The Independent That Could: A&M Records

by Todd Everett

There is a strong case to be made that the most interesting record companies are the smaller, independent ones. While sometimes characterized by shoestring budgets and shotgun distribution, it's the independents—with no parent company pressure—who have traditionally supplied most of the imagination and set many of the trends in the music business. Rock & roll, disco, reggae, and to some degree mass appeal black music all owe their initial exposure to independent labels. Almost invariably, they've been founded by the need to make music available through means other than existing distribution channels. Witness the proliferation, even in these relatively sophisticated days, of small companies dealing in contemporary classical, avant-garde *and* traditional jazz, blues, folk, spoken-word, and both legitimate and bootleg reissues of vintage material from all categories.

With the absorption in recent years of Decca by MCA, Mercury by Phonogram, and Elektra and Atlantic by Warner Communications, only a few major independent labels exist—A&M, Motown, and Casablanca among them. A&M has the largest number of charted albums (forty-six in 1976, according to *Billboard*), but despite its size (something like three hundred employees) and financial solidity it remains the classic independent.

The company was founded in 1962 by its current owners, Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss. Both were young; both were determined "record men." Alpert was a record producer (notably, Jan & Dean's early successes), songwriter (several of Sam Cooke's, including *All of My Life* and *Wonderful World*), singer (remember *Tell It to the Bees* by Dore Alpert? Don't worry, neither does anybody else!), and actor. Moss was a promotion man, whose first job—at a salary of $75 a week—was to get the Crests' *16 Candles* played in Philadelphia.

Todd Everett is a free-lance writer who is less interested in the stars than he is in the process that makes them.

Alpert, who also played trumpet, had recorded an instrumental of a song called *Twinkle Star*, written by a friend. He had added corrida crowd noises and then dubbed it *The Lonely Bull*. Rather than try to sell or lease the master to another label, he and Moss decided to launch their own, operating from Alpert's low-rent Hollywood garage.

The Lonely Bull, performed by the Tijuana Brass, eventually sold 700,000 copies—most of them during the several-month period that A&M continued to crowd Alpert's car out into the driveway. But not much time passed before the company moved to a real office on the Sunset Strip (in the years since, that office has been considered good luck by the superstitious in the industry—Uni, 20th Century, and Casablanca are now headquartered in the same building). In 1966, A&M settled permanently in the Charlie Chaplin film studio lot, which is today a historic monument preserved in much of its original condition. The label uses the huge sound stage for rehearsals and occasional showcase performances.

Typical of the independents, A&M's artist roster reflected the personal tastes of its owners—smooth, adult-oriented pop, occasionally with a slight jazz, rhythm & blues, or Mexican tinge. Aside from Alpert's Tijuana Brass, the label's successful early acts included the Baja Marimba Band (like the Brass's, their music was Latin-flavored pop-instrumental with more than a hint of humor in the arrangements and presentation), the Sandpipers (a Lettermen-styled vocal trio whose first hit was *Guantanamera*, in Spanish), Sergio Mendes and Brasil '66, wispy-voiced Claudine Longet, and the quietly folk-rocking We Five (*You Were on My Mind*).

Some attempts were made at entering other

The start of it all—Alpert's Tijuana Brass (1966)

areas. Captain Beefheart's first single was on A&M and became a hit in Los Angeles, Waylon Jennings was signed to the label in the mid-Sixties, and Leon Russell released a couple of energetic songs including an uptempo *Misty* that predated Ray Stevens' version by a good nine years. But generally, A&M was one of the country's major suppliers of tasteful middle-of-the-road music.

