

## Monty Alexander

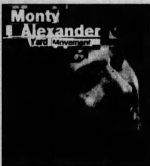
*Yard Movement* (Island  
Jamaica Jazz)

## Ernest Ranglin

*Below the Bassline* (Island  
Jamaica Jazz)

Island Jamaica Jazz — a new imprint of Island Records — has released two superb albums that showcase the best of a not altogether rare breed, Jamaican jazz.

In addition to contributing session work for the top producers in Jamaica in the 1960s, such as Coxsone Dodd, Duke Reid and Chris Blackwell, pianist Monty Alexander and guitarist Ernest Ranglin have top-drawer credentials as jazz stylists. These are probably the best efforts by both veterans that can be found in print.



On "Yard Movement," Alexander begins with the album's high point—a 12-minute alchemy of the theme from the movie "Exodus" with the popular, militant song of the same name by Bob Marley. It's an uncommonly good blend of popular source material, characterized by Alexander's ruminative but never excessive soloing, one of three tracks culled from an inspired performance at the Montreux Jazz Festival in July 1995.

A technical bravado and engaging emotionalism mark the

eight compositions of "Yard Movement," Alexander favoring ripening glissandos to achieve his notable effects.

Ranglin leads a highly unified five-piece combo on "Below the Bassline," essaying songs familiar to roots reggae fans ("Congo Man Chant," "Satta Massagana," "King Tubby Meets the Rockers") while remaining steadfastly on his jazz course. His is the work of a suave hipster, negotiating knotty chord progressions and sweet, needling notes with flair.

Frequently, Ranglin succeeds through restraint and suggestion. The Skatalites' Roland Alphonso lends saxophones in the manner of light brush strokes to give "Ball of Fire" its ska undertones. Similarly, the root R&B rhythm is all that remains of Toots & the Maytals' "54-46 (Was My Number)," yet Ranglin finds the song's exhilaration, if in more muted and intimate terms.

The stacked charts of jazz rarely make room for reggae. These two releases make a case that they should, proving, particularly on Ranglin's album, that reggae isn't incompatible with a cerebral sort of swing.

— Michael Kuelker

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## Daddy's Farm

*Scroat Belly* (Bloodshot)

Scroat Belly is four guys from Kansas who got some drums and electric guitars and subverted its bluegrass project into something harder, louder and faster. Bluegrass still lives somewhere among the rapid bang-bang-bang beats of this debut album, but at this point it's a thin and damaged thing at the mercy of the aforementioned bang-bang.

The players are nimble and often clever but, sacrificing feeling for speed, they play as if their hearts aren't in it. There are a few jazzy, atonal breaks in a few of the songs, a bit of toyed-with feedback once in a while to break the monotony of, you know, bang-bang-bang. But the songs are all the same, as flat as Kansas. Now it's clear why nobody vacations there.

They used to call this stuff Cowpunk, back before speed for speed's sake and exaggerated