

He's Still a Player

By JOHN BERLAU

Many musicians have gotten their start in garages and, in the tech era, so have many entrepreneurs. But Herb Alpert has the rare distinction of beginning not only a successful career as a musician but a multinational entertainment corporation at the same time in one of them.

"It was a two-car garage that I converted into a studio," Mr. Alpert, 77, said during a telephone interview, recalling the events in his West Hollywood home more than 50 years earlier. "I made a room inside a room, and I was able to go out there at any time, day or night, and blow the horn and not disturb anyone."



Fred Harper

Herb Alpert foundation has given away more than \$120 million in grants.

That "horn" is the trumpet with which Mr. Alpert climbed the pop charts—first with "The Lonely Bull," the garage recording he made in 1962 after hearing the sounds of a Mexican bullfight, followed by a string of singles in the '60s with his band, the Tijuana Brass. He continued to have sporadic hits in the '70s and '80s, including "Rise," a disco-flavored instrumental work that topped the Billboard pop charts for two weeks in 1979.

Mr. Alpert and his wife, the singer Lani Hall, are currently performing with a backing trio at New York's Café Carlyle through March 16. He says playing in such small venues reconnects him to his musical roots of playing at weddings, bar mitzvahs and sororities before his breakthrough with "The Lonely Bull."

"I get a more sincere feeling out of playing at small, intimate clubs," Mr. Alpert says. "People are right there, and you can see them, and they react. I like to just have that feeling of playing and getting a response."

During this visit, Mr. Alpert will head uptown from the Café Carlyle's tony Upper East Side neighborhood to the Harlem School of the Arts. There, on Monday, that community center, which educates children in music, dance, theater and the visual arts, will add "Herb Alpert Center" to its name.

In 2010, the Herb Alpert Foundation saved the cash-strapped center from closing, and has supported it with grants totaling \$6 million since then. "I just couldn't imagine that such a historic and artistic community could lose its ethnically diverse center," he says.

The giving also reflects Mr. Alpert's belief in the importance of pairing talent with self-discipline to hone creativity. "I think everyone's creative to some degree," he says. "You have to find your own creativity and uniqueness, and maybe through your own uniqueness you can learn to appreciate each other's unique qualities."

Mr. Alpert made much of his fortune by seeking out the unique qualities of other artists in his parallel career as a record-company executive. But his label, A&M Records, began as a way for Mr. Alpert and his record-promoter friend Jerry Moss to distribute "The Lonely Bull." It got its name from the first initials of their last names; Mr. Alpert's signature trumpet was part of the logo. Their first office was in the same garage from which Mr. Alpert recorded.

"Our goal was not to start a record company," Mr. Alpert says. "We just wanted to put a record out and see what would happen." But when "The Lonely Bull" did well, Messrs. Alpert and Moss realized they had not only the resources but the know-how to expand their services to other artists. And they thought that caring about the musical product would give A&M an advantage over its larger competitors.

"We didn't want to be involved in the beat of the week," Mr. Alpert says. "We were trying to find artists who had something uniquely special to say in their own way."

Yet A&M ended up producing many hits, as well as signing and introducing musicians who would become superstars. In the decades before Messrs. Alpert and Moss sold A&M to PolyGram in 1989, artists on the label included everyone from the rock band the Police to the pop group the Go-Go's to jazz saxophonist (and Alpert influence) Paul Desmond.

"We were looking for artists who were passionate about what they were doing," Mr. Alpert says. This was a big reason he personally signed brother-and-sister singing duo Richard and Karen Carpenter, who would become one of the label's top hitmakers.

"The Carpenters' music wasn't my natural thing that I would listen to, but I loved [Karen's] voice," he recalls. "She reminded me of Patti Page or one of the great singers of the past." He says that the saddest part of her death in 1983 from complications of anorexia "is that she never really knew how great she was, and how many people she touched in a positive way."

Though no longer a music executive, Mr. Alpert is still on the lookout for young talent. The Herb Alpert Foundation has given away more than \$120 million in grants, much of which goes toward individual artists and music-education programs from preschool through college.

Of the popular musicians today, Mr. Alpert is particularly impressed with the singer Adele. Commenting on her performance at the Grammys last year, he says: "Adele just stood in

front of a microphone—no dancing, no flash. She just knocked everyone out with her voice and her intent. That's the type of artist who touches me the most."

But Mr. Alpert is also focusing on his own music and art. In addition to performing live, he and Ms. Hall are cutting a new album called "Stepping Out," which will include such standards as Irving Berlin's "Puttin' On the Ritz" and Cole Porter's "Anything Goes." Mr. Alpert has also become an accomplished painter and sculptor, and his artwork will be the subject of a show at the Robert Berman Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif., starting May 4.

Mr. Alpert, who has won several Grammys for instrumental performance as well as arrangement, still practices the trumpet for an hour every day, while adding that he will never completely "conquer the horn." He tells aspiring artists, such as the children he has met in Harlem, that there is no substitute for practice in mastering their creativity. "My big phrase is, 'When you're sleeping, someone else is practicing.'"