THE HERB ALPERT FOUNDATION’S SPIRIT OF GIVING FORTIFIES ART MAKERS AND ORGANIZATIONS AGAINST COVID-19

By Christina Campodonico

The T.S. Eliot saying goes that “April is the cruelest month,” and this year as COVID-19 put its stamp on almost every aspect of daily life, it rang especially true for artists and arts organizations — preceded by an equally brutal March.

Late that month, downtown LA’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) laid off 97 part-time workers. The same day, the Hammer Museum in...
rigorous selection process — not only serves as a landmark moment of recognition and investment in an artist’s career, but carries special meaning this year as many artists struggle to make ends meet and figure out how to continue making work under strained circumstances such as closed venues and/or canceled or postponed performances.

“I’m overwhelmed,” said Soltonoff, his voice breaking as he accepted his award and spoke of the thematic alignment between his experimental theatrical work on “Star Trek’s” Captain Kirk and that of the Herb Alpert Awards. “To go where no man has gone before… that spirit is something I believe in, and I feel the Herb Alpert Awards supports…”

“It gives me a vote of confidence in what I’m doing,” Soltonoff said in an earlier phone conversation. “The acknowledgment from my colleagues is fantastic. The money’s fantastic. … It allows me to have the studio and not worry about paying rent on it. It allows me to get a piece of equipment I’ve had my eye on. … It gives me a chance to dance with my imagination.

“The money becomes really a way to get through the next period of time before touring and residencies and workshops can safely start up again,” he added.

“To be able to focus and have some quietude and be able to reflect is kind of an endangered species when you have to worry about how you’re going to pay rent,” said awards director Irene Borger. “It’s quite wonderful to be able to support artists who are doing deep work…. This is a kind of shelter from the storm.”

For other artists, like Grammy-nominated Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, receiving the Herb Alpert Award in music was a full circle moment.

“I grew up listening to Mr. Alpert’s music,” said the musician. “It’s a huge part of my musical heart. … To be part of this award just means the most.”

“Some of my fondest memories are of listening with my grandparents around the kitchen table. Mr. Alpert’s Tijuana Brass recordings were a big part of that time for me,” he added in a statement. “The honor is beyond words. His contribution musically, which obviously was integral in my nourishment as I developed, is boundless. His full commitment to help support, champion and uplift other artists and outliers… shows the grace within and why he is one of the G.O.A.Ts. (Greatest of All Times).”

Yet the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts is just the tip of the iceberg for the support that the Herb Alpert Foundation gives financially. Since its founding in 1988, the foundation has granted more than $185 million to arts, music and nonprofit organizations such as the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance (now the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz Performance) at
UCLA, the California Alliance for Arts Education, programs at Santa Monica’s The Broad Stage and 18th Street Arts Center, and P.S. Arts, which operates in Santa Monica public schools. Separately, the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts has given $8 million to individual artists and the handling of the awards since 1994.

“I sometimes think of it as a pyramid,” said Herb Alpert Foundation President Rona Sebastian. “And at the base of the pyramid is all the young people. We do a lot of programs that are really designed to give the arts experience to as many young people as we can. And then as you go up the pyramid you see how we kind of fine-tune and hone in our programmatic support. … And at the tippy top, I would say is really the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts.”

In response to the financial crises facing arts and nonprofit organizations due to the pandemic, the Herb Alpert Foundation has “front-loaded” its aid — giving grants to its partner organizations such as homelessness services nonprofit Chrysalis earlier this year to make up for revenue lost from canceled fundraisers or galas and given even more flexibility to how recipients utilize the funding.

“It’s really a combination of flexibility and immediate response,” said Sebastian. “We’ve always historically had a policy of primarily giving non-restricted giving because we have felt that it’s really the nonprofit organizations and their leadership that know best. … In response to COVID-19, we see that a lot of foundations who didn’t do that in the past are now pivoting… and [giving] the organizations non-restrictive giving. … We’re actually pleased to see that a lot of other foundations are now following that lead.”

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Westwood dismissed 150 of its part-time employees. In April, a survey of 11,000 artists applying for emergency aid from the national arts coalition Artist Relief and co-sponsored by the nonprofit advocacy group Americans for the Arts, found that 67% of California-based respondents were unemployed and 80% of those surveyed did not yet have a plan for recovering from the crisis.

While theaters and galleries from the heart of downtown to Santa Monica's Bergamot Station sit in limbo under LA County’s ever-shifting stay-at-home order, and a quarter of SoCal galleries surveyed by the LA Times say they are facing permanent closure if the conditions of the pandemic do not improve quickly, there are glimmers of hope.

Earlier this spring, the J. Paul Getty Trust launched a $10-million LA Arts COVID-19 Relief Fund to aid small and mid-sized visual arts organizations, then co-launched a $650,000 relief fund for visual artists in LA County. The Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs recently launched a second round of emergency artists relief funding.

Among the organizations aiding artists and arts organizations during the COVID-19 crisis is the Santa Monica-based Herb Alpert Foundation. The brain child of legendary pop trumpeter and A&M Records co-founder Herb Alpert, the musician’s namesake philanthropic organization honored the recipients of the 26th annual Herb Alpert Award in the Arts on Friday, May 22, during a virtual Zoom ceremony attended by 200 people from across the internet.

For Alpert (who trusts the selection of the winners to a cohort of expert panelists), the question of backing the arts right now during this “crazy time” is a no-brainer.

“The arts are so critical to everyone’s lives,” the 85-year-old Alpert said over the phone. “Instead of reducing the amount of money that’s going into the arts, we’ve got to think about supporting artists. They’re the second responders. We know we need the first responders for human health, but the second responders are the artists of the world, the painters, the sculptors, the musicians, the dancers. Those are the people that keep us buoyant. … They’re the ones that keep us thinking happy and help to get us through life.”

This year’s winners are choreographer Karen Sherman, filmmaker Sky Hopinka, jazz trumpeter Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, New York theater maker Phil Soltanoff and fine artist Firelei Báez.

The award — a $75,000 unrestricted gift administered by the California Institute for the Arts and granted to each of five exceptional mid-career artists in the fields of dance, music, film/video, theater, and visual arts after a
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