

Jazz pianist Alexander plans surprises at his World concert

By Tom Surowicz

Jazz pianist Monty Alexander knows the value of having friends in high places. While the Jamaican-born dynamo was still a teen-ager working in Florida he was discovered by Frank Sinatra. Ironically, Alexander was accompanying a singer named Duke Hazlit, whose specialty was impersonating Ol' Blue Eyes.

"He was a traveling entertainer from Chicago. Part of his act, he'd put on the hat and raincoat and get into that swingin' approach Sinatra had back in '61, '62, '63," said Alexander, whose trio will perform Sunday at the World Theater in St. Paul, in a Jamaican patois unaltered by three U.S. decades.

What Sinatra thought of the mimic remains a mystery. But he liked Alexander enough to take him to New York and set him up with his pal, club owner Jilly Rizzo, who employed Alexander in his Big Apple bistro for the next four years. "That was really something to enjoy and remember, the memory of having met that crowd of people and Sinatra himself when I was 18, 19 years old," Alexander said.

During that period as house pianist at Jilly's, Alexander was discovered again. His benefactor this time was funky keyboard star Les McCann. Then at the height of his popularity, McCann secured a record contract for Alexander with Pacific Jazz Records. It resulted in some peppy sessions Alexander would rather forget. They sold poorly.

"Oh, you have a copy of my LP 'Spunky'?" he asked, laughing. "I hate you. There should be a law against that. But seriously, everyone's got to begin somewhere, I guess."

It took yet another jazz star and admirer, pianist Oscar Peterson, to keep Alexander's name and talents in the public eye. He got Alexander a record deal with Germany's distinguished MPS label, and the LPs produced were subsequently licensed to firms in the United States. These sessions revealed a more mature stylist, comfortable with bebop, blues, show tunes, pop ballads and the calypsos of his homeland.

So Alexander was hardly an overnight sensation. Even today, at 43, the double-barreled, explosive pianist is underrated in the jazz community. But his steady progress has been apparent to critics and his output of LPs — for labels like Pablo, Pausa and Concord Jazz —

A review

Monty Alexander Trio

Where: World Theater, 10 E. Exchange St., St. Paul.

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: \$7.50 to \$14 with a \$1 discount for members of Minnesota Public Radio; call 298-1300.

is extensive. So is his touring schedule.

Expect a few surprises at his World Theater show, in terms of repertoire and presentation.

"That's to me what jazz is all about," he said, "where all the ingredients get flowing, the melodic and the rhythmic, and something comes together and lets you communicate with the other players and the people in the audience. Then there's that extra thing that happens, when you reach for something and have no idea what you're going to do. That's when I'm really working, functioning — when something wasn't supposed to happen, I went ahead and did it, and it worked out right."

As an example, he cited saxman Sonny Rollins' recording of "St. Thomas," considered a classic Caribbean jazz piece. "He simply went into the studio to perform this tune that he grew up with — a popular folk song from Barbados or one of the islands, Virgin Islands for all I know. And through the force of his performance, it resulted in a jazz standard, and somebody stuck the title 'St. Thomas' on it. But that's a song I remember hearing as a child, and it had nothing to do with jazz music then."

Perhaps through the force of his own piano, Alexander can make similar jazz club standards of such unlikely selections as "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," Frankie Laine's "To Each His Own" or even Michael Jackson's "Ben." He has tried all three songs on vinyl with arresting results. Has the pianist ever worked with tenor sax legend Rollins, whose bloodlines stretch back to Haiti?

"About two weeks ago I played on a boat cruise with Sonny in New York and we had a terrific time," Alexander said. "All through the years we'd meet and always mention, 'We gotta get together sometime.' And it just finally happened. I joined his rhythm section — Bob

Cranshaw on bass and Marvin (Smitty) Smith on drums — and we played for about 3,000 people on the boat. Sonny went through his spontaneous routines and it was a particular treat for me."

Other Alexander heroes and influences include pianist-vocalist Nat King Cole and pianist-composer Ahmad Jamal. From the former he has inherited a light, darting and fresh swing conception; from the latter, a spacious and orchestral approach to the full keyboard. But Alexander has long since graduated into the realm of new creation and invention. A rhythmic firebrand, he might pile on dense clusters of chords in rococo fashion or toss off sly quotes of everything from Brahms' Lullaby to "Got My Mojo Workin'!"

It would be hard to find a jazzman with a more catholic approach to tune selection. "I have such varied musical tastes," Alexander said. "I like so many things about so many things. I think I went through a period where I tried to force myself into liking only one thing, because you're supposed to like only one or two styles, and in that way define yourself to the world a little better."

"But I've been sort of a sponge since I was a youngster, absorbing the popular songs of my country, the folk music of Jamaica, the balladizing of people like Nat King Cole, even Western music from the cowboy shows I used to see, you know. Perhaps it's not the standard thing to do, to tackle a march like 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home,' but I take pleasure in doing things a little different."

"It goes back to childhood," he said. "If you're 4 years old and somebody's singing these tunes all the time around the house, like my dad did with 'To Each His Own' or Nat Cole's 'Mona Lisa,' that's where your first and deepest memories are. I'm surprised a lot of other musicians don't look on their youth that way, because, man, that's the stuff that sticks out."

At the World, Alexander will be joined by longtime associate John Clayton on bass and Jeff Hamilton on drums. A fine orchestrator and former member of the Count Basie band, Clayton is known for his humorous "walking" bass selections and his specialty of bowing ballads in the cello register. Hamilton is an equally versatile sticksman, probably best known for his work with the L.A. Four. Tom Surowicz is a Minneapolis free-lance writer who frequently reports about jazz.