

# Q&A: Herb Alpert

**Bruce Richardson talks to the jazz legend about his career, Spotify, lessons from Sam Cooke and Miles Davis, and music education. He and his wife, Lani Hall, play the Majestic Theatre on Saturday.**

by Bruce Richardson TheaterJones March 31, 2016

Legend is too small a word. He's earned nine Grammys, and recorded 29 gold and platinum albums. He has sold well over 72 million albums. He is married to Lani Hall, the magical voice behind Sergio Mendez's Brasil '66, and a Grammy winner in her own right. Together they operate the Herb Alpert Foundation and the Alpert Awards in the Arts, which have awarded many tens of millions into education and artist development.

After finding some early success in songwriting, Herb Alpert's first hit was an overdubbed home-studio experiment, inspired by Les Paul's work. He wanted to take an early lesson from Sam Cooke—that people cared most about music that made them feel something. A trip to Tijuana's bullfights, with their roaring crowds and mariachis, was the light bulb moment. A few overdubs later a new Sol Lake tune called "Twinkle Star" had morphed into "The Lonely Bull," and Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass was born.

So was A&M Records. With his new partner, independent promoter Jerry Moss, and a \$200 bank account, Herb Alpert and The Tijuana Brass would sell enough records to bankroll the most successful record company of its time.

TheaterJones chatted with Alpert, who will appear with Hall at 8 p.m. Saturday, April 2, at The Majestic Theatre in downtown Dallas.

TheaterJones: Are you in the throes of tour prep?

(Laughs) In the throes of sculpting at the moment.

Cool, what are you working on?

Totems. Giant bronze totems. I have nine huge totems in front of the Field Museum in Chicago at the moment. There's eight in the entrance, and one inside. It's been good, I've been doing this for years. Sculpting, painting, blowing the horn, doing concerts. I'm a lucky guy, man, a lucky guy.

You've created a lot of luck for some grateful musicians...

We weren't looking for the beat of the week, we were looking for artists with something unique and special to say, and we picked those artists and we didn't give up on them. In today's world, if an artist doesn't sell off the bat, they're gone, jettisoned, off the label. We didn't do that. That's the reason we were successful. The Carpenters didn't happen off the bat, it took a while for them to mature, and Cat Stevens...The Police. The Police did, with "Roxanne."

Yes, they were immediately hot.

They had done a lot of the legwork, traversing Europe, and they were ready to take on the big time stuff.

And they were ready for MTV, too.

That was a big transition, between people listening with their ears, and listening with ears and eyes. All the sudden, if you had it together, and you could dance like Michael or package up your material in a slick way, you had a nice shot.

So, rewind to the very top. What got you started?

When I was eight years old, I had this remarkable opportunity. We had a music appreciation class, and we listened to classical music mostly. There was this table of instruments. I picked up the trumpet, and I tried to blow hot air through it...and you know that didn't work. But I took some lessons, and the thing started talking for me, and I was blasting away. I was shy, not very verbal. So the horn became my mouthpiece, and obviously through the years it's been a good friend. A good friend, but it turned against me at one point in my life...

The trumpet is a cruel mistress.

Oh yeah, it got cruel in 1969. I was stuttering through the instrument. I was going through a divorce. Emotionally, I couldn't do it. It took a while to get the answers I needed. I started taking lessons from Carmine Caruso, a teacher in New York who was called "The Troubleshooter."

Ha...chop doc.

Yeah, exactly. But he never played trumpet. I think he played saxophone and flute. He was about the physics of the instrument, that's what he studied. How do you make a sound? He taught me a lot.

What about influences?

I spent a lot of time trying to play like other people. I could play like Harry James and Louis Armstrong...not like them, but I could cop their sound. But who the hell wants to hear that? They've already done it. It took me a while to get that "aha" going...for myself.

But then you created this fusion of mariachi, that double time upbeat in the guitar against a shuffle, that set of elements that made up the Tijuana Brass sound. And you built A&M Records out of two hundred bucks and The Lonely Bull.

It was a whole different period. I think if A&M tried to start in today's music world, it wouldn't have a chance. It was timing. You gotta be at the right time at the right place, and be prepared, and if all those link up properly, you've got a good shot. But you need luck as well.

How did you put the elements together for The Tijuana Brass?

