

When jazz meets calypso

John Fordham reviews Monty Alexander

THE chemistry of Nat King Cole, Oscar Peterson and the Caribbean that makes up the popular piano voice of Jamaican-born Monty Alexander has usually been discreetly exposed to British audiences in Ronnie Scott's, generally with a straight jazz trio. The

Contemporary Music Network/Rolling Rock tour schedule has given Alexander the chance to uprate his calypso interests with a local wind section, as well as escape into his own breezy keyboard style with an imported rhythm section.

The effect on Alexander's

gig at the Queen Elizabeth Hall was odd: like listening to a soloist performing with two separate bands simultaneously.

When Alexander plays his own gleeful, jostling jazz music, he invites the deft brushwork of Idrees Muhammad and the throaty bass-playing of ex-Ahmad Jamal bassist Jamil Nassar.

When he invokes Jamaica

all hell breaks loose in the form of a thunderous three-strong percussion section (Muhammad usually discreetly drops out or pads in audibly alongside, looking like a black Groucho Marx) and a Jazz Warriors trio on brass and reeds.

It was cheerful, bright-eyed music, even though the texture of all the clattering grew muddy in the South Bank's drum-busting acoustics, Alexander's piano amplification (turned up to cope with all the surrounding racket) was tinny and the tunes were mostly amiably ordinary.

But there were some classy solos, notably from young trombonist Dennis Rollins (a slinky, oiled sound fitfully disrupted by raucous blurts), trumpeter Kevin Robinson (who unleashed a spectacular stream of rising and falling trills on the funky Think Twice) and frequently from Alexander himself — splashy, glistening figures against left-hand lines ostensibly marching in divergent directions but always coming home to agreeable, if unstartling Caribbean landmarks like *Island In The Sun*.

Everybody quoted furiously like that all night. Even Dennis Rollins, who certainly wasn't born when his namesake Sonny Rollins recorded it, threw in the calypso *St Thomas* for good measure.

● *Monty Alexander's Ivory And Steel is at Sheffield (Nov 12), Manchester (Nov 13), Cheltenham (Nov 14) and Dartington (Nov 15).*

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