

Instinct, vision, and a bit of Brass

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IT might be a 1969 telegram to Australia from a label president unaccustomed to working with openly out-of-control rockers, asking about Joe Cocker's "deportment." Or a letter from a fan irritated that it was not possible, in 1966, to buy tickets in New Jersey for a concert in Queens. A recording studio schedule revealing that crooner Bing Crosby and country rockers the Flying Burrito Brothers were working side by side one March 1970 evening. And an apology from an international branch manager in 1977: He just couldn't get a video promotion for Quincy Jones' "Roots" album on South African television.

These are just a few of thousands of documents contained in the A&M; Records Collection at UCLA. Here, a cache of donated recordings, photographs and promotional items, and boxes and boxes of business papers offer a rare glimpse into the mind-set of a working record label. Reading through the material, what registers above all is how much had to be invented to create pop music as we now understand it: a global industry of countless styles, formats, venues and distribution channels. What we often reflexively dismiss as "mainstream" or "middle of the road" is actually a complex, if hard to mythologize, accomplishment.

And A&M; was arguably the most adventurous mainstream label in music history. With founders Herb Alpert, a jazz trumpeter with an ear for pop, and Jerry Moss, who got his start promoting records to radio stations, about to receive a president's merit award at this year's Grammys, a reconsideration is in order.

Founded in 1962, with offices in the historic Charlie Chaplin film lot on La Brea Avenue, A&M; led the pivotal 1960s shift of the music industry from New York to California. An independent label that competed with the majors, it survived by becoming steadily more diverse in its artist roster.

Talent-spotting acumen

MOSS is still old school enough to call himself a “record man.” “I always liked the term,” the wry and spry septuagenarian says in his Beverly Hills offices, where every wall holds an artwork by the likes of Roy Lichtenstein or a memento of his 2005 Kentucky Derby winning race horse, Giacomo. (Horse racing and philanthropy are his main pursuits these days.) “I’ve never been a real business man. I don’t read a balance sheet all that well. We just always were trying to survive, after Herbie’s great success allowed us to build a company. We went along, looking for people who really excited us, and once in a while we got lucky and found somebody.”

It is the range of those somebodies that registers in retrospect. Nearly all of A&M’s top acts were categories unto themselves, centrist entertainers with an off-center disposition. A&M; in the easy listening 1960s meant Alpert and his Tijuana Brass, which sold 13 million albums in 1966. In the pop-rock 1970s, it meant the terribly straight Carpenters on one end of the decade and the new wave Police on the other. (In between came the Captain & Tennille’s saccharine “Love Will Keep Us Together” and the album that ruined arena rock, “Frampton Comes Alive.”)

The 1980s saw Janet Jackson given a funky retrofit and grunge progenitors Soundgarden ushered into the pop arena. Before relinquishing A&M;, which they sold in 1989 for \$500 million to Polygram but managed until 1993, Alpert and Moss had one final signing: Sheryl Crow, an updated singer-songwriter versed in digital rhythm loops.

“Listening to artists, you don’t get a second chance,” says Alpert, whose status as a performer-businessman is unrivaled and gave A&M; its reputation as a musicians’ label. “You can’t hem and haw and decide in three weeks if you like them. As a partnership we were able to turn quickly. That worked to our advantage.”

Where Moss is the eclectic record man, Alpert, also 71, is the equally eclectic artist and dreamier interview presence. He can live with that. “I think the true measure for an artist is honesty,” he declares. “If you’re honest, you can win out. It doesn’t matter what genre you’re in. It’s like when we signed the Carpenters. There was some honesty about her [Karen Carpenter’s] voice, the way they approached it. It was real to them. That’s the measure.”

Alpert, who in recent years has exhibited sculpture and painting, funded arts education through his personal foundation, bankrolled theater pieces such as “Angels in America” and refashioned his Tijuana Brass catalog with new albums, was A&M’s first pioneer of mainstreaming. The archives at UCLA, which are open to the public by advance arrangement (an online exhibit of some the holdings can be viewed at the library website www.library.ucla.edu/amrecords), reveal how broad his appeal was, from teen magazines to White House appearances. One fan letter called him “the Lawrence Welk of the Acid Set,” an indication of just how fluid the generation gap was. Ethnicity was fluid too: playing faux-Mexican music crossed with jazz and pop, Alpert made a habit of announcing that the Tijuana Brass comprised “four lasagnas, two bagels and an American cheese.” He winces when reminded of that today: “We wanted to be entertaining. As I look back, I take offense at it.”

The easy listening idea of entertainment, where success was measured in Hollywood gossip column mentions and national television appearances, was not necessarily conservative politically. Among the papers at UCLA is a letter from civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy, thanking Alpert for appearing at a benefit show that featured committed leftists but also mainstream songsters Harry Belafonte and Barbra Streisand. Moss is proud to note that he made Nixon’s enemies list for his friendship with the Kennedys.

A versatile portfolio

ROCK was only one of A&M’s staples. Others included the softly orchestrated but deeply feminist sounds of Carole King, whose album “Tapestry” stayed on the charts for half a decade, and the cinematic jazz of African American pioneer Quincy Jones.

Among the most fascinating documents in the collection are weekly newsletters aimed at the label’s national promotions men, exhorting them to become conversant in a wide range of works, including free-form experimentalism and the work of smooth guitarist George Benson. It was the mix of stuff that remains so dizzying to contemplate. In 1979, a memo from England noted about a Los Angeles punk act: “The Incredible Shrinking Dickies Album enters industry chart here next week at No. 22. Number of retail accounts tells me that it is outselling the Bee Gees’ new album. Obviously we are all delighted here, but what a strange world we live in.” Moss says the industry now is much less fun, with corporate consolidation leaving fewer radio gatekeepers and pop music itself more of a “background” presence.

A&M, notoriously, quickly dropped punk rockers the Sex Pistols -- both the Pistols and Alpert & Moss were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year. But Moss says he and Alpert loved the band. "Supposedly, something happened between them and a friend of our British managing director's, an engineer, who maybe they roughed up a little bit or something. Our managing director felt that he couldn't root for them anymore, quite honestly, and we always felt that we wanted to be with people that we could root for."

That family style of doing business is part of A&M's lore: holding onto middling groups for multiple albums (which paid off when the long underperforming Supertramp helped rescue the label from financial crisis in 1979), embracing art and commerce with equal glee. Moss glows as he recalls coming back from Australia with a song, "The Lord's Prayer," by a rocking nun, Sister Janet Mead. "I said, 'Get one guy to play the record.' Finally, KMPC, somebody, played the record. Switchboard lit up. Record sold a million-four singles. I mean, the album did *nothing*."

Spoken like a true record man.