

A magical and musical miracle happening right here in Easton

By **JOHN MALIN**
Guest Commentary

Something magical happened over the Labor Day weekend in Easton. The rapidly growing Monty Alexander Jazz Festival just celebrated its fourth year with performers and performances that can justifiably be described as magical.

The four-day festival, led by the world's leading living jazz pianist Monty Alexander, started on the Thursday evening at the Academy Art Museum. Outside, a sleek black limo with New Jersey plates reading "7 STRING" gave a hint of the musical spectacle about to evolve. Bucky Pizzarelli, the 87-year-young guitar virtuoso with Ed Laub on support guitar, along with string bassist Tommy Cecil and Chuck Redd on drums, gave a mesmerizing performance that was both technically accomplished and musically moving. The evening was serendipitously bejeweled with Monty Alexander joining in on the Melodica and his wife Caterina Zapponi singing a Neapolitan ballad with her silky soprano voice.

The Friday concert in the Avalon Theatre showcased the remarkable young New York saxophone phenomenon, Sharel Cassity, accompanied by Alex Brown on piano, EJ Stickland on drums and Preston Carter on bass. Sharel led the band through classics like Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train," with melodies from her tenor sax complemented by Brown's magnificent piano work.

The Saturday afternoon concert at the Avalon was a tribute to the late great trumpeter virtuoso

Dizzy Gillespie. The world class band of John Lee on fretless electric bass, Chuck Redd on drums and vibraphone, Sharel Cassity on alto sax, Greg Gisbert playing the Dizzy Gillespie role on trumpet, Andres Boiarsky on tenor alto sax and Emmet Cohen on piano did justice to the legend. John Lee's deep rich and creamy bass solos could have been poured into your coffee, while Chuck Redd was in flames with his drum solos and thoughtful and evocative in his vibraphone solo. Greg Gisbert's trumpet solos seemed to add at least half an octave to the instrument's top register.

The evening came quickly with the headline concert of Monty Alexander on the Avalon stage. The first half of the sellout concert featured Alexander on the big Yamaha grand piano with Hassan Shakur on string bass and Obed Calvaire on drums. Monty was at his best, and at times spiritual, as he looked towards the heavens during his composition, the very moving "Looking Up." In the second half of the momentous 150-minute session, Monty added four Jamaican musicians, including Karl Wright playing his towering array of cymbals and drums with his cricket gloves. The band covered Monty's arrangements of Afro-Caribbean numbers, including a remarkable rendering of Bob Marley's "No Women No Cry." Monty Alexander is a man of musical spontaneity, creativity and pure joy ... he is truly a musical giant and the concert was a memento to his art.

The finale to the Jazz Festival on Sunday afternoon in the

Avalon featured the return from 2012 of jazz/gospel vocalist Dee Daniels with her amazing 52 note vocal range and the most elegant piano work one might imagine. With her pianist Carlton Holmes, drummer Dwayne "Cook" Broadnax, and string bassist Paul Beaudry, she produced one of the most memorable sets ever, with standards like "Fly Me to the Moon" and "Who Do I Turn To?" The concert included a surprise as Dee invited Monty on stage to accompany her on his early arrangement of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which brought the audience to their feet.

For the second half of the show, Dee introduced eight young local Easton singers who accompanied her in three memorable gospel style numbers, "I Believe I Can Fly," "My Prayer," and "The Cross of Redemption." The singers, led by vocalist Jana Leslie, included Terron Quales, Terri Key, Sam Martin, Matthew Sevon, Laura Spies, Earle Kirkley and Brenda Wood. By the end, the audience was on its feet again, begging for more.

This was a truly amazing musical weekend with some of the most talented, and I must say the nicest musicians, in the world. Something very special and magical happened this year and it was a privilege and an honor to be there to enjoy it. I kept feeling a bit like the folks who bought Apple stock at a \$100 a share.

Watch out Monterey, Montreux, and Montreal! Easton has arrived on the world jazz map.

John Malin is a friend of the Monty Alexander Jazz Festival.