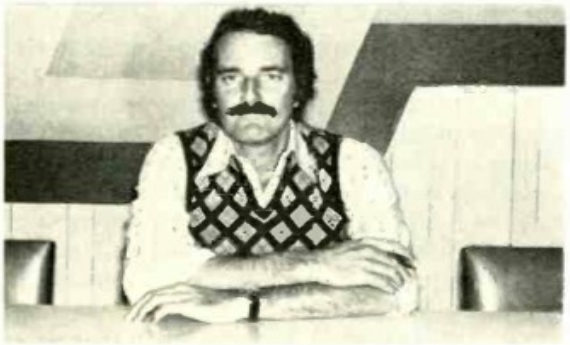
Today the roster is large—about fifty-five acts currently signed—but still a clear indicator of Alpert and Moss's personal tastes. The music of Karen and Richard Carpenter, the Captain and Tennille, Lani Hall, Chuck Mangione, and Gino Vannelli is a Seventies extension of what was happening on the label ten years ago. Most of the rock artists, signed in a blitz that started shortly after the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, are of the clean-living, not-too-heavy type like the Ozark Mountain Daredevils and Peter Frampton. Heavy metal acts (Nazareth and Budgie being two examples) remain the exception.

The most recent cultural inroads have been in the area of r&b, starting with the signing of veteran composer/arranger/producer Quincy Jones and keyboard player/singer Billy Preston several years ago, and continuing up through the recent success of the Brothers Johnson and LTD.

Though record sales are substantial enough to be competitive in the CBS/Warner league ("Frampton Comes Alive!" has sold in excess of six million units alone) A&M continues to operate as an independent. Alpert's duties are largely musical, as a producer and recording artist, and Moss handles the executive/administrative end of things. Both are still in their early forties; neither has the slightest desire to sell out to a larger corporation (though there were rumors not so many years ago that the company—then in a lean period—was on the auction block). "There are only two reasons to sell." Moss explains. "To get a lot of cash so that you can tick off the days till your retirement, or you sell a part of the company for cash in order to expand rapidly. I'm only forty-one, and I've been with A&M for fourteen years. There's nothing that I would rather be doing than what I'm doing now—it's not a job, it's my life."

In addition to the money generated by such huge-selling acts as the Captain and Tennille, the Carpenters, Frampton, Jones, Preston, and Cat Stevens, A&M counts on other sources of revenue. For one, the recording studios are in constant use by outside artists. Also, it distributes one outside label, Ode, which is owned by Alpert's long-time friend and former co-writer and co-producer, Lou Adler. Artists include Carole King (though she recently signed with Capitol, she owes Ode one more album), comedy duo Cheech and Chong, and several other, less familiar, acts. (Rumor has it as we go to press that Ode is up for sale.) A&M's music publishing wing, Irving/Almo, is notably strong. Aside from handling the administrative work for many of the label's acts, they own (for instance) all of Brian Wilson's early copyrights; they've also recently established their own print division, publishing and distributing sheet music and folios.

At various stages in the company's development, there have been tactical errors—largely the result of wanting to expand too rapidly into areas that the staff wasn't prepared to handle. Moss still grimaces at the mention of A&M's short-lived 1968 venture into motion picture production; within a year's time the movie branch was announced (with three initial projects planned) and dissolved. Sometime later, the label



Owners/founders Moss & Alpert: personal pride and attention to detail

co-financed the film of the Joe Cocker/Leon Russell tour with a band called Mad Dogs and Englishmen. In a few years, all rights to that picture revert to the label, but one can assume—since no other ventures along these lines are planned—that this too was an error in judgment.

A&M also recently pared its artist roster by some fifteen acts to make it easier to handle. And various artist and/or production deals have proven less fruitful than expected. One with producer Phil Spector in 1969 resulted in a couple of moderately successful singles (by the Checkmates and Ronettes) but nothing more. One with George Harrison in 1975 resulted in albums by Ravi Shankar and bands like Attitudes, Splinter, Jiva, and Stairsteps, but nothing by Harrison himself. This all climaxed in a huge lawsuit that was settled out of court last year in A&M's favor. An attempt to initiate a jazz series, Horizon (loosely patterned after ABC's Impulse and Arista's Freedom lines), isn't showing the kind of profit anticipated. The artists, production, and presentation are topnotch, but the A&M sales and promotion forces are apparently unable to push Jim Hall, Ira Sullivan, Paul Desmond, and Charlie Haden—though those same forces are doing well enough with Chuck Mangione and Gato Barbieri's albums on the parent label. Nevertheless, says Moss, "In retrospect, any mistakes have been minor. We're still here, and I don't owe anyone any money."

