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A Touch of Brass

Herb Alpert Hopes to Get A Second Wind From His Feel-Good 'Tijuana' Sound

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SANTA MONICA, Calif.

Just a few notes from that peppy horn are enough to book you on a first-class nostalgia trip. They take you back to turntable parties in the paneled rec room, tiki torches on the patio, and Dad sporting his groovy new sideburns. They evoke enormous plastic daisy decorations, wide whitewall tires and yellow shag carpet.

Odd as it seems now, Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass had as much claim on the soundtrack of the 1960s as the Beatles. The group's instrumental pop albums, slickly produced by Alpert himself, made him king of easy listening, god of the gentle and long-gone Middle of the Road genre.



Alpert, above with the Brass in 1964, developed his trademark sound after attending a bullfight in Tijuana.

You heard those horns everywhere — on "Ed Sullivan," on Top-40 radio, on chewing-gum commercials, on "The Dating Game." Your parents loved him, but so (often in secret) did the kids. At its peak in 1966, the TJB — essentially Alpert and an evolving cast of L.A. studio

musicians — had four albums in the Top 10. By the end of the decade, the group had sold more records than one except the Beatles, Elvis and Sinatra.

And then? And then the Tijuana Brass began a shuffle toward used-record store bins and Muzak obscurity. There were a couple of brief Alpert spikes in the 1970s (notably, the disco-ish "Rise" in 1979), but the air went out of the golden trumpet soon enough. Al devoted more of his time to building the record empire he had co-founded (he was the "A" in mighty A&M Records) and to other pursuits. As ubiquitous as such Tijuana Brass hits as "Spanish Flea," "Mexican Street Music," "Tijuana Taxi" and "A Taste of Honey" were four decades ago, they are dusty artifacts today, the musical equivalent of double-knit polyester slacks.

So maybe it's as good a time as any for a Herb Alpert revival, or at least a retrospective. After more than a decade out of print, Alpert's best-selling TJB works from the 1960s are being reissued by Shout! Factory, a small Los Angeles-based label. A complicated publishing deal kept the rerelease until last month, when the 10-album approved series began with "The Lonely Bull," the 1962 debut, as well as "South of the Border" (1963).

See ALPERT, C8, Col. 1

Herb Alpert's Horn of Plenty

ALPERT, From C1

a collection of unreleased and obscure recordings (some with new Alpert trumpet parts) from 1963-74 called "Lost Treasures." Eight more remastered originals will follow throughout the year.

"My kids say a new generation will discover this, but I don't know," says Alpert. "I couldn't predict that I was going to make a hit record [40 years ago], so I can't say if they will or they won't. I will say it's upbeat and positive music. There's so much dark music out there now."

Alpert, now 70, who is as low-key and relaxed as a bass solo, talks in the offices of his self-named philanthropic organization here, which is decorated with imposing sculptures and paintings by the man himself. The jet-black hair and angular features that made him salable to middle America a few decades ago haven't quite been erased by time.

Despite one health issue last year (atrial fibrillation, a heart ailment), Alpert remains active and creative. He practices every day on the same trumpet he has played since 1953, works on his art and oversees the



considerable fortune he has amassed, especially since selling A&M to Polygram in 1990 for a reported \$500 million. Sometime soon, he says, he plans to produce an album by his wife, singer Lani Hall Alpert, who once recorded with another A&M group, Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66.

The legend of Alpert's big recording breakthrough, "The Lonely Bull," really is true, he says. When Alpert and his business partner, Jerry Moss (the "M" in A&M), attended their first bullfight in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1962, Alpert became intrigued by the brass fanfare that introduced each fight, and crowd's excited reactions. He set out to capture it in a recording. Alpert reworked the melody of a song called "Twinkle Star," written by collaborator Sol Lake, and mixed it with a recording of the "oleis" from an actual bullfight.

The single was the first hit for Alpert, then 27, and for his fledgling record label. The album that followed, also a popular success, established the Tijuana Brass formula: a few highly polished original compositions (by Alpert, Lake and other writers), coupled with bright cover versions of popular songs of the day and a few golden oldies. The whole package — music, promotion and, of course, the Tijuana Brass name, which was dreamed up by Moss — was designed to conjure up a south-of-the-border tourist fantasy. Alpert played up the old Mexico feel by using marmbas, breezy guitars and brass elements that vaguely suggested a mariachi horn section (actually, Alpert overbubbling himself). The original songs also had titles that stayed with the theme: "Acapulco 1922," "Adios, Mi Corazon," "Salud, Amor y Dinero," etc. "When you're making an instrumental record," he says, "there has to be a visual attached to it. You close your eyes and you get a mental picture. I got letters from all over the world from people saying, 'Thank you for taking me on

per never paid much attention to mariachi music (he leaned more toward Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis). He and Moss, a veteran record promoter, were primarily interested in creating a bright, radio-friendly pop sound. Although one of the early session musicians was Hispanic (Mexican jazz bassist Abraham Laboriel), most of the group that became the Brass in its touring heyday were Italian Americans: Pat Senatore (bass), John Pisano (electric guitar), Lou Pignati (piano) and Nick Ceroli (drums).

