

JAZZ REVIEW Monty Alexander Trio at the Jazz Showcase

The sunny sounds of Monty Alexander

By **Howard Reich**

TRIBUNE CRITIC

Just when we needed it, a warm Jamaican breeze has blown into Chicago, in the form of Monty Alexander's pianism.

Not that Alexander explicitly quotes much folkloric material from his youth in Kingston, Jamaica, where he was born. But the ebullient rhythms and radiant optimism of his playing consistently evoke a sunnier place, as they did during his first set Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase, where he's playing through Sunday.

When: 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Saturday; 4 p.m., 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Sunday

Where: Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Ct.

Tickets: \$20-\$25; 312-360-0234

No wonder Alexander and his trio opened the evening with a bebop-tinged perspective on music from "South Pacific." Not the most innovative repertoire, to be sure, yet Alexander's lush harmonies, glistening arpeggios and spacious voicings represented a distinctly pictorial approach to jazz pianism.

At times during his "South Pacific" medley, in fact, Alexander veered dangerously close to cocktail pianism. A few more rounds of endlessly cascading

glissandos and one might have been tempted to leave a few dollars in a jar on the piano (fortunately, there was none).

But soon enough Alexander brought his playing under greater control, locking in firmly with bassist Hassan Shakur and Chicago drummer George Fludas. When these three players latched on to a taut swing pulse, listeners heard the best of both worlds: Alexander's tonally sensitive pianism



Jamaica-born pianist Monty Alexander.

enhanced by Fludas and Shakur's harder driving rhythm.

In "Old Devil Moon," another ancient selection, Alexander and friends suggested the spirit (if not quite the high polish) of an earlier era of jazz trios: hard-swing outfits led by Nat "King" Cole, Oscar Peterson and others. Much of the credit belonged to Fludas, who consistently pushed tempos and added sonic punch to the proceedings.

Few pianists handle ballads as poetically as Alexander, and he reiterated the point on "Sweet Lady," unfurling some of the most tender playing of the night. Soft, lyrical, unpretentious, Alexander would have been effective even if he hadn't been answered by Shakur's lithe solo on bass.

No, there was nothing particularly innovative or groundbreaking here—just gently shimmering trio work of a sort that's harder to come by than you might think.

hreich@tribune.com