



HERB ALPERT

A master of the trumpet and music business alike reflects and looks ahead

By Bill DeMain

with a career of nearly five decades behind him, legendary trumpeter Herb Alpert still takes the same approach to reinterpretation that he always has. "I like to do songs that are familiar, then put my own little twist on them," he says. "There's no fun in doing them the way they've been done before." He takes just that approach on his first studio album in a dozen years: *I Feel You*, a jazzy collaboration with his wife, former Brasil '66 vocalist Lani Hall. Together the duo reinvents classics from the Beatles ("Here Comes the Sun") to bossa nova ("Berimbau") to Broadway ("Til There Was You"), bending them into delightfully unexpected shapes. Alpert's familiarity-with-a-twist style has served him well. In the 1960s, he and his group the Tijuana Brass turned everything from "A Taste of Honey" to "Zorba the Greek" into crossover hits and sold more than 6 million copies of their landmark 1965 album *Whipped Cream & Other Delights*. By the time Alpert hit No. 1 in 1969 with his vocal debut, "This Guy's in Love With You," he'd racked up several Grammys and been cited in the Guinness World Records for placing five albums in the Top 20 simultaneously.

Alpert extended his unique philosophy into the music business when he and partner Jerry Moss founded A&M Records in 1962, the same year Alpert released his classic debut single, "The Lonely Bull." Home to superstar acts such as the Carpenters, Cat Stevens and the Police, A&M was known for its artist-friendly environment. "Jerry and I were not greedy guys," Alpert says. "We loved to treat artists fairly." Alpert and Moss sold the company in 1989 and formed a new label, Almo Sounds, five years later. More recently Alpert has helped found Artists House Music, an interactive education site for musicians. He also continues to pursue his passions for painting, sculpting and, of course, the trumpet. "I'm looking for the same thing

in everything I do,” he says. “That lyrical feeling, that thing that touches the soul.” We caught up with the Chicago native to discuss music, business and the bullfight that changed his life.

What sparked the new album?

The simple answer: I enjoy playing. Lani and I have a group, and we’ve been doing concerts for the last three years. We made a live album about two years ago called *Anything Goes* and we had a great response to that, so we thought we’d do a studio album as well.

What was your approach?

My parameter for everyone I record with is “Don’t think.” That’s the key, man. When we started recording, I told the drummer, Michael Shapiro, “I don’t want to hear any backbeats on this record.” He looked at me like a deer in the headlights. (laughs) I just didn’t want that incessant two-and-four bang you hear on most fusion records. Sometimes you can do more interesting, creative work when you set parameters like that at the outset.

What do you feel are the pluses and minuses of digital recording?

You have to be careful, because you can oversanitize a recording very easily. Suddenly you find that you’ve got umpteen tracks to fiddle with and all sorts of gadgets to keep you in tune and to replace parts. I’m totally aware of the spontaneity of music, and I’m OK with minor mistakes that happen within a song. A song has to breathe organically to touch me—and if it can touch me, then it can touch others as well. I’m from the old school. I want somebody to stand at a mic and sing and play. Let’s hear what they have to say. That’s something I learned from working with Sam Cooke back in the early ’60s.

What was Sam like?

Sam was always listening for the feel. He wanted his records to have honesty. I remember when he was cutting “For Sentimental Reasons” and the owner of the record company was in the control room. After a playback, he said to Sam, “Listen, you’ve got all these opportunities to put in a bunch of ‘Whoa-whoas.’” Sam’s previous hit, “You Send Me,” had a bunch of “Whoa-whoas.” Sam simply said, “Hey, you can’t just put a ‘Whoa-whoa’ in whenever you want. You got to feel it!” (laughs)

What inspired “The Lonely Bull”?

It was the spring of 1962, and I saw a matador named Carlos Arruza at a bullfight in Tijuana. I came home to L.A. and started experimenting in my little garage studio, trying to capture the excitement and visual power of Arruza. I played the tune for a few people but didn’t get a terrific reaction. I’d overdubbed my horns, but the song needed an extra hook. So I came up with the idea of adding in the yells from a bullfight. An engineer friend of mine had a tape of 20,000 people at a bullfight, recorded live in Mexico. The record got some local radio play and really took off from there. With “The Lonely Bull,” I realized the power of making visual instrumental music.

Why do you believe *Whipped Cream & Other Delights* was such a hit?

It was a lucky stroke. Our distributor in New Orleans played the song “Whipped Cream” for me over the phone. It was written by Allen Toussaint for Al Hirt, but Hirt turned it down. There was something unique about it—and that song was the catalyst to a concept album. Jerry always liked continuity in an album, a theme. So it was his idea to have all food titles:

“Peanuts,” “Tangerine” and so on. “A Taste of Honey” was the song that really took us to another dimension.

How did you come to sing “This Guy’s in Love With You”?

There’s a question I like to ask songwriters: “Is there one magical song you have in your drawer that you have a special feeling about but has never had its day?” I was looking for a song for a television special I was doing [The Beat of the Brass, 1968]. So I asked Burt Bacharach that question, and he sent me “This Girl’s in Love With You,” with Dionne Warwick singing. She had cut it, but it wasn’t a hit. I fell in love with the melody and asked [Bacharach’s co-writer] Hal David if he’d make some modifications on the lyric—change the gender and adapt it to the TV show. He agreed. And it wasn’t my idea to sing. Honestly, I was reluctant at first. It was Jack Haley Jr., the director of the show, who convinced me. I just had to find the right song.

Why did you sign the Carpenters?

I got their demo tape and used the Sam Cooke method, which was to close my eyes and listen. The speakers were in front of me, about 10 feet from the couch, but Karen Carpenter’s voice seemed to be sitting right next to me. I was intrigued. It wasn’t the type of music I would go out of my way to listen to, because I was coming from Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. But they had a certain honesty that was beautiful, and her voice was extraordinary. I said, “I want to sign them.” Done deal. We didn’t need board members to raise their hands in a meeting. We made decisions quickly, that was the beauty of A&M.

What about Cat Stevens?

Boy, there’s a guy who was really on his own planet. First time I heard him was at the Troubadour in L.A. This was after he was already a success in the U.K. It was just him and a guitar, but he could captivate you with his unique voice and his songs. His passion was overwhelming.

And the Police?

They were signed out of London. Then they came over and did a performance at the Whiskey A Go-Go in L.A. I remember thinking, “Here are three guys on stage, and they sound like eight!” Sting was bouncing around the stage like he was on a pogo stick. The songs were terrific, and each member brought a unique element to the sound.

What’s a day in your life like?

I get up around 6. I’ll read for a while, go in the studio and play the horn, then paint. I like to get on the computer, check email, the news and various websites. I also sculpt. I do these huge bronze sculptures. I live on the right side of my brain about 80 percent of the time. I think about creating. That’s what I love to do.