

Herb Alpert: Music legend happy he is ‘still in the mix’

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By [Anthony C. Hayes](#) · April 28, 2019 ·



LOS ANGELES — As a brash young trumpeter trading riffs with better players in the US Army Band, Herb Alpert realized that, if he was ever going to make it in music, he would have to come up with his own sound. Numerous Grammy awards later, no less an authority than Miles Davis maintained, “You hear three notes, and you know it’s Herb Alpert.”

Alpert and his wife – Grammy award-winning vocalist Lani Hall – are kicking off their 2019 tour this Wednesday night, with a tune-filled show at the [City Winery](#) in Washington DC. The concert will offer fans an eclectic mix of American standards, improvisational jazz and beloved classics from the Tijuana Brass and Brasil '66. The Alperns' eastern jaunt will also include stops in Boston, Chicago, Nashville and Atlanta, before they land in New York on May 10 for two shows AND the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Herb Alpert Awards in the Arts Celebration. (West Coast readers will be happy to learn that Herb has several concert dates in September in Sacramento, San Diego, and Las Vegas.)

We spoke with Alpert last Friday about the upcoming [tour](#), his art and philanthropy, and touched on many highlights from his six-plus decades in the music business.

BPE: Thank you for taking some time from your busy rehearsal schedule to speak with us today. I have to admit that this is a special honor for me. When I had the chance as a sixth-grader to take music lessons, I chose to learn the trumpet. And that was largely due to the music of Herb Alpert.

Alpert: Oh, isn't that nice. And what happened?

BPE: I eventually got kicked out of the band for crapping around.

Alpert: Ha! You wanted to play jazz! You sound like you were having fun, though.

BPE: Maybe too much fun. I've renewed my interest recently with the purchase of a second-hand Olds Ambassador. It's amazing how much comes back after all these years.

Alpert: Good. I hope you keep at it.

BPE: Before we get into this, I've got to ask you a question which has bothered me for an awfully long time: Are you the guy standing way off in the background on those [Baja Marimba Band](#) album covers?

Alpert: I may have been on that first one. I don't recall now. It was kind of my idea for the image and the publicity. I envisioned running billboard and Cashbox ads for the record which read: HEADED FOR NUMBER TWO.

BPE: Nice! And you directed Julius (Wechter) into forming the [Baja Marimba Band](#)?

Alpert: Well, it was both our ideas to get a group together, and he followed through on it.

I did this song called Coming in the Back Door that became a moderate success. Julius was playing bass marimba on it. He was a friend of mine. We met when we were about 18. I used to play odds and ends – weddings, parties, etc. I was called for this dance party and hadn't met Julius, but he

was there, playing the vibraphone. He took a solo and man, he sounded like Lionel Hampton! It was unbelievable. So we became friends. He wrote some songs for the Tijuana Brass and traveled with us sometimes. Just a fabulous musician.

BPE: Julius played at one point with Martin Denny, right?

Alpert: Yeah, he did the [Quiet Village](#) song.

BPE: I don't mean to linger here on album art questions, but Peter Worf, who did those crazy covers for the Baja Marimba Band – didn't he also do the Whipped Cream album cover?

Peter Worf's iconic cover for the 1965 album Whipped Cream & Other Delights.

Alpert: Yes! Peter was our Art Director at A&M. He showed me the picture of the girl (Dolores Erickson) and to tell you the truth I didn't like it. I didn't think it represented what I had in the album. So, I rejected it but was talked into it by my partner, Jerry Moss, and I'm glad I did. It's become an iconic cover.

BPE: Maybe the most famous album cover in history. Everyone seems to know it. Moving away from Whipped Cream, if I may borrow another song title here: [So, What's New?](#)

Alpert: Right now, I'm doing fifty concerts a year. My art painting and sculpting are going crazy. I have a show in China this year; one in Palm Desert, and one at the Wildlife Museum in Jackson Hole, so things are great. I can't complain.

The thing I love about jazz is I think it's the real thing. I think jazz relates to all of the other forms of creative art. It's about freedom, and great artists are free to express themselves through their imagination.

I've met a lot of great artists through the years, not only in music but actors, sculptors, and painters. They're all truth seekers – they are all looking for the truth. The truth is the thing that is gonna set us free. It doesn't matter if you're a Democrat, Republican or Independent – if you can tell the truth, then we know where you stand, and I think we need more of that in this society.

BPE: You'll be appearing in DC on Wednesday. What can concert-goers expect?

Alpert: Oh, they'll hear a great concert. I know we make a lot of people happy with our music. We'll do a little [Tijuana Brass medley](#); my wife Lani will be doing some [Brasil '66](#). But surrounding that will be pretty open. We change the set list continually. There's a lot of improvisation that makes it of the moment. We have some visuals behind us, and it's a great show. Been doing this now for the last twelve years with the same group, and the response has been tremendous. I'm looking forward to playing – period.



Herb Alpert and Lani Hall
(credit Dewey Nicks.)

BPE: And this is just one stop of many that you've got lined up?

