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Monty Alexander performed a sold-out show at "Art of Jazz." (Photo by Crush Boone)

Alexander entertains sold-out 'Art of Jazz' crowd with music, stories

By Garaud MacTaggart | Published January 29, 2018 | Updated February 23, 2018

Pianist Monty Alexander's appearance Sunday as part of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's "Art of Jazz" series was sold out and anyone who attended the concert could probably rave about it for another week or two. It was that good.

Not only is Alexander an incredibly talented pianist, he's a raconteur of the first order. When his fingers weren't flying over the keyboard or he wasn't egging on his sidemen (bassist Hassan J. J. Shakur and drummer Jason Brown), Alexander regaled the audience with stories about musicians he met or played with, somehow dropping names of jazz giants like Frank Sinatra, Ray Brown and Miles Davis and making them seem like regular folks.

Although his stories were entertaining, the best part of the afternoon was when he rolled through his vast repertoire of tunes, starting with one piece, slipping in bits of others, and finally winding toward an ending where notes faded into the atmosphere.

Over the course of the concert, Alexander had a tendency to create medleys rather than concentrate on one song. I say medleys because much of the time he didn't just opt to drop little quotes from standards into the overall mix, he stretched them out for whole choruses.

That's why, in the middle of "Hold 'Em Joe," a Harry Belafonte classic, Alexander's listeners were treated to lengthy snippets of "I Got Rhythm," the theme song to "The Andy Griffith Show" and Sonny Rollins' "St. Thomas" before the proceedings wound back to the starting point.

Bassist Shakur was given space to do a similar thing when Alexander gave him the opportunity to carve out some solo territory on "Renewal." Shakur used his prodigious technical skills to take melodic hooks from Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love," Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" and Lee Hazlewood's "These Boots Are Made For Walking" and make them works of art.

While Alexander and Shakur were the obvious virtuosi, Brown's supple and subtle playing provided the perfect platform for the others to riff off of. His brushwork was refined and the overall pulse was sophisticated, not byzantine.

The end of the regular concert featured a medley of Bob Marley tunes ("Redemption Song," "No Woman, No Cry" and "Get Up, Stand Up") and a lovely version of "Angel Eyes" and "In the Wee Small Hours." After a well deserved standing ovation, Alexander and his cohorts returned to the stage for an encore which found Alexander playing a melodica and leading the audience in a sing-along to Marley's "One Love."

REVIEW

Art of Jazz with Monty Alexander. Sunday afternoon at Kleinhans Music Hall.