



# Dawn Patrol

By Captain Kilmer Joyce

## Jamaican jazzman Monty Alexander likes to keep tunes short and sweet

Jazz pianist Monty Alexander is excited: On Monday, he will perform with bassist John Clayton and drummer Ed Thigpen at the Cheek to Cheek lounge (Villa Nova restaurant, Winter Park). Vibraphonist Milt Jackson will join the trio in mid-set.

"Milt Jackson!" Alexander exclaims in his lilting Jamaican accent. "I mean, this is a legend! He's still happening!"

So, certainly, is Monty Alexander. He is talking about jazz and raving about Jackson in the music room of his mother's Altamonte Springs home. The wall behind Alexander is English-made Knight piano is covered with dozens of album jackets, most of them featuring the pianist's face.

One album, though, has a picture of Alexander and Jackson on the cover. The recording is *Soul Fusion* (released in 1977 by Pablo Records), and it captures Jackson, Alexander, Clayton and drummer Jeff Hamilton trading ideas in an easy, clear musical dialectic. The compact arrangements and concise solos on each of the album's eight songs underscore Alexander's and Jackson's basic jazz philosophy: Keep it short.

"We know where we want to go and we have something to reach for and we make it happen," Alexander says. "Milt plays the same way. Rather than play three long tunes in one set, we might play seven or eight shorter ones. We like to make it short and sweet."

Alexander says he has made more than 35 albums, many of which were cut for European and Japanese labels that had weak distribution in the United States. "People in the states who know my music will say, 'I've got all your records! All six of them!' And I say, 'Great!' I don't want to tell them that I've been knocking around, you know?"

Now 40, Alexander is not making millions playing jazz, but he's making a living at it and his versatile, calypso-tinged style has caught the attention of many jazz-shy listeners.

Alexander wishes jazz was enjoying greater commercial success, but he also understands why it isn't.

"I think jazz is something, even in its simpler forms, that sort of appeals to a certain type of intellect," he says. "You've

got to spend a little time, you've got to develop an appreciation for it. That's instead of a quick fix and a quick buck and a quick whatever it is."

The process of getting acquainted with jazz began for Alexander at 4, when he started picking tunes out on the piano. He liked music with a beat — which in Jamaica consisted of reggae, calypso and rhythm 'n' blues — and so spent a good deal of his childhood vigorously resisting his piano teachers' orthodox, classical instruction. Once he heard the recordings of Louis Armstrong and Nat "King" Cole, Alexander became an incorrigible jazz fanatic.

As a student at a Jamaican boarding school with strict off-campus rules, Alexander once tugged the braces out of the left side of his mouth so his parents would have to take him to Kingston for orthodontic repairs. It was more than mere coincidence that Armstrong happened to be performing in Kingston at the time. The ploy worked. Alexander's father drove him into town to the dentist and lectured all the way, but nevertheless allowed his son to see Armstrong perform.



ANGELA PETERSON/SENTINEL

**MONTY ALEXANDER:** Musician's calypso-accented style has captured fans in this country and abroad.

By 17, Alexander had departed Jamaica for the United States and soon found work in "some little joint on Miami Beach that was trying not to be a strip joint anymore." A year later, he got a job in New York at Jilly's and, after that, the Playboy Club.

The job offers, including several each year from Europe, have since come in steadily. Alexander modestly acknowledges that his playing just might be improving.

"I haven't changed that much," he says, "but I've noticed that there's an evolution,

a growth, a maturing process taking place. I guess I've gotten more — how can I put it? — thoughtful. There's less tendency to play just what comes naturally on the fingers and to try to be more musical.

"After all," he says, "the piano is an orchestra."

Monty Alexander and Milt Jackson appear at 8 and 10:30 p.m. Monday at Cheek to Cheek in the Villa Nova, 839 N. Orlando Ave., Winter Park. Tickets are \$12.50 (\$8 for students with ID). For details, call (305) 644-2060. □