Photo: Tony Brown

Herb Alpert receiving a National Medal of Arts and Humanities from Barack Obama in 2012

I was enamored with that record Les Paul did, around '57-'59, How High the Moon, where he was overdubbing and layering his guitar. And I started doing that at home, in my little garage studio, and I came up with this sound. So that was really the genesis of the sound. The Lonely Bull happened in 1962. That was the opening door. That record took off like a rocket. It gave me the encouragement to continue on and develop that idea.

I got a letter from a woman in Germany, while this record was in the top ten, and she thanked me for sending her on this vicarious trip to Tijuana. When I read it, I was like, "Yeah, sure," but then I thought, "Well, that record was so visual for her that it transported her..."

She went there.

Yeah. And that's the kind of music I started trying to make, music that took you someplace and conjured up feelings.

The Tijuana Brass was classically programmatic in that way for sure.

I was trying to paint with an honest palette. I didn't try to make The Lonely Bull sideways...I kept trying to push it, but I wasn't trying to make a hit record. I was just trying to make a good record. That was the key for me.

I worked with Sam Cooke and watched him, and he taught me a heck of a lot. Sam used to say, "People don't care, they're just listening to a cold piece of wax. They don't care what kind of echo you're using, or if you're black or white. It's just a feel. Doesn't matter if you're in tune, out of tune, things that heady people get wrapped up in. It's all about the feel."

To me, that's art in general. You can't put your finger on why you like something. I loved Miles Davis. I can't tell you why. I loved the way he played, but if you try to analyze it...

Or try to imitate it...

Exactly. You can't. We played in Rome once, and I walked through the Sistine Chapel, and thought about what this guy Michaelangelo accomplished. Holy shit, man, who is going to compete with that? But you only have to compete with yourself, set your own water level. I can't do what he does, he can't do what I do.

In college, I was trying to sound like Miles and Freddie. And I got out and started playing, and people would say, "Wow, you really sound like Miles," and I began to understand that wasn't necessarily a great thing. I think I was afraid that my thing wouldn't be cool enough.

Yeah, that's the realization every artist needs...when you start actively trying to get to your own thing. If you're too heavy in the judgment department you can blow it. You never quite get where you want to go. Dizzy Gillespie used to say "The closer I get the farther it looks."

Hey, I've been checking out your jazz club, Vibrato. How's it going?

Last year was our best year, and this year is starting out great. I wanted to have a place where great musicians in the area, and people from all over the world, could play...where you walk in and it's really comfortable, and the acoustics are impeccable. When I was creating it, I had Vincent Danoff—the same guy who did the A&M Studio—with me every step of the way. It's a restaurant with studio sound. You walk around the place and the sound is even and musical everywhere. It's pride of ownership for me. I love the feedback I get from musicians. The place is beautiful and the food is good.

I've seen the pictures. It's gorgeous.

Unfortunately, as you know, jazz represents like two percent of the total sales of CDs, if there is even such a thing as sales right now. It's not getting the attention it deserves. It's the great American contribution to music.

The Internet tore me a new one.

The Internet has decimated the record industry. It's leveled it, man, completely.

I did that record Rise. My nephew wrote the tune and we produced it together. We had a good first run, and got another run, a mashup with Hypnotize on a monster R&B record a few years back. For, like, forty zillion spins, I think the check from Spotify was \$18. It's unfair. The record companies are in cahoots with them. It's an unfortunate situation for creative people.

OK, I want to walk back through something. Brasil '66. Sergio Mendes describes his first meeting with you and Jerry as "the magic of the encounter." You produced several of those records, right? You came up with the idea to double track Lani like that?

Yeah. Sergio had another singer, she was really beautiful.

The blonde?

No, this was before the blonde. She was a big star in Brazil, had a soap opera. She could really sing, but she wasn't a recording artist. That's different. And then I heard Lani, and thought, "Wow. What a voice. That is a God-given voice there."

When Sergio played all those songs for me, I really loved "Mas Que Nada," but he was doing it at a hummingbird's pace...man it was REALLY fast. I said, "Man, that's no good, we gotta slow this baby down."

He says that he never gets tired of playing "Mas Que Nada," that it was the song that changed his life forever.

Sergio is an extremely talented guy. He has great taste with songs and he is a wonderful musician. And I'm forever indebted to Sergio, because without him I wouldn't have found my wife Lani, and we've been married for 42 years.

"Mas Que Nada" wasn't the first Sergio tune that came into my awareness. It was his version of "Going Out of My Head," with Lani doubled on the verses and then soloed on the bridge. She killed that bridge, you just wanted to hang on every note.

