

Sounds Around Town: Herb Alpert brings his brassy sound to Boston's City Winery

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Herb Alpert, the trumpeter-record executive-producer-composer-painter-sculptor-philanthropist recently turned 83. And he's still out on the road, now in his 12th year of playing with his quintet, doing a bit of jazz, some pop standards, a medley from his days fronting the Tijuana Brass, and another medley featuring his wife Lani Hall, singing tunes she made famous during her time with Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66. Alpert and Hall and group come to City Winery in Boston on April 22.

It's no surprise that Alpert remains an active musician. Though it would take him almost 20 years of constant, if varied, work to hit the big time, he knew at 8, when he picked up his first trumpet at Melrose Elementary School in Los Angeles, that he was on the right road. On a phone conversation from his Malibu home, Alpert recalled that day clearly.

"There was a table filled with various instruments," he said. "The trumpet was a smaller instrument, and I was a small kid. I didn't want the trombone or the tuba or anything that was too big. I was intrigued by the feeling of the trumpet, and I tried to make a sound from it, but I couldn't. When I finally did learn to make the sound, the trumpet was talking for me. I'm pretty much an introvert, and when I was 8, I was almost a mute, and this horn was speaking for me."

Yet after playing in high school with the Colonial Trio – piano, drums, trumpet – which won a number of competitions on the L.A. TV show "High Talent Battle," and after a stint in the Army, where he was sent to band school, he had his mind set on a career as a vocalist, landing a contract with RCA, but never clicking. Alpert was 27 when he and his friend and business partner Jerry Moss started up A&M Records (the initials of their last names) by self-funding and making a recording of "The Lonely Bull" in Alpert's garage

Alpert, with the Tijuana Brass and on his own, would go on to have nine Top 20 hits – both "Rise" and "This Guy's in Love with You" reached the top of the chart – and he continues to release albums with Hall and his band, the most recent being last year's "Music, Volume 1."

Though he's had plenty of influences, ranging from Harry James to Les Paul, he recalled the experience of playing with Louis Armstrong as an eye-opener.

"It was just one night," he said. "But his personality came right through the instrument. He was kind and smart and upbeat and funny, and a hell of a player, and all of that came right

through the horn, and that's magic, man. That's what we're supposed to be doing; we're supposed to find our own voice, and let that voice be heard."

After Alpert's releases with the Tijuana Brass (a group went on tour with him, but in the studio, it was Alpert re-tracking the horn parts, accompanied mostly by the L.A. session players called the Wrecking Crew) got A&M Records going, he and Moss started building a stable of acts that ranged from rockers Joe Cocker and The Police to the comparatively softer Cat Stevens and The Carpenters. Alpert takes credit for signing that last one.

"The Carpenters sold more records than any of our other artists," he said. "But even after they had a couple of records out, my own company was saying, 'Man, why'd you sign these kids? They're a little too cute.' Maybe they thought they weren't compatible with what was happening on the radio at the time. But then I gave them 'Close to You'."

Alpert stopped to savor the memory, then added, "The first time they recorded it, Karen was playing drums, and she was very good, but she wasn't a recording drummer. I got the idea that they should have the real artillery, so we used (drummer) Hal Blaine and the Wrecking Crew, and that record was a monster. After it became number one, the people that were asking why I signed them were looking at me and saying, 'You're a genius!' " (laughs).

Alpert also knows that luck has had its place in his career. Three Tijuana Brass songs were in rotation on the TV show "The Dating Game." A snippet of "Spanish Flea" was heard during the "boys' entrance." Some of "Whipped Cream" played for the "girls' entrance." And a bit from "Lollipops and Roses" was cued when a winner was named.

"Those were chosen by the producers of the show," said Alpert. "It was a phone call from them to our publishing company. Because they were played on that show, a lot of records were sold. But what sold even more was when I did 'Rise' in 1979, and it was used on 'General Hospital' (in the infamous Luke and Laura Campus Disco scene). That just catapulted the sales of that song."

Alpert had a quiet spell in the 1990s, when he was concentrating more on painting and sculpting. But in 2006, he and Hall were asked to join Sergio Mendes at a Hollywood Bowl concert to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Brazil '66. They did.

"Afterward, Sergio's drummer, Michael Shapiro, said we should get a group together and do some more concerts," remembered Alpert. "I thought that people would only want to hear Tijuana Brass songs, and I didn't want to just be playing that the rest of my life. But for our first show at a place in San Diego called The Anthology we didn't play any Tijuana Brass, and nobody cared. They liked what we played and we had a great reaction. So I decided that I would do this as long as I have fun doing it and people are having fun listening to it. A few

years later we added a medley of the Tijuana Brass and Brasil '66 surrounded by this other music we were playing.”

In the middle of all that, Alpert got another phone call, from Rocco Landesman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, telling him that President Obama would be honoring him with a 2012 National Medal of the Arts.

“I was totally caught off guard,” said Alpert. “I didn’t know what to feel. It was overwhelming. It was a great experience.”

The Herb Alpert and Lani Hall Quintet appears at City Winery in Boston on April 22 at 8 p.m. Tickets: \$50-\$65. Info, 617-933-8047.