



# Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss



*By Barney Hoskyns*

**T**he history of American pop music is filled with great partnerships. Most of them, from Rodgers & Hart to Jam & Lewis, are songwriting teams working under pressure to create hits for the stars of the day. But occasionally fate brings together two highly talented men who create and build a record company with the same love and dedication that goes into the best songs.

A&M Records, the brainchild of Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, remains one of the greatest labels launched in the 1960s, a decade when thousands of independents were born in America. Home to an eclectic array of outstanding artists from Alpert himself to Janet Jackson, A&M reflected the passion and savvy of the two men. Its success was as great a testament to their friendship as to the high quality of the acts they signed over the course of thirty years.

"What we built we're very proud of," Jerry Moss says today. "We were able to communicate to people that the label really meant something unique in the music world."

Like a handful of other unique labels – Atlantic, Reprise, Island – A&M stood for quality and attention, for the patient building of careers through the sixties, seventies, and eighties. From their headquarters in the old Charlie Chaplin movie lot on Hollywood's La Brea Avenue, Alpert and Moss established an environment of fun, risk-taking, and sheer respect for talent. "Once we got to the La Brea lot, we tried to create a really special place," says Moss.

The label started life in mid-1962 as a tiny DIY operation in the garage of Herb Alpert's West Hollywood home. Alpert already had a musical track

record of some repute: He'd cowritten hits with Sam Cooke (including the wonderful "Wonderful World") and fellow native Angelino Lou Adler. But the dark, handsome trumpeter had little idea of the success in store once he teamed up with New York-born promotion man Jerry Moss.

The pair's first label, the short-lived Carnival, was launched simply to release two singles they had made independently of each other. "Jerry and I never had this master plan of starting a label," Alpert has said. "It just happened." September 1962 saw the release of the first A&M single, Alpert's "The Lonely Bull." The mariachi-flavored instrumental struck gold, hitting Number Six by early December of the same year.

"For the first couple of years, it was really just Herb, myself, and a resourceful secretary," Moss says. "We tried to make records that we believed would be commercial, but also records we liked."

The success of Alpert's group the Tijuana Brass, one of the biggest-selling acts of the sixties, set the tone for A&M's formative years. Expanding their roster of pop/MOR acts, Alpert and Moss signed a number of artists working in a similar vein: the Sandpipers, the Baja Marimba Band, Burt Bacharach, and the hugely successful Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66. "Even though at the time we had an easy-listening reputation, we were always on the lookout for innovative artists no matter what the genre," Alpert said of the A&M sound.

Moss understood that the company had to adapt to the times as well. With A&M's move to 1416 North La Brea Avenue in November 1966 came a recognition that the label needed to compete in the fast-evolving world of rock. Reconnaissance trips to the U.K. estab-









FROM TOP: Jerry Moss with country-rock pioneers the Flying Burrito Brothers; Herb Alpert with Karen and Richard Carpenter. BELOW: Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass with Jerry Moss (back, right) and Gil Friesen looking on.

lished relationships with producer Denny Cordell and Island founder Chris Blackwell; the resulting signings (Joe Cocker, Cat Stevens, Free, Fairport Convention, and others) transformed A&M's image. Simultaneously Moss and his right-hand man, Gil Friesen, hired hip new staffers – Derek Taylor, Michael Vosse, Tom Wilkes, David Anderle – to help sign such American artists as Phil Ochs, Dillard & Clark, and the Flying Burrito Brothers.

"A&M brought me in and tried to attract some major talent," says Wilkes, who brought the Burritos to Moss. "It was all Boyce and Hart, Sergio Mendes, Herb Alpert, and now they wanted to get into the mainstream of rock."

"The Burritos really touched me," says Moss. "They set a course for us in America, that we were open and available and competitive in this area. This was where we felt we needed to be if we were going to have a contemporary label."

If A&M failed to break the Burritos and other pioneering country-rock bands, it successfully sponsored Joe Cocker's Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour and achieved further rock success with Steve Marriott's group Humble Pie and, subsequently, with Supertramp, Nazareth, and others. A deal to distribute Lou Adler's Ode label brought further rewards when Carole King's Adler-produced *Tapestry* became one of the best-selling albums of 1971.

Yet A&M never forsook the pop roots that had given Alpert and Moss their early success. The signing of siblings Richard and Karen Carpenter led to some of the classiest easy-listening pop of the seventies. "There was a very specific philosophy at A&M," says L.A. producer Bones Howe. "It was that there should always be someplace that you can get your record played. If you can't get it on Top Forty radio, you should be able to get it on a late-night MOR station."

By the mid-seventies, A&M could boast a formidable roster that covered most bases, from pop (Paul Williams) and rock (Styx) to jazz (Chuck Mangione, Quincy Jones, Gato Barbeiri) and R&B (Billy Preston, LTD) and even country





(the Ozark Mountain Daredevils). Peter Frampton's double album *Frampton Comes Alive!* became one of the biggest-selling releases of all time, shifting ten million copies and helping to bankroll new signings in the process (including, for ten heady days, punk *enfants terribles* the Sex Pistols).

After the music-industry slump of the late seventies, when A&M was forced to drop a number of underperforming acts, Alpert and Moss (with the help of new president Gil Friesen) were able to guide the label into a period of resurgence in the eighties. Megasuccess with the Police, Janet Jackson, Bryan Adams, Sting, Suzanne Vega, Soundgarden, and Joe Jackson ran in parallel with the distribution of dynamic new indies such as IRS and Windham Hill.

In October 1989, deciding that A&M could grow significantly only with a proper injection of cash, Alpert and Moss sold their baby to Polygram. Continuing to head up the label, they presided over further success – including hits by Bryan Adams, Amy Grant, Extreme, and a reenergized Alpert. But eventually the new corporate mentality took its toll on both men.

"A&M had one of its greatest years in 1991," Moss recalls. "But it didn't work to keep me there, and eventually I had to leave. I was very sad to leave, but that was the way it was. We had no other choice."

Alpert and Moss remain friends and business partners to this day, their post-A&M label Almo Sounds becoming home to such acclaimed artists as Garbage, Gillian Welch, and Ozomatli.

"Herbie was a complete musician, and I was sort of a promotion person," says Moss, "but we blended extremely well. I don't remember any issue at all where we felt passionately differently about something. The whole basis for our label, and what was exciting about what we did, was that if one of us really wanted to do something, we had the confidence in each other to just do it. Fortunately, we were right more often than we were wrong." ←



LEFT: Moss and George Harrison. FROM TOP: Moss and Procol Harum; Friesen, Moss, Bill Graham, and manager Dee Anthony with Humble Pie and backup singers; Alpert, Peter Frampton, Anthony, and Moss (from left); Alpert and Moss in the late eighties.