

# Q&A: Herb Alpert

The jazz legend, who performs Saturday at the Majestic Theatre, on his new album, career, signing The Carpenters, and loving art.

Bruce Richardson TheaterJones October 10, 2019

**Dallas** — This Saturday, **Herb Alpert and Lani Hall** return to Dallas's Majestic Theatre for a one-night appearance. Alpert's new album *Over the Rainbow* topped last week's Billboard jazz album charts, and features a wide variety of new material and well-loved covers.

Alpert rose to fame when he released an experimental multitrack recording, in which he overdubbed trumpet tracks and the sounds of a bullfight he'd seen to a tune he'd been working on. Released as *The Lonely Bull* in 1962, by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass, the single took off. Realizing the potential, Alpert joined forces with Jerry Moss, and founded A&M Records.

Alpert soon signed a young Brazilian jazz pianist named Sergio Mendes, and the resulting album *Herb Alpert Presents Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66*, brought A&M Records a new hit with "Mas Que Nada." But for Alpert and Brasil '66 lead singer Lani Hall, the collaboration led to romance and a lifetime artistic partnership as well.

Alpert and Hall take the stage at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 12. TheaterJones caught up with Alpert for a phone interview.

**TheaterJones: Before we jump down the rabbit hole, let's talk about the show. You're back at the Majestic.**

Herb Alpert: That's a great sounding room, great stage sound, so it's fun for us, and the audience has a great experience there.

**I saw video in the shows you did earlier in the year. Are you still using that?**

Oh, that's a big part of the show now. We've tweaked it into something really nice that people enjoy. The music is different, too. We still do a Tijuana Brass medley, and Lani does a Brasil '66 thing, but what we do around that tends to be different every night. All the guys in the band are friends of ours; great musicians. We've had the same group together 13 years now, so we can really just go out and have fun with it. We average about 50 dates a year.

**That's insane, man. I think it's safe to say you're the only octogenarian record industry mogul with a 50-date road schedule.**

Yeah, I'm a lucky, lucky guy. I obviously don't need to do this. But I like it. I'm grateful for my good fortune, and a certain number of people still love to hear this music. We get to spread some joy. It makes me feel good to be able to do that.

**Well, I want to talk about your visual art, too, because it's not like music is all you're doing. You're still cranking out shows, right?**

Yeah, man. More than ever. I've got three new shows at the moment. One's in China, in Macao. We just put up 12 sculptures at the Jackson Hole Museum of Art. And there are still nine sculptures in Chicago at the Field Museum.

I just opened a show at the Annenberg Estate in Palm Desert [California], called *Reach for the Sky: Tradition + Inspiration*. That one's a beauty, because I'm exhibiting with a family of [Canadian First Nations] traditional carvers; Henry Hunt, and his son Stanley and grandson Jason.

I was inspired to start with the totems when I saw the sculptures in Stanley Park, Vancouver, years ago. I started out experimenting with those original faces and forms...birds, animals. Then I started riffing on the idea of jazz totems; what would those forms be? The Hunts get a kick out of me "going tall" with my artwork, based on their ancestral poles. But man, what I do would never exist without that inspiration.

I am popping down to New Orleans for a couple of hours after our Houston show, because they want to put a sculpture in the Jazz Museum there. I want to see the space before I pick something for that.

**Last time we talked, we got into your history with A&M Records, and how your Tijuana Brass record, *The Lonely Bull*, essentially launched hundreds of careers. You outsold The Beatles in 1966. You have a standing Guinness Record for having five albums in the Billboard top 20 at the same time.**

Well, you have to remember what a transitional time we were in. The business. The country. The world as well. I think the key ingredient was timing, being at the right place at the right time. If we started A&M Records today, I don't think we'd have a chance.

**I was born the same year Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, came out, so as far as I knew, there was always instrumental music spinning when I was a kid. Then, as I grew up and got into it myself, the market for it seemed to evaporate.**

Yeah, you know, the thing people don't remember is that as much as we revere Charlie Parker, Dizzy, all those bebop legends, they were not getting the big audiences that Miles won over with that record. Everyone benefited from it.

Last week I was pretty flattered that our new record *Over the Rainbow*, was No. 1 on iTunes and Amazon [Music] last week and was No. 1 on the Billboard Jazz Chart as well. And what was thrilling to me is that the No. 2 was *Kind of Blue*.