The concept — gringos dressed in sombreros and matador outfits, playing Americanized Mexi-pop — probably wouldn't stand the authenticity test today, let alone a cultural sensitivity or kitsch test. To a few critics, it didn't hold up then, either. The San Francisco Chronicle dismissed the Tijuana Brass as a Mexican minstrel show.

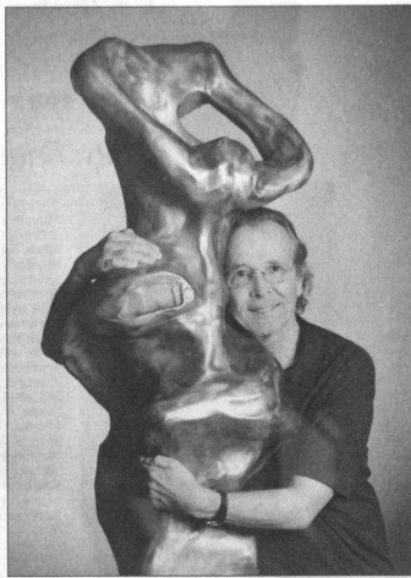
Alpert was aware of it then, as he is now: "In the real early days, I didn't want to feel like we were stepping on anyone's toes. Some of the PR at the time suggested I was a direct offshoot of mariachi music. I didn't want to be perceived as a phony." But he is untroubled by it. "When you come right down to it, it's all in the music," he says. "I think people just liked the music. It was upbeat for the most part. I never thought it was frivolous or corny. I put as much of my heart into it as I could."

He pauses a beat and reflects, "Art is timing. You're in the right place at the right time and the door creaks open for you. We came at the right moment."

In fact, Alpert eventually got some validation even in Mexico. When the Brass went on tour in the mid-1960s, they played several dates there, and the audiences were as large and appreciative as any north of the border.

Although his dark good looks enabled him to pass for Latino, Alpert is actually the son of a Jewish tailor from Kiev and a Hungarian immigrant mother; he grew up in Los Angeles' heavily Jewish Fairfax district. Alpert began playing at the age of 8 after he picked out a trumpet from among the instruments on a table at his elementary school's music appreciation day. By 16, he was playing in a local party band and thinking of becoming a professional musician. He eventually played so many gigs, he says, that at one time he knew some 2,000 songs from memory.

He also had a brief stint as a mov-



Alpert will exhibit his sculptures in Nashville in August. "Whipped Cream and Other Delights" is being reissued on CD.

the 6th Army Band in the 1950s, and later with the University of Southern California marching band while a student. With partner Lou Adler, later a famed record producer in his own right, Alpert wrote songs for Sam Cooke, including "Only Sixteen" and "Wonderful World" ("Don't know much about history . . ."). Alpert and Adler also produced a hit for Jan & Dean ("Baby Talk").

These experiences provided Alpert with a street-level PhD in almost every major aspect of the music business and gave him the confidence to handle most creative aspects on his own albums. He was producer, songwriter, arranger and lead musician.

To be sure, some of the commercial polish on the TJB sound also came from Moss, who was a co-producer on the classic Brass records. As Moss recalls, "Herbie did all the playing and arranging, of course, but some of the ideas in the studio came from me. I was a promo man. I knew what would get played on the radio."

The success of the records, says Moss, was a reflection of the "warmth" of Alpert's sound. "It was the kind of thing you hear and feel

most memorable feature may have been the cover photo of a beautiful, dark-eyed and apparently naked model covered in white cream.

The picture occupied a not insignificant piece of real estate in the psyches of adolescent boys of that era, who are men of this one. As Esquire put it in 1989, "We bought this album for the album cover. Her here is what last looked like in 1966."

When art director Peter Whorf presented his cover idea to Alpert and Moss, Alpert says, "We thought it was pushing the envelope too much. You've got to remember this is 1965. Now it's nothing."

