

Monty Alexander makes tropical jazz

By John Litweiler

What is Monty Alexander's Caribbean Jazz? It's calypso, sambas and other attractive south-of-the-border (but not Afro-Cuban) music, using mostly original themes and harmonies, featuring steel drums as the lead voice, colored by bongos and congas, with a large helping of modern jazz included. At the Jazz Showcase in the Blackstone Hotel, Alexander's band's most attractive feature was its light, ever-moving swing.

Unique about the band is that steel-drum set, which as Trinidadian "Boogsie" Sharpe played it, sounded like a high carillon. His music was in fairly simple ideas rhythmically; it did not swing with the grace of the rest of the band, possibly because of his instruments' unwieldiness.



Monty Alexander

His showpiece was his own ballad, "Crying," with a "Manha de Carnival"-like theme, over gently throbbing hand drums. His climactic strain was in fast flurries of notes, a surprisingly facile approach, given his otherwise modest style.

As for Jamaica-born Alexander's piano work, his swing immediately swept away this listener. His technique was impressive—he rippled off the most complicated ideas as easily as sipping milk—and his variety of

Monty Alexander's Ivory & Steel Jamboree

Monty Alexander, piano; "Boogsie" Sharpe, steel drums; David Williams, bass; Marvin "Smitty" Smith, drums; Robert Thomas Jr., percussion; at the Jazz Showcase in the Blackstone Hotel, 638 S. Michigan Ave., at 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday, \$10 cover charge, no minimum. Phone 427-4300.

phrasing was impressive. While in most songs his bassists and drummers shifted to straight-ahead jazz accompaniments, "The River" and the closing Jamaican folk song proved he could improvise in samba and calypso patterns.

Alexander's music was oriented in swing-era rhythmic structures and bop harmony, yet his soloing was not satisfying. His playing was nervous, with a sense of melodic development usually limited to no more than two bars. Thus all kinds of eclectic material entered his solos, including quotes from other pianists, from Errol Garner to Oscar Peterson, although with good taste and a light touch. Perhaps this was enough, after all, in a music aimed to be simply high-quality entertainment.

As for the others, bassist David Williams took a long, low, melodic solo in "Look Up," and throughout the evening Waukegan native Marvin "Smitty" Smith discovered a wider variety of sounds and catchy, clickety-click rhythms than did Robert Thomas Jr., his percussion partner from Trinidad.

JAZZ NOTES: Southend Musicworks, which for much of 1987-88 has produced concerts around town as Nomads of Modern Music, finally has a home. The musical events are at 224 N. Desplaines Ave. (283-0531), and its fall season begins this weekend. The drum and dance troupe of Gideon Alorwoye, of Ghana, will perform at 7 p.m. Sunday.