

# Today Is The Question: Ted Panken on Music, Politics and the Arts

Tag Archives: Monty Alexander

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## For Monty Alexander's 71st Birthday, a Downbeat Feature From 2010 and a Separate Interview

In acknowledgment of pianist Monty Alexander's 71st birthday today, here's a feature I wrote for DownBeat in 2010. I've appended below an interview that I conducted with Monty for [a Ray Brown tribute that appeared in DownBeat after the bass grandmaster passed away in 2002](#).

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### **Monty Alexander Downbeat Article:**

The adage “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” coined to convey the kindling effect of separation on romantic ardor, applies with equal measure to pianist Monty Alexander's ongoing obsession with the music of Jamaica, his homeland, whence he migrated to Miami in 1961, at 17.

As a Kingston youngster, Alexander recalled, “I soaked up everything—the calypso band playing at the swimming pool in the country, local guys at jam sessions who wished they were Dizzy and Miles, a dance band playing Jamaican melodies, songs that Belafonte would have sung. I was fully aware of the rhythm-and-blues, my heroes on piano were Eddie Heywood and Erroll Garner, and, above all, Louis Armstrong was my king. I had one foot in the jazz camp and the other in the old-time folk music—no one more valuable than the other.”

Once in the States, though, Alexander compartmentalized, sublimating roots towards establishing a jazz identity. By 1970, he was a distinguished voice, with a c.v. citing long-haul trio gigs with various New York A-listers, as well as consequential sideman work in Los Angeles with Milt Jackson and Ray Brown. By the late '70s, when he closed the books on his 300-days-a-year-on-the-road trio with John Clayton and Jeff Hamilton, he was an upper-echelon stylist, referred to by Oscar Peterson, himself descended from St. Kitt's and St. Croix, as “my little West Indian counterpart.”

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In Orvieto, Italy, for a five-concert engagement at Umbria Jazz Winter 2010, Alexander spoke in the high-ceilinged sitting room of his hotel, which evoked a ducal mansion. With him for the week was a band comprising an acoustic trio with bassist Hassan Shakur and drummer George Fludas and a plugged-in Jamaican contingent—Wendell Ferraro on guitar, filling both soloistic and comping roles, Glen Browne on bass, and Karl Wright on drums.

Dubbed the Harlem-Kingston Express, this instrumental configuration—documented on the 2011 release, *Harlem-Kingston Express* (Motéma), comprising live dates at Dizzy’s Club Coca Cola and in Europe—is the most recent iteration of a series of Alexander-conceptualized efforts over the past few decades to coalesce “things that reflect my heritage as an English-speaking Caribbean person” with the principles of hardcore swinging jazz. “I was bummed out after it ended with John and Jeff because I’d gotten used to that precision, that projection,” he said. “Although other people were fine and good, no one came close to that, and I’m not one to go scouting.” To recharge, he began spending quality time in Jamaica. “I’d go to the studio with Sly and Robbie, who know me from way back. It’s simple music, two chords—but life is in those two chords.”

Later in the ‘80s, Alexander—whose first Jamaica-centric dates were the still-sampled mid ‘70s MPS groove albums *Ras* and *Demento*—started to present units with which he could incorporate Caribbean flavors, including an “Ivory and Steel” ensemble with steel drummer Othello Molyneaux and hand drummer Bobby Thomas “married to whatever bass player and drummer I had at the time.” After signing with Telarc in the mid ‘90s, he embarked on a succession of recordings on which he reunited with musicians he’d known since teen years, among them several dates with guitarist Ernest Ranglin, and one with Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare. Four other recordings—*Stir It Up* and *Concrete Jungle* reveal Alexander’s take on Bob Marley’s music, while *Goin’ Yard* and *Play in’ Yard* address a broader Jamaican spectrum—hearken to mento, Jamaica’s indigenous calypso, descended from the French quadrille music to which English colonists danced in the nineteenth century. Mento evolved into, as Alexander puts it, “a deep country Jamaican thing” with African retentions—a banjo, a rhumba box that is akin to a bass kalimba, hand drums, and often harmonica, fiddle or pennywhistle. It spread throughout the island, and, as the 20th century progressed, cross-pollinated with rhythm-and-blues and jazz, evolving into Ska.

