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MILES AHEAD IN REGGAE MUSIC



Monty Alexander Jazz Meets Jamaica Uptown

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session musicians of the period was their serious leaning to jazz. "Those people were listening to Charlie Parker and Lester Young. Don Drummond was worshiping [trombonist] J.J. Johnson . . . All of those men were basically jazz-minded . . . If they could have been hanging out on 52nd Street with Charlie Parker, they would have been there . . . These guys were on a quest for knowledge." Many of these players were veterans of Jamaican big bands led by Roy Coburn, George Albergro, Eric Dean, Val Bennett, Jack Brown and others.

One of Alexander's closest [Jamaican] musical relationships has always been with guitarist and Skatalites member Ernie Ranglin. "From when I was 10 years old, I used to see Ernie playing. He's a big inspiration to me. This man had a technique on the guitar, and to this day, there's hardly anybody who can play the guitar like Ernie . . . He's a world musician . . . But Ernie also speaks that language of 'yard.'

"Roland Alphonso to this day is another favorite saxophone player—forget just Jamaican music, the way he spoke on his instrument, I'll never forget the way he played. I just couldn't wait for the next phrase to come out of Roland's horn . . . Roland was one of my favorite musicians ever in my life.

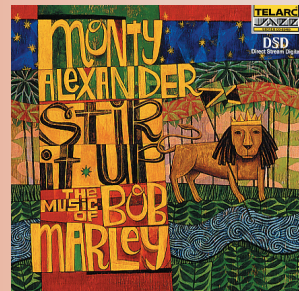
"And then there was Don Drummond . . . the only person I could compare him to as a musician was Thelonious Monk. The reason is that Monk was very very mysterious, and had these ominous expressions, but he was like a big kid ready to say something funny or make you laugh. He played little games on the piano. When I heard Monk playing, [it was] like a genius playing these little nursery rhymes on the piano. And Don Drummond was this guy where maybe there was a mental condition, as there was with Monk, that he was different to most of us. He was very fiery. On a trombone you can be very blustery, and he could get effects that really affected people. Don was strong, but kinda scary cause he didn't say much. And couple times I saw him standing in the corner talking to himself . . ."

Lesser-known session piano player Aubrey Adams had perhaps the greatest influence on the young Alexander. "If you ask me who were my heroes, the piano player was this . . . incredibly delightful, generous, wonderful man who played whole heap a piano, Aubrey Adams. Aubrey [showed me] Nat Cole, and Art Tatum and Errol Garner. I'd already heard boogie-woogie piano playing, but Aubrey was that, and more."

Alexander left Jamaica in 1962 at age 18, before the local scene really defined itself, but the experience made an indelible mark on the aspiring jazz pianist that would inform his entire career. "When you have the wonderful childhood and heritage and culture, you can't leave it alone. If for no other reason that every couple days I'm going to speak to my mother on the phone, and she's going to remind me that she have some saltfish and ackee waiting on the dinner table. I can't forget. That is what you love as you grow up—the food, the way people talk, those places in Jamaica I think of going. You don't forget it. I am very simple in terms of my roots. I love what I come from. I never let it go. I remember a phase I went through, when I was around the American 'hip cats' when I would sorta downplay my heritage, but then the few guys that would say, 'man I love that music, or I love that pepper sauce.' That's who I'd be inclined to share it with."

Alexander was discovered in America, with seemingly cinematic serendipity, by Jilly Rizzo and Frank Sinatra, which led to a residency at Jilly's club in New York. Alexander's first two albums were recorded for Pacific Jazz in the mid-'60s, and both *Alexander the Great* and *Spunky* remain out-of-print collectibles. The latter album notably features a track called "Jamaican Shake," Alexander's first use of a Jamaican folk theme in a jazz context.

While Alexander's jazz career blossomed in the States, Jamaican music was experiencing its first international success, and Alexander took notice. "Some things that struck me that reflected Jamaican recording, including Desmond Dekker and the Israelites, and then you had Millie Small and 'My Boy Lollipop.' And I was saying, 'wait a minute, this thing getting played on big-time American radio!?' [But] when I was watching "Soul Train" on television, and they played a reggae rhythm, and all these dancing kids, who were used to shaking and bopping and grooving to the beat . . . they put on a reggae rhythm . . . and none of them knew how to move to it. Cause with reggae, you don't dance, you just groove—move easy. I said, 'this thing not going to catch,' . . . but as you look around today, you see the incredible impact [with] young people so loving the spirit of



Jamaica, and especially what Bob Marley gave to the world.”

