

Feature

Alexander the Great

Monty Alexander comes to Salt Lake City

by Clayton Fuller
Chronicle On-line Editor

Born across the sea in Kingston town, Monty Alexander reunites with friends John Clayton and Jeff Hamilton in Salt Lake City's Jazz at the Hilton concert series tomorrow night. Taking a cornucopia of island and diverse influences, Monty's trio will provide defying entertainment for the serious listener, reggae rider, and straight-ahead, hard-swinging, jazz connoisseur.

Here are excerpts from a recent interview with Monty.

Clayton Fuller: Having played the piano from the age of 6 and growing up in Jamaica where you were surrounded by the Trinidadian calypso and other Afro-Caribbean sounds, what were your first impressions of the "North American" music you hear after arriving in the states?

Monty Alexander: Gee, I'm really here! This is where all this stuff comes from! I had a good dose of it with the radio and the records at home and seeing local musicians play—or try to play—jazz ... Seeing American artists come to Jamaica, a lot of R&B people in the '50s—everybody from Little Richard to Fats Domino, Sam Cooke ... and then I got to see Louis Armstrong and Nat Cole live and that was the real big excitement for me because I was familiar with their records and that made me want to play. When I came to Miami when I was 17, I sought out the local musicians ... and by osmosis I was able to pick up more stuff. In our so-called "jazz music," that's been the greatest university of all. I don't think it is as available today for whatever social reasons, but back then, as it was all through the history of the music, there was opportunity to go to places and be with the guys that are doing it. Today younger people have to go to some university and sit in a room with somebody teaching 'em and all 50 of them are sitting there hearin' the same thing.

CF: You are well known for your straight-ahead, hard swinging hop infused with island rhythms. What were some of your important influences?

MA: Well, I just heard so much music. Usually music with a beautiful melody, a simple melody, a good feeling in the music—the rhythm was there and some sense of expertise. I loved anything that was that ... If it's about straight-ahead music, those people move me, but I can't get away from my natural roots which manifest themselves in today's reggae music, Jamaican music. And all that stuff is in the melting pot.

CF: What did the opportunity to be house pianist at Jilly's in 1963-67 mean to you both musically and personally?

MA: Wow! When I got to New York—to think as 19-years-old—I was green as you can be. There I am ... in New York to see Frank Sinatra and all those other famous people coming to this little club and I'm in there playin' and they're all lookin' over and sayin', "Hey kid, swing it! Keep it up!" Ya

know? It's hard not to get a big head about it ... It was a great training ground because that's where I was able to play with some of the finest musicians in New York City ... but it was just hard to believe. All through the years I've always had this feeling that I had a light shining on me from a higher place that just brought all these circumstances that I tried to take advantage of.

CF: Talk about your moments with Frank Sinatra.

MA: I met Frank Sinatra the first time in Florida ... and then I was hired by his good friend Jilly who had the club Jilly's. He'd come in there whenever he was in New York and would say hello to the musicians ... and [sometimes] he'd be in the mood to do some music. I remember more specifically as a private party I had to play for him. I was quite nervous because I didn't know a lot about Frank Sinatra's music at the time. And if it wasn't for this very helpful bass player that would call out the chords to certain songs he was singing, I would have been a real mess, I would have messed up the whole thing, you know, and I wouldn't want to mess with Mr. Sinatra's music! ... I remember doing one song while the bass player was calling out all of these notes to me, you know C, G, F, what have you, and I must have messed it up and Sinatra looked around at me and I was really concerned! He looked at me as if to say, "Everything's cool kid." The next thing you know, I played a wrong chord and he just went in a different direction and the bass player picked it up and everything was OK. [With Sinatra] there's not just this show biz, charisma guy. No! He had this musical insight to fix something that wasn't going so well. I almost messed up!

CF: What has been the core influence of your joyful, swing playing that has now graced 20 Concord releases, 15 of them as a leader?

MA: I attribute that to my general nature, which is to be grateful. ... I'm really expressing my joy in being able to have such a

wonderful ... this all sounds Shaggy-La and Utopia, but I really have this sense of appreciation and gratitude to God for giving me this way of sharing my better parts with people. It's just a wonderful thing to have that ability. I feel that I have within my reach, if I really wanted to use it, the power—not my power, another power—to be able to make people be at one with one another. I just had experiences as a kid that made me hear music in a very wonderful light. Not just our native folk music, but how people are when they're grateful for what they have. So that's some of my approach. It's not what you do, as they say, it's how you do it!

CF: How have you progressed to where you are today?

MA: By sheer instinct, instinct and familiarity and a love for the music ... and a lot of listening! Listening to a good balance of stuff ... and being around great people who encouraged me and inspired me. I was able to apply my learning to certain things I wanted to know about and somehow I picked up some of it, and with that knowledge I just keep trying to renew it. So I just keep renewing myself toward the music, rather than learning new music I just renew me, not the music. Every time I play, it's a possible renewal experience.

CF: I'm curious about your experience as a teenager with your first group "Monty and the Cyclones."

MA: We just tried to attract women at an early age. Let's be frank.

CF: What can you tell us about John Clayton and Jeff Hamilton?

MA: I can't tell you enough! Those people are more than words can describe in terms of talent. I never really know what we're gain'g to do when we play together. I just have this great sense of comfort and confidence and good taste and judgment from them to help me be the best that I can be. They are a great rhythmic team, and they are my friends ... we have a real friendship. We get these get-togethers every once in awhile, it's not a regular thing ... The last time we were together this summer in Europe we played [in] the Montreux [Jazz Festival] ... it was in 1976 that we had [our first success] at [Montreux]. [John and Jeff] had just graduated from Indiana University together and they decided they were going to work with Monty Alexander! ... I realized this was just me, your average musician playing the bass. These guys are top notch!

CF: What can we expect from this reunited trio here in Salt Lake City on Tuesday night?

MA: I have no idea! It's just always, for me, a special occasion. If people are there to share that special experience with me, then they'll feel like I do—that it's something good.

CF: A few remaining details are available by calling Lois Munnis at 532-3144. Shows begin in the Hilton Sausage Ballroom at 8:00 p.m., Tuesday night. Monty will also be on KUER FM 90.1 this evening.