As Alexander delved ever deeper into these rediscovered interests, he found it increasingly difficult to convene a single ensemble in which he could satisfactorily convey them. “I would have a trio of jazz masters, and when I’d want to play something that reflected Jamaica, whether calypso or Bob Marley, I couldn’t get that thing because that’s not what they do,” Alexander said. “Conversely, the Jamaican guys didn’t relate to the jazz experience. I wanted to give myself an opportunity to share my two loves, which is one love, to coin Bob’s phrase.”

This feeling had permeated the previous evening’s concert. Alexander came to the piano, positioned stage center to the left of Shakur and Fludas. He opened with Ellingtonian chords, and launched a chugging train blues, transitioned to the changes of “Blue and Boogie,” then returned to an Ellington medley that resolved into “Caravan.” After brief remarks, a brisk stomp through “Sweet Georgia Brown,” and some nachtmusik chords, the Rasta-dreaded Browne and Wright, who wears white driving gloves when playing, entered stage right, and laid down phat Reggae riddims. Playing percussively, Alexander soon segued into Ernest Gold’s “Exodus,” blew a melodica, quoted “let my people go” within his solo, returned to the piano bench, and ended with a flourish. With the trio, he played a shuffle blues, then a hard-swinging blues—midway through the latter, he stood, pointed to the Jamaicans, and orchestrated a metric modulation, quoting “Manteca” in his solo, before seguing into Marley’s “No Woman, No Cry.” The back-and-forth proceeded for another half-hour, before Alexander concluded with a romping “Come Fly With Me” and a melody-milking rendition of “All The Way.”

“Recently I’ve been doing this with more commitment than before,” Alexander remarked of the real-time genre-switching. “I’m fulfilled, because it’s my own life experience. It’s like Barack Obama music. We are all cut from the same cloth.”

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the muscle tightens, and I look like a kid who takes one index finger and goes PLINK-PLINK-PLINK. I think, ‘Shit, that must look terrible to the audience, this so-called ‘good’ piano player playing with his index finger.’”

The chops are abundant on Uplift (JSP), a deeply swinging navigation of the American Songbook with bassist Hassan Shakur and drummer Herlin Riley that follows the 2008 trio dates, *The Good Life: Monty Alexander Plays the Songs of Tony Bennett and Calypso Blues: The Music of Nat King Cole* [Chesky] as companion pieces to his excellent 1997 Sinatra tribute, *Echoes of Jilly’s* [Concord]. Rather than abstract the tunes, Alexander hews to the iconic arrangements, illuminating the music from within, deploying effervescent grooves, lovely rubatos, a killing left hand, an innate feel for stating melody, well-calibrated touch, harmonic acumen, and an ability to reference a broad timeline of piano vocabulary stretching to pre-bop. Each interpretation embodies a point of view. Like his “eternal inspiration,” Erroll Garner, Alexander gives the hardcore-jazz-obsessed much to dig into, while also communicating the message to the squarest “civilian.”

“In our home, Nat Cole was the voice of America,” said Alexander, who experienced a transformational moment in 1956 when he saw Cole play on a package concert in Kingston with Louis Armstrong. “I grew up learning his songs, without knowing the titles, even before I knew about Sinatra. My awareness of his piano playing came later; it was just that smooth voice. At first I confused him with Gene Autry. I was always connecting one thing with another—‘Wait a minute, that sounded like that.’ That’s why for me, even now, it’s one world of music. I try to remove all the lines.”

By 1956, Alexander had already spent half his life entertaining people with music. “I’d emulate people my folks knew who played old-time stride,” he said. “I was playing boogie-woogie from the getgo, rockin’ the joint. I just had fun at the piano.” Later, he would extrapolate a conceptual framework from Ahmad Jamal’s 1958 classic, “Poinciana.” “It was a merging of two worlds,” he said. “Sophistication on the piano, harmonic wonderment, and the nastiest jungle rhythm going on in the background. That’s Jamaica. It’s about dancin’, it’s about groovin’—it’s all one thing.”

Such formative experiences gave Alexander a certain ignorance-of-youth confidence when he started playing in “tough guy clubs” in Miami Beach, where hookers congregated and alcohol “flowed like crazy.” Within a year he was working at Le Bistro, a two-room joint where he shared the bill with a Sinatra impersonator named Duke Hazlitt. One night after a concert at the Fontainebleau, Sinatra came through with an entourage, including Sinatra’s consigliere, Jilly Rizzo, and Rizzo’s wife, Honey.

