

## Dan Nooger Profiles A&M Records Head

# A&M

Herb Alpert (the 'A' of A&M Records) occupies a unique niche in the music business as the head of the industry's largest independent record company as well as a chart topping musician/composer/producer. His signature trumpet style sold millions of Tijuana Brass albums and singles during the 1960s, and his 1979 'comeback' single "Rise" topped the pop/R&B/MOR charts late last year. He finished out the '70s with a slew of awards from the national trade magazines *Billboard*, *Cash Box*, and *Record World*, including "Top Pop," R&B, and "Disco Instrumentalist," and Top Jazz Soloist."

What is less known is how Alpert's roots in the industry go back to the late '50s when he started out as a songwriter. In the course of his career he has worked with such looming pop music figures as Sam Cooke, Phil Spector, Waylon Jennings, and Lou Adler. Alpert's unique perspective on the problems of both artists and industry executives helps explain why he has been able to remain at the top and keep his company growing (A&M has been called "the record company of the '80s" by industry observers) while other major labels have been looking and acting like dinosaurs sinking in tar pits.

Alpert attributes much of the success and growth to "the great relationship I have with my partner Jerry Moss, and the people working for us. What we've been able to do since we started is go with what we feel, not with what we think the bottom line is going to be. We didn't buy a roster of heavyweight stars. With people like Supertramp, Styx, Peter Frampton, Joe Cocker, Carole King, we always hung in with them, we developed them. If it wasn't this album, it was the next one that would have the magic."

Alpert's musical inclination goes back to his childhood. Born in Los Angeles to a Russian immigrant father and Hungarian mother, Herb first picked up the trumpet at age eight, although he points out: "I'm not a trumpet player in the traditional sense. I didn't come up in the big bands, or playing in symphony orchestras. In fact I had no intention of being a professional musician."

After a stint in the Army, Alpert got his first taste of the record business as a songwriter. He worked closely with Lou Adler, who went on to become a kingpin of the L.A. '60s folk-rock scene, as founder of Dunhill Records and producer of the label's most successful acts the Mamas & Papas, Grass Roots, and P.F. Sloan. In the early '70s Adler started Ode Records (which was distributed by A&M), coming up with hits by Carole King and everybody's favorite stoned comedians—Cheech & Chong.

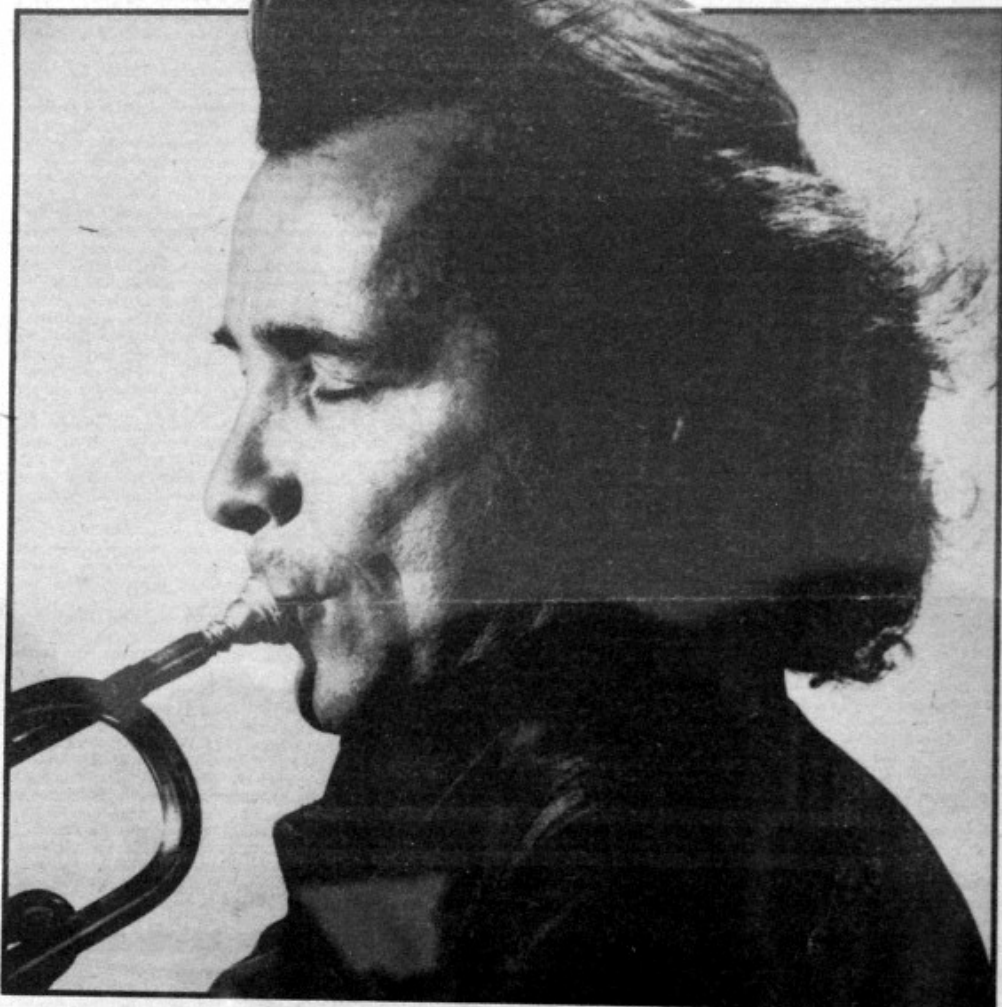
"When I met Lou," Alpert recalls, "it was about 1957, he was in the insurance business, and he sold me a life insurance policy that I didn't need. I knew from that point that I could trust him. He was writing lyrics, poetry actually, and I was fiddling with piano, writing music. He put lyrics to a few of my songs, we went to one of the little studios in L.A., and for about \$100 we put some of the songs on tape. We got a few musicians to help us, I was singing, and we came out with 5 or 6 demos. We went around to the different record companies. The A&R man at Specialty Records was Sonny Bono. He liked one of the songs called "Dreamer's Romance" and said he was gonna cut it. But he just held it, it turned into one of those 'don't call us, we'll call you' routines.