**Well, that's amazing, first of all. And in a way, a reflection of the business in a nutshell, right? Sixty years later, *Kind of Blue* is still moving thousands of units a week, and it's still the record to beat.**

Well, it's number one for a reason. Miles is it, my favorite jazz musician by far. Really the quintessential jazz artist. He understood the medium, all the ingredients. He knew a good song. He knew space. He was never trying to razzle-dazzle you. He was always authentic.

**And always surrounding himself with the best people he could find, such as Bill Evans.**

I think Bill Evans was greatly responsible for that thing happening. Feeding Miles all that harmony, the feeling, the way he handled changes. He deserves a lot of the credit for that album's success. And of course, Cannonball and Coltrane didn't hurt the project at all.

**I know you credit timing with a lot of your success, but I can't help thinking that if your 24-year-old self were plunked down in today's market you'd find your way. In many ways, we are in the same kind of transitioning world. Have you checked out Snarky Puppy's live studio concerts?**

Yeah, man. I like that group a lot. I think they're onto something. But you know, at the heart of it, the music is good. The videos work because it's all there.

**I guess what I'm referring to, though, is that instinct to look for**

**nontraditional ways to get the music out. You didn't invent licensing revenue, but you certainly saw the potential in the media landscape you inhabited. You couldn't turn on the TV without hearing the Tijuana Brass. But at the same time, you were signing and producing artists like mad. Were you pretty much "the guy" at A&M when it came to all the artistic-side decisions?**

Early on, yeah. It was just the two of us, me and Jerry [Moss], running out of my garage. Then two, three, four of us. When we had five it was a staff, then 12, then a hundred. At that point, I was involved in the overall concept, but nothing nuts-and-bolts. By the time we sold, it was 500 employees.

But Jerry and I were steering the ship the whole time. All the big decisions we both made by just the two of us. So, there was nothing like a Board of Trustees who voted on whether I should sign The Carpenters, say. I'd heard Karen's voice and met Richard; so I met them in my office. It wasn't the kind of music I made, or even liked, but there was something about them...her voice, and their willingness to make the kind of music they loved.

I peeked my head into Jerry's office, which was right next to mine, and I said, "I'm going to sign these Carpenters. I love them." And he says great. That was it. Done.

**And it was pretty much the opposite of anything that was selling at the time.**

Yeah, but that feeling. All art, period, whether it's acting, poetry, sculpture, painting, music...it's all about the feeling, right? You can walk by a dozen good paintings, but a great one will stop you in your tracks. All you can do is stand there and stare at it. You can't quantify that or analyze it. Forget it. You don't analyze a Jackson Pollock painting. You feel it, and you get it. I had that feeling, hearing her voice.

It's hard to convince people of that, though. When I had A&M, and I had a record that I thought was worthy of the people whose job it was to promote it, sometimes I'd play it for them, and they'd be staring out the window like they were on something. That's happened with The Carpenters and their first couple of records. They'd look at me like "why the hell would you sign these people?" Of course, that all changed when they hit no. 1 with "Close to You." Suddenly I'm a genius.

But for me, it was all in the feels category, that otherworldly thing you can't define. That's the beauty I find in the arts. It's passion. All these years, and I'm still seduced still by painting, and sculpting, and making music.

Now, CBS, Warner Brother's, all the big companies, that wasn't the process there. Our operation made us a very different company; nimble. We could make decisions very quickly.

**The roster of artists that A&M signed while you operated the company is remarkable. Despite that, in the big scheme of things, A&M was an indie label that just happened to compete with the big boys for mainstream success. Was there ever a "one that got away" that you really wanted to sign?**

Oh yeah. Prince. When I heard the demo tapes he was shopping around, I said, "Holy crap, let's sign this guy, he's great." But even though we were big for an independent label, we couldn't throw down the millions and millions that the conglomerates were shelling out for artists. We went back and forth, but we just couldn't afford to get into that picture. It wasn't something we could safely do.

**So, before we go, I just want to circle back around to something we talked about last time you were in town: your philanthropic efforts. You and Lani operate the Herb Alpert Foundation — you've endowed university music programs, created mid-career awards, provided a home for the Monk Institute (now the Herbie Hancock Institute), and since we've last spoken, an endowment you funded at Los Angeles City College now provides a tuition-free education for students who major in music. That's an extraordinary contribution.**

Well, we are still in high gear on all of that. If I had the power, I would make sure that every kid, in every school, public or private, could have creative experiences starting at an early age. I was privileged to have that, but I don't think it should be a privilege. Everyone should experience art, whether that's music, dance, poetry — it should be considered a human right.

