

JAZZ REVIEW

ALEXANDER TRIO
AT PARISIAN ROOM

By LEONARD FEATHER

Monty Alexander, whose trio is at the Parisian Room this week, is not one of your easily classifiable pianists. Neither an avant-gardist nor a traditionalist, he applies his exceptional technique and taste to a middle ground in which harmonic imagination and rhythmic finesse play significant roles.

Occasionally he spices his work with the rhythms and moods of his native Jamaica, and it is this characteristic that lends his performances some of their most personal touches. The Caribbean influence was evident in his composition "Accompong." Named for a town in Jamaica, it established a contagious beat with the help of his supportive teammates, Frank Gant on drums and Gerald Wiggins Jr. (son of the pianist) on bass.

In such standards as "Happy Talk" and "Never Let Me Go" (the old Nat King Cole hit), Alexander placed a strong opening emphasis on straight melody before launching into a series of consistently engaging improvisational forays. Wiggins too is a commanding soloist, though his sound, perhaps because he was using a borrowed instrument, was somewhat too resonant and lacking in the clarity usually associated with him.

Alexander's talent as a composer was best displayed in the haunting waltz "Sweet Lady." He again displayed his roots with the Blue Mitchell tune "Fuñji Mama," which began as a calypso before shifting into a hard-driving four-beat.

The trio merged into a tightly swinging blues groove with Milt Jackson's "S.K.J." It was with Jackson that Alexander made his first Southland appearance in the early 1970s.

Over the years since then, building on such early influences as Oscar Peterson and Ahmad Jamal, Alexander has built a solidly personal file. Coincidentally, Gant, a dependable and non-intrusive drummer, is a former member of Jamal's combo.

Sharing this week's bill is a comedian, Robin Harris. The show closes Sunday.

GEORGE BENSON AT
GREEK THEATER

The ultimate irony of George Benson's career is that he spent 20 years honing a fluid, improvisational guitar style but has made his greatest commercial impact with a series of concise, tightly formatted vocal hits.

Benson's split musical personality was in evidence Tuesday as he opened a six-night stand at the Greek Theater. His set featured seven songs from last year's smash "Give Me the Night" LP. The tunes seem disarmingly simple, yet feature highly intricate rhythm and melody patterns in addition to the lilting party tempos and high-hat flourishes that are their most obvious commercial hooks.

Benson otherwise straddled the jazz/pop fence with mixed results. A pair of jazz standards—"Take Five" and "Moody's Mood"—were highly effective, but a pair of pop hits—Leon Russell's "Lady Blue" and George Harrison's "Here Comes the Sun"—were ill-suited for the jazzy embellishment they received. The Beatles' tune especially suffered from a self-consciously mannered vocal that conveyed none of the ease or naturalness of the original.

Benson demonstrated remarkable vocal stamina on the challenging "Unchained Melody" and employed a wide range of vocal shadings on other tunes in the set, from gritty toughness on the Drifters' "On Broadway" to smoothness and subtlety on Leon Russell's "This Masquerade," which raised classy cocktail-lounge pop to high art.

It still can't be said that Benson is a flashy performer. He registers a bug-eyed enthusiasm but little else in the way of stage presence. That's why Aretha Franklin, in an almost perfunctory walk-on appearance, nearly stole the show. The two sang "Love All the Hurt Away," their current hit duet, which marries Franklin's R&B-rooted wail with Benson's jazz-derived scatting.

—PAUL GREIN

Faye Dunaway is Joan Crawford.
A star...a legend...and a mother...
The illusion of perfection.