

An Interview with Herb Alpert & Lani Hall

By **Tony Sachs** Huffington Post May 25, 2011

Herb Alpert is, simply put, a music legend. He got his start writing hits like Sam Cooke's "Wonderful World" before founding A & M Records with Jerry Moss in the early '60s. By the time they sold it a quarter-century later, it was one of the most successful record labels in the world. As a producer, trumpeter and occasional singer, he had a phenomenal string of hit singles and albums with the Tijuana Brass in the 1960s — in 1966 Alpert and the TJB outsold the Beatles in the U.S. — and continued recording regularly into the '90s.

Lani Hall is a star in her own right, having sung on smashes for Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66 like "Mais Que Nada," "The Fool On The Hill" and "Scarborough Fair." She married Herb Alpert in 1974 and embarked on a successful, long-running solo career around the same time.

Both Herb and Lani have been quiet musically for the last decade or so, apart from the reissues of the Tijuana Brass' classic '60s albums in 2005. But last year they re-emerged, hitting the road for a series of low-key shows which were recorded for the newly-released *Anything Goes* — the first time they've ever collaborated musically. The album is a mix of standards, Brazilian music and a couple of new songs, and it's some of the jazziest, most adventurous music either artist has ever recorded. They're back on tour for the rest of the year; check out their schedule at Herb's website.

One last note: Since I am a big-time fan of both Herb and Lani, I'd like to give myself credit for not asking them questions like, "How come you're so damn awesome?" Thank you.

Tony Sachs: It's been about ten years since either of you made a record. What made you stop recording and what made you start again?

Herb Alpert: Well, I've been painting and sculpting, but we've been making music and having fun and practicing and having fun playing the horn, and Lani's been singing. We just thought that maybe it might be fun to get a little group together and do some concerts, just to see if we could have fun.

Lani Hall: And do it in more of a jazz way, something that we haven't done before. Through the years we were collecting songs. We have our list of songs that would haunt us, and so we kind of pulled those out and started looking. Also, in 2006 Sergio Mendes was having a tribute to Brasil '66's 40th anniversary at the Hollywood Bowl. He asked us if we would do a few songs, and we did, and the drummer, Michael Shapiro, who we'd both worked with before, was so excited about it, he was just relentless, saying, 'What

do you think? We should do this again! Get a group together! Let's do it!' And he would call Herb, and finally, you know, we started taking him seriously.

HA: One of the objects for me was that I wanted to see whether I could have fun doing concerts again. In the '60s, I was so consumed with the Tijuana Brass, and trying to make it sound right, and making sure people could hear it properly, etc., that it wasn't a great experience for me. I certainly appreciated what happened in those days, but I didn't really experience it all, in a way. So I wanted to see whether I could this time, and this is what the experience has been like for me and Lani. We've actually had a good time playing.

TS: I know that the two of you have worked together on a few tracks here and there, and Herb, you've produced Lani's albums, but until now you've never collaborated 100% on a record. Why did it take so long, and why now?

HA: Well, we looked at each other and said, if not now, when? We just felt that time's moving so quickly now, that we felt like now's the time to do it if we're ever going to do it.

LH: There's a great album by Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley that I grew up with. I always wanted to do something like that with Herb, where I was singing and he was playing, kind of conversations between each other. That always was very seductive to me. We talked about that, and we started fooling around with that idea in mind, and then the songs started to take on that whole jazz vein. We both had the same idea to make arrangements that make these old evergreen standards fresh, in a way that people had never heard them before. We were both on the same page with all of it, so we did what we set out to do.

TS: I thought it was interesting that a lot of the album is standards, but none of them sound the way you'd expect them to sound. There's one, "Let's Face The Music And Dance," that I'd love to know how you came up with the idea, because the whole performance seems to revolve around the line "There may be trouble ahead," which brings out the darkness in that song, where usually it's a swinger.

LH: We heard that Irving Berlin wrote "Let's Face The Music And Dance"...

HA: As a reflection of the '30s.

LH: And the Depression. So when you look at it with that in mind, it's different. There's an irony about the lyrics that you didn't see before. Or at least I didn't. We wanted that sense of drama and irony in the whole mood of the piece, and it came out very much like a cabaret song. It's very powerful - I could see the questioning on people's faces in the audience when we started. It's really powerful. It's a powerful arrangement.

