



AL SEIB / Los Angeles Times

Pianist Monty Alexander, drummer Jeff Hamilton, bassist John Clayton Jr. at Dunbar; Like a visit to a haunted house.

The A Train to L.A. History

By LEONARD FEATHER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Officially, the concert given Sunday afternoon by the pianist Monty Alexander, bassist John Clayton and drummer Jeff Hamilton at the Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue in Los Angeles was the latest in the Da Camera Society's series of "Chamber Music in Historic Sites."

Actually, it was more like a visit to a haunted house, one whose history goes back to Prohibition days and is closely related to the social evolution of Los Angeles.

The performance was a dazzling display by three artists whose work interwove magically. Alexander dominated, with a series of well planned arrangements marked by stride interludes, changes of key and tempo, bowed bass solos, ballad medleys and a two-fisted attack on "The Work Song" that stunned the crowd in the sparsely decorated room.

Beyond the music, though, listening to Alexander quoting from an Ellington theme, you could look up at the balcony and see, in your mind's eye, Duke himself at a piano on the mezzanine, working out an arrangement for tomorrow's show.

The Dunbar is remembered by many Angelenos as a social mecca where, during its heyday in the 1920s and '30s, black celebrities who were denied lodging in Hollywood and Beverly Hills found a hospitable place to stay and mingle. Located at 41st Street and Central Avenue, it opened in 1928 in an elaborate ceremony; later that year it was host to the NAACP's first West Coast-based national convention.

Musicians such as Ellington and Count Basie, dancers such as Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, comedians such as Eddie (Rochester) Anderson were among the Dunbar's frequent residents in an era when Los Angeles was so segregated that there were even two separate musicians unions.

The hotel was founded when black businessman Dr. John Somerville, moving here from the West Indies, had

Echoes of Ellington and Other Black Entertainers Fill the Air at Dunbar



MARJANNA DIAROS

As late as 1987, vandals had destroyed much of the African-American museum adjacent to the Dunbar.

trouble finding a place to stay and decided to build a hotel where African-Americans would be welcome. It was then known as the Somerville Hotel.

The early years are recalled by Almena Lomax, who with her husband Lucius Lomax Jr., edited and published the Los Angeles Tribune, which had

offices in the Dunbar.

"My father-in-law, Lucius Lomax Sr., a very successful gambler, bought the hotel after the Depression and renamed it after the black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar," Almena Lomax said Sunday. "Over the years, it became a hangout where all the show people stayed, as well as writers like Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois."

"But the stories about great jazz musicians working there are nonsense," she said. "The only time they had entertainment at the Dunbar was very briefly in 1935, when Nellie Lutcher played piano in the lounge; then they dropped the policy, because the hotel was its own drawing card."

Nellie Lutcher confirmed Lomax's recollections: "I was there for eight weeks, working from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. for two dollars a night plus whatever people would put into the kitty. I had just arrived here from New Orleans, and it was at the Dunbar when I first began to sing. I was 19 years old. After I left, they didn't have anyone else."

Nevertheless, great music and musicians were not far away. Right next door on Central near 41st Street was the legendary Club Alabam, founded in the early 1920s by the drummer and band leader Curtis Mosely. The Alabam was a focal point of Los Angeles' nightclub and jazz scene, with a spacious dance floor and a big show featuring a line of dancers a la the Cotton Club.

Lee Young, the drummer who led a band at the Alabam in 1939, remembered: "The fellows in the band—Charles Mingus, Art Pepper, all of us—would hang out between sets next door at the Dunbar, which was then owned by my father-in-law, James Nelson. He had acquired it from his cousin, Lucius Lomax. Between the club and the hotel you'd see movie stars and all the big show business names of the day."

"I stayed at the Dunbar," says singer Herb Jeffries, "while I was starring in those six-day quickies, the first all-black musical cowboy movies, like 'Harlem

Please see DUNBAR, F5