“I’m playing, minding my own business, trying to behave, not to be too noisy,” Alexander recalled. “But I must have been kicking up a storm, because apparently Honey came in and told Jilly to come hear this kid play. In those days, I’d come in with all guns blazing. She told me, ‘We’ve got this club in New York, Jilly’s, and it would be nice to have you play in there, kid.’”

About a year later, midway through 1963, Rizzo finally brought Alexander to his eponymous West 54th Street tough guy bar, which doubled as Sinatra’s late night office. Just 19 and residing a few blocks away in the Hotel Edison, Alexander joined Local 802, situated directly across the street from the club, and assumed his place among New York’s jazz elite. Within a few years, he was also working uptown at Minton’s Playhouse, “before a different crowd of tough guys; drug people and hot goods,” and at the Mad Men era Playboy Club.

“I remember sitting at Jilly’s piano bar, a few feet away from Miles Davis and Frank in deep conversation,” Alexander reminisced. “My crowning point was when Miles came to me and said, ‘Where did you learn to play that shit?’ Next thing, he writes his phone number on a little matchbook, and we’re hanging out at his house or going to the fights. Miles told me, ‘You got the right complexion.’” Alexander noted that his bloodline is an admixture of Lebanese, Spanish and African strains, and that the ambiguity as to his racial identity had a great deal to do with his ability to comfortably navigate various circles in Jim Crow Miami as well as New York City. “At Minton’s they’d say, ‘What’s this Puerto Rican guy doing who can play jazz like that?’ When I

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Coleman Hawkins and Major Holley. After he hung out with Bean, he said, ‘What’s going on uptown?’ ‘There’s a little bar called Docks, and Wynton Kelly and Sam Jones play duo there.’ ‘Ok, let’s go.’

“I got to know Ray better. I went to see him in L.A. at the Gaslight. When I got there, nobody’s listening, nobody cares, it’s the last set, and they had to play one obligatory tune. Frankie Capp walks to the drums, Mundell Lowe picks up the guitar, but the piano player is boozed-out at the bar. I asked Ray, ‘Can I play a tune?’ Within two choruses, he’s screaming, he’s groovin’ and I’m groovin’, and we’re as happy as kids in the candy jar. He said, ‘Where are you going to be this summer? I want you to play with me and Milt Jackson.’

“When you’re in company with people who are at a certain level, it upgrades your musicianship. I’d been smitten with the MJQ since I saw a record with these four dignified black men on the cover—they looked like funeral directors. I learned about the connections—John Lewis and Ray with Dizzy’s big band, Hank Jones telling Dizzy about Ray. I took that personal thing on the bandstand. I felt like I belonged to that crowd of people.”

[BREAK]

In spontaneously orchestrating the Harlem-Kingston Express band in live performance, Alexander seemed to be paralleling the bandstand procedures by which both Ahmad Jamal and Duke Ellington deployed their units to convey their intentions in real time. The pianist concurred.

“It’s a kind of joyful, loving dictatorship,” he said. “That’s why I use musicians who are willing and easy-going, who give me their trust and confidence and won’t question what I’m doing.”

Moreso than instant composition a la Jamal and Ellington as an m.o. for following the dictates of the moment, Alexander focuses on serious play. “I don’t read music and I play by ear,” he said. “You can chalk it up to a certain amount of laziness, because if I really wanted to read, there’s no reason I can’t. I took lessons with an older white lady from England who slapped my knuckles to play the scales. I learned to love her, because she meant well and she saw my talent—that taught me respect for the instrument and to get a sound, so the music starts to fly. But when I see paper in front of me, man, I start sweating. That part of my brain doesn’t function well. I don’t know how to play music that’s not coming from my instant, make-it-up stuff.

“I get bored with a planned format. I can’t repeat the same thing twice. I’m always reaching for now, live in the now, present tense, and I look for inspiration from wherever.”

This blank slate attitude inflects the aforementioned trio projects. “I just went in the studio,” Alexander said, referencing the 2008 Nat Cole tribute. “‘Haji Baba’ is from a movie with Nat, and I used to sing walking down the street when I was nine—I listened to the bridge on that and on ‘Again’ to make sure I had it right. But for the most part, when I play music, I smell it and see colors. Every song has its own personality, its own soul, and if I can’t feel it, I can’t play it with feeling.

“I don’t understand what it is that makes me different, but I feel I have very little in common with anybody else. I seem to be my own strange character. If I’m right in my motivations and attitude, amazing things happen.”

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### Monty Alexander on Ray Brown, 2002:

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