

'Joie de Jouer' of Monty Alexander

BY LEONARD FEATHER

Times Staff Writer

There is more to music from the West Indies than just reggae and calypso. Monty Alexander, whose trio is now at the Hong Kong Bar, offers nightly evidence that jazz of exceptional quality can be distilled in the Caribbean.

The Jamaica-born pianist, who began his career as a member of a small jazz clique in Kingston before taking off for the United States at 17, is making his first local appearance in two years with the group he leads regularly. What strikes the listener immediately is his obvious desire to communicate, coupled with his concern for a swinging, 4/4 brand of music that spurns funk/jazz, modal effects and R&B in favor of a style reflecting such influences as Nat Cole, Oscar Peterson and Fats Waller.

There is, too, a hint of Erroll Garner in his penchant for occasionally delaying the beat very slightly. A colorful Richard Evans composition, "Montevideo," found him with hands crossed, using the right had to pick out a melody in the bass register while the left strummed Garner-like chords an octave higher.

The trio shows a firm sense of organization when the arrangements call for it. Some passages played in unison by Alexander and his excellent bassist John Clayton are the product of exceptional empathy. Clayton, a protege of Ray Brown, displayed Brown's bowing technique in a beguilingly melodic solo on "Emily."

"Work Song" was the most vigorous piece, with Alexander plucking the piano strings and drummer Jeff Hamilton all but playing the melody in a keenly integrated, constantly pulsating performance.

Alexander ended the set by turning back to his island origins, "for all the Jamaicans in the house," with a rhythmically engaging workout on "Yellow Bird."

Alexander is one of a breed rare among today's jazz pianists, confining technical and rhythmic skill within a relatively orthodox framework and projecting a rare sense of his *joie de jouer*. He will be at the Hong Kong Bar through June 4 (off Sunday and Monday).

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