

REVIEWS

JAZZ

A Touch Of The Islands

Monty Alexander adds his own unique style to jazz traditions

MONTY ALEXANDER

Jazz at the Bistro, Wednesday,

Nov. 20

By Terry Perkins

PIANIST Monty Alexander displayed his affinity for the jazz tradition Wednesday evening at the Backstage Bistro in the opening set of his Jazz at the Bistro appearance. And Alexander also showcased his Caribbean roots — adding a steel drum to fill out the sound of his piano trio with a decided island accent.

Alexander, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica, has been playing jazz piano in the U.S. since the early 1960s, and he has developed a reputation as a versatile musician with a thorough knowledge of jazz tradition and the technical expertise and creativity to construct his own distinctive keyboard style.

Throughout his opening set, Alexander balanced versions of jazz standards with his own original compositions. For example, he turned in an version of "When I Fall in Love" — made famous by Nat "King" Cole — that illustrated his ability to cut to the emotional heart of a ballad with a precise lyrical touch.

But Alexander surrounded that lovely tune with several of his own compositions that allowed him to stretch out into bebop, gospel — and even add a little calypso beat on occasion. Alexander's "Look Up" featured a simple, memorable melody that served as a springboard for some highly entertaining excursions into several different musical directions.

Alexander built up the energy level by bouncing the tune back and forth between the piano and Derek DiCenzo's steel drum, then kicked up into a higher gear with a fast-paced keyboard solo that was straight out of the hard-bop tradition. Then, just when the tune seemed ready to follow the usual jazz pattern of solo turns by bass and drums, Alexander settled back into the simple, catchy groove where he and the band had first begun.

Steel drummer DiCenzo didn't perform throughout every tune, occasionally stepping back to let Alexander work in a traditional trio context with bassist Hassan J.J. Wiggins and drummer Troy Davis.

Wiggins, who worked for several years in the Mercer Ellington Orchestra, provided solid support for Alexander's excursions into a variety of musical styles — and added a couple of bracing solos as well. Davis, who is a regular member of trumpeter Terence Blanchard's group, exhibited a subtle percussive touch that worked well whether the music called for a straight-ahead tempo or a lifting island beat.

Alexander used steel drummer DiCenzo in a dual role that straddled percussive accents and a counterpoint to his own keyboard efforts. At times, DiCenzo's background work added a light island accent. And on other tunes, he functioned like an exotic vibraphone player — trading fast-paced leads with Alexander, then adding distinctive support with a flurry of slurred percussive tones.

Alexander will perform two very different types of music as he completes his Jazz at the Bistro appearance this weekend. Friday will feature DiCenzo adding steel-drum accompaniment to Alexander's piano trio. And since Davis will not be with the group on Saturday, Alexander will perform a tribute to Nat "King" Cole featuring himself on piano, Wiggins on bass and DiCenzo on guitar.

Monty Alexander continues at Jazz at the Bistro, 3535 Washington Avenue, through Saturday, with sets at 9 and 10:45 nightly.