

## JAZZ FEST 2017

# Pianist Alexander continues to hit the right keys of life

JEFF SPEVAK

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Monty Alexander got a standing ovation before he'd even played a note.

So, off to a good start, Alexander piled on Tuesday afternoon before a few hundred people in the Lyric Theatre on Day Five of the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival. This was not unexpected, the Jamaican native has a long history with this city. One of his 70-plus albums, 1971's *We've Only Just Begun*, was even recorded live in a Henrietta club called The Monticello in the old Rowntowner Motor Inn.

"It's good to be back," the 73-year-old Alexander said. "I shall now try to play piano."

That was the only understatement of the performance. This one was solo. Wednesday at Kilbourn Hall, Alexander plays as a trio.

A beautiful ballad, "Consider," Alexander said, called for the listener to "consider all of the things around you and come to a good decision." He seemingly plays only the brightest of notes, except for crashing crescendos at the end of "Hurricane," a piece about a storm that hit Jamaica in 1953, and for a big finish on fellow Jamaican Bob Marley's "No Woman, No Cry." Alexander's lived in the United States for many years now, but his soul still retains some Jamaica, despite the minor concern he expressed about the mosquitoes.

Any darkness in the music is more contemplative than it is possessive of his soul. Alexander talked of being a young pianist in New York City, where music school wasn't where the lessons were to be learned, the scene was late-night bars and rough characters drinking. So he gave us Frank Sinatra's "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" and "Call Me Irresponsible," which followed Alexander telling a story about when Count Basie and Miles Davis were in the house because "it was the place to be, Frank was there."

And he spoke of "the deeper realities," sharing with the audience how



JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Monty Alexander performing at Lyric Theatre during the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival.

his song "Just Wait" reflected his recovery from prostate cancer. Followed by a stroke, which stole from him the use of his left hand for a while. When he suggested at the start of the show that was going to try to play piano, Alexander is speaking from the perspective of someone who's seen what he loves nearly slip away.

"Just wait," Alexander said. "A simple little riff you play while you're waiting for the chemo thing to go. And just wait. It's going to be all right."

## Today's jazz haiku

G-clefs like sparrows  
circle the Lyric ceiling  
then home to roost, safe, sound

## Rom's surreal appeal

Mario Rom's Interzone doesn't just talk the William Burroughs talk, it walks the William Burroughs walk. And damn if the Austrian trio didn't sound like Mugwumps being milked for their hallucinogenic secretions.

Playing for a full house at The Little Theatre for its first set, the off-beat trio is urgent, cosmopolitan jazz. Band leader Rom plays a trumpet sort of like Dizzy Gillespie with an upturned bell, also favored by people

who drop the thing.

He never speaks during the show, leaving that to double bassist Lukas Kranzelbinder.

Watching these guys for a song or two, particularly the energetic drummer Herbert Pirker, and their personalities become clear: Jokers. They have the same whimsical, self-deprecating humor found in the musicians playing a few blocks away in the Nordic Jazz Now series at Lutheran Church of the Reformation.

And they are serious players. A driving, frantic opening number, "Everything is Permitted," merged seamlessly with "Words of Advice," with satisfying quirks: A buzzing-fly effect from Rom's trumpet, the clatter of drumsticks against the edges of Piker's drums, Kranzelbinder bowing his bass to mournful effect.

As a bonus, after the first show the band took advantage of The Little's movie screen to show the series of surreal videos that it made a couple of years ago, including a few brief scenes shot in its Rochester hotel while playing the 2015 jazz fest.

Mugwumps appear in Beat writer Burroughs's most-famous novel, *Naked Lunch*. Interzone is a fictional territory recurring throughout Burroughs's stories and novels, a place where "Everything is Permitted." Burroughs references are scattered throughout the song titles; the band's first album was called *Nothing is True*, which could be a Burroughs thing.

## Old instruments, new use

Since 2005, the Rochester Education Foundation has been collecting used musical instruments to be donated to the Rochester City School District.

The drive's co-sponsor, M&T Bank, has donated the booth space that it receives in the merchandise tent as a presenting sponsor of the jazz fest, where the instruments can be donated. The annual drive has collected more than 1,600 instruments over the years.

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