

Herb Alpert: The Art Of Finding Your Voice

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by Bryan Reesman

Jazz trumpeter and composer Herb Alpert has experienced a rich, life-spanning career. He rose to fame with his Tijuana Brass Band in the early '60s to become a worldwide phenomenon, and since that time has released dozens of other recordings both group and solo that have found inspiration in everything from Latin music to trip-hop sounds. The 80 year-old legend has sold over 72 million albums, won nine Grammy Awards, and even founded a jazz club in Beverly Hills called the Vibrato Jazz Grill. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Obama in 2013, holds the Guinness record for having five albums simultaneously in the *Billboard* Top 20 in 1966, and co-founded the artist friendly A&M Records with Jerry Moss in 1962.

Beyond his own music, Alpert has been a major supporter of music education in schools. The Herb Alpert Foundation has bequeathed \$135 million in grants and funds in-school programs at the elementary, high school, and college levels. They have endowed music schools at UCLA and Cal Arts and established a financial aid endowment for the Harlem School of the Arts. Further, the annual Herb Alpert Award In The Arts bestows five annual \$75,000 prizes to artists across multiple art disciplines.



The indefatigable Alpert continues to tour on a regular basis with his band, which includes his singer and wife Lani Hall, to whom he has been married since 1974. His latest album *Come Fly With Me*, a mixture of classic covers and new originals, is out now and exudes a Caribbean feeling in a few spots. One might think he could retire and take it easy, but the trumpet player loves to make music, and when he speaks to *JAZZed* he is bubbling with energy and positive vibes. He simply loves to play and is a strong advocate for jazz music, which he feels is ready for a new resurgence.

JAZZed: I've always thought that travel is a good way to expand one's horizons. I'm sure you've seen a lot of it.

Herb Alpert: I think it's an important ingredient for a kid, after college or even before college, just to travel around and get a feel for what other people are up to. You get a little perspective on your own life that way.

How much did you travel when you were younger?

I didn't travel that much until things hit for me, and then with the Brass we traveled to some very interesting spots. It really opened my eyes, man. I thought the world centered around Los Angeles – and it doesn't.

Did you come from a musical family?

My brother was a professional drummer. My sister played piano, my mother played a little bit of violin, and my dad was a mandolin player. I don't know if that had any effect on the concept of what I do, but it certainly didn't hurt. Other than that, they appreciated music, which is important – it's important to be encouraged.

What do you think was the first thing that really propelled you into music?

There was a music appreciation class in my grammar school, and that was the start of it all. They had a room with a table filled with various instruments, and I picked up the trumpet. I was eight years old, very shy, and started making noise with the trumpet. It was talking for me, so that turned into a friend. It was saying things that I either couldn't or didn't know how to.

You went to USC and were part of the marching band there.

For a brief moment. That didn't thrill me. I went through periods of trying to copy my favorites and realized: Who in the hell wants to hear that? They've already heard that – certainly a better version than what I could come up with. I was working on my own voice, and I think that's the key to being an artist, period. Whether you're a painter, sculptor, or musician, you have to find your own voice.

I imagine going to Mexico helped you with that, especially in terms of the Tijuana Brass Band.

Not really. I never listened to mariachi music. I didn't even know what it was. I was going to bullfights, and what influenced me were these incredible matadors from all over the world who were risking their lives every Sunday afternoon.

You put out a lot of music in the '60s. People aren't nearly as prolific these days.

It was easier, man. In today's world, you've got 14 zillion tracks because of Pro Tools or Logic or whatever you happen to be on. In the '60s you had a recording session – you hired the musicians, were going to maybe do three or four cuts in a session, and – bada bim, bada boom! Now you fool around and treat each track like a precious gem. I think there's an opportunity to over-sanitize everything, and it doesn't come out nearly as human and the urgency is sometimes lost with that type of approach.

