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Monty Alexander Shares Recording Experience With Natalie Cole

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Published: Sunday | January 24, 2016 | 12:00 AM | Cecelia Campbell-Livingston

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Monty Alexander

Contributed

On New Year's Eve, the entertainment world was rocked by the sad news that Grammy Award-winning singer Natalie Cole, daughter of the legendary Nat King Cole, had passed.

Among those who acknowledged the news in a daze was Jamaica's jazz aficionado, Monty Alexander, who was on tour in Maine, USA at the time.

Her death brought back a flood of memories, including his love affair with Nat King Cole's music, which led to him being an integral part of the tribute album, **Unforgettable**, that Natalie recorded in 1991 to her father.

Monty Alexander, who has travelled the world, is known for recording such hits as **For All We Know, Love and Happiness**, and **Straighten Up and Fly Right**. Known as the jazz pianist who plays the melodica, he was raised in Kingston, Jamaica.

In an interview with **The Gleaner**, Alexander, who will grace the stage at the world famous Lincoln Center in Manhattan on February 12 and 13 in a special musical tribute to legendary American singer and actor Frank Sinatra, went down memory lane about his first romance with the music and the connection he established with the late Natalie Cole.

GREW UP ON COLE'S MUSIC

Alexander grew up feasting on Nat King Cole's music through his parents, who seemed to have all his songs in their collection, and they would play them a lot, so much so that he fell in love with them.

"I became very close to his music. I went around imitating him (Nat) from age 10 or younger," he shared.

Alexander finally got the chance to meet his hero when King Cole performed at the Carib Theatre in Kingston. His mother had got a ticket and he recalls hastening from school to meet her there, "catching the last three songs".

"I saw this elegant human being sitting at the piano, entertaining. Nat King Cole became my hero and I stayed close to his music," Alexander reminisced.

It was this love and passion for King Cole's music that eventually saw Natalie Cole's management team reaching out to him to assist on the tribute album project.

Alexander said he got a phone call from her manager saying they heard he was familiar with Nat King Cole's songs and that Natalie wanted him to assist her in recording a tribute album to her father.

"I was so honoured. I was so thrilled. I actually jumped in my shoes. Let's go do this thing!" he said, remembering that it all took place during the Persian Gulf War in the 1990's.

Alexander flew to Los Angeles to meet Cole whom he described as "the beautiful woman with those green eyes. Man, I think I ended up with a crush on her", he joked.

Although he was meeting her to set up the recording sessions, he was already familiar with her through his sister-in-law, singer Phyllis Hyman.

"I went to her house. I met her and her husband at the time, a man named Andre Fisher. It was such a thrill. I went through like 25 songs that she wanted to revisit," said Alexander.

That was not a challenge for Monty, as he knew those songs "like the back of my hand".

"I would say my participation brought her closer to her dad, because she had moved away from his music and was deep into R&B," shared Alexander.

The rest is now history, how that project turned out with the tribute album, **Unforgettable**, achieving multi-platinum status. The album won several Grammys, including Album of the Year, Record of the Year and Best Traditional Pop Vocal Performance for the top song.

For his effort, Monty was presented with a replica platinum album that today hangs on the wall of his house. The recording sessions also saw him developing a closeness to Cole.

"She is a sweet, sweet spirit. Natalie Cole was just a beautiful lady. She had that little girl quality. Boy, she could wail!" he gushed.

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