

# For Herb Alpert, Music Has the Taste of Honey Once Again Television

By DON HECKMAN

BY almost anyone's definition Herb Alpert looks super. California tan, shiny white teeth, a firm, assertive jaw and the kind of lithe muscles that come from long afternoons on the tennis courts with pale blonde songwriters Burt Bacharach and his wife, actress Angie Dickinson. "I guess," Alpert told me recently, "you could say I've been pretty lucky. A lot of really nice things have happened to me."

"Nice" is putting it mildly. When one thinks of money-making pop music groups of the mid-sixties, the Beatles automatically come to mind. But in 1966 Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass had three albums in the year's top five, and five albums in the year's top ten. The highest Beatles placement for the year was No. 16. During the next two years, four more Alpert albums cracked the top ten. In 1966 alone, 137 million Alpert albums were sold in the United States, and that's a mark no artist, before or since, has equaled.

Now, sitting in a fake French Provincial chair in the fanciest suite the Catskills Concord Hotel had to offer, Alpert looked considerably more than lucky. He was a study in California cool, rapping quietly but enthusiastically about his reorganization of the Tijuana Brass for a return to action after a four-year layoff. A long tour was to be the foundation for a drive to return the Brass—and himself—to the center of the pop music stage. "The clinicians," he said, crossing his fingers, "will be our new recordings and our TV special." The television show, taped in London in September, will be on ABC tonight at 10.

"Why did I decide to come back?" He stretched languidly and flashed a bright grin at his wife, singer Lani Hall, who now sings with the Brass. "A complicated question. I suppose I finally realized how much I needed music—that music is my thing. My only real concern has been that I don't want to get into a repeat of the past and do that old number. I want to see how far I can stretch myself and my music."

One doesn't often hear talk about artistic integrity from pop musicians. Lip service, perhaps, especially from performers who already have made big money for themselves but more often the specter of the almighty dollar is omnipresent. Alpert went on: "When I'm not playing I really get bottled up, almost to the point of feeling I'm going to break out with eczema or something. After the changes I've been through over the last ten years, that may account for why I wasn't content to sit around the swimming pool and get fat."

It was a simple explanation—perhaps too simple an explanation—from a man who is more complex than he appears. As I listened I kept recalling the curious contradictions in Alpert's career. He is an almost embarrassingly successful pop musician who continues to the jazz music as his standard of excellence; he is a multi-million record-selling instrumentalist who hit his peak during an era of vocal music; he is a trumpet player who signed his first recording contract as a singer (it didn't work out); and he is the cofounder of A & M Records, one of the most powerful new record companies in the business, despite his disclaimer that he has no un-

derstanding of merchandising. I didn't understand their language. When I started in the business and I still don't, I simply can't relate to people who talk about records in terms of tonnage."

Alpert's situation, in short, is a performer's dream. He works when he wants to work and he plays the music he wants to play. It has not always been so, of course, yet the irony is that what he has chosen to do and when he has chosen to do it seem to have had

as much to do with commerce as with art.

For example, it may not have been a calculated merchandising decision to choose to return with the Tijuana Brass at this point in time, but it certainly tells us, no matter what he may say to the contrary, that Alpert's antennae were quiveringly alert to the fact that the mid-seventies, like the mid-sixties, are a time of flux and confusion in the record business, and a time when the

**"It's different now," says Herb Alpert, who's on the comeback trail. "It's a labor of love." His TV special is on the ABC tonight at 10.**

Tom Frazee



easy-going rhythms and crisply accessible melodies of the Brass might have another big success.

Alpert has an intuitive understanding of the delicate blend of hoopla, hard-sell and pure talent that can set the public pulse pounding. But the contradictions persist. Eager as he says he is to touch his audiences again, Alpert was surprisingly restrained in his Concord appearance, seeming to come to life only during a few brief numbers by Lani Hall. The Brass played with intermittent authority, and audience enthusiasm waxed and waned between the familiarity of old favorites like "A Taste of Honey," "Whipped Cream" and (with Alpert's breathy vocal) "This Guy's In Love With You," one listener asked me, "Tell me you didn't make out with somebody on a beach blanket when this record first came out, go ahead, tell me!" or simply to revel in the return of a semi-legendary pop music figure.

Alpert's California image, stereotyped though it may be, is genuinely come by. Born in Los Angeles in 1935, he started playing the trumpet at the age of 8. Like many young music makers in the early fifties, he divided his time between playing for junior symphony orchestras, concerts and casual dates at bar mitzvahs, weddings and dances. A love for jazz in general—and trumpeter Clifford Brown's playing in particular—came early and dominated Alpert's Army years. Yet, and here's that contradiction again, when he was discharged in 1956 he gravitated toward

pop music rather than the jazz which was, at the time, one of Southern California's most vital commodities.

Why? "I'm not sure," Alpert said. "But I know I was still shivering over Clifford's playing, and I sure didn't want to be caught doing anything remotely similar to what he was up to." Given his activities, there wasn't much chance that he would be confused with Clifford Brown. He drifted around, collaborating on songwriting with Lou Adler (then an insurance agent and today the manager of singer Carole King, A & M's most successful act since the Brass). The breakthrough began in 1962 when Alpert teamed up with an independent record promotion man named Jerry

**In 1966, Alpert's albums sold nearly 14 million copies—a mark no other artist has equaled.**

Moss to form a small record company named, logically enough, A & M records.

Alpert had been experimenting with overdubbing his own trumpet parts—that is, recording and re-recording to produce melodies that sounded as though they were being played, simultaneously, by four or five Herb Alperets. While he was working on an instrumental called—at the time—"Twinkle Star," he took a Sunday afternoon off and went to see the Tijuana bullfights.

