

Herb Alpert disproved Sonny Bono's prediction

Bruce Fessier, The Desert Sun Published 11:57 a.m. PT Oct. 27, 2016

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(Photo: Chris Adjani)

Alpert ranks him as the seventh greatest charting artist of all time — not counting the songs he wrote for other people or the songs he recorded as a label chief.

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Alpert, now 81 and playing the McCallum Theatre Saturday, November 5, laughs in retrospect at Bono's skill as a talent scout.

"I loved Sonny," he said. "He spoke his mind and he was an interesting chap. But, if we had taken his advice, I wouldn't be here talking to you today."

Both Bono and Alpert were influenced by a pivotal player at Specialty Records. Bono became the indie label's head of A&R after his predecessor, Bumps Blackwell, decided to let gospel artist Sam Cooke record a pop song. Label owner Art Rupe had forbidden Cooke to

In the late 1950s, a young trumpet player and an aspiring lyricist were making the rounds of the Los Angeles independent record labels hoping to find a sympathetic ear for their original music.

When they got to Specialty Records, they met Sonny Bono, the future mayor and congressman of Palm Springs. He was the head of Specialty's artists and repertory department and he assessed their talent with characteristic abruptness.

"You guys ought to get out of the business," he told them, "because you don't have it."

The young songwriters turned out to be Lou Adler and Herb Alpert. Adler went on to become one of rock's greatest managers and producers. He founded the Dunhill and Ode record labels, co-produced the Monterey Pop Festival, founded the Roxy nightclub in Hollywood and executive produced the cult classic film, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

Alpert went on to form the Tijuana Brass and A&M Records. As a recording artist, Billboard today

sing pop music, but, in 1957, Blackwell recorded him singing an original, light R&B song called "You Send Me." When Rupe found out, he fired Blackwell and hired Bono to replace him.

Blackwell took Cooke to Keen Records and "You Send Me" went to No. 1 on the Billboard R&B and pop charts. It eventually sold 1.7 million copies, virtually inventing the genre of soul music. When Alpert and Adler stopped by Keen Records on their song-plugging journey, Blackwell hired them to catalog songs and they became close to Cooke. When they had a new song, they gave Cooke the first look. In 1960, their composition, "Wonderful World," became Cooke's biggest song since "You Send Me," reaching No. 12 on Billboard's pop charts and No. 2 on the R&B charts.

Alpert said working for Cooke was an education.

"It's very spontaneous," he said. "I try to do it by feel. Sam used to say to me, 'People are just listening to a cold piece of wax, brother. It either makes it or it don't.' So I always thought of it as, 'Here's a guy that just came out of the gospel field.' He wasn't teaching me, it was just by example. It's about a feeling. It's not about intonation, it's not about anything other than, does it touch you? When you listen to a Billie Holiday or a Miles Davis, they touch you. They're coming from a deep place, and that's what I'm trying to do."



Herb Alpert will perform Saturday at the McCallum Theatre. (Photo: Submitted)

Alpert made his entry into the music industry as a songwriter, but it was his attempt to release an instrumental recording that led to his becoming a major label owner. He used to be fascinated by the brass fanfare at bullfights in Tijuana. Tinkering around a makeshift studio in his Los Angeles garage, he overdubbed his trumpet and applied that brass sound to a melody by his friend, Sol Lake. He added the sounds of a bullfight crowd and changed the name of the song from "Twinkle Star" to "The Lonely Bull."

Alpert took his record around to radio stations, just as he did when he was pitching songs with Adler. The DJs liked "The Lonely Bull" and created a demand for it. Alpert set up a company called Carnival Records with businessman Jerry Moss to supply that demand. When they learned there already was a Carnival Records, they created a new label based on their initials, A&M Records.

It was 1962. Sonny Bono was an assistant to Phil Spector and Herb Alpert owned a record business. And he found that exciting.

"In a strange way, it was," he said. "But the key for me was to surround myself with people who can do things I can't or am not excited about doing. I had an amazing partner. We're still friends, which is beautiful, but he was a businessman. I'm a right brain guy. I paint, I sculpt, I make music."

Alpert assembled a band of Los Angeles musicians "none of whom were Hispanic" to tour as the Tijuana Brass when the first two albums took off. In 1965, "A Taste of Honey" became the band's first No. 1 adult contemporary hit thanks to Alpert's powers of perception.

“We would play that tune in concert and everyone would go wild,” he said. “They just loved that arrangement. My partner was pushing another record. “Third Man Theme”™ was the A side of this single and “Taste of Honey”™ was on the B side. I called him and said, “Man, you’re on the wrong side. I got a focus group and they’re telling me let’s turn that baby over. And when we finally did, it was the door opener for the Tijuana Brass.”