You've got all these opportunities to clean a solo up, change things, and move them around. It's really tempting. The '60s and '70s were probably a lot more in the moment. It was always beautiful to hear Sinatra talking about wanting to record right in the studio with the musicians. You see always pictures of him with a microphone right there, and he's singing and they're playing. That's what he wanted. I totally understood that.

How have you approached recording your recent albums in the same way?

I try to do it that way. It's just a different way of making music these days. I did this album, *Rewhipped*. Shawn Amos had this idea to get the best remixers and fool around with those cuts [from *Whipped Cream & Other Delights*], and I could add my trumpet to it. He organized it all and we got these great remixers, and they would send me a music file. I would put on my trumpet and then send the trumpet back because it was all time coded. My point is that I never met these guys in person. It came out great. I liked the results, but it was not as human as you would hope.

Have you done any private teaching in recent years?

I did a master class at UCLA with the Thelonious Monk Institute. I didn't enjoy it, to tell you the truth. I've got some gems that I'm willing to share with anyone, but after 10 minutes I'm dry, man. I don't have the rap. I don't have the staying power to hang in there. I did one exercise with them that I thought was really beautiful and worked. The musicians played a couple of tunes, and I isolated one tune. I told them: 'When [you] each play a solo, don't try to impress me or anyone that you're playing with. Just play exactly what's coming out at that moment.' It may not be good, it might be great, it might be whatever – who cares? But just be honest to what you're playing. It was a really interesting exercise, and the difference was quite profound.

Do you think they got something out of it then? Sometimes younger students these days don't want to learn the basics, they just want to take shortcuts.

Oh man, absolutely. People ask me about these producers that take your groove – like they did with *Rise* – and use that as a basis, then scramble it up and do some other stuff on top of it. I'm not flattered by that. I think it shows lack of understanding of music, for one. To press a couple of buttons isn't really very creative.

What more can you tell us about the Thelonious Monk Institute at UCLA?

It's a great two-year program. We have the premier jazz artists of the world working with them – Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and the like. It's been fantastic. The musicians are enthusiastic and motivated. My only problem is that jazz recordings represent an infinitesimal part of records or CDs that are sold. It's a rough go. I am feeling that jazz needs a Renaissance. We need the new Miles Davis to come along, the guy that pushes it upwards, downwards, sideways, whatever. I think just playing the songs, taking a chorus, and playing the song again – who cares now? We've heard these great guys do that, so we've got to move into another area. Of course, without it being taught in the public school system or the private school system... Unfortunately, they carve out these art programs and kids are coming up to their own water level, which is rap music. I don't have a problem with it, but I don't call it music. I call it poetry.

Remember the smooth jazz movement back in the '90s?

Smooth jazz is a little boring too.

A lot of it blended together.

It's because of the musicians. Sometimes I hear some really great musicians playing and I can't tell them apart. I know what Coltrane sounded like, I know what Stan Getz sounded like, and Sonny Rollins and those guys, but to hear some of the smooth jazz guys... they're really good but you can't tell them apart. I was close friends with Gerry Mulligan, and he played for the inauguration of Bill Clinton. He was invited with nine other players, and about three days after he called. I said, "Did you have a good time?" He said, "Yeah, man, it was really interesting. These young dudes play high and low and fast and know all the changes, have got all the modes going, and incredible technique. The only thing they don't know how to do is leave the bone alone." I just love that description. It's what Miles knew.

When you meet younger players and aspiring musicians, what do you tell them about developing their craft and developing their voice?

First off, you've got to be super passionate about what you're doing. If you're not, then while you're sleeping someone who's really passionate and wants the same thing you want is practicing. That's the first order of business, make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. Be honest. Listen – I think art is in the abstract. I don't think art can be taught. It can be felt, unless you get to that stage, unless you can stand in front of a Jackson Pollock painting and get the goosebumps going without thinking about what the f__k he was trying to do.

You've released over 40 albums and explored different styles of music. I can't imagine after a certain point that somebody could teach you how to do all of that. You've always just felt it.

