

**WORD WITH: HERB ALPERT**

# The Other Delights in a Trumpeter's Life

By James C. McKinley Jr. New York Times March 3, 2013

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Few people can claim to be a Renaissance man in this complex age, but Herb Alpert, the jazz-pop trumpeter and co-founder of A&M Records, might be one of them.

At 77 Mr. Alpert is working on his 34th studio album, a collection called “Steppin’ Out” (Almo Sounds) to come out this year. And on Tuesday he and his wife, the singer Lani Hall, are returning for the second year to the Cafe Carlyle for a two-week stand, offering some songs from the new album, a few jazz standards and, of course, hits like “A Taste of Honey” and “The Lonely Bull,” which he recorded with his group the Tijuana Brass.

Aside from being one of the most successful pop instrumentalists and label executives of the last 50 years Mr. Alpert also produces paintings and sculptures at a professional level. He has an exhibition of abstract paintings and large totemlike sculptures — wavy black obelisks — opening on May 4 at the Robert Berman Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif.

He’s a philanthropist too. Since 2010 Mr. Alpert’s foundation has donated more than \$6 million to the Harlem School of the Arts to save it from closing. (The school plans to rename its building the Herb Alpert Center on March 11.)

In a telephone interview last week from his home in Malibu, Calif., Mr. Alpert talked about the new album, the music industry’s woes, his desire to help young musicians in Harlem and how his trademark blend of Latin rhythms and catchy smooth-jazz horn lines, is, for him, “visual music.” Here are excerpts from the conversation:

**Q.** Why did you want to play the Cafe Carlyle again this year?

**A.** Years back I saw Bobby Short there, and I thought it’d be fun to play in this nice, intimate setting. We had a good time last year. The acoustics are really good. We’re going to play some new songs, and we have some songs that we played before, but every time we start rehearsing for a new tour we scramble it up and change the arrangements.

**Q.** What is the new album like? Is it a continuation of 2011’s “I Feel You,” on which you and Ms. Hall did jazz renditions of songs like “Here Comes the Sun” and “Moondance”?

**A.** No it’s different. It’s primarily me. My wife is featured on a couple of songs. They are songs I’ve always wanted to play, and I used an orchestra.

**Q.** Why did you decide to save the Harlem School for the Arts?

**A.** I believe the best chance we have of creating responsible and productive kids is through the arts, and it has to be developed just like literacy. When we were playing in New York I visited

the school, and I was really impressed with the faculty, the teachers, the kids — looking in their eyes and seeing the enthusiasm they had. I felt a strong pull to them.

**Q.** Is it true that in the early 1970s you lost confidence in your playing, and you went to a trumpet coach who told you the trumpet was just a piece of plumbing?

**A.** I didn't lose confidence in my playing. I just lost my desire, and I was going through a divorce, and it just hit me right in the lip I guess. I found myself getting into terrible habits with the horn. So I met a teacher in New York by the name of Carmine Caruso, who prided himself in being a troubleshooter. He had these exercises that over a period of time straightened me out.



Herb Alpert is working on his 34th studio album and has an exhibition of his art opening soon. © Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

**Q.** You were a successful label executive at A&M before you sold it in the late 1980s for a reported \$500 million. How does the music industry get out of the mess it's in these days?

**A.** Aw man, it's in serious trouble. The Internet has not been a big help. And looking back on it, I don't think we responded properly to the music-sharing problem that was rampant and that devastated the business.

**Q.** What is the future of the business?

**A.** When you look at YouTube and see some of the hits some of the artists have had — millions upon millions upon millions of people can listen in on what you're doing. So if you know how to get around the Internet, you might have a good shot. But the record companies as they used to be? I think that's gone.

**Q.** "Whipped Cream and Other Delights," the Tijuana Brass album with the woman covered in a wedding dress made of whipped cream, was in hundreds of thousands of American homes in the 1960s. How do you feel about that album nearly 50 years later?

**A.** I think the album is really good. It was the biggest-selling Tijuana Brass album. At the time, when Peter Whorf, the designer of the cover, was showing it to me, I thought we were pushing it a little too far. Nothing was exposed but something seemed like it was beyond what we needed to do. Obviously it became an iconic cover. Delores Erickson, the model, was three months pregnant at the time.

**Q.** She was?

**A.** Yeah, and I hate to break it to everyone but she was covered with shaving cream.

**Q.** What sort of artwork are you exhibiting in May?

**A.** Sculptures, totems, black-and-white paintings, and I also paint with coffee.

**Q.** What is the connection between your artwork and your music?

**A.** A big connection. I've been painting for over 40 years and sculpting for maybe 25, and I approach it the same way. I'm going for rhythm and things that make me feel good.

**Q.** Did the Tijuana Brass style for which you became famous limit you as a musician?

**A.** I never felt limited. This might sound weird. Man, but I never tried to make a hit record. I tried to make good records, and I tried to make interesting records. I worked with Sam Cooke and wrote a song, "A Wonderful World," with Sam and my partner at the time, Lou Adler. Sam was a mentor, and he said: "People are just listening to a cool piece of wax. And it either makes it or it doesn't. And it's not important what kind of echo chamber you're using. Or how much time you've spent in the studio practicing."

Even as an owner of A&M Records, when I hear an artist, I'm listening for a feeling, not for the intricacies of it all. I try to play songs that make me feel good. "The Lonely Bull" was my response to the bullfights I had seen in Tijuana. After that became a big hit I remember I got this letter from a person in Germany thanking me for a vicarious trip to Tijuana. And it hit me over the noggin. Man, I'm going to make visual music. That's what I'm going to do.

**Q.** Visual music?

**A.** Music that conjures up images for me as I'm creating it and playing it.