

The Christmas Wish: A Conversation With Herb Alpert

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HERB ALPERT'S THE CHRISTMAS WISH'S ALBUM ARTWORK

A Conversation with Herb Alpert

Mike Ragogna: Herb, it seems like you've approached your new album *The Christmas Wish* like you wanted to create a new "classic" Christmas project, like iconic ones we've cherished through the years.

Herb Alpert: Well, I try to approach everything I do like that, actually. I did a Christmas album with The Tijuana Brass, I think it was 1968. After I finished that it was on my bucket list to do one with orchestra and choir. I thought that would be good. It took me forty years to pull it off, but I had a good time doing it. The musicians were great, the songs we chose were fun to play. I've always come up with the idea that if it's fun for me to play, it's going to be fun for a certain amount of people to listen to. I write all my music like that; I hope it's all iconic. Why not? What the heck. [laughs]

MR: Nice! So the wise guy question right about now would be, "What took you so long?"

HA: I was doing other things, and it just didn't strike me that the time was appropriate. When it felt right I struck and I found the right orchestrator and person to work with, Chris Walden, and I got excited about it. And certainly we don't need another Christmas album. You go out to Amazon and you see eighteen-thousand Christmas albums out there. I didn't want to make just another album, I wanted to make something that I thought was special.

MR: It's really a beautiful album. The "Joy To The World"/"Silver Bells" medley seems to contain everything you've been associated with over the years. There's a Latin rhythm, a little Janet Jackson instrumentation, a Quincy production hint, and Richard Carpenter's elegant approach overall. It's like the whole album has a "This is Your Life" vibe to it.

HA: You know, that could be! It wasn't an intellectual process for me, it was just probably something instinctive that happened. You might be right on that, I never even thought of that aspect.

MR: So how did you choose these songs?

HA: There were a lot more songs that we chose, but like I said, if a song is fun for me to play, it might be fun for someone to listen to. I try to pick on songs that I have a feeling for. I'm crazy about the mystery of, "What is that thing that touches you when you hear a song?" I don't know what it is, I can't even come close to it. You can say you like the melody, but so what? It's in the mystical realm.

MR: Herb, to me, your rendition of "What Are You Doing On New Year's Eve?" has a chilling undercurrent to it.

HA: You're absolutely right about that, and there's an undercurrent that's a little more sophisticated on "White Christmas," because it starts off in minor and has just a little different vibe to it. I feel like there are a lot of people that Christmas isn't so wonderful for them. People living in some not-so-great situations. Christmas isn't always a wonderful time of year for a lot of people, it's just another time of year that they're not as happy as they could be.

MR: Which, sadly, also applies to New Year's.

HA: Absolutely.

MR: You can also hear a real intimacy on the title track.

HA: I think the message is really great. It's all about love. That's what it's all about. That's "The Christmas Wish."

MR: Your wife Lani sings lead on that track. Her voice has gotten smokier, more expressive over the years, and your own technique on the trumpet fills it with emotion. Do you think that comes with age?

HA: I think you're hitting on something. It does come with age, but it also comes with passion. I'm passionate about playing the horn. You know my story, we've spoken before. I started playing when I was eight years old and I had this great opportunity in my grammar school, so it's been a wonderful ride for me. I'd love for other kids to have that opportunity, not necessarily to be a musician but to express themselves at an early age through painting, sculpting, writing, poetry, acting—it doesn't really matter what—and to get those feelings out. I've had this great opportunity that I've followed through with, that was "passion." I'm not doing this to keep my name in lights, I'm doing it because it's something I just love to do. I love waking up in the morning and practicing the horn and painting and sculpting. I'm a lucky guy.

MR: You are, and you've had a lot of success to be able to help people, too. Your school and your foundation are both testaments to that. And you keep "Herb Alpert" low-key while doing that. Beautiful...and you've been at this a while.