The song became such a hit, satirist Allen Sherman had a hit with a parody titled “A Waste of Money.” The instrumental tended to overshadow the fact that the Beatles and Barbra Streisand had recorded earlier versions of the song with a lyric by Palm Springs resident Ric Marlow.

“I know,” Alpert acknowledged. “He was a little down on me. I didn’t do a lyric version and I guess when I never mentioned his name about writing the song, I guess he could have been a little offended.”

“A Taste of Honey” won a Grammy for Record of the Year in 1966 and Alpert went on to win eight more Grammys in his career. After disbanding the Tijuana Brass in 1969, he became the only artist to have a Billboard No. 1 hit as both a vocalist (for “This Guy”™s In Love With You” in 1968) and an instrumentalist (for “Rise” in 1979). A&M became one of the most successful independent record labels until Alpert and Moss sold it to PolyGram for a reported \$500 million, which ballooned to an even larger amount after they sued PolyGram for breach of integrity. Alpert and Moss received Grammy lifetime achievement awards in 1997 and 2007 and were named to the Rock ‘N’ Roll Hall of Fame for their work at A&M in 2006. Alpert received a National Medal of the Arts from President Barack Obama in 2013.



Herb Alpert received the National Medal of the Arts from President Obama in 2013. (Photo: Submitted)

“The irony of the whole thing is, if we tried to start A&M Records in today’s environment, it never would have happened,” Alpert said. “It’s all about timing. There’s a thing that happens. You get momentum going in your direction, like I did with the Tijuana Brass. It sold lots and lots of product. Some artists have it, some artists don’t. Some artists who deserve to have it can’t get in the front door.”

Alpert is still recording material he feels comes from the depths of his soul. His latest album, “Human Nature,” is light years from the Tijuana Brass with a very contemporary feel accented by strong electronic beats and percussion. He says he might play three songs from it at his McCallum concert, along with selections from the Tijuana Brass, his solo career and songs by Sergio Mendes and Brasil 66, which featured his wife, Lani Hall, on hits such as “The Fool on the Hill,” “The Look of Love” and “Mas Que Nada.”

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“I’m just trying to make music that touches me,” Alpert said. “With this particular album, we’re all aware of “Human Nature” by Michael Jackson and I’ve done this throughout my career. If there’s a song that’s familiar to people, whether it’s an evergreen or an American songbook song, I try to do them in a way that hasn’t quite been done before. That’s always been a pursuit of mine.”

“I’ve heard a lot of the music that’s on the air and a lot of it has this electronic groove on it. I’ve always felt, if it’s fun for me to play, it’s possibly going to be fun for others to listen to.”

Alpert believes artists today need luck, as well as social media skills, to succeed in the recording industry today. Many young artists don't have the business skills they need. Earlier this year, he helped provide a navigational guide to the industry by donating \$10.1 million to Los Angeles City College. He had formed a Herb Alpert Foundation in the early 1980s, but he said he’s never been so excited about what one of his charitable distributions could accomplish.

“I don’t really like to talk about the money scene, but I will on this particular case because I never had a response like I did with this particular donation,” Alpert said. “Community colleges are serving kids that might not have the grades to get into a UCLA or a USC, and also it gives them an opportunity to go to this college free of charge. So, this gives them a little helping hand and, if they can cut the mustard, they can transition into something maybe a little bit different. But, it’s touching the average person.

“It’s not a very sexy thing to give to a community college. It’s much more sexy to give to Harvard and Yale and all the major universities. But, they have enough. Let’s try to support these colleges that really try to help the average kid.”

Herb Alpert's top charting hits

“**The Lonely Bull**,” with the Tijuana Brass, No. 6, 1962

“**A Taste of Honey**,” with the Tijuana Brass, No. 7, 1965

“**Spanish Flea**,” with the Tijuana Brass, No. 3 in the UK, 1965

“**This Guy’s In Love With You**,” No. 1, 1968

“**Rise**,” No. 1, 1979

“**Diamonds**,” with Janet Jackson and Lisa Keith, No. 5, 1987

A&M Records top albums

Joe Cocker, “Mad Dogs and Englishmen,” 1970

Cat Stevens, “Tea For The Tillerman,” 1970

Carole King, “Tapestry,” 1971

Peter Frampton, “Frampton Comes Alive!,” 1976

Supertramp, “Breakfast In America,” 1979

Squeeze, “Singles - 45's and Under,” 1982

The Police, “Synchronicity,” 1983

Janet Jackson, “Control,” 1986

Soundgarden, “Temple of the Dog,” 1991

Sheryl Crow, “Tuesday Night Music Club,” 1993

Alpert at McCallum

What: Herb Alpert performing with his wife, vocalist Lani Hall from Brasil 66

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, November 5th

Where: McCallum Theatre, 73-000 Fred Waring Drive, Palm Desert

Tickets: \$37-\$77

Information: (760) 340-ARTS