TS: Did you decide to do a live album from the get-go or were you thinking of bringing it into the studio?

HA: Well, we weren't thinking of doing an album. We were just doing the concerts, and we got an idea that maybe we should record them just to see what we were doing, thinking we could learn from it. We got back to our home after the series of dates we did,

I was listening to all the CDs that we'd recorded in various venues, and it really struck me, this is pretty darn good!

TS: A lot of what you did onstage was not on the album, like two Sergio Mendes songs, and a couple of things that alluded to Tijuana Brass songs. Was that done purposely?

HA: We kept whittling it down and saving room for a possible second CD.

LH: And we only had a certain amount of time, I think we could only fit 14 songs. We didn't want it to be a double CD.

TS: Lani, you did an album for Windham Hill, but Herb, this is the first record of yours that I can think of where you're not the owner of the label. How did that come about?

HA: Lani and I have a jazz restaurant here in Los Angeles called Vibrato. When we were organizing the club, there were a few investors. One of the investors happened to have been Hal Gaba, who was the co-owner of Concord Records. Hal was just a delightful gentleman that I liked very much. He had a good bead on picking great artists, putting his heart and soul, and trying to do the best he could for the artists. Unfortunately, Hal passed away about, maybe a year ago. [But] we continued with the idea of being with Concord, because most of the personnel there, they're very young and enthusiastic and nice to be around. That was one of the ingredients that we were looking for.

LH: And they believed in the music. They believed in this CD. It just seemed to click.

TS: Are you going to stick with them for future projects?

HA: I believe so.

TS: Herb, having run a label in the '60s, how do you see the industry as different, the way things go on today?

HA: I don't even relate to the music industry the way it is now. It's another world. There's another way of making music, there's a different way of presenting music. So it's totally different. In the old days, you could go up to a radio station and if the program director happened to like the record, he could conceivably put it on that same afternoon or maybe the next week. That doesn't happen anymore, because they have the focus groups, [or] they don't want guitars on some stations, so it's kind of ridiculous.

TS: Herb, how did you feel about going through the vaults a few years ago and reissuing all the Tijuana Brass albums, and are there any plans to do that with Lani's catalog?

HA: Oh, definitely. We're definitely going to do [Lani's 1972 album Sundown Lady and probably the best-of. There's wonderful tracks that Lani's recorded during the years, like "Never Say Never Again," which she did as the title song for the James Bond film.

When we sold the publishing company, one of the things I was holding out for was getting my entire catalog back from the company, which they finally agreed to. And I got Lani's catalog as well. So I decided, let's just re-release these in a very sensible way. I went back to the original 2-track masters, because there was a time when we used to

master for CDs, in the early stages of CDs, and we used to try to compensate, try to make it sound warm and cozy, and all that. And by doing that, we took the natural sounds away. So when I remastered it, all the new technology provides for the CDs to sound a lot closer - I'm not saying it sounds as close as a wonderful vinyl - but it's a lot closer to the vinyl than it used to be.

TS: Lani, I've gotta ask you - I've heard that you sing in Portuguese phonetically. How long does it take you to memorize a song that way?

LH: To memorize it completely? It takes a little while to really get it going, but I start feeling comfortable with the song, probably three days into it. I don't speak Spanish either, and I won a Grammy award for singing it. I just have an ear for it.

TS: Did you ever want to learn?

LH: I started learning, but I really feel like I would have learned it if I had been living in that country, and it would have been coming at me all the time and I had no choice, or I had to learn it if I wanted to communicate. And I was never really in that position. I studied for a little while, but I really just never went the whole nine yards with it.

When I went to Brazil, they all spoke to me in Portuguese - they were positive I spoke it. And I would say, meekly, "I don't speak Portuguese!" (laughs)

TS: When you are not actively doing concerts or recording or anything like that, how often do you still do scales on the trumpet or vocal exercises?

LH: Oh, every day.

HA: I play every day, Lani sings every day. I look forward to it — I mean, I wake up thinking about the horn, and what I can do with the three valves.

LH: It takes too long to get back into shape, when you want to get back into shape. This way, you can just be ready at all times, if you get excited about a song or if you want to record something. You don't have to take months to get ready.

TS: Sinatra took a couple of years off and his voice was never the same after that.