"I was intrigued by the whole feeling," Alpert recalled, "the colors, the sounds and the spirit of Mexico. It was the first time I was exposed to anything

that resembled Mexican music. When we got back to Los Angeles, I started fooling with 'Twinkle Star' in more of a Latin mood, not trying to capture the sounds that I had heard, but more of the colors and spirit of it all. It came out well and had a nice feeling but it seemed to be lacking something that would make it really appealing to somebody listening to it for the first time."

"I remember walking down Sunset Boulevard with Jerry and getting a flash of an idea to incorporate the sounds of the crowd in Tijuana, the 'Old Old' into the intro we already had, which represented the horns that played when the bull enters the ring. So we overlaid sounds that actually had been recorded at the bullring in Tijuana. The minute we put the new sounds in, the song took a whole new direction. It was a kind of a real visual feeling . . . something that added to the spirit of the song. It became 'The Lonely Bull.'"

Then and there, the Tijuana Brass was born. "The Lonely Bull" took off like a running bull at Pamplona, became an overnight smash hit in L.A., and soon spread nationwide (to the pleasant old of 750,000 copies). Alpert and Moss, realizing they had a bull by the horns (pun intended) decided to move into the big-time arena, and released the Tijuana Brass's first album in December of 1964.

For its time, the group was the consummate expression of Los Angeles-slick. The music combined a jazz shuffle rhythm with a touch of Latin accents, overlaid it with Alpert's Miles Davis-derived melodic phrasing, and parlayed the resulting mixture into an astonishing Horatio Alger story.

Today, Alpert has ambivalent feelings about those early Brass recordings: "When I first started the Brass I was infinitely more inhibited than I am now. (Continued on Page 38)

Don Heckman is a New York freelance who often writes about the world of music.

# Herb Alpert Tries It Again

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It was a long time before I finally began to realize that being a musician simply means being able to play whatever you're capable of playing. I'm not in competition with anyone except myself, to see how far I can extend my talent."

In 1969, presumably at the top of his form, Alpert disbanded the Brass and retired from active performance. Why? For the first time Alpert looked gloomy. He grimaced, obviously reluctant to dig back into what was, for him, a painful time.

"Prior to disbanning the group," he said, "I had gotten to the point where emotionally I could hardly play; sometimes nothing came out of the horn, and it actually was painful even to hold the instrument. I did our last television show under those conditions and followed up with a 45-day tour which took us through the States and Europe in virtual one-nighters. At the end, in December of 1969, I could do nothing but stick the horn back in its case and start trying to put the pieces of my personal puzzle together. It wasn't happening for me at all. Musically, I didn't understand what I was doing; I felt it was less than honest, and I didn't think I had anything to say that wasn't a rehash of what I had done or worse — of what someone else had done. I just had to let the dust settle and see what happened."

"You've got to remember that the sudden success of the Brass was an incredible jolt, and one that eventually threw things out of focus for me. After all, before it began to break I was just playing gigs around Los Angeles and occasionally producing a record. To go from that to — wham! — having the press and people and just plain strangers asking serious questions about myself and my family and my view of the world, well, I just found it hard to handle, and after a while it really began to pull me apart."

The doubts Alpert expressed seemed little different from those which plague so many come-from-nowhere sensations. The gilded flow from the Tijuana Brass was, after all, a two-sided coin reflecting both the instant riches possible in the music business and the enormous pressure to maintain the pace, to keep the lucre coming in. But when one considers that in 1965 and 1966 the Brass was accounting for nearly 90 per cent of A & M's billing, Alpert's

doubts, and his contradictions, come somewhat more clearly into focus.

"You know," Alpert continued, "there was a time when I was so disturbed by it all that I really considered just taking off — leaving the whole thing and going off to an island or something. I was willing to give up playing again, or almost anything else that gave me pleasure if I only could find the kind of inner peace I needed."

Alpert's partner, Jerry Moss, confirmed the pressures that were brought to bear on the trumpeter in those years: "Our basic view from the beginning was that the record company should never be an inhibiting force for either of us. But I think there may have been a point where we lost sight of just how important it was to make it fulfill the creative and the commercial aspects

of what we wanted to do. And most of the burden fell on Herb.

"I don't think the extent of that pressure really hit me until Herb decided he just couldn't hack it any more and decided to disband the Brass. I suddenly looked around and said, 'My God, I don't know what records I'm going to put out in January.' In 1970 and 1971, when we finally began to hit big grosses at A & M without the Brass, it certainly comforted Herb — and, I think, helped cool him out — to know that something he had worked so hard to create could now, so to speak, stand on its own feet, without his support. And that, as much as anything, helped create the kind of loose, unpressured attitude he has now."

But would Alpert's commitment remain the same without the pressure to pro-

duce spectacular results? Wasn't the interaction between his creative and commercial energies basic to his music, despite the negative effect it seemed to have on his psyche?

"I don't think so," Moss replied. "The Brass's performance today simply isn't a financial necessity to the company, as it so obviously was from 1965 to 1969. And that's made it possible for Herb to really do his thing, to play, to be as creative as he can be; it's that simple."

Alpert agreed. "It was the right decision — coming back. I'm sure of it, even though I had to force myself to get another group together and I had to force myself to record, knowing what it had done to me the last time. But this time it's a different ball game." He smiled again, his lean face untroubled. "This is my thing," he said. "A labor of love, period."



The Tijuana Brass, returning as TJB, are part of Herb Alpert's TV special.