

# Monty Alexander Trio

## subtle, but sensational

By Howard Reich  
Entertainment writer

The elegant sounds at the Jazz Showcase this week belong to the Monty Alexander Trio, a group that chooses its every note carefully.

At its center is pianist Alexander, whose keyboard touch remains one of the most distinctive in jazz. Unlike many of his colleagues, Alexander regards the piano as a lyric instrument rather than a percussive one. So he is constantly spinning long-lined melodies atop warm, discreetly voiced chords.

Yet this is not music of the easy-listening variety. The harmonic subtlety and rhythmic ingenuity of Alexander's improvisations keeps the music constantly in flux. So even though Alexander is neither a loud nor particularly aggressive pianist, the quiet sophistication of his work consistently commands attention.

During Tuesday night's late set, Alexander seemed to shift musical directions every four bars or so. A number that opened with a rhapsodic piano solo might soon include bebop runs, Caribbean rhythms and gospel harmonies. The man considers almost everything fair game, drawing on divergent sources to come up with his own, coolly appealing blend.

By far the most seductive of Alexander's selections was his rhythmically jubilant version of an old Jamaican folk tune. To hear the pianist deliver the song's unexpected syncopations was to learn something about Jamaican music: Its rhythmic charm lies not in the strength of the beat, but in the way the melody rides the offbeats.

That was the main lesson here, with phrases stopping and starting just when one least expected them to. Similarly, Alexander's vocal riffs on the tune were as imaginative as they were rhythmically sur-

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## Jazz

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### Monty Alexander Trio

Performing with drummer Duffy Jackson and bassist Ira Coleman, at Jazz Showcase in the Blackstone Hotel, 636 S. Michigan Ave., with shows at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Thursday; 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4 p.m., 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$10-\$12; for details, phone 312-427-4846.

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Elsewhere in the set, Alexander offered fascinating and complex chords in an original tone poem, "Renewal"; exquisite phrase-making in an old standard, "With a Song in My Heart"; and an irresistible sense of humor in a funk-influenced version of—brace yourself—"Battle Hymn of the Republic."

As far as his ensemble is concerned, Alexander is fortunate to have a drummer as light on the beat as Duffy Jackson. Though everything Jackson does shrewdly supports his leader, the way he handles a pair of brushes is particularly appealing. Like the best of the old soft-shoe hoofers, he can divide a beat a dozen different ways.

Add to that Ira Coleman's similarly lithe way around a standup bass, and you have a trio that sounds nearly transparent, even when all three players are going at it together.

And though the set had a few weak moments, particularly in a New Age-like original titled "River," such numbers were the exception. For the most part, Alexander's trio enriched its pastels with sophisticated harmonies and unpredictable lines.

Ultimately, this is not the kind of music that will astonish the ear with its virtuosity or win ovations with simple, tried-and-true ideas.

Instead, this is jazz of a more introspective sort. But what a pleasure to hear a music that prefers to whisper rather than shout.