HA: Well, booze and smoking didn't help, either! (laughs)

TS: Herb, when you did some new trumpet parts for the remixed version of the Whipped Cream album [2006's Whipped Cream And Other Delights... Rewhipped], did that pique your interest in new recording technologies? And did you use them?

HA: The technology is strikingly amazing now. Some of the guys that did the remixes sent me music files on ProTools, with the stereo mix of the track that they had. I would add my trumpet to it, play around with it, do whatever I felt was appropriate, and then I would send them back a CD with just the trumpet on it — because the time code was available on the tracks. All they had to do was take my trumpet on the CD, slip it into the master recording, and mix it. The irony of the whole thing was, I didn't meet any of these

guys! But it really came out nice, I'm very happy with the results, and we had some really outstanding artists.

LH: It's so creative. Oh my God, I just love that album.

TS: Do either of you ever say, "We're going to go down memory lane and go on the road and play all our old hits"?

LH: We're never, never, not gonna do that. I think that both of us want to grow, want to continue growing as artists, and that's what we're doing with this group. It's always different every night, it always challenges us, and it's always bringing a newness and a freshness to the experience. If you do the same songs every night in the same way, it gets stale, and there's no movement then, there's no more growth. And that's not really what we want to do. We want to continue growing as artists.

We've added a Tijuana Brass medley in the show, but it's done in a completely different way. It continues the whole idea we started with -0 you know, wanting to do songs that are recognizable, [but] in a different way. The audience recognizes them, so they feel satisfied, I think. And then we move on to new stuff.

HA: That was one of my fears when we first started doing this. I thought people were going to yell out "Tijuana Taxi", "Spanish Flea," etc. And it just did not happen.

TS: Herb, who influenced your trumpet style, if anyone? Because I don't think you sound like anybody.

HA: That's what Miles [Davis] said - he said, "You hear three notes and you know it's Herb Alpert," which is quite a compliment. I think I have my own language and way of approaching it. I was in the army band, in Fort Knox, Kentucky, when I was drafted into the army. And I met twelve trumpet players from around the country that all played higher, faster and louder than me, and could read better, and the whole thing. And I just realized, if I'm ever gonna be a professional musician, I would really have to come up with my own way of playing, and I worked on that.

LH: And then also, he would say, "When I listen to the radio, I listen to what's not on the radio." That's how he approached it. So you really did find your own voice with it. And you worked at that.

TS: And Lani, who are some of your vocal influences?

LH: When I was growing up, I listened to Judy Garland, Anita O'Day, June Christy, Carmen McRae, Ruth Olay, Lambert Hendricks & Ross, Frank Sinatra.... And then when I was in my teens, when Barbra Streisand came out, I listened to her and those arrangements, plus her beautiful voice. But those arrangements were really striking to me, because it's the first time I think I ever heard the music defining the lyrics, and that marriage being so close. I'd never noticed that before. When I was listening to Streisand's early albums, a lot of them had songs that I just adored so much, they were from a play called "The Fantasticks," so I went out and I bought the album for "The Fantasticks," because I thought, this album's gotta be full of songs I love. And I listened

to it, and... it was so different! It wouldn't have turned my head. And I realized then the power of an arrangement, and how much it colors and carries you. So that was very pivotal for me as well.

And then, of course, I was influenced very greatly later on by Laura Nyro, and I loved Joni Mitchell's lyrics, and America, Crosby Stills & Nash, and that whole '60s movement. I was enamored with that as well. But by then I was already singing with Brasil '66.

TS: But in your solo career, you started doing material in that vein.

LH: Yeah, in my solo career, I started getting back into that style, [but] I never really dropped the Brazilian thing, because the Brazilian thing was just a part of my soul from the time Stan Getz brought Brazilian music into this country with Jobim and Joao Gilberto. That's pretty much why I joined Brasil '66 when Sergio asked me, because I'd fallen in love with that rhythm when I heard it in '62. I wanted to sing that music, I wanted to sound Brazilian, I just wanted to immerse myself in that sound, that rhythm, and learn as much as I could. And I never stopped singing Brazilian music.

TS: The love you have for each other after 30-plus years of marriage comes through very strongly on the album and especially when you're onstage. What are your secrets to making a marriage work?

HA: We respect each other's uniqueness.