

Monty Alexander: devoted to music

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say 'Let's do that.' So you have to draw the line in personal relationships.

"That comes first," he said, pointing toward the piano. "Not just the piano, but the life of a traveling musician. I guess it's possible I'll get married in about 10 years from now ... if I'm not too old."

Alexander's devotion to music began when he was five years old. The story is not uncommon. He liked listening to recordings of American popular tunes and found it easy to pick them out on a piano.

"But I remember how thrilled I was at such an early age that people enjoyed it," he said.

He became interested in jazz when he saw Louis Armstrong, first in the movies, then in person. "Dad got me a trumpet and I got myself the handkerchief to go with it."

But there wasn't a lot of jazz happening in Jamaica, just "a small group of guys spearheaded by Ernest Ranglin." Fate helped Alexander find that small group. Now Ranglin travels as guitarist with Alexander's quartet. "I went and got him out of the woods," said Alexander with a grin.

That grin appears often, on or off stage. But, except in rare cases, he wears it almost constantly onstage. That may be one reason audiences are attracted to him, beyond his playing. He really does seem to be having a wonderful time.

"The telling blow is when you get on a bandstand," said Alexander. "You go through the ritual to make it right for everybody. I feel an obligation. Some guy paid five bucks to see me. I have to give him the best I've got."

"So you have to constantly treat yourself well — keep good things in your mind and body. If not, it weakens you."

Anyone who has seen him and knows anything about music can tell that Alexander is strong. He is

among a select group of performers who can quiet an audience without saying a word.

"It depends on how you play what you play," he said. "Some artists can hit one note and get total attention. The way I approach it is that this is special. I'm going to make it special for me and for the audience. If you don't pay attention, you're missing out."

Alexander is also one to keep things in motion, constantly changing, interesting.

"I want to make it appealing to all kinds of people without changing the product," he said. "When you have problems is when you want everyone to love you. But one thing that jazz has suffered from is a lack of presentation. I try to make it a little presentation. You don't want to wear people out with long solos. If you can't say it in a short time, you're not going to say it at all."

In his engagement at Bubba's, Alexander changed things around by starting off with just piano and guitar, then adding bass for a few tunes, then adding the drummer for the final few. But he may or may not do that in tonight's concert.

"Once again, it's a question of presentation," he said. "It's fine to let everybody go up and let it all hang out. I do that sometimes. This week, I made it a little different. It was building it. Starting at one point and taking it somewhere else."

There are, of course, differences between playing concerts and nightclubs. But they don't seem to bother Alexander at all. The music, of course, is the bottom line.

Monty Alexander will be presented in concert along with Stephanie Grappelli and the Four Freshmen tonight at 6:30 at the Sunrise Musical Theater by the Gold Coast Pops. Tickets are \$10, available at the theater, BASS outlets or Jordan Marsh ticket outlets.