Yeah, I just go with my gut. I guess that's how I did just about everything that's working for me. If it felt right, I did it. A&M [Records] got rolling because of a negative experience I had. Prior to A&M, I recorded for a major record company and didn't like the way I was being treated, so I took all of that experience and put it into A&M. I wanted the company to revolve around the artists with other accoutrements involved. I wanted the environment to be right. Prior to A&M, I was recording in a cold studio that was white on white on white. They didn't even use my name. I was "some number, take two". All that stuff is an important ingredient to making an artist feel good. Of course, I think the major issue is timing. You've got to be at the right place at the right time. If you're prepared and the timing is in your favor, you get lucky. That's what happened to me. I was ready. I put in my time on the horn and worked [with] and watched the great Sam Cooke and learned from him. The door opened for me when I recorded that *Lonely Bull* record, and I took advantage of it. I didn't try to do *The Lonely Bull* sideways [afterward]. I wanted to keep creating and see how far I could take it. It was fortuitous, but I definitely made the most of it.

It was timing. In the '60s, you could also put out a couple of records a year and it wasn't considered overkill.

And also radio was an important ingredient. You could take a demo to some of the radio stations, and if the program director happened to like it, if you could press enough records you could have that thing heard on a good radio station. Now it doesn't happen.

What do you think has to happen in order for jazz to have the renaissance that you want?

I think artists that are just true artists... There are people who are musicians, and then there are artists. There are the musicians that knock you out because they can do everything, and you can stare at a wall wondering why you're not moved. Then you can hear a little 11-year-old kid like Joey Alexander who will knock your socks off. Check him out on YouTube. This is what's coming.

The Herb Alpert Foundation has helped endow music schools over at UCLA and Cal Arts, along with the Herb Alpert Center at the Harlem School of the Arts, and you've been a huge proponent of music education in college and earlier. Do you think the key is getting people when they're younger, or can people get bit by the music bug when they're older?

I don't know, it's that innate thing that some people have. When you hear guys like B.B. King [being asked] "Can you read music?" "Not enough to hurt my playing." Wes Montgomery recorded for us, and he didn't know a C chord. He could knock your socks off. The guy was unbelievable. I did a show at the Hollywood Palace and Wes was on the show. It was the first time I met him. I was anxious to meet him and see him. I wondered how the hell he got that sound. It was so beautiful. He came in with his little Fender amplifier that had cobwebs all over it, just a little tiny thing, and he plugged it in and there was Wes. It ain't what you do, it's the way you do it. That's the one you can't teach, the one you can't put your finger on.

When you go on tour with other musicians in your band, do you bring along sheet music for them?

We've been playing with the same guys for nine years. Lani and I are very transparent with what we're doing – piano, keyboards, bass, and drums. Other than me playing a little Tijuana Brass medley and Lani doing a little Brasil '66 thing, everything around that is all up for grabs. I tell the guys play what you want to play within the structure that we've established, and I'm free to do that. Night after night it's fun for me. I get to create and do whatever feels good for me. I'm 85 percent on the right side of my brain, and this is what makes it fun at my age to do and continue doing till I can't blow anymore.

You're still doing it after all these decades, which is great.

It's a pleasure of mine. I don't feel like it's an obligation, but I've certainly been blessed and made a lot of people happy selling so many records. I feel like I have this opportunity to go out there and share my gift, and we've been doing it for nine years and people leave feeling better than when they came in. I'm not trying to make music that takes you down, I'm trying to make music that keeps me up floating and it's on the positive side of life.

You and your wife Lani have an ideal situation being married and being collaborators.

Lani's my muse. She's the one that makes it all work for me. She changed my life. She's obviously a world-class singer, and she's fun and open and willing to try anything, except she won't sing a song if the lyric doesn't work. If it's not something that satisfying for her, she won't even attempt to sing it. She's a real artist.

How often do you check in with the schools that the Herb Alpert Foundation has endowed?