"The door opened a bit for us when we took our demos to Bob Keene's label, Keen Records. The only artist they had at the time was Sam Cooke, who was just having a big hit with "You Send Me." They were impressed with the songs and hired Lou and myself as staff songwriters for \$35 a week—we jumped at the chance. They took this group called the Salmas Brothers and recorded "Circle Rock," that was the first song of ours that was cut."

The song was subsequently picked up by several artists including Sam Butera & the Witnesses (Capitol) and Lloyd "Cowboy" Copas (Dot), whose Jerry Lee Lewis-styled treatment became a rockabilly classic. (It's available on the Cotton Pickin' Rock anthology on British ABC). Alpert, Adler, and Sam Cooke co-authored another of Sam's early hits, "Wonderful World."

"I'd like to give Sam Cooke a lot of credit," says Herb. "He was a real special guy, he was instinctively knowledgeable about the record business and what people were looking for. We learned a great deal from him. For instance, once we were auditioning a singer, a very good-looking Caribbean man who played guitar. We listened for about ten minutes and I thought he sounded great. Then Sam said to me, "Turn your back on him and check him out for about five minutes." I did and I felt it wasn't the same, it was weird. Then Sam said, "That's right, people don't care if you're white or black, what you look like, where you come from. You're listening to a cold piece of wax in the record business, and it either makes it or it doesn't. I think of that, often, when I listen to a new group. Today of course I can't listen to everything that comes in. But when the A&R department finds something interesting, I get to hear it."

"Lou and I left Keen in 1958. I was playing casual jobs around



Herb Alpert

L.A., and we were producing independently. We recorded the first Jan & Dean record, "Baby Talk," in Jan's garage. Later Lou and I overdubbed a rhythm section in a studio. We did a few other sides with them, which came out on Lew Bedell's Dore label.

"Then we got a call from Larry Uttal, who was running Madison Records in New York" (later he headed Bell/Amy/Mala and Private Stock) "and we gave him the Dante & the Evergreens version of "Alley Oop." We were working for him for a while but we never got paid, he took the money and ran. He was good at giving cufflinks and ties, he had a nice smile, but keep both eyes out! "After that I dropped out of the record business for a while and studied acting. But all through this time I was playing music, gigging around the area with people like Julius Wechter (who later had the Baja Marimba Band) and Pete Jolly, a great pianist who I produced for A&M years later."

It was also during this period that Alpert cut a few early sides under his own name, such as "Summer School," on the Anxex label, credited to "Herbie Alpert & His Sextet," and others as "Dore Alpert" (labels unknown), but the records were never distributed outside the L.A. area. More importantly, he struck up a friendship with Jerry Moss, who was then the top independent promotion man on the Coast, and in 1962 they started A&M Records. The first offices consisted of Herb's garage in West Hollywood.

The first A&M record to have any impact came in August '64 with "The Lonely Bull" by the Tijuana Brass. "The Tijuana Brass was originally just a studio group I put together. I was a record producer putting it together with my horn, rather than a trumpet

player looking for a producer to put a tapestry behind me." Another of the Brass' early hits was an Allen Toussaint composition, "Whipped Cream." The Tijuana Brass quickly became a live attraction, touring widely and selling millions of records. In April '66, Alpert and the Brass held down the #1, #3, #6, #14, and #17 spots in the trade magazines' LP charts, a landmark achievement of five albums in the top 20 that has never been equalled.

