

Alexander's back in town, praising Cole and calypso

By CLIFF SMITH

Jazz pianist Monty Alexander is squeezing his Saturday appearance at Nazareth College Arts Center into the biggest project of his life.

"Within a month, I will have made five trips to Los Angeles to help Natalie Cole with her love letter to her father, Nat Cole," he said in a phone interview from his home near Orlando, Fla.

Alexander, who's always listed the late Nat Cole as among his earliest piano influences in his native Jamaica, said he's "proud of the fact that they called me" to advise and perform in the making of what may become a two-CD dedication to Natalie's dad.

"She's always wanted to go back to what she heard her father do when she was a little girl, from the commercial sweet ballads like *Monza Lisa* and *Smile* to the swinging things like *Straighten Up and Fly Right*," he said.

He said there will be three segments to the recording — an orchestra with strings, a big band with swinging brass and "the combo stuff." Veteran arrangers Johnny Mandel, Michele Lagrand and Marty Paich are writing the arrangements for the larger ensembles, while Alexander will have much to do with the recreation of the Nat "King" Cole Trio numbers.

The project, on Warner Bros.' Elektra label, "might cover 30 songs," he said.

Alexander's selection was a natural because of the "To Nat with Love" show, a reprise of Cole's playing and singing, that he put together for two performances at New York's Blue Note club and for five nights at a Columbus, Ohio, theater about three months ago.

"The recording project is a major endeavor," he said. "A lot of heart and thought is behind the whole thing. Natalie also happens to be my favorite woman singer. I hear a sweetness in her, something unaffected."

"I like singers who don't go through a whole lot of stuff, who just let the song come out. I like a maximum of expression with a minimum of tricks. Rosemary Clooney is another good example of that kind of singer. I love her, too."

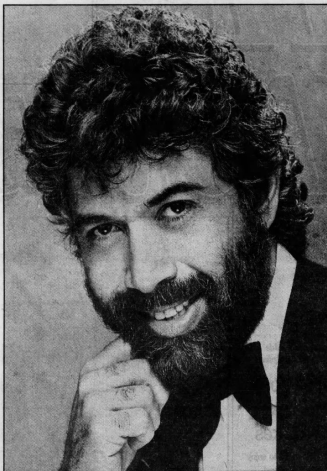
Alexander, 46, said he'll repeat his own Nat Cole show "every so often. But I won't make a steady diet of it. It's fun to remember your heroes, but you have to live your own life, too."

The program here, which is a benefit for The Health Association, will include two of his own compositions written for orchestra; a couple of arrangements written by his former bass player, John Clayton, who also arranges music for singers Carmen McRae and Ernestine Anderson; and a brief dedication to Nat Cole.

BEFORE MOVING TO Florida from his Caribbean island with his mother when he was 17, Alexander's other heroes included jazz pianists Ahmad Jamal, Erroll Garner and Oscar Peterson. By the time he made his first Rochester ap-

Spotlight

ON ENTERTAINING PEOPLE IN ROCHESTER



Library/Woodhead

Monty Alexander did so many shows in Rochester in the 1970s, including one in 1972 at the age of 27 (below), that "I got to feel I was living in Rochester." He returns Saturday for a benefit for The Health Association.



pearance in 1970 at age 25, his playing was an amalgam of all four heroes, plus the flavor of the calypso beat which helps make the Caribbean unique.

Alexander (named for Britain's World War II military hero, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery) must have appealed to Rochester audiences, because in the 1970s he appeared here nearly as

many times as pianist Marian McPartland did. And she owned Rochester.

He played most often at the old Rowntowner Motel's Monticello Restaurant in Henrietta and remembers particularly 1970, when he and his trio stayed for a month.

"It was the longest I ever spent in any club playing music," he said. "I got to feel I was living in Rochester."

But "part of my whole agenda," he said, "has been to keep moving. You remain kind of fresh when you do, because geography changes your perspective. When you come back in, say, six months, you sound slightly new."

At first, he said, "I thought there was something wrong with me for feeling that way. But then I found out all my heroes felt the same. You wonder if Duke Ellington would have created so many wonderful things if he had stayed in one place. He thrived on travel."

Alexander said he spends no more than seven to 10 days at a time in his Altamonte Springs, Fla., home.

SATURDAY

Monty Alexander in "Evening of Jazz," benefit of The Health Association, with Eastman New Jazz Ensemble, directed by Rob Hudson, at 8:30 p.m. at Nazareth College Arts Center, 4245 East Ave.; also reception at 6 p.m. and dinner at 6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$18 (concert and dessert reception); \$30 (reserved seating, program listing and dessert reception); \$50 (reception, dinner, preferred seating, program listing and dessert reception), and \$100 (reception, dinner, VIP seating, program listing and dessert reception). (423-9490)

"There's nothing set about this business," he said. "I don't have a schedule. I've got to go wherever it (work) happens."

ALTHOUGH HE'S SPENT nearly 30 years in this country, he's still waiting for American audiences to appreciate calypso music and the rest of the "wonderful world of West Indian culture, which is not that far away from our shores. Not only that, it's also English, not Spanish or French."

Americans are the losers for having heard so little of "those marvelous calypso singers, with their fantastic sense of humor, the way they put lyrics and music together, their commentary of what's going on in the world, the satire, the funny things they sing about men and women and politics," he said.

Alexander said he "grew up with that. But there's a barrier of understanding in the U.S. It's not interesting enough to the majority of the public. But it's very sophisticated, in a country sort of way. It's very hip."

If rap music had an origin, "it's the West Indian culture," he said. "The first time I heard rap, it reminded me of Jamaican dance hall music. In the new movement, reggae, they started to talk the words. It was about real life, with heavy undertones, degrading at times. Instead of singing about life, as in calypso, they beat the rhythms and talked about it."

In a 1971 *Times-Union* interview, Alexander said his goal was "still to master the piano." In the interview last week, he said that goal "has been kind of short-circuited" because his gigs have prevented him from taking the time off to practice.

But he's found satisfaction, since "I can express myself with what I have. I don't have to be the fastest player. People keep telling me I have an outstanding technique, which I don't believe."

"Each time I play, I say a prayer and hope something special comes out. I pray that whatever happens in that one hour, the whole experience will come together as a musical upliftment for me, for my associates playing with me and for the audience."

"This happens most of the time, he said.

"But I remember nights in Rochester when I went to the job and tried to have that attitude," he said. "I felt incredibly frustrated when it didn't happen that often."

Alexander said he doesn't take himself as seriously now. "But I take the music very seriously. The part of me that's a musician is almost sacred. I don't want to trash that. It's too special. I consider it a gift. I don't want to abuse it."

"The attitude behind your playing is a very key issue. It's more important than how fast you can play."

Jazz enthusiast Cliff Smith is a Monty reporter for the *Times-Union*.