HA: Yeah, I started the foundation in around 1982 and one of my objectives was, "If I can do it, you can do it. Tag, you're it." The opportunity to help other people is a really uplifting thing to do in life. I think if we're given this great ticket to be a part of life, then we should all have the same opportunity. That's what I find really stressing. We all have this same ticket, so I want the playing field to be even. That's why we made this huge donation to the community college, the LACC, where we can give kids a chance who don't have the opportunity to go to UCLA or USC or Yale or Harvard or the big schools. This donation was not sexy. It wasn't like, "Wow, look what we're doing!" It's very low-key and what it did was just help kids that want to see if they can take a step up in life and they didn't have the opportunity, didn't have the funds even to go to a community college. This gives them that opportunity, and if they do well and put in the time, they have that chance to transition into a bigger university. It's a two-year program at LACC and it has just given kids a leg up. I like that feeling.

MR: Do you keep an eye on those kids? Do you poke in every once in a while?

HA: Yeah, actually, I do. The wonderful lady who runs the foundation is more hands-on than I am, but every year, we go to the school and I meet with the kids and hear their stories and it's beautiful. It's a great feeling to be able to help others. I love it.

MR: Were any of them lucky enough to appear on the Christmas album?

HA: No, that was another thing. The orchestra we had is all professional musicians, and the thirty-two piece choir is all people who work in town and read music. That's their livelihood.

MR: I briefly mentioned Richard Carpenter earlier. Richard and Karen Carpenter recorded one of the great Christmas albums of all time for your old label, A&M, and you used him to arrange your cover of his and Frank Poole's original "Merry Christmas, Darling," a song that now seems as traditional as "White Christmas." What was it like working with him again and why did you choose that song?

HA: Well, I signed the Carpenters to A&M in 1970, and I love Karen. She was a doll. She had a God-given, amazing voice. She never really realized how she affected so many people around the world with her talent. If you asked her, she'd say, "Well I'm a really great drummer." She was something special. That song, "Merry Christmas, Darling," was one of the songs on their Christmas album that I happened to like a lot. Richard wrote the song and I asked him if he'd do the arrangement for me on this one with the orchestra and the choir. He was more than happy to do that. He's a really talented guy. When people talk about the Carpenters and they say, "Karen was this magical artist," she was, but it was the two of them. Richard really knew how to get the most out of Karen's talent, he knew a great song, and he's an excellent arranger, so I'm delighted that he was part of this album.

MR: Richard's not only part of your history but also your extended A&M family. It seems it was a very tight group of people.

HA: It was. It was tight at the beginning because it was the two of us [A&M co-founder Jerry Moss] in my garage. Then there were three, and five and it was tight. Then there were ten and it was tight. Then there were forty and it was tight, and seventy and it was sort of tight, and then there was five-hundred and it wasn't tight anymore. I had to get out of there! [laughs]

MR: [laughs] Herb, everyone adored working there and loved you. And your independent label A&M influenced the music business as much as "majors" like Warners, Columbia, RCA, and Capitol.

HA: I recorded for a major company before A&M. I was very aware of how I was being treated and I just didn't want to repeat that with A&M. I wanted A&M to revolve around the artist. Artist first. That's the feeling that we had and I think artists appreciated that.

MR: So you recorded The Christmas Wish at the Capital Tower, right?

HA: The main studio there, the one that Sinatra recorded in. It has a huge history and it's a really excellent studio.

MR: I have to mention that you had one of the great studios, yourself. A&M Studios was a remarkable facility.

HA: It still is one of the most-used studios in town.

MR: Right, since it became Henson Recording Studio.

HA: It's a terrific studio.

MR: Recording at Capital Studios and seeing those Hall of Fame pictures—greats like Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin, etc.—those were vocalists for whom music was more than a product, it was about creating a work. Do you acknowledge at this point that you're in that realm of artists?

HA: We just got off the road after doing a series of concerts back East. It's amazing, the reaction that we get. When I played the "Tijuana Brass Medley," people love it. My wife Lani sings a little "Brazil '66 Medley"; same reaction. Then we play these other songs surrounding those two medleys and the reaction has been phenomenal, so I know I'm making a lot of people happy with the music. That's certainly a terrific feeling. But if you want to get down to how that all happened, I think timing plays a huge part in an artist's success. If we tried to start A&M Records in today's musical environment, I don't think it would have a chance. In 1962, when it started, the timing was perfect, and then the timing was perfect with [our hit] "The Lonely Bull." I'm not taking anything away from me or the talent I have or the time that I put in to develop it, but timing is the key ingredient.