That was a cool one. She just has a spectacular voice. Check out "So Many Stars." It's a song Sergio wrote actually, the Bergmans did the lyrics and Dave Grusin did the arrangement.

Those Brasil '66 records were game changers...there was a Bossa Nova invasion in full swing before the British Invasion.

It all started with Stan Getz. That was the breakthrough for Brazilian music in this country. He had that record [Jazz Samba] with Charlie Byrd in 1962, and won the Grammy (for Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Desafinado") in 1963, and then "The Girl From Ipanema" went nuts.

Stan Getz was a dear friend of mine. He was like a brother to me. The last four years of his life, he lived next door.

OK, I had no idea.

He was living in Palo Alto. I called him, I forget the year now, and I said, "Man, is there anything that you've wanted to record that you haven't recorded?" He loved that question and wanted to get together, so he flew down and we chatted, and I signed him to A&M.

Then he said, "I want you to produce me."

And I said, "No man, no chance. I've heard horror stories about you." But he guaranteed me he was going to be cool. He had cancer at that point in his life. He was eating macrobiotic, and burning moxa in his belly button, and he was making peace with all the people he'd leveled in his drug days. So, I produced him and we became really close friends. He was quite a guy, really, a guy you would love because he didn't know how to bullshit.

I know he had no poker face at all.

No, he had no filter. He'd say anything that came to mind. We'd get into an argument about something, and he'd say, "What do you know motherfucker, you're down to your last hundred million dollars..."

OK, what people may not know is that you've probably given away a hundred million dollars through The Herb Alpert Foundation. You've built music schools. You've endowed programs. And tell me about the Alpert Awards in the Arts. You are preparing to award the 2016 recipients.

Well, we've been doing that for the last 20 years. Five artists every year, in different categories.

So you don't have to be a musician to get in on this one.

You don't. We've had all kinds of artists. I always gravitate towards those that choose the road less traveled, the ones willing to do whatever they want to do, not to make money, not to just knock one out, not to get laid...not to do anything other than follow their passion. The artists we've chosen for the Alpert Awards are generally artists in mid-career that are passionate about what they're doing, and need a little shove and a little encouragement. That's what we try to do with them.

And it has been beautiful. These are real artists, people who are doing it for the right reason. They're not trying to knock you out with something that's super commercial. They're just trying to be themselves, and I think that is really noble.

Your Foundation has made some big investments in jazz.

Yes. We have the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, and the Monk Institute is with us. The Monk Institute takes in seven musicians each year. And it was a fabulous audition, musicians from all over the world...Israel, Afghanistan, just all over, including the US. It was me, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Jimmy Heath...interviewing these musicians and listening to them, and it was amazing to see how many wonderful musicians there are who are not necessarily struggling, but looking for their time in the sun. And it's not that easy to get rolling these days. Jazz is really not understood the way it should be. Playing the tune and taking chorus after chorus and going back to the tune is not what is happening any more.

We need the new Miles Davises of the world. Kind of Blue is selling 5000 CDs a week the last several years. It's unbelievable. He understood a great song, and understood how to put great musicians together. Of course, Bill Evans didn't get his due on that one. He brought a new harmonic language. I got to spend an afternoon with Bill at A&M once. That guy was...I mean, you really can't even put it into words. He was just uniquely special.

You signed all kinds of artists at A&M. But there was a thread running through all of it. The production values were high. What else?

Well, take Stan Getz. The intent was always there, the passion and the intent. He didn't give you a cursory note that didn't belong someplace. I think that's the key that all good artists have. I don't think it matters what degree of talent they have if they can do it that way.

When I listened to the Carpenters, that's what got me. That wasn't the music I listened to. But I felt their intent was there, their passion for what they do.

So, did they come to the table with all of the arrangements and that particular style in place?

There was no table on that one. Somebody slipped me a tape, and I closed my eyes listening to it, and Karen's voice struck me. I was just thinking, "Wow, I've gotta hear more of this."

They weren't doing that style. They were doing some other stuff. Karen was playing drums. She thought she was a jazz drummer, and she was actually pretty good. "Close to You" was the one that opened the door for them.

And you ended up married to Lani Hall.

Lucky me.

Yes, lucky you.

We have a terrific relationship. She is an amazing wife. Amazing talent. She's brilliant. She doesn't sing a note unless it's coming from a deep place. She just can't do it any other way.