Over the years, Alexander kept in touch with Coxson Dodd. “If I was playing in America, [Dodd] might show up with Roland Alphonso, just to watch me play. I always saw him as a guy with a third eye.” A late ’60s collaboration during one of Alexander’s return visits to Jamaica resulted in “Meditation,” an Iron Side 45 credited to Count Ossie and the Cyclones—a rootical meeting of *burru* and B3. The cut was recently released on the *Studio One Roots* collection by Soul Jazz Records.

Due to the exposure at Jilly’s, Alexander began a key association with bassist Ray Brown and vibraphonist Milt Jackson in 1969 that would further legitimize his efforts and connection to the greater story of jazz. Ray Brown had worked with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the ’40s and was the anchor of the Oscar Peterson Trio for 15 years. Brown is often considered the godfather of the bebop bass men—a giant in the jazz world. He died on July 2, 2002. Milt Jackson is of similar stature and is known for his work with the Modern Jazz Quartet in addition to key work with Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and his own vast catalog. He died in 1999.

Alexander recalls the validation he received from his association with Jackson and Brown. “It’s like a real nurturing thing that came because of Ray—a very heavy, wonderful important member of my life. We were very close, lotta laughing, lotta music. I felt a great sense of loss when he died. As much as I was complete and fulfilled in my efforts, before I met Ray and Dizzy Gillespie and Milt Jackson, I guess I was just gangbusters going ahead and just enjoying being a musician and playing. And dreaming one day that I could be in company with these kind of people who are, I have no other way to express it but to call it ‘royalty.’ These are not people who want to be, these are the people who are. It’s like personally handing the baton to a younger musician who was going in this direction, which is all [in] the legacy of Louis Armstrong. ‘Let’s make this the best it can be. Let’s live life to the fullest.’ And that was just a continuation of the attitude I had way back in Kingston, Jamaica. This man [Brown] went back to Charlie Parker. And it was deeply meaningful to me because I really learned about the spirit of [jazz]. We didn’t talk, we just played, and most times, the smoke would start and the fire would burn.

“The true ‘dot of the i’ and the ‘cross of the t’ was his wonderful abiding relationship with his brother, Milt Jackson. Bags was like, you talk about a diamond—just another natural musician. He’d start playing and you hear the spirit of God coming out in his talent. When he and Ray would get together, it was this relationship of two brothers, and that they invited me into that fold . . . it was a union that I will never forget and there are some recordings that attest to that.”

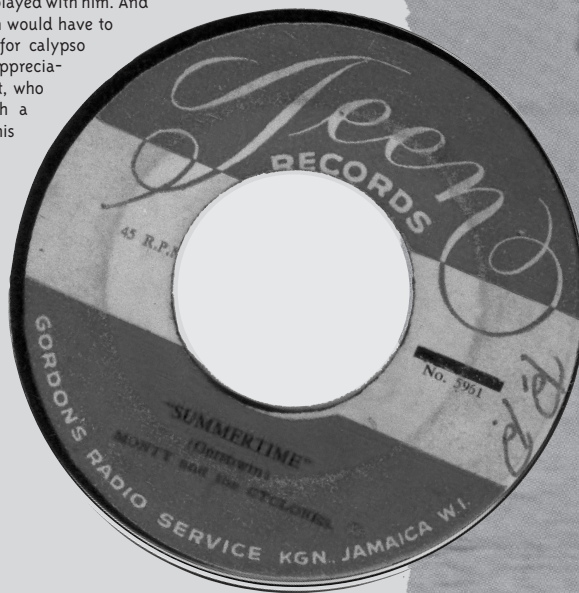
Alexander’s respect for the two elder musicians was reciprocated, as Brown once told journalist Ed Bradley. “When you hear Monty Alexander on the radio, you know who it is. You don’t mistake him for somebody else . . . It’s always fun when you’re playing with a world-class player, like a Monty Alexander or an Oscar Peterson or a Jimmy Rowles; those guys play so great, there’s not a lot you have to do—just give some good notes.” Alexander played on Brown’s last session, a revisitation of the piano-bass-guitar trio style that Brown developed with Oscar Peterson in the ’50s. The set was released by TelArc in late 2002.