Whether or not they owe anybody anything, A&M must operate with less capital than a label funded by a huge international corporation. So it saves where it can. Rather than invest in huge branch warehouses and sales staffs, the company remains as it started, with an independent distribution system—distributors in every marketing region but two handle A&M together with several other lines. Rather than set up international offices, A&M licenses recordings to established local labels, except in Great Britain and Canada, where its wholly owned affiliates operate on a semi-autonomous basis, able to sign their own acts as well as distribute A&M's U.S. roster. Manufacturing in the U.S. is handled by Columbia Records, saving A&M the cost of pressing, packaging, warehousing, and shipping facilities.

(The exceptions to A&M's independent distribution system are in Atlanta, where they share ownership of Together Distributors with Motown, and in the Northeast, which is served by an A&M office in Boston. Both resulted from an urge to experiment and from what Moss felt to be inadequate performance by their previous distributors in those markets. There are no plans to expand in this area.)

When A&M does expand its roster, it does so slowly—again with an eye to sensible financing. Although the early acts included the Canadian Sweethearts and Waylon Jennings and later country-rockers like Steve Young, Dillard and Clark, and the Flying Burrito Bros., the label never really felt at ease with country music and eventually ceased its attempts in that area. Though now a strong force in the r&b market, initial inroads were made by acts like Billy Preston, who crossed over into it from the Top 40. A&M has never had a separate r&b-oriented staff, as most labels do; it releases no classical product, and no hardcore jazz appeared until the Horizon operation was founded last year.

Unlike the larger companies, this one can't use money as a weapon in artist recruitment. Artists-and-repertoire head Kip Cohen, a three-year veteran of Columbia before joining A&M, puts it this way: "We can't compete with bigger companies on that level, and we don't even try. Labels like Columbia and Warner Bros. can lure an act with a promise of a huge cash advance and larger royalties. What we tell an act that we can deliver is an individual treatment, and a highly specialized one. We're experienced in image-making and growth-building. Furthermore, we can deal with acts on a musical basis. Herb's a producer, Jerry's a promotion man, and most of our executives are record people and not attorneys or accountants. Columbia's moving their West Coast offices to Century City [an office building complex well outside of Hollywood]. That's because they want to be closer to the lawyers who work there. When *I* have lunch with somebody, it's with an artist or a producer. That's the difference between us and a Columbia."

Cohen adds that the label seldom signs established artists—"... not only because of the money they might demand, but because there's no sport"—and when they do, it's likely to be one who hasn't reached full career potential (a nice record-biz way of saying an artist has been around a while without going anywhere). Recent acquisitions in that area include Joan Baez, Chuck Mangione, Nils Lofgren, and Richie Havens. And when A&M does get into the big-money sweepstakes, they don't often win: After releasing a number of Baez's albums, each selling considerably better than its predecessor, they were outbid by Columbia's new Portrait label at contract-renewal time.

In the foreseeable future, A&M's plans are to remain pretty much the same record company that it is today, with reinforcement of the relatively weak areas, such as jazz. Moss is most interested in preserving a high-quality image. A&M was the first large label to supervise the manufacture and distribution of prerecorded tapes, largely in order to upgrade quality control (most labels that didn't manufacture their own tape would lease cartridge, cassette, and open-reel rights to a tape company like Ampex or GRT). Now Moss is looking at pressings. "Playback equipment has been getting more and more sophisticated, and we aren't making the same kind of advances in the physical quality of records. Columbia presses ours; their quality control is higher than the industry standard, and we have our own people to double-check. But still, shoddy pressings get released. It's our goal to come out with the best record in the country, even if that means that we'll end up pressing them ourselves." It is this kind of personal pride and attention to detail that has characterized A&M throughout its history and has, no doubt, contributed in no small amount to its ultimate—and independent—success. ●