

Amazing & Magnificent

Hall of Fame inducts legendary duo from A&M Records

By Mark Brown, Rocky Mountain News
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It is, Jerry Moss will concede, quite a tale.

Two guys start a record company out of their garage. One of the guys, Herb Alpert, goes on to sell millions of his own albums and change music history. The other guy, Moss, does the hands-on work that made A&M Records one of the music industry's most profitable and respected labels, both in selling huge numbers (The Carpenters, Peter Frampton) and delivering great music (The Police and George Harrison, who met his wife Olivia at the A&M offices).

And when it's all over, the lifelong friends sell the company for a half-billion dollars, split the proceeds and walk away.

"It's a great story. It's available for anyone else who wants to try it," Moss says. "We're not brilliant. We're not unbelievable. We're just two people who hit a nerve. I think it can be done again and again and again. More people should try it."

Regardless of Moss' words, voters at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame do consider it both brilliant and unbelievable. Alpert and Moss, both 70, will be inducted into the hall tonight as nonperformers.

It's hard to overstate the influence of A&M, just as it's hard to overstate Alpert's musical impact. His recordings with the Tijuana Brass brought the concept of world music into suburban homes long before the Beatles headed to India.

"What I really love to do is make records. That was really my strength. I was lucky enough to be part of the record that Sam Cooke made. I was watching Sam and learning from him and learned how to produce records with my friend Lou Adler," Alpert says.

Alpert felt "the fascination of how to get a sound that was appealing onto a tape. I tried that with a trumpet, and ultimately, that became the sound of the Tijuana Brass."

"The A&M experience was just so sweet. It was literally an American fable - two guys getting together and creating something that just worked," Moss says. "We were in business together for 28 years without any investment from anybody else. We had our own shop."

"We had the advantage of being the only ones who would make decisions," Alpert says. "I was very fortunate to find a guy who was such a nice human being filled with integrity. He could add and subtract and do things I couldn't do. I've said this before, but we started with a handshake and ended up with a hug."

It was 1962 when they pooled a couple hundred dollars and released an Alpert song under the name "Dore Alpert" on a label they called Carnival. Finding that name was already taken, they took the initials from their last names and linked them. Then began the real work of finding music, signing artists and finding success.

"Herbie is an absolutely superb musician. Being associated with someone like that gave me the confidence, frankly, to deal with other musicians," Moss recalls. "I remember the earliest sessions, when I had some thought of how I wanted the guitar player to do something. He'd say, 'Go tell him.' "

"We'd have these meetings with financial people and my eyes would glaze over. It was getting in the way of my creativity," Alpert says. "I didn't get into the everyday trenches, which made it a lot easier for me and allowed me to be who I am."

"The partnership over the 28 years we had the company afforded him the opportunity to experiment and live his life as an artist and a label honcho and do what he wanted to do. It afforded me the same opportunity," Moss says.

The music could be as poppy as The Captain & Tennille or as hard-edged as the Sex Pistols (a fiasco that lasted only a few days). A&M occupied the old Charlie Chaplin studios and was a great place to just hang out. Besides signing their own acts, A&M distributed albums for smaller labels, including Harrison's Dark Horse.

"We responded to music emotionally, No. 1: How it thrilled us, how it pleased us. We obviously had to find new acts, because we couldn't compete with the major labels on established talent," Moss says.

"These new people had to start off in left field because they had to be different. They had to have something different than what was already on the radio."

"It's not that complicated. If you hear something and it makes you want to hear it again, that's the ticket," Moss says. "You have to be lucky enough to find geniuses, welcome them and get out of their way."

Both are dismayed at how commerce has forced the art out of the music industry. It was part of the reason why they sold A&M in '90.

"There are plenty of guys with ears out there. Unfortunately, they're working for people who are so bottom-line conscious that it's hard for a great artist to be heard these days," Alpert says.

"It's so structured with three or four big companies running the show. They want projections of what they're going to make in three months. That's not the business. It's a little more mysterious than that."

These days Alpert is involved in his sculpture and painting (a major display is featured in L.A. at the moment) as well as his charitable foundation. He also owns a jazz club where he may record a live album with some friends in the near future. Moss is into race horses, in a big way: his horse Giacomo won the Kentucky Derby last year.

The news of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction was a welcome reminder of the pair's past success.

"We tried to create a different kind of culture and I believe we were somewhat successful in that regard," Moss says. "For the Rock Hall of Fame to recognize us in this way is an honor . . . it's a nice cap on it."

"I didn't know how to react," Alpert confesses about hearing the news of his induction.

"I'd been out of the loop for so long in the music industry I didn't know what that meant till I received a call from my wife's gynecologist, who congratulated me. I thought, maybe we're on to something."

The 2006 inductees

The class of 2006 for the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, to be inducted today in New York at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel:

- Black Sabbath
- Blondie
- Miles Davis
- Lynyrd Skynyrd
- Sex Pistols
- Herb Alpert & Jerry Moss