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# Keyboardist Monty Alexander, Celebrating His 80th Birthday, Surprises With the Breadth and Scope of His Sounds

This critic can't think of an occasion when he's heard so much great music in so many different styles; it's hard to believe that it all revolved around one remarkable man.



Monty Alexander and friends at Frederick P. Rose Hall. Lorelei Edwards Design Co.



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*Monty Alexander*  
*Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra*  
*Frederick P. Rose Hall*  
*Streaming Through February 1*

In 1961, a 17-year-old pianist from Kingston named Montgomery Bernard Alexander arrived at Miami. He had

already amassed considerable experience playing with fellow Jamaican musicians on sessions of calypso, mento, and ska, the foundation ingredients of what evolved into reggae music. Still, his passion was North American-style jazz.

He was absorbing what he could from recordings by such keyboard heroes as Oscar Peterson and Duke Ellington, and by the age of 10 he had already heard numerous jazz legends, including Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole, in person at Kingston's Carib Theater.

These days, Mr. Alexander is celebrating his 80th birthday — he was actually born on D-Day, June 6, 1944 — and it takes at least three hours of stage time just to give the barest outline of one of the most fascinating careers in all of contemporary jazz. Even those of us who have been following Mr. Alexander's development for decades were surprised by the breadth and scope of the sounds he has created since he started playing keyboards around 1950.

Mr. Alexander walked out on stage — wearing his Order of Jamaica medal (that island nation's equivalent of a British knighthood) — and apologized in advance for talking too much. He needn't have worried: His charming Kingston accent is a key part of his performances. He introduced his current trio, with bassist Luke Sellick and drummer Jason Brown, and laid out two bebop numbers, the second being an unsentimental, hard-edged variation on Cole Porter's "Love For Sale."

The rest of the first half was a kaleidoscopic sequence of widely varying musical genres, starting with two different varieties of church music. First, he recreated how as a little boy he played accordion marching with the local Salvation Army band, and he was joined by four horns — trumpeter

Dominick Farinacci, trombonist Andrae Murchison, and saxists T. K. Blue, Ron Blake, and Wayne Escoffery — on a traditional hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Then, he reminisced about hearing the music of the Rastafarians, which led into a keyboard collage that began with “Waters of Babylon” and ended with “No Woman, No Cry,” with the help of multiple percussionists, Karl Wright, Robert Thomas, Jr., and Junior Wedderburn, and guitarist Joshua Thomas. With the same accompaniment — and switching from accordion to piano to melodica — he led the entire house in “Day-O (Banana Boat Song)” in honor of Harry Belafonte.

As Mr. Alexander talked of hearing rhythm and blues over the airwaves from New Orleans and live at the Carib Theater, the horns re-entered and were joined by bassist Hassan Shakur and drummer Herlin Riley, who sang Magic Sam’s “Just a Little Bit.” They followed with Don Drummond’s ska number, “Eastern Standard Time”; next, Mr. Alexander donned a 10-gallon hat and brought guitarist Justin Poindexter out to join him on Johnny Mercer’s “I’m an Old Cowhand.” He dedicated this to the movie cowboys of his youth and to his Western-loving friend, Sonny Rollins, and referenced “Back in the Saddle Again,” the 2010 album in which he co-starred with guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli.

The second half was equally jam-packed. He began with his arrival at Miami, and told of how he gradually started playing in local clubs. One night, two rather famous New Yorkers, Frank Sinatra and Jilly Rizzo, heard him and were so impressed that in 1963 they brought him to New York to play at Mr. Rizzo’s iconic Midtown night spot, Jilly’s. Sinatra

remains a key influence, as he acknowledged with “Come Fly with Me.”

Mr. Alexander met Miles Davis at Jilly’s, and he honored the trumpeter with a “So What” that was more boppish than modal, with the help of Messrs. Sellick and Brown.

Indeed, there were so many different ensembles over the two acts that you needed a scorecard almost more than a standard program. He played “Straighten Up and Fly Right” in honor of both Nat King Cole and Triple Treat, his ensemble with bassist Ray Brown and guitarist Herb Ellis. He played “Frankie and Johnny” and the blues “Wheelin’ and dealin’” with Messrs. Shakur and Riley, and Mr. Blake on tenor in the role of Teddy Edwards — and with Steve Nelson playing vibraphone in the spirit of Milt Jackson — as heard on his classic 1969 album, “That’s The Way It Is.”

Mr. Alexander gradually brought the focus back to his Caribbean heritage, and recreated his quintet Ivory & Steel, with Victor Provost playing steel pan drums along with Mr. Shakur and percussionists Bobby Thomas and Quentin Baxter, on “Montevideo.” There was also a segment featuring his more recent, Grammy-winning ensemble, Harlem-Kingston Express, with two basses, two percussionists, and three horns playing a reggae-driven treatment of Monty Norman’s theme from the first James Bond movie, the 1962 “Dr. No,” with a fine solo by the tall tenor, Wayne Escoffery.

In between, he and his wife, the gifted singer Caterina Zapponi, duetted on the second Sammy Cahn song of the night, “I’ll Never Stop Loving You.” Somewhere along the line, he also found time to celebrate the legacy of Ahmad Jamal with “Poinciana” and “You Can See,” his own composition that Jamal recorded.

I can't think of an occasion when I've heard so much great music in so many different styles; it was hard to believe that it all revolved around one remarkable man. Let's end with a question for the National Endowment of the Arts: How can it be that Monty Alexander has not yet been named an NEA Jazz Master? To answer that, we have to paraphrase his hero, Duke Ellington: I guess they don't want him to become too famous too young.

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