

# Our country 'tis of thee, musically

By **DON HECKMAN**  
*Special to The Times*

**J**AZZ has not often served as the vehicle for inspirational or spiritual ideas — at least not in an overt, literal sense. Most jazz listeners (and musicians, for that matter), though, would be quick to note the subtle presence of those qualities in almost every aspect of the genre.

Duke Ellington's sacred music represents an exception — a group of compositions inspired by and connected to specific spiritual reference points. Others—John Coltrane comes immediately to mind — delved into more ecstatic areas of expression, as have many of the contemporary artists exploring the blending of jazz with various world musics.

The tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001, produced surprisingly low-key reaction in the jazz world. A few CD arrivals this month relate, however indirectly, to personal responses triggered by Sept. 11, others simply expressive of the power of jazz to voice inner feelings, aspirations and spirituality.

**Monty Alexander**  
"My America"

★★★ 1/2, Telarc Records

This an upfront, heart-on-his-sleeve effort by the Jamaican-born pianist to articulate his loving musical vision of this nation. The very directness of Alexander's approach, in which he neither indulges in patriotic excess nor hesitates to tap into the popular psyche, makes for a compelling musical experience.

The songs run the gamut of Alexander's musical memories, from the jaunty fun of "Don't Fence Me In" and the darkly swinging "Mack the Knife" to the soulful sensuality of "Sexual Healing" and the rousing spirit of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Along the way, Alexander is aided by vocalists Freddy Cole, John Pizzarelli and Kevin Mahogany.

But what makes this CD special is the quality of personal drive and energy that Alexander brings to his interpretations. Listening to his soloing, one never doubts the authenticity of his feelings or the sheer, passionate involvement with which he approaches the music.