Alpert: Well, it's a good one. We're going out for two weeks. We start in Washington, DC; then we go to Boston, Chicago for a couple of nights, Nashville, Atlanta, and end up in New York City. There we'll have the [Herb Alpert Awards in the Arts](#), celebrating our Twenty-Fifth Anniversary.

BPE: Tell us a bit about the awards.

Alpert: We got started twenty-five years ago when the National Endowment began closing in on the money they were giving for the arts. It was a knee-jerk reaction, but I just felt I had to do something.

I always gravitated to artists who were on their own trip – going down the road less traveled. I like those artists because they don't care whether you love it or not. They're just doing it because they have to. I see two types of artists in this world. Those who are doing it, say commercially, because it's something they choose to do, and those artists who are always looking for the right thing to do – the right notes to play. They're the Miles Davises and the Charlie Parkers of the world.

BPE: You've always been a real champion of the arts – going back to the 1950s when you started out as a music producer. But then, you grew up in a musical home. Your dad played the mandolin and your mom the violin. Was the trumpet your instrument of choice?



Alpert said the trumpet has been “quite a friend for me through the years and obviously changed my life.”
(credit Dewey Nicks)

Alpert: Yeah, and that's the reason I'm so revved up about seeing kids have that kind of experience at an early age. I had that opportunity when I was eight years old in my grammar school. There was a music class that had a table full of instruments. I picked up a trumpet because it fit my hand – I was very small.

I was – and still am – an introvert, but when that trumpet started making noise for me, I realized it was speaking and saying things for me that I couldn't get out of my mouth. So, it's been quite a friend for me through the years and obviously changed my life.

I like to pass that along – the idea of touching elbows with something creative at an early age. It doesn't have to be music. It can be painting, sculpting, acting, writing poetry. If kids have that experience and can appreciate what they do, then with a little luck, they'll also come to appreciate the uniqueness in other people. I see it as a win-win situation.

BPE: You took your trumpet with you when you went into the Army?

Alpert: I absolutely did. I took it on the train with me, and when I arrived at basic training, I said, “This is the only thing I know how to do. I can't file; I can't type.” I got into a little bit of a game and said, “Yeah, I played with Lionel Hampton and Count Basie.” I basically BS'd my way into the designation: O2.1 – Trumpet Player. So, that's what I did.

It was a big ‘Ah-ha’ for me. They sent me to band school, and I met a bunch of trumpet players that were better than me. It was there that I had the realization that, if I was ever going to make it as a professional musician, I had to come up with my own sound. I worked on that, and I was fortunate – fortunate enough that Miles Davis said, “You hear three notes, and you know it's Herb Alpert.”

BPE: That's high praise indeed. Let me ask you a post-Army question: With so many rams horns on the set, how did you come to be a drummer at Mt Sinai in The Ten Commandments?

Alpert: (laughing) Man, I was young. I was cast as a behind-the-scenes musician, so what I was doing was purely visual. I was on the kettle drum and Aida trumpet. I worked on the film for about three months. There were a lot of extras there – just hanging out at the studio – because you never knew when Cecil B. DeMille would want to do another scene or re-shoot something.

BPE: The uncredited extras list from that movie is something of a Who's Who of [name actors](#) from the later 50s and 60s.

Alpert: It was an interesting experience.

BPE: Do any particular memories from that film stand out?

Alpert: Yeah, I was in the scene where Moses comes down from Mt Sinai with the tablets. There was a party going on – the bacchanal scene. I was playing kettle drum, and the scene was opening up on my back. I looked around and DeMille was up on the boom with the cameraman. Just before they started shooting, I turned and yelled up to DeMille, “Excuse me, sir, but would you mind if the scene opened up on my face?” He just looked at me and said, “Not this time, kid.”

BPE: You were a music producer before you really became known as a recording artist?

Alpert: That's true. My ex-partner, Lou Adler and I started in the business together. We worked with Sam Cooke and wrote [Wonderful World](#) and another song called [All Of My Life](#). I learned a lot from Sam. He was a talented artist and a lovely gentleman. He was great.

BPE: Was Baby Talk by Jan & Dean your first hit record as a producer?

Alpert: [Baby Talk](#) was the first one that started to make noise. We had the cover record of Alley-Oop – that was a big one. Then a guy saw me at the gym and said, "You're good looking – you ought to be an actor." So, I dropped out of the music scene for a while, til I realized I wasn't a very good actor.

BPE: How did a trip to see a bullfight in Mexico shape your music into what became the Tijuana Brass?

Alpert: There were several trips to Mexico over a few years. There was a brass band in the stands, and they would introduce the events with Bah-DEHH Ba-dapa-Ba-dapa Bah-DEHH and the bull would charge out. Then they'd have another type of fanfare and I got into that. I never got into mariachi music. I know some people try to equate what I did with mariachi music, and I don't have anything against it, but I never listened to it.

No, I wanted to translate the feeling I got on those Sundays in Mexico, and that's how The Lonely Bull came about.

BPE: Was The Lonely Bull your first collaboration with Sol Lake?

Alpert: It wasn't really a collaboration. Sol was a guy who wrote some really good songs for me and my partner.

BPE: Given how times have changed, I wonder if your music is still being well received south of the border?

