

# RIFFS JAZZ NOTES

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## IRREPRESSIBLE JOY OF MONTY ALEXANDER



OWEN MCNALLY

**M**onty Alexander, a globe-trotting pianist and celebrated musical ambassador for the nation of Jamaica, is the headliner for the Artists Collective's second annual Jackie McLean International Arts Festival, which runs Friday and Saturday.

A master of American jazz, popular song and the music of his native Jamaica and the Caribbean, Alexander performs in the festival finale Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Jazz and Roots Jamaica at the Collective, 1200 Albany Ave., Hartford.

Born on D-Day, June 6, 1944, Alexander began taking piano lessons at 6. By his teens, the largely self-taught pianist was hooked on jazz after seeing performances by such visiting American icons as Louis Armstrong and Nat "King" Cole at Kingston's Carib Theatre.

Less than two years after he and his family emigrated from Jamaica to the United States in 1961, he landed a job playing with Art Mooney's orchestra. His brilliant playing caught the eye of the flamboyant club owner Jilly Rizzo and his lifetime pal, Frank Sinatra. Rizzo hired the young pianist to work in his club, where he accompanied Sinatra and many other guest stars.

At Jilly's, Alexander ran into Milt Jackson, the legendary vibraphonist and a founding member of the Modern Jazz Quartet. Jackson introduced the young phenom to Ray Brown, the great jazz bassist, and the pianist soon began performing and recording with the two jazz giants on many occasions.

A virtuoso of versatility, Alexander has cut more than 70 albums as a leader and performed and recorded with such diverse stylists as Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Quincy Jones, Ernest Ranglin, Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare, among many others.

The Jamaican government has awarded him the title with the Commander in the Order of Distinction for his outstanding



**MONTY ALEXANDER**, center, is the headliner for the Artists Collective's Jackie McLean International Arts Festival Friday and Saturday.

service to Jamaica in his capacity as musical ambassador around the world.

A big part of any live performance by Alexander is a pure sense of joy and an irrepresible ebullence that oozes out of the sound of his super keybord chops.

"My goal is to uplift," Alexander says of his musical credo. "The piano, to me, is a vehicle for connecting to other human beings. I am very open to all forms of music."

General admission tickets for the Monty Alexander, Jazz and Roots Jamaica concert are \$20 in advance, \$25 at the door. Information: 860-527-3205.

The festival, which honors the late jazz great, educator, social activist and Collective co-founder Jackie McLean, opens Friday with free performances from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Hartford Public Library, 600 Main St.

The library lineup features: **Artists Collective African Connection**, the **Hart School Community Division string and dance ensemble**, the **Artists Collective Choreographer's Workshop**, the **Jackie McLean Institute music ensembles** and the **Artists Collective Jackie McLean Youth Jazz Orchestra**.

On Saturday morning, the festival continues with the **Artists Collective's Music Student Showcase** at the Collective's Albany

Avenue headquarters, corner of Woodland Street and Jackie McLean Way. The free event runs from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

As a prelude to the festival, the Collective on April 16 presented South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela.

### Piket's Piano Prowess

Continuing its tradition of excellence, the Hartford Public Library's free "Baby Grand Jazz" series Sunday presents **Roberta Piket**, an expressive pianist/composer.

Piket (pronounced Picket) performs at 3 p.m. in the library's atrium with bassist **Johannes Weidenmuller** and drummer **Billy Minz**. They'll tap into a repertoire ranging from pieces by Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock to underplayed standards from the American Songbook.

With any luck, Piket will entertain her Sunday matinee patrons in Hartford with her finely spun, elegant inventions on Jimmy Webb's "Up, Up and Away," a selection from "Love and Beauty."

### "Ways and Means"

Pianist/composer **James Carney** and his tightly knit ensemble preview segments of his new virtual film score, "Ways & Means," Friday at 8:30 and 10 p.m. at New Haven's

Firehouse 12.

The keyboardist will also lead his collaborators in selections from his most recent release, 2007's "Green Wood" (Songlines Recordings).

The bandleader will be joined by **Ralph Alessi**, trumpet; **Josh Roseman**, trombone; **Chris Lightcap**, bass; and **Mark Ferber**, drums.

Tickets: \$15, opening set, \$10, second set. Information: www.firehouse12.com and 203-785-0468. Firehouse 12, 110 Crown St.

### Frisel's Sonic Portraits

Originally inspired by eight paintings by the German painter Gerhard Richter; a 20th century heavy-weight innovator who switched-his from abstraction to realism, guitarist **Bill Frisell** composed music for his 883 Quartet.

Frisel has continued to write more new, bold music for the quartet, which he leads Wednesday May 20 at 7 p.m. at the Iron Horse Music Hall.

Helping the innovative maestro are cellist **Hank Roberts**, violinist **Jonny Scheinman** and vocalist **Eyvind Kain**. Information: 860-986-9686. The Iron Horse is at 20 Center St., Northampton, Mass.

### Other Notes

**The Hall High Jazz Combo** performs tonight at 7:30 at Szechuan Tokyo, 1245 New Britain Ave., West Hartford. Pianist **Chris Casey** entertains with his combo Friday at 8 p.m. at the restaurant. Information: 860-561-0198.

**Carla Cook**, a Grammy-nominated vocalist, leads a first-rate trio Monday at 8 p.m. in the Hartford Jazz Society's "Monday Night Jam" series at Black-eyed Sally's, 350 Asylum St., Hartford. Cook's able aides are pianist **Alex Nakhimovskiy**, bassist **Denzon Douglas** and drummer **Neal Smith**. Information: 860-276-7427.

Bassist **Paul Fuller** leads his quartet Friday at 10 p.m. at the Grady Tavern, 822 E. Middle Tpke., Manchester. Bartitone saxophonist **Norman Gage**, guitarist **Sean Clapsi** and drummer **Bob Turristano** join him. Information: 860-646-9554. Vocalist **Caroleyn Hartford** appears Saturday at 8 p.m. with pianist **Ken Hewitt** and a bass player to be announced at Pazzo Italian Cafe, 377 Cromwell Ave. (Route 9), Rocky Hill. Information: 860-721-8888.

» Send information to jazz@courant.com.