

ENTERTAINMENT

Monty Alexander celebrates 50 years as a musical pioneer and master of many styles

By **GREG THOMAS**
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | MAR 04, 2012



Monty Alexander bridges musical worlds of jazz, Caribbean folk and popular music during a two-week run at the Blue Note. (DINO PERRUCCI)

Pianist Monty Alexander, celebrating 50 years as a professional musician, bridges cultures through musical joy. "I'm an integrator, a guy who likes to bring people together. I take special pride and pleasure when I see two or more worlds coming together. People sitting there, groovin', dancin', and enjoying what I'm offering them, you know?"

"And the musicians always, inevitably and bar none, come up with a mutual respect and love for each other. I love to see a brother from Kingston, Jamaica, hooking up with a cat from New Orleans." Over the last two weeks, the 67-year-old native of Kingston brought together the musical worlds of jazz, Caribbean folk and popular music for a two-week run at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village.

"I'm one of the first artists to have known the owners of the Blue Note 30 years ago. The Blue Note is a place with a ne reputation, good business, good outreach, so I said here's where I've got to come. I put my two cents together and called my friends, no strangers, from Christian McBride, to Freddie Cole, Dee Dee Bridgewater and the others."

Alexander's 2011 release on the Motema label, "Harlem-Kingston Express," was nominated for a Grammy Award as the Best Reggae Album. The recording was notable for a seamless marriage of styles, with a jazz band and reggae ensemble performing on stage at the same time. Although he's respected as a pioneer artist who plays many styles with integrity, Alexander says that he didn't always bring in his native voice-musically or otherwise. As with many immigrants, he tried to t in when he came to the States as a young man in the early '60s.

"When I first came here, I was in a state of wonder: wow! This is where Armstrong is from, where Superman, Roy Rogers and Sinatra's from too. I even learned how to talk like the American guys so people would stop saying: Where are you from, man?" About 20 years ago, a light of remembrance came over him. After playing with giants such as Sinatra, Ray Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, and Quincy Jones, Alexander said he felt somewhat alienated from the rise of the academic jazz scene.

A self-taught musician, he began going back home to Jamaica.

"It's like a mystical, miraculous alarm clock that woke me up. It was a wakeup to reality. So I started doing it little by little, and the branches of the roots started to grow, and I just claimed who I am! "I'm a Jamaican boy, I come from de yard. The rst thing I heard coming out of my mother's home was the calypso band, the mento band."

When Alexander swings jazz or grooves with his Trinidadian pal Etienne Charles or his Jamaican homeboys Ernest Ranglin, and Sly & Robbie, it's second nature.

"I'm 67, going on 19," he says with a sly smile. "When I perform, I play life, my life."