"After the Brass hit, I started getting more involved in the company, because we really started to grow. I was producing the Baha Marimba Band, Sergio Mendes & Brazil '66, and Chris Montez, and we used some of our profits to build a custom studio. Anybody was welcome to use it, and a lot of artists recorded there. Elvis Presley did some of his movie soundtrack albums there. I never went to the sessions myself. I don't want people to feel like I'm eavesdropping or trying to cop their songs, so I purposely stay out of the studio if it's an outside client, unless I'm invited in. We try to make it as comfortable for the artists as possible, so they don't have to wade through a bunch of people gaping at them." Today the studio is one of the most advanced in the U.S.; it was one of the first to install digital recording equipment.

Shortly after the first flush of success with "Lonely Bull," Alpert produced three singles with Waylon Jennings, who had been Buddy Holly's protege and bass player, but had virtually quit the business after Holly's death (See GOLDMINE #43 for the complete Waylon Jennings story). Although Waylon says, "We never could quite get it together except maybe on a couple of things. I was trying to hang on to country, but I think they kept

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hearing Al Martino. "The A&M contract did get Jennings back in the groove of making records, and the next year he signed with RCA and really started to build his career. In 1978 Wayne sang on the A&M release "White Mansions," a country-rock concept album.

During the mid-'60s, A&M expanded rapidly, and although this was mostly thanks to the Brass and other MOR acts, they did record some really off-the-wall stuff, early sides by Captain Beefheart and Leon Russell, and obtained some prehistoric cuts by T-Rex and The Move.

Alpert observes, "I think we were good at the off-the-wall things. The MOR stuff we were doing then was adventurous, ahead of its time in a lot of ways."

However the company did have its eye on other areas in those days. According to Tom Ayers, who was running Hanna-Barbera Records in L.A. in '66, Lelan Rogers (older brother of Kenny) was "hired to start a new A&M subsidiary specializing in R&B, but he fouled it up somehow and got fired." After this Rogers went to Texas and ended up running the crazed International Artists label (13th Floor Elevators, Red Crayola, Golden Dawn, etc.).

Alpert notes, "We got caught in this syndrome of people thinking A&M was corny, that MOR was the only kind of music we had. It wasn't until the late '60s that we started to lose that image. We had had English representation since the mid-'60s and opened an office there in 1970. We signed up people like Procal Harum, Joe Cocker, Car Stevens, Humble Pie with Steve Marriott and Peter Frampton, Spooky Tooth with Gary Wright. That made us look a lot more legitimate all of a sudden."

A&M also helped pioneer the late '60s country-rock fusion by signing Dillard & Clark and Gram Parsons' Flying Burrito Brothers, which included the original Byrds' rhythm section of Mike Clarke and Chris Hillman, and Bernie Leadon, who became a founding member of the Eagles.

But while the label was expanding into the rock field, Alpert was losing his enthusiasm for his own music. As late as 1968, he says, the Brass accounted for 75% of A&M's sales, and "this was just too heavy a burden for me, carrying the whole company. What started out as fun, making music, and putting down some sides turned into a whole heavy business trip. I had to get away from that or end up in a sanitarium. It was a bad period. I'm 44 and I feel younger now than I did 12 years ago. I felt like I was 70."

"I decided to get more involved in the business side, and although we went through some hard times in '69, we made the adjustment. Around this time the Carpenters came along—every other label had passed on them—and they became a giant act. That didn't hurt any and soon things started to fall into place."

In 1969 Alpert and Moss signed a joint partnership association with Phil Spector, bringing his Phil Spector Productions logo to A&M. Spector had been inactive since the 1966 failure of Ike & Tina Turner's "River Deep Mountain High." The first album released under the new deal was a reissue of the *River Deep Mountain High* LP, which had previously only been available in England where the single was a top 3 hit. Next came the *Love Is All We Have To Give* album by Sonny Charles & The Checkmates Ltd., which was Phil's first new production and showed that he had lost none of his studio prowess, yielding the top 20 single "Black Pearl." There was also a Ronettes 45 coupling, "You Came You Saw You Conquered" (Ronnie Spector and a studio group) with the earlier Phillies master "Oh I Love You." Spector moved directly from these projects into the second major phase of his career as producer of the Beatles' "Let It Be" and solo albums by John Lennon and George Harrison.

Rock became the order of the day. Alpert recalls, "My first indoctrination to loud rock was Lee Michaels at the Whiskey. Just after we'd signed him. He was so loud I was literally pinned against the back wall, and there were kids thate with their heads jammed right into the speakers. That's when I realized I was listening with a different pair of ears."

