

# Monty Alexander is what jazz is all about

JACKSONVILLE — Those music lovers who don't know today what makes jazz so special as an art form obviously did not hear the Monty Alexander Trio in concert Wednesday night in Jacksonville State University's Theron Montgomery Auditorium.

In the second concert of the Jacksonville Community Concert Association's season, the trio embodied all the qualities that have made jazz perhaps the only distinctly American musical form with a stable international following.

It was all there — spontaneity, freedom, improvisation, humor, rhythm, mood, versatility. And all of these qualities fused into a carefully controlled pyrotechnic display against the background of Monty Alexander's own technical proficiency and musical discipline.

From the first few bars of "Yellow Bird," it was clear that Alexander would be master to the piano, driving his vision crisply through its keys and strings. The next few bars told his audience what every jazz audience hopes to hear — that the performance is not canned, that the improvisation is to be just that, improvisation.

It was also in "Yellow Bird" that the audience first encountered Alexander's ability to move effortlessly from almost busy (but never uncontrolled) complexity to note-by-note simplicity.

ALEXANDER'S EASE in making a melody entirely his own, his capacity for taking a

kaleidoscopic look at a melody, was beautifully demonstrated in his treatment of Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely." While Wonder was never out of sight, it was clearly through Alexander's eyes only that he was to be seen.

The versatility of the trio, including that of bass player Reggie Johnson and drummer Frank Gant, became apparent as it played its version of the theme from the film "Black Orpheus." A truly brilliant bass solo by Johnson took the listeners abruptly into the bluest of music's netherworldly realms. Even the entrance of a very blue piano improvisation seemed to offer relief from the cobalt-blue near-oppressiveness of the bass.

Versatility retained a position at center stage as the trio moved through interpretations of "Where Is Love" from "Oliver" and "Concierto de Aranjuez" by 20th-century composer Joaquin Rodrigo. "Where Is Love" displayed a light, easy style that captured the stretch-the-moment, capture-the-mood-while-it-lasts feeling that can make jazz a sometimes comforting companion.

Through the Rodrigo piece, the trio moved quickly from a musical image of Spain to Harlem and back to Spain without striking even the slightest bump along the way.

But it was playing his own composition, "Consider," that Alexander most clearly showed the characteristic that sets him and other jazz greats apart — the manifest understanding that in jazz, it is the continuing act of creation, not a finished product, that counts.

—JOHN CHILDS