

JAZZ

Pianist Alexander: Great Sounds

By OWEN McNALLY

Jazz pianist Monty Alexander's name ought to be a household word, at least in those enlightened American households in which Bird & Prez or Duke & Lady Day are esteemed more highly than Starsky & Hutch or Laverne & Shirley.

Unfortunately, this Jamaican-born Alexander the Great has a recognition factor that falls far short of being commensurate with his imperial command of the keyboard.

The latest evidence of Alexander's hip hegemony can be found on the new Pablo Records release, "Monty Alexander in Tokyo."

Recorded last January in a Tokyo studio, the new disc features the pianist with bassist Andrew Simpkins and drummer Frank Gant. There are eight selections, with a spicy variety ranging from Oscar Pettiford's "Tricotism" to Ma Rainey's "See See Rider."

The Pettiford piece is as delectable as a petit four and moves along with plenty of rhythmic zing. Typically, Alexander's playing is graced with a fine, fluid flow of ideas, mixed with block chords that shimmer like Shearing.

What makes this the best version of "Tricotism" since Pettiford recorded it with tenor saxophonist Lucky Thompson is Alexander's own distinctive, stylistic mark—one that generates a special elan for the tune's pulse.

"See See Rider," the Rainey classic, comes out sounding not like a "golden-oldie," but rather as a thoroughly contemporary blues—blues for the dawning of the 1980s.

Alexander begins his musical address with "Broadway," a dashing, flashy opening for side A. This is followed by "Just in Time," with more modern mainstream grooves that bounce along with the sort of joie de vivre of a Wynton Kelly chorus.

On "Sweet Lady," a ballad, there's a touch of the sort of romanticism favored by a Bill Evans or a Keith Jarrett. Side A closes out in style with the intriguing rendition of "Tricotism."

Side B features a pretty "Never Let Me Go"; a capital Latin touch on "Montevideo"; a sensitive, unaccompanied rendition of Quincy Jones' "Pawnbroker," and the grand finale, "See See Rider."

Alexander's non-raggy or ragged time band provides solid support throughout. Simpkins shows a bit of irritating, scratchy intonation briefly on one piece, but his bass work is strong and supportive practically everywhere else. Alexander will appear in the Hartford area with his quintet as part of the Hartford Jazz Society's new season which will get underway in the fall. He'll be performing with a rhythm section of bass and drums, plus a percussionist and a guitarist. This Alexander combo will stress jazz with a saucy Caribbean inflection. This too is brilliant, absolutely engaging side of Alexander's musical personality.



Monty Alexander

Alexander might well become a most familiar attraction on the local entertainment scene—as Mort Fega, the jazz impresario, also plans to bring Alexander to Hartford for an appearance at the 880 Club's upcoming new season next fall.

So "Monty Alexander in Tokyo" might well serve as a good intro to Monty Alexander in Hartford.

Along with this work by a young master, Norman Granz' Pablo Records has just reissued solo piano gems by Art Tatum. The 10 tunes are from the marathon solo sessions that Tatum cut for Granz in the early and mid 1950s. The selections are also available on the 13-LP, boxed set, "The Tatum Solo Masterpieces" (2625-703).

Except for "Blue Lou," all the tunes are evergreen standards by the likes of Gershwin, Ellington, Mercer and Rodgers. Among these are: "Too Marvelous for Words," "You Took Advantage of Me," "Sophisticated Lady," "I'm in the Mood for Love," "Everything I Have Is Yours," "Embraceable You," "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" and "Come Rain or Come Shine."

"Tea for Two" is the tour de force number, the Magnum Tatum Opus.

Rich in quicksilver modulations, bravura rubato passages, incredible arpeggios and a fine, fat harmonic sound, the 25-year-old pieces are still fresh. Going back to Tatum sides is like dipping again into Shakespeare, Melville or Tolstoy. Substance abounds, undimmed by time, trends or trivia. Like good literature, good music stands the test of time, transcending the sort of junk-food-aesthetics used to measure pop music. Jazz is meant to last, not self-destruct.

As part of the Fats Waller revival, Pablo has also issued "Ain't Misbehavin'," a new disc that features Clark Terry and his combo doing a handful of tunes either written by or closely associated with Fats. Among

the Walleriana are: "Jitterbug Waltz," "Your Feet's Too Big," "Honeysuckle Rose," "Squeeze Black and Blue?" "Handful of Keys" and "The Joint's Jumping."

Terry's classy combo consists of Chris Woods, also and flute; Oscar Peterson, piano; Victor Sproles, bass; and Billy Hart, drums. Peterson is good, often the jazziest of the players and sometimes saves the LP from total lethargy.

The disc is actually a handsome salute to Fats, even if it's far from being a great jazz session. With 11 selections here, there's really far too little room for anyone ever to stretch out and say something really significant.

"Ain't Misbehavin'" ain't bad, but it ain't really all that good when judged purely as jazz recording. Aside from Peterson's playing (Peterson should have made the salute to Fats on his own LP), the best moments belong to vocalist Johnny Hartman on the tune, "Ain't Misbehavin'." Hartman is a criminally under-recorded vocalist of prime talent. Perhaps Granz will give him a well-deserved shot with one of Pablo's all-star combos which proliferate throughout the company's blooming catalogue.

"Ain't Misbehavin'" isn't a bad record. Terry, the consummate professional, doesn't make bad records. But when compared to the original Waller renditions—almost all of which are available again on RCA's superb reissue series—all of this sounds pretty pallid.

Compared to the genuine article, this is flat Waller.

At the Community Renewal Team's jazz concert in Bushnell Park last Monday night, Terry was his usual entertaining self. Best of all was his hilarious rendition of "Mumbles," a signature tune in which he sang choruses of outrageous nonsense syllables that were a mix of Slim Gaillard's gallimaufry and Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." It was like a syncopated surreal sermon with Terry as the Bid Daddy of Dada, outrageous and funny right down to its closing bars which inexplicably slammed shut with the word, WATERGATE.

Ence and vocalist Tiny Joe, a natural born entertainer, sat in with the Terry band and belted out two blues numbers in the tradition of Jimmy Rushing, Ray Charles and Dizzy Gillespie. Also lurking in Tiny Joe's ingratiating stage presence is a more refined touch of a Wolfeman Jack.

Terry's band itself was slick and proficient. There weren't any really memorable moments, no solos that will be indelibly etched in anyone's memory. But the fare was thoroughly entertaining and seemed to please the crowd of some several thousand that had camped down on Bushnell Park's greensward, which was still soggy and mouldy-smelling from the heavy rain of the previous weekend.