Alpert kept his hand in as performer and producer during the early '70s. He made a solo album, a couple with a revamped Tijuana Brass, and produced albums with French Jazz composer/arranger Michel Colombier, African chanteuse Letta Mbulu, singer Lani Hall (former lead vocalist of Brazil '66 and now Alpert's wife), and the frey Argentine saxophonist Gato Barbieri, whose A&M debut *Caliente* sold more than all of his previous albums put together. Alpert also played on a later Gato LP "Ruby Ruby" and he credits Gato with increasing Alpert's confidence in his own music.

"I wanted to use some production and editing techniques on *Caliente*," says Herb, "but Gato didn't want to do any tricks with the tapes. He said to me, 'I'm a jazz musician, and I'll play the tune straight thru, all night long, until you like it.' And I was pissed off and admitted him at the same time. It made me realize that music is like life, it's not perfect. You take the good with the bad, and try for one with a lot of good in it. Now when I pick up the horn, I just let it fly. Because when I hit that good note or bar, that's worth it all."

Another spur to Alpert's musical confidence was his brief collaboration with South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela. "Hugh told me once that the music I was doing with the Tijuana Brass, with the syncopations I instinctively used, was similar to the music he was raised with in South Africa. We did an album together, put a band together, and toured, and got a second, live album out of that. We played in small clubs night after night and I really enjoyed that. It was something I'd never done before because the Brass went straight from being a recording venture to playing in major venues. I learned a lot playing with Hugh and it helped lead me in the direction of 'Rise' and the things I'm doing now."

Peter Frampton became the major success story of '76, confirming A&M's status as a major label. Of Frampton's fall from grace—he's back doing the 3,000 seats—Alpert says, "Coming off the live album he had a whole dedicated following, and although it's easy to say this with hindsight, taking two years off the road and doing that dog movie 'Sgt. Pepper' wasn't the wisest decision. It's sad to read what some people say about him,

trying to cut him down. If you turn your back on him and listen, he's a hell of a guitar player, a musician right down to the core. All I can say is don't count him out."

While solidifying its hold on the rock mainstream with acts like Frampton, Supertramp, and Styx, the company also plunged into the new wave. Alpert enthuses "I think we're at the forefront, we have the best groups. We spotted it right from the beginning. We had the Sex Pistols, but that fell apart. They were on A&M for a week in March '77, and it was longer than they deserved to stay."

There were stories circulating at the time that some of the label's other acts wanted the Pistols dumped, but Alpert says, "The Pistols were too demanding, too crazy, too drugged out, and as far as I'm concerned, just nonsense. I can go for somebody who's flamboyant, for craziness y'know, but when it turns on you then it doesn't matter how good an artist is. They were so self-centered they didn't care about anybody else. The Pistols were very rude to our London staff and there was a scene in our offices there. We had some money invested in them but Jerry and I agreed, 'let's get them the fuck off, who needs that!'"

A&M was set to release "God Save The Queen," but all 25,000 copies pressed were allegedly destroyed. A few did in fact get out and now change hands for close to \$100 apiece (with picture sleeve).

"I think that period of punk rock, when people barked on stage, was just a forerunner to the current new wave," says Alpert. "Groups like the Police, Squeeze, and Joe Jackson are another quality entirely, it's intelligent music. I think Sting is a major star, he's our Paul McCartney for the '80s. Our distribution arrangement with IRS Records came about through Jerry's

relationship with Miles Copland, and his past track record of being able to find good groups and put together good records." This means that records by the Buzzcocks, Cramps, Fall, and Fashion are easily available here.

If Alpert has managed to keep his musical attitudes contemporary, his attitude toward the increasingly high technology of recording remains futurist, but pragmatic.

"Rise" was actually cut as an experiment," he says. "We weren't really thinking about it as a single. We had just gotten in the new 32-track 3M digital recorder at the studio, and cut the track just to see what the machine was about. But when we heard the playback, even before it was finished and mixed, I had a deep feeling that it was a number one record, and sure enough it was."

"The experience I had with digital recording leads me to think that it's just a matter of time until it becomes the accepted state of the art. It's much cleaner and quieter than conventional analog recording, there's no background noise, flutter, or hiss, and you can copy tapes with no loss of sound quality."

"My very first recorder was a wire recorder, you had to edit with a soldering iron. When I first got into the business, you'd record live, straight to 2-track. Then multitrack machines came along and you could edit, splice and overdub—8 tracks was like heaven back then. Now you've got 16, 24, and 32 tracks. Now there are 48 track studios in Germany, and the digital process makes them all look like the Wright Brothers trying to get off the ground. Where does it end? With music—you've got to put a feel on. You don't get points for how clean the sound is, you get points for feel. Now if you can get that good sound and good feel, then you've got something."