MR: It seems to always be about being in the right place at the right time and having the right amount of talent.

HA: I tell the kids you've got to be passionate. If you want to be a musician, unless you're passionate about it, forget it. While you're sleeping, these other kids who want the same thing that you want will be practicing. I put in my time. I still do. I play this horn every day. I'm trying to get as good as I can on it. Dizzy Gillespie was a friend of mine and he used to say, "The closer I get, the farther it looks." I love that.

MR: Have you been in the music business as long as you have out of pure enjoyment?

HA: I love it. I don't know if you heard the Volume One album, but I love the process. You know I started playing when I was eight, but then when I had this opportunity to work with Sam Cooke. Lou Adler and I wrote a song with Sam called "What A Wonderful World," and I watched Sam and learned from this guy. He was a great gospel artist and it was all about feel. To me, if I can just wrap up what art is all about in a word—it's all about feel. It's not about anything else. It's about that thing that you can't identify but certain artists have—Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis... It's about feel. It's that certain little thing that you can't identify.

This is as close as I can come to identifying it. I did this Kraft Music Hall show in the sixties and I was the MC. Louis Armstrong was on the show. I played a couple of things with Louis and interviewed him, but what I realized with him was his sound, his persona, his personality, all came right through the horn. It was so honest. It was so authentic. From that point on, I realized, "That's the only way to be." Don't measure yourself against other artists, get yourself up to your own water level.

MR: Although he and other inspired you in your practice.

HA: Oh, definitely! But I tried playing like Louis and I tried playing like Miles and Harry James and a lot of different people, then I realized, "Who in the hell wants to hear that? They've already done it." That's when I was looking for my own voice. So on top of this thing that I'm stuck with—finding the feel—you've got your own voice. You've got to find your personal way of doing it, whether you're an actor, a painter, a sculptor, whatever you happen to do, you have to find your own voice. If there is a key, I think that's it.

MR: I was going to ask what advice you have for new artists, but you said it right there.

HA: Yeah. It's in the abstract. But passion is the key. If you don't really, really feel it and wake up in the morning excited to do it, forget it. There are too many great musicians out there, for one. We have a jazz club in LA here, Vibrato, and a lot of wonderful musicians reside right here in Los Angeles. Some of them deserve more attention than they're getting, but that's the way it goes. It's rough. You've got to be at the right place at the right time at the right moment to be heard.

MR: Your club Vibrato seems to have become the Blue Note of the West Coast. Are you going to do a Christmas concert there?

HA: I don't think so. The orchestra and the choir wouldn't fit into the place. But as we've been traveling the last couple of weeks we did a couple of songs in concert. We did "Santa Baby" and "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town" and people love it. I'm a lucky guy. I get to do what I really love to do and people respond to that. It's a pretty nice feeling.

MR: You're sculpting, you're painting, you're recording music... Are there other creative areas that you want to get into that you haven't yet?

HA: I'm really doing what I love to do creatively. In terms of the Foundation, I want to make sure we can be as effective as possible. We're not the Ford Foundation but we have limited funds that if we use wisely, we can help a lot of kids and we have been helping a lot of kids. It's just more of the same, making sure that I'm authentic. I want to be me, I don't want to be anybody else. I want to be a good example for people that are successful.

MR: And I'm imagining Lani's okay with all of this? [laughs]

HA: [laughs] Lani is an angel, she changed my life. In the middle of December, we'll be celebrating our forty-fourth wedding anniversary and she's an amazing human being. I'd give the whole thing up just to be with her. Not the Foundation, but the records, the attention, the music, the notoriety, and all that. I can do without that but I couldn't do without her. As you get older—I'm eighty two, as you know—you kind of get rid of the bulls**t. Your brain won't accept it anymore...at least mine won't.