They went ahead anyway, hiring a friend of the A&M founders, a Ford Agency model named Dolores Erickson, then 25. Whorf spent most of the daylong photo session slathering Erickson with shaving cream, which held up better under the hot studio lights than whipped cream (although whipped cream was used on Erickson's head and hand). All that shaving cream covered up the fact that she was three months pregnant at the time.

The resulting image reveals far less of Erickson than the average low-cut dress, but the overall effect was electrifying. "People have told

With You." With a few quick lyrical alterations, Alpert sang the song "This Guy's in Love With You" on TV and later recorded it.

"You didn't ask me this," Alpert says, somewhat amused by his own braggadocio, "but I'm the only guy who had a No. 1 instrumental record and a No. 1 vocal record."

Not long after, Alpert went through the same drill. Hal David handed him "(They Long to Be) Close to You." But after recording it, Alpert felt the song wasn't right for his understated tenor. He passed it off to Karen and Richard Carpenter, who put it on their second A&M album. It was the Carpenters' breakthrough song.

As it happened, the Carpenters ushered in Alpert's later career as a record-industry mogul. By 1969, he felt burned out from the Brass' worldwide touring and constant recording. His first marriage was crumbling. For the first time in many years, he briefly stopped playing the trumpet. Alpert disbanded the group (though it would have periodic revivals) and began investing more of his energy in A&M's artists.

After several years in which Alpert's Tijuana Brass records carried A&M (its logo featured Alpert's horn, after all), the label began signing more rock and folk-rock acts. It added Cat Stevens, Joan Baez, Joe Cocker, Peter Frampton and the Police to its roster. It also released the work of Quincy Jones, Hugh Masekela, Antonio Carlos Jobim and, later, Janet Jackson.

"When we started," says Moss, "small labels lived and died on a hit single. Herbie and I wanted to develop artists who could make albums that would sell for years and years to come. We were trying to build something real."

Real indeed: By the time Moss and Alpert cashed out in 1990, A&M was the largest independent record label in the world.

Alpert would release 14 more original albums of his own, but with inconsistent commercial reaction ("Rise" in 1979 and "Keep Your Eye on Me" in 1987 were comeback records). In the meantime, he branched out to Broadway and philanthropy. He was one of the producers of "Angels in America," Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, and the musical "Jelly's Last Jam." After selling A&M in 1990, he and Moss joined forces again and in 1994 started Almo Sounds, which signed the rock group Garbage.

These days, Alpert's name usually rises in connection with his foundation. It gives money to environmental and arts-education causes benefiting children; Alpert's name is affixed to a private school campus in Santa Monica, Calif., an annual state arts award, and a visiting professor's chair at the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

a trip to Tijuana. The Latin flavor extended to A&M's early artist lineup, which included the Sandpipers ("Guantanamera"), Mendes, and the Baja Marimba Band, which featured another Alpert collaborator, Julius Wechter. Of course, Alpert and the Tijuana Brass were about as authentically Mexican as a Chili's restaurant. Al-

actor, in his one uncredited role, he played the drums as Charlton Heston descended from Mount Sinai in "The Ten Commandments."

Alpert's early musical career was a hodgepodge of performing, producing and songwriting. He played trumpet during a two-year stint with

good about," he says. "That part is as fresh to me now as it ever was."

It's debatable, however, whether one of Alpert's most commercially successful albums owed more to its cover art than to its music. "Whipped Cream & Other Delights," released in 1965, was certainly high concept — all of its songs were named after foods — but its

look," says Erickson, now 65, retired and living in Washington state. "It's what you can't see" that adds to its allure. "I understand it was very suggestive to men, but I never thought of it like that."

She refers to it as "the world's most famous album cover."

"Whipped Cream" stayed at No. 1 on the album charts for eight weeks. Alpert's biggest-selling single of the era came three years later, in 1968, when Alpert asked the celebrated composer (and A&M artist) Burt Bacharach if he would contribute a song for an upcoming TV special featuring the group. Bacharach offered an old composition he'd written with Hal David. It was a song that Dionne Warwick had made a demo tape of, called "This Girl's in Love

If anything, Alpert's career as a recording artist says much about the value of simple, nonthreatening, happy music. It may be just a coincidence that his greatest musical success coincided with a period of turbulence and upheaval, socially and musically. "Lonely Bull" became a smash in the months preceding Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and John F. Kennedy's assassination. It postdated Elvis and predated the Beatles. As rock grew increasingly rebellious, as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War flared, the Tijuana Brass offered something dreamy and transporting and distinctly non-edgy.

Listening to it now, you can almost feel the shag carpet beneath your feet.