

Bebop or Not, It's No Sweat For Alexander

By Bo Emerson

Staff Writer

Jamaica-born Monty Alexander is the headline performer in Saturday's daylong series of free jazz concerts in Piedmont Park, but he could just as easily fit into Sunday's schedule of African and Caribbean music.

Like Eddie Palmieri, the jazz-bred salsa bandleader who will shoot sparks into this weekend's Montreux Atlanta International Music Festival, Mr. Alexander is a hybrid pianist, with one foot in bebop and the other in calypso.

What sets Mr. Alexander apart is his complete command of the jazz idiom, coupled with a willingness to bend his talents as the situation requires. "You can't say I'm a total bebop cat," says Mr. Alexander, 45, speaking from a Harrisburg, Pa., hotel room, "though I did work with Milt Jackson and Dizzy Gillespie. So I guess the guys let me into the club." On the other hand, he adds, "if Prince wanted a piano player, man, I'd jump."

When Mr. Alexander plays, everybody jumps, whether he's teamed with steel drummers, as he was Wednesday night in Pennsylvania, or is playing in a classic jazz trio, with regular collaborators Ray Brown on bass and Herb Ellis on guitar.

Born on D-Day in 1944 in Kingston, the child of a white father and a black mother, Montgomery Bernard Alexander lived in a house full of the sounds of Jamaican folk music and jazz recordings by Nat King Cole.

By 17, he was a regular session player in Kingston's recording studios. In 1962, his parents separated, and the young man moved to Miami, receiving his first taste of American jazz clubs and American discrimination.

"As a Jamaican, I didn't know anything about racial prejudice," he says. Playing one night in a bar, "I heard some guy ask, 'Is that boy colored? Puerto Rican? Or what?' For the most part, most of my friends were black musicians."

The best musicians. He played with Julian "Cannonball" Adderley in Florida. After six months in the country, he was noticed by Frank Sinatra at a Las Vegas gig and won a job at Jilly's, the New York club owned by Mr. Sinatra's pal, Jilly Rizzo.

Because of his sparkling technique and exuberant over-the-top soloing, Mr. Alexander has often been compared to the colossal Oscar Peterson. The esteemed pianist must have liked what he heard, because he



Monty Alexander performs Saturday at Piedmont Park.

recommended Mr. Alexander for his first recording contract with the MPS label in the mid-'60s.

During the 1980s, Mr. Alexander has performed tribute concerts to Nat "King" Cole as a way of paying back someone he still considers a mentor. Though he never met the man who crooned "Mona Lisa" and "Sweet Lorraine," he believes the singer's influence on his own style can't be overstated.

"Nat Cole touched me personally in a very lovely way," says Mr. Alexander. "Even just thinking of one of his songs, I get this lovely little feeling."

In another sort of re-creation, Mr. Alexander was tapped by the makers of the movie "Bird" to provide some of the soundtrack's piano parts. The movie soundtrack featured Charlie Parker's alto sax solos, plucked from crumbling vintage tapes and wrapped in accompaniment provided by contemporary musicians.

"I remember getting a real thrill in the studio while this process was taking place," he says. "I'd put the headphones on, and it's Bird, as if I could close my eyes and he's standing right next to the piano."

Yet, Mr. Alexander adds, he wishes the original musicians could have been rescued from those tapes. "The truth is, it was a synthetic thing," he says. "It wasn't leather, it was plastic. Sitting there with that tape, pretending like you're playing with Charlie Parker, is a lie."

For the real thing, listen to Mr. Alexander, accompanied by drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith, bassist Lyn Seaton and percussionist Robert Thomas Jr., in a performance Saturday that Mr. Alexander says will be upbeat.

"The bottom line is, it's like a celebration," he says. "It's something I want to come together musically, I'm trying to reach that thing, and when I reach it, boy I'm so happy. And I guess that comes across."