One of the most famous of Alexander’s associates in the jazz world was tenor saxophone legend Sonny Rollins. Alexander says that Rollins always had a keen interest in Jamaican music, in no small part because of his own West Indian heritage. “[Rollins] is a genius, a man who when he plays his horn, he doesn’t play the horn, he plays the environment,” explains Alexander. “If you listen to Sonny, when he wants to hit the climax, he goes down the calypso road. He starts playing one of them island rhythms that is so deep down in him. . . having roots in the Virgin Islands. He’s a true West Indian, who grew up in New York. But he tapped into the language of Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker. His gift came to fruition, but he has never forgotten the joy of his roots as a West Indian. And whenever he plays, I hear all of what I knew about as a kid.

“I’ve been with him on a number of occasions, played with him. And when I talk with him, the bulk of the conversation would have to do with mutual friends from Jamaica, his love for calypso music, his appreciation for Ernest Ranglin, or his appreciation for Sugar Belly. [Sugar Belly was] a true spirit, who played a homemade bamboo saxophone, with a matchbox for a reed. When I hear Sonny playing his horn . . . I’m reminded of Sugar Belly.”

In addition to 50 albums under his own name, Monty Alexander’s work as a sideman includes Dizzy Gillespie’s Montreux ’77 performance, albums for Ernestine Anderson, Jimmy Smith, *Continued on page 71*

Before leaving Jamaica in 1962, the young Alexander cut a few records with his group Monty and the Cyclones, and also worked with early greats like Higgs and Wilson, Clue J and the Blues Blasters, and Owen Gray.





didn't I think of that?" Something from everyday life. That was there right in front of my face. It's like Bob Marley. He hasn't said anything new. It was all said before because it's colloquial expressions as well as sayings from the olden days. "Foolish dog bark at a flying bird" and all these things. Things that were being said every day. But the way he formulated it in music, this is what you have to give him the credit for.

On this one I thought I had a good song when I got the melody. The lyrics were all right but when I got the melody I thought "yeah this is a good song." The lyrics were good because it's a real smoochie thing: "my love is stronger than a magic spell." It's a 1-6-2-5 progression that was a popular thing in those days, because "Stand By Me" and a lot of songs were written on a progression like this. The song is sweet but not too sweet. It follows another formula that I try to follow as well [Laughter]. Take a song like "Tonight's the Night." [Sung by Claudette Miller, released on Treasure Isle, produced BB Seaton.] The bass line is really driving, really going there. But she's singing really simple. It's really happy music, but it's still earthy. With a good bass line like this you can go anywhere. So you're capturing the dancehall, and you're capturing the housewife. That's a formula I like to use in my music, hence when you say Soul Beat Music [BB's label] you're saying sunshine music. It's called "roots with quality."

BB Seaton has recently released two cds comprising much of his hitherto hard-to-find early music. The first, *Ska Days*, is composed of rare ska tracks that appeared on BB's own Astronaut label, for the Yap brothers, and Coxson Dodd; while disc two, *Seal of Approval*, presents 27 hot rocksteady tunes recorded for Studio One. Both are available domestically from our good friends Ernie B and VP, and in Europe from Fat Shadow and Jet Star.

Thanks to BB and Sue, Ken Boothe, Michael Campbell and Rhys McCarthy for the kindness and support given to us during our visit to London.

AFRICAN BEAT

Continued from page 50

double-disc format of 17 songs becoming tiresome. It is, of course, still too long and even a fanatic like myself finds it hard to listen to a double cd of one particular group in one sitting. There is certainly some enjoyable music contained within this lengthy package. Despite the initial criticism of the guitar work that I'd heard I actually found the efforts of Flam Kapaya and Maladi Japonnais to be quite pleasing, particularly in a rhythm guitar sense rather than the solo guitar passages. Vocally the group is superb and there is a nice balance between the slower melodic songs and the heavily animated *Koyi Mbiko* dance tracks. Some great voices, especially Aimelia, Ferré Gola and Baby Ndombe (the son of Ndombe Opetum from Bana OK) help out Werra Son on a release that should sell enough units to keep Werra's pitbull terrier in dog food for a few months.

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PAPA WEMBA DVD

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larly explode onto the stage, just missing the astounded bass guitarist Tosha. Shortly after this someone rushes onto the stage and starts to wipe Wemba's shoes and rub down his trousers. The fan graciously takes a bow and scurries off. Then, right at the end of the show, while the very popular Apocalypse is singing his solo during "Maria," there is an influx of fans. They rush the stage attempting to pay the same deferential homage to Apocalypse. Wemba's security forces take them one by one and literally run them off the front of the eight foot high stage launching them haplessly into the audience below. I guess it is only rough justice "Kin-style" but it's fun to watch.

