

**"JAZZ":** Monty Alexander, "To Nat, With Love" (Zanda, 870001)

Pianist Monty Alexander went into New York's Blue Note jazz club a year ago with a splendid concept. He used the week to celebrate the music of Nat King Cole — particularly of the late 1940s and early '50s when he was known as much for a smooth and velvety piano touch as for 'the voice. This is Alexander, a fine pianist, tipping his hat to pre-pop star Cole. And, for those who know Alexander only for his keyboard skills, his vocals may come as a pleasant surprise. His smoky voice is not unlike that of Cole's. It has the same breeziness but lacks the edge that made the master's so distinctive. The album opens with the same guitar-bass-piano trio format that Cole created one night when his drummer didn't show up. John Clayton is on bass, and John Collins handles the guitar work. The album is a showcase for Collins, a warm and imaginative player who worked with Cole from 1951 to 1965. The great tunes associated with the King are here, including "Unforgettable," "Nature Boy," "Moonlight in Vermont," and "What Is This Thing Called Love?" Alexander adds his vocals to "Straighten Up and Fly Right," "Too Marvelous for Words," "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You," and "The Trouble With Me is You." The latter cut is the weakest vocally but may be the strongest instrumentally, due to the drums-congas interplay between Jeff Hamilton and Robert Thomas Jr. Harry "Sweets" Edison, a Cole collaborator to 1939, stops by for a muted trumpet solo on "Gee Baby." Hats off to Alexander for a super concept, and fine performance.