my music after all this time and I plan to continue to do it until I can't blow anymore."

That almost happened at the height of his career in 1969 and 70.

"I was going through a divorce and was not in charge of myself," he recalls. "I was stuttering through the instrument, couldn't get the notes out - trumpet players know what I mean. I realized I never thought of how to play the trumpet. I had classically trained teachers, but I never thought about the mechanics."

So, the man who had number one albums, platinum albums and Grammy awards and eventually sell 72 million albums, humbly sought out a trumpet sensei. Carmine Caruso of New York, who worked with the greats over the years, trained him in the basics of trumpet playing.

"He explained that the trumpet is just a piece of plumbing, that I am the instrument and that I had to take control," he said. "It worked and I was back to making music."

He said fans can expect a fun, casual concert that is quite different from the usual concert experience.

"It's not a stiff, uptight show, it will be loose and informal," he said. "I don't have a packaged show, I let the audience lead me. We will play a lot of our big songs, a medley of Tijuana Brass and Brasil 66 songs and there is a lot of jazz. I invite the audience to ask questions, I like interacting with the people that spent good money to come and see me."

Five things you didn't know about Herb Alpert:

1/ In the 1950s, he co-wrote ("What A) Wonderful World" with writing partner Lou Adler for Sam Cooke, who added new lyrics.

2/ He's not Mexican, he's Jewish.

3/ Until he started to tour in the mid-60s, he was the entire "Tijuana brass," thanks to studio tricks and overdubbing his own horn. He recorded his first hit, "The Lonely Bull" in 1962, after attending a bullfight in Tijuana.

4/ In 1969-70, after a difficult divorce, he found himself unable to play. He sought the guidance of legendary trumpet master Carmine Caruso and worked with him to get his chops back.

5/ He's an accomplished sculptor and expressionist painter. His sculptures are on permanent display in Los Angeles, Nashville and elsewhere.