Alpert: I don't know but I'm still in the mix. I have a song which just came out, called [Ain't No Sunshine](#), and it's on the charts.

I never really kept track of those things. I just do what I love to do and I've been very fortunate.

BPE: We spoke recently with [Bonnie Lamdin Phipps](#) – a Baltimore girl who was a member of the 60s group Peppermint Rainbow. Bonnie marveled that, while their song, [Will You Be Staying After Sunday](#), did well here in the States, it really took off in Canada. I guess you just never know where a song will resonate.



“I just do what I love to do and I've been very fortunate.” (credit Dewey Nicks)

Alpert: That's the beauty of it. I did a song – singing it in Spanish – that became a number one song in Venezuela.

BPE: Since I asked about Sol Lake, could you speak about some of your favorite songwriters and arrangers?

Alpert: Oh, man – there are so many. It just depends on what genre you are talking about.

BPE: Did you ever have a chance to meet [Bert Kaempfert](#)?

Alpert: I spoke with him over the phone once but never had a chance to meet him in person.

I did a record once with Quincy Jones, and that was fun. We did a single with Billy Eckstine. There are just so many great musicians out there and great orchestrators and arrangers. I can't single them out – it just depends on what you are looking for. I mean, [Claus Ogerman](#) would probably be on the top of one of my lists in terms of orchestration.

BPE: Most of your early stuff was recorded with [The Wrecking Crew](#)?

Alpert: Definitely. [Hal Blaine](#) was the drummer on my Whipped Cream album and the album I did before, [South of the Border](#). They were terrific – it was like they became part of your band. Whenever they were on a session, they were flexible, reliable, and tried to give you what you were looking for. They were able to do that. [Tommy Tedesco](#) was a wonderfully versatile guitar player. He played mandolin and some other stringed instruments. It was great using them, because you'd just sing an idea for them and they would be right there at the party, ready to do it.

BPE: Is Tony Terran on any of your records?

Alpert: No; it's only me playing trumpet on all of my records.

BPE: So, then you over-dubbed the various parts, the way you did on The Lonely Bull?

Alpert: Yes.

BPE: You have the distinction of being the only artist to have a number one record both as an instrumentalist (with Rise) AND as a singer. What were your thoughts about recording This Guy's In Love With You?

Alpert: We originally did that number for a TV special called Beat of the Brass. Producer Jack Haley, Jr. asked me if I could find a song to sing so he didn't have to photograph me with a trumpet to my mouth. I called a friend of mine – Burt Bacharach. Remember that guy?

BPE: That's certainly another great name everyone associates with the music of that era.

Alpert: Well, I asked Burt if he had a song tucked away in a drawer that didn't catch on, so he sent me the record of Dionne Warwick singing This Girl's In Love With You. Hal David changed the lyrics to suit the gender, and I did that on the television show. Two weeks later, thanks to the power of TV, it was number one in the country.

BPE: Is it fair to say television has been pretty good to you?

Alpert: Television?

BPE: [Route 101](#) was used for a number of years on the Weather Channel, Rise in a reoccurring flashback soap opera scene; then there's the [bachelor](#), [bachelorette](#), and [date](#) cues on The Dating Game. Do you get residuals from the Game Show Network?

Alpert: Oh yeah, sure. You can't play somebody else's music without paying for it. That's why there are ASCAP and BMI. It's all tracked, but there is a different situation now for writers and artists, who aren't getting their fair share, and that's really a shame. Pandora and Spotify are giving artists money for spins, but it's not commensurate with the amount of the spins. It's just not fair at the moment.

BPE: May I ask about the Scopitones – particularly about [Bittersweet Samba](#)? It's rumored that Robert Altman directed that one. Did you have anything to do with the creation of those films?

Alpert: No, I didn't, so there's really nothing I can share there. But I can tell you that Bittersweet Samba has been used for the last forty years as the opening theme for a radio show in Japan, called All Night Nippon. It's been a good record for me.

BPE: Earlier this week, I was chatting about your music with a friend in New York – jazz trumpeter [Brian Newman](#). Brian was curious to know how you have managed to persevere in this ever-changing business?

Alpert: I'll tell you, you can't overlook being at the right place at the right time. And luck – I've been lucky. There are a lot of [great musicians](#) out there. I see them every night. We have a jazz club here in LA ([Vibrato Grill Jazz](#)) and I hear these musicians and they are just fabulous. They deserve to be heard, and they deserve to be famous. They just have a little bit of a struggle getting their place in the sun. Unfortunately, that's just the way it is in this world.

BPE: I'm sure you get asked a lot about your trumpet of choice. Do you have any advice for the novice trumpet player?

Alpert: I have some advice for any wannabe musician. Make sure you're passionate about wanting to do it because it's not easy out there. The same holds true if you're in the shoelace business. You get this one shot at life and it goes around quickly. Unless you're passionate about it and think you're doing something special, I wouldn't even attempt it. This may sound a little off the wall but it only follows that, unless you're doing something that you think is really special, why should you expect anyone else to think you are doing something special?

In any case, that would be my advice to young musicians out there.