

Monty Alexander displays versatility on the piano

By FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Monty Alexander, who was presented in concert this weekend by the Left Bank Jazz Society, is a great acoustic pianist in a space age that has seen many prominent jazz pianists equip their keyboards with myriad sound-altering gadgets.

While there is a lot of innovative music being pounded out on synthesizers, clarinets and other electrified keyboard instruments, it was a pleasant change of pace to hear a musician delve into the piano's natural timbre and dynamics.

Monty Alexander has melded together the ideas of keyboard wizards like Oscar Peterson, Bud Powell and Horace Silver to create his own unique style of piano playing. Alexander also acknowledged his indebtedness to the Duke by playing a medley of Ellington compositions which included "Take the 'A' Train" and "Satin Doll."

Alexander displayed his fluidity as a blues pianist by playing a funky, gutsy original composition saucily entitled "It's Been a Long Time Baby Since I Heard My Backbone Crack." Although no

one's backbone could be heard cracking while Alexander belted out this up tempo jam, the sound of popping fingers and stamping feet reverberated throughout the Famous Ballroom. The audience was really getting into Alexander's groove, which was as cozy as the unseasonably warm weather that Baltimore has been blessed with lately.

There was a heat wave brewing inside the Famous Ballroom as Alexander explored some of the other facets of his virtuosity as a piano player. Not only is he an excellent blues player, he is also capable of cooking in any of the jazz idioms ranging from ragtime to bop to the most avant garde, iconoclastic piano stylings.

Alexander has a powerful left hand which hammers out intricate chord progressions which serve as the launching pad for a blitz of staccato produced by an extremely accurate right hand.

One of the things that Alexander does best with his talent is to breathe new life into songs that seemingly have been worked to death by other musicians. A prime example

of this was his rendition of "We've Only Just Begun." Somehow he was able to revitalize this song, to make its charming melody sparkle and scintillate with newfound vigor. He managed to do the same thing for "Love Makes the World Go 'Round," a top-40 ditty recorded by the Stylistics, which he turned into one of the biggest crowd-pleasers of the evening.

"Work Song," yet another tune that has been recorded countless times, afforded Alexander and his sidemen an opportunity to lay down some freewheeling, no-holds-barred jamming. After Alexander stated the basic melody of the tune, he proceeded to flail his piano unmercifully, knocking out one of his best solos of the evening. Jeff Hamilton took an excellent solo on the drums, and then turned the stage over to John Clayton, Jr., who delivered a pulsating, throbbing acoustic bass solo that Baltimore jazz fans will be talking about for weeks to come.

AMUSEMENTS

Anna Russell