I check in through [Foundation president] Rona [Sebastian] when she puts up the flag. I'm not into the everyday nuts and bolts of all the things I'm involved with. It takes a lot of energy, and that's not where I want to go. I'm happy doing all the things that we've done through the Foundation and all the kids that get a chance to create and learn. I'm not that hands-on. My concept is a little random. I'll write these notes to Rona that she decodes, and when she decodes them she moves on them. She's a whiz, I love her. And she's an artist. She played piano and used to teach piano.

What do you think of the state of music education in this country right now?

Because of the lack of funds and lack of carving out these programs in the public and private schools, I think it's pretty sad. I don't think it's where it should be. I don't think our politicians get the beauty of the arts and how they can benefit us as a society.

I notice that whenever we go through tough economic times, the arts face study budget cuts. Some students are fortunate to have high schools with strong arts programs, like the one I went to, but many others are not so lucky.

Amen to you, that's beautiful. You need the right teacher. As Stephen Sondheim was saying, learning in school is all about curiosity, and if you can get kids to be curious about the subjects, you've got it. Once you bore them and they check out mentally,

it's a lost cause. When I ran into a huge problem with the horn, I studied with Carmine Caruso in New York, who never played trumpet a day in his life. He was a great trumpet teacher.

What made him a great trumpet teacher?

He was a troubleshooter, so he would teach people that were having various emotional problems or just physical problems. He likened the musician to the athlete, and the key was to sync your body muscles to rhythm. This was his basic concept. He didn't teach music per se, he taught the mechanics, he thought the physics of playing an instrument. Once I got a hold of that, my troubles seemed to vanish. Not vanish totally because you never really get there. I don't mean to namedrop on you, but I was friends with Dizzy [Gillespie], and he used to say, "The closer I get, the farther it looks." I love that saying.

The movie *Whiplash* portrayed the opposite situation with a contentious relationship between a student and teacher.

That's the reason I don't even want to see that movie. That's just anti-teaching as far as I'm concerned.

You said that students need to have curiosity. After all these years, what keeps you curious?

I spend my day painting, sculpting, and blowing the horn. I'm always working on something on the trumpet that I'd like to be able to do, like all other musicians. I've met most of the great ones, and they all say the same thing. And the beauty part of jazz is talking to all these jazzers that I've known through the years, and they all have a different approach to this whole thing called jazz. Stan Getz lived next door to me, and I did a couple of records with him. We wanted to do something for me, so I said, "How about giving me some bebop lessons? I never had a chance to play with Coltrane and Charlie Parker and all the guys you were around. I just want to get up to my own water level." He said, "Okay. How honest do you want me to be?" I said, "Just be honest. Let's see how far I can take this thing. Do you think I should learn the 2-5-1 chords in all keys?" And he said, "What's that?" That was a real eye-opener for me. It showed that those guys – Stan Getz the genius and Coltrane and all those guys – didn't think about those things that the music schools taught. They had a whole different approach to how to play jazz.

I had a conversation one afternoon with Ornette Coleman, and he was showing me his concept for playing jazz. Man, I didn't understand one thing he was saying. It was out there. He was sincere and certainly a nice guy, but it was his thing.

As far as music education, are there any other types of programs or places that you'd like to get involved with?

I don't know directly at the moment. I like to try to inspire people to rise to their own water level and follow their passion. That's the thing we have too little of. We have a lot of people doing things that don't give them pleasure, and they wake up in the morning resenting what they have to do the rest of the day. It doesn't make for a happy group.

The annual Alpert Award in the Arts are important to many artists, and people like Vijay Iyer have won in the past and gone on to great careers.

It's a beautiful program that gives a little lift to these people that are not trying to play into the hands of what people are looking for. They're trying to express themselves, and it's nice to be able to give them a little helping hand and encouragement. When I was growing up, I always admired not the loose cannons, but the people that were just on their own thing and did it their way.