

Herb Alpert talks music, Tijuana, more

BY [GEORGE VARGA](#) SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE APRIL 30, 2015 6 AM PT

It's been 53 years since [Herb Alpert](#) scored his first hit with The Tijuana Brass, 1962's "The Lonely Bull (El Solo Torro)," but the Los Angeles-born trumpeter and band leader is still experimenting with his music.

His latest album, last year's "In the Mood," opens with a pulsating reinvention of the Glenn Miller Orchestra's 1941 hit, "Chattanooga Choo Choo," which features electronic loops, skittering synthesized beats and a live string section. It's not uptempo enough for airplay in an EDM club, but it's sufficiently out of character to inspire a double take from longtime fans of the trumpeter.

"I'm fond of this version," said Alpert, 80, who performs a sold-out May 7 show at the Belly Up with his wife, former Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66 singer Lani Hall. "It's an interesting combination of electronic music, my style of jazz and a very interesting string arrangement by Eduardo del Barrio, who's a serious composer."

Intriguingly, Alpert's new album does not contain his similarly updated version of Miller's biggest hit, "In the Mood," though not for a lack of effort.

"There was some problem with the Miller estate," he explained. "There were snags trying to convince them this was an appropriate version, because I was playing over the top of (a sample of) the Glenn Miller Orchestra at some point. It became a legal thing; when you deal with estates, it's not musicians you deal with, it's lawyers."

Alpert was barely 25 when he co-wrote Sam Cooke's 1960 hit, "Wonderful World." In 1962, trumpet in hand, he formed The Tijuana Brass and — with business partner Jerry Moss — launched A&M Records. "The Lonely Bull" put both Alpert and his fledgling record label on the map.

"I used to go to bullfights in Tijuana for about three years, during the spring, and I liked the sound of this little band that was used to announce the different fights," Alpert recalled.

"It wasn't a Mariachi band, it was a brass band, and I was trying to get the feeling of those afternoons that I spent there with 'The Lonely Bull.' Then, Jerry, my partner, came up with the band name, Tijuana Brass. We later did a TV special, and part of it was filmed in that bullring in Tijuana."

And how were the acoustics for music in the bullring?

"Fantastic," Alpert replied. "They were really good, unusually good."

Started on a shoestring budget, A&M soon grew to become one of the most successful independently owned and operated record labels in the world. Its roster of artists included Joe Cocker, Cat Stevens, Joan Baez, The Carpenters, Free, Quincy Jones, Peter Dinklage, the Neville Brothers, Split Enz, The

Police, Janet Jackson, such jazz greats as Paul Desmond, Billy Hart and Charlie Haden, and many more.

“We had to borrow money to start A&M, and borrow money just to release a single,” recalled Alpert, who has since earned nine Grammy Awards. “That was the only intention we had at the time; a lot of record companies then were starting then, operating out of trunks of cars.

“Fortunately, ‘The Lonely Bull’ single became a big hit. The record distributors said should take the money and run, which piqued our interest, so we did ‘The Loney Bull’ album. The Tijuana Brass was the label’s savior, because the records we sold let A&M experiment. We started with the two of us, Jerry and me, and ended up with 500 employees.”

Alpert met Hall in 1966 when A&M auditioned Sergio Mendes & Brasil ’66, with which Hall was then a featured vocalist. They have been married since 1974 and won a Grammy Award for their 2013 album, “Steppin Out.” Like the new “In the Mood,” “Steppin’ Out” features former San Diego jazz keyboardist Bill Cantos.

“When we play concerts, I play a little Tijuana Brass medley, and Lani does a Brasil ’66 tribute,” Alpert said. “Other than that, everything we play is pretty spontaneous. The guys in the band are free to play whatever they like ...

“I’m not active, just to stay active. I’m passionate about what I do. I love playing the trumpet and music with the group we have. And my wife and I paint and sculpt. That’s what I do for pleasure, and it’s great.”

Herb Alpert bonus Q&A

Q: You’ve been playing the trumpet for decades. How often do you practice?

A: In order to improvise, you need to have certain techniques that allow you to close your eyes and let it fly. The Chinese have a proverb: ‘Before spontaneity comes discipline.’ I try to move my fingers (on the trumpet) in a way they haven’t moved before. Dizzy (Gillespie), who was a friend of mine, used to say: ‘The closer I get, the farther it looks!’”

Q: Out of curiosity, what did you think of the recent court ruling, in favor of Marvin Gaye’s family and against Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams, over the similarities between their song, “Blurred Lines,” and Gaye’s “Got to Give It Up?”

A: It seemed a little stiff to me, like it was overkill, that \$7 million-plus ruling. I’d have to listen to both and really suss it out to understand the verdict. I mean, (Igor) Stravinsky once said: ‘Great composers don’t copy, they steal!’ We’re dealing with 12 notes, and endless types of rhythms. We’re all

borrowing something from different people. I'd have to see to what extent they borrowed from Marvin. I knew him, and he was the real goods.

Q: You are on tour with your wife, Lani Hall, who used to sing in Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66. When did you meet her?

A: I auditioned Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66 in 1966, with my (A&M Records) partner, Jerry Moss, and we signed them to A&M. This was in a hot period for the Tijuana Brass, and I thought they'd be great to open the show for us and we traveled together. And that exposure really ignited the sound and popularity of Brasil '66. Then I produced their first few albums and Lani and I became friends. Shortly after that, something more developed. She's extraordinarily talented in many directions. I was married at the time we met, but I was enthralled with her voice, her style of singing, her energy; it was just overwhelming. Like I said, we became friends for a while. When I got divorced, something more developed. Lucky me! We've been married for 41 years.

Q: When you play songs by the Tijuana Brass in concert now, how do you keep them fresh?

A: I only play songs I like to play, that are fun for me to play. I feel if it's fun for me to play, it will be fun for somebody to listen to. There are no fillers. That's how A&M started, with the premise that we'd give people full value. In 1962, a lot record companies would put out albums that would have one hit on them, and nine other songs that were so-so. We never did that."

An evening with > Herb Alpert & Lani Hall

When: 8 p.m. next Thursday, May 7

Where: Belly Up, 143 S. Cedros Ave., Solana Beach

Tickets: Sold out

Phone: (858) 481-8140

Online: bellyup.com