

MUSIC | JAZZ REVIEW

Monty Alexander Still Looks Fondly to Jamaica

By NATE CHINEN APRIL 27, 2006

The pianist Monty Alexander left Jamaica for the United States in the early 1960's, when he was still in his teens. His crisp and energetic style was already evocative of Oscar Peterson, and it quickly earned him work in modern jazz and pop, laying the groundwork for a brightly swinging career.

But like any good expatriate, Mr. Alexander has devoted a lot of energy to homeward glances; his discography is peppered with Caribbean flavor. On Monday night at B. B. King's Blues Club and Grill he attempted to recapture the spirit of his new Telarc album, "Concrete Jungle: The Music of Bob Marley," which was recorded at Marley's Tuff Gong International Studio in Kingston last year.

The show opened with an arrangement of "No Woman, No Cry" from Mr. Alexander's previous Marley tribute, also on Telarc. He warmed up with some pastoral stirrings at the piano before being joined by the bassist Hassan Shakur and the drummer Winard Harper. Their acoustic treatment of the tune was airy and appealing but couldn't stand a chance next to the full-blown reggae that kicked in halfway through, courtesy of another band on the opposite side of the stage.

Mr. Alexander had enlisted some of the Jamaican musicians who play on his album, an expert crew anchored by the booming bass of Glenroy Browne. Members

ensemble's hardy groove that provided the evening's most reliable feature; so much so that Mr. Alexander's piano, skating over the riddims, often felt extraneous.

That feeling only grew after Mr. Alexander called up the reggae star Luciano, who sang a verse on one of the album's best tracks, "War." Bounding onstage during Mr. Alexander's introduction to that tune, Luciano veered instead toward some sanctified songs of his own.

He began with a round of heavenly exhortations, moving on to his devotional hit "It's Me Again Jah." He dropped to his knees; he jumped up and down; he tossed his dreadlocked head in time. His energy and magnetism were such that Mr. Alexander could only follow him, along with the rest of the band.

Eventually Luciano wrapped up his set, or so he thought: on his way offstage, Mr. Alexander accosted him to insist that there was still a Marley song to be sung. This of course was "War," a tone poem based on a speech by Haile Selassie. Luciano sang his verse, the first, with convincing passion; there were additional vocals by Junior Jazz, Mr. Armond, Mr. Browne and, fleetingly, Mr. Alexander.

Mr. Alexander's musicianship was more apparent during other choice moments in the show. He dug in with the saxophonist Dean Fraser on the jaunty Skatalites classic "Dick Tracy," and recast Marley's "Jammin' " as a soul-jazz shuffle. And when he puffed into a melodica, he could cast an effectively dramatic spell.

Near the concert's end, he brought up the banjoist and singer Carlton James, an elder statesman of the Jamaican folk style called mento. Beginning "Three Little Birds" by himself, Mr. James offered an unsweetened, intoxicating taste of that tradition. Then the band chugged into gear, and Mr. James, like Mr. Alexander, was enveloped.