

# Traveling A Varied Musical Path With Pianist Monty Alexander

By Michael J. Renner

**F**OR SHEAR excitement and entertainment, pianist Monty Alexander delivers. And if his opening night Wednesday in front of a near-capacity crowd at Just Jazz is any indication, you'd better arrive early to stake your claim.

Jamaica-born Alexander is a vibrant, passionate player who possesses a considerable two-handed technique. Having grown up with calypso and ska, he produces exuberant Caribbean rhythms filtered through a jazz prism. Accompanying Alexander was bassist Ira Cole-

man and two (!) percussionists, drummer Dion Parsons and Bobby Thomas on hand drums. Steel drum player Derek Dicenco could not make the Just Jazz date, but will appear with Alexander at Sunday's Summerfest.

Alexander would lead us down unexpected paths, careening off into several directions. His composition, "The Hurricane," teased us with its opening punctuation, alternating between staccato two-finger playing and big, two-fisted chords. The drummers blended an infectious groove of rock, blues and straight-ahead jazz while Alexander explored sections of Miles

Davis' "So What."

Alexander's spontaneous approach often had him calling out different time signatures to the band, or conducting the drummers when he wanted to explore another fork in the musical path. "I've been with him 18 years and I still don't know what he's going to do — he never plays a song the same way," Thomas told me during the break.

It is that quick-witted interpretative knack that would weave familiar melodies into beautiful, multi-patterned musical quilts. Like his closest link, Oscar Peterson, Alexander has a

big, percussive tone that is both maximal and lyrical.

On a Bob Marley reggae tune, Alexander combined the attack of Peterson with the charm of Jamaica. Alexander would often search and find a groove, close his eyes and play with it. The result was surprisingly complex augmented chords and bursting, joyous solos.

Alexander continues tonight and Saturday at Just Jazz in the Hotel Majestic and Sunday at Summerfest at the St. Louis Symphony School of Music.