Although Papa Wemba's voice has become a little tired and has shown occasional signs of faltering during the last few years he has a great ability to surround himself with youthful raw talent. His *Stade des Martyrs* concert proves that he is still one of Kinshasa's favorite performers and this DVD is packed full of enough good moments to make it a worthwhile purchase.

[Available from Stern's Music]

MONTY ALEXANDER

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Shelly Manne, and eight albums with Milt Jackson. He also contributed to the *Bird* movie soundtrack (Columbia, 1988) and Natalie Cole's *Unforgettable* album (Elektra, 1991).

Alexander has nodded to his Caribbean heritage on albums including *Jamento* (Pablo, 1978), *Ivory and Steel* (Concord, 1980), *Caribbean Circle* (Chesky, 1992), *Yard Movement* (Island Jamaica Jazz, 1996), in addition to producing Ernie Ranglin's *Below the Bassline* for Island Jamaica Jazz in 1996. His 1980 *Facets* album (Concord) with Ray Brown and drummer Jeff Hamilton features a jazz remake of the mento standard "Hold Em Joe," but his interest in exploring his Jamaican roots has grown with age. "I got very disenchanted with my experience with the so-called jazz music business or jazz experts and jazz magazines and jazz know-it-alls and the people who decide who is who and who is what. During that phase, I would go to Jamaica, hanging out. And I realized I love what [Jamaican music] is all about. It's just people doing what they do, and that's a part of me too. So I started playing these innocent things, and in that I found a lot of joy and fulfillment."

In 1994, Alexander played on the Skatalites' stellar 30th anniversary recording, *Hi Bop Ska* (Shanachie). The set features guest jazz players Lester Bowie (trumpet), David Murray (tenor sax), and Steve Turre (trombone), with ska interpretations of Murray's "Flowers for Albert," Lester

Bowie's "Ska Reggae Hi-Bop," and Monty Alexander's "Renewal."

Alexander's recent efforts for TelArc include the 1999 set *Stir It Up*, which offers jazz interpretations of the music of Bob Marley; *Monty Meets Sly & Robbie*, an experimental but ultimately forced meeting of jazz piano and dancehall drum patterns; and perhaps his best unification of jazz and Jamaican music, the live album *Goin' Yard*. *Goin' Yard* showcases Jamaican bassist Glen Browne and drummer Desi Jones (Gumption and Skool bands). The drum and bass duo show their proficiency beyond reggae by interpreting Alexander originals like "Serpent," "Trust," "Hope" and "Grub," but the captivating rendering of Augustus Pablo's "Rockers Meets King Tubby's Uptown" is the album's highlight. "[Jones and Browne] are what you call complete musicians," says Alexander, "but everything they play has a Jamaican vibe on it."

Browne and Jones also joined Monty Alexander for *My America* (TelArc, 2002), an album that pays tribute to Alexander's experience in the "land of opportunity." The musicians take a tour of Alexander's favorite compositions by Cole Porter, Nat King Cole, Al Green, Ray Charles, James Brown, and others, all tied together with the thread of early influence on Alexander's passion for music.

I asked Alexander to what jazz artists he would direct a Jamaican music fan experiencing a touch of curiosity, excluding his own recordings. "A lot of people who might be into John Coltrane, they will easily have a Bob Marley cd right next to it, because it's about something in the spirit of the music that comes through . . . but they really [have to] to open their minds and appreciate why Roland Alphonso and Don Drummond and Aubrey Adams and Ernie Ranglin and Monty Alexander, why we aspire to this [jazz] expression. [It's] because of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong . . . It's music for people. It's like go and find out why this is such a great gift to us on Earth, this thing that ended up being called jazz. You have to go out of your way. If you wait for it to come to you, what you will hear is 90 percent rubbish. There's artistry and artform in almost every genre. But most of it, because of the pandering to the big dollar and commercialism, is rubbish . . . If you want to follow the example, follow the example of embracing all things that are good."

Ultimately, Alexander has managed to define his creative space on his own terms, regardless of how he is characterized in the history of jazz. "Jazz is actually not a style, it's a democracy. Jazz is a thing that says, 'I can accept you and bring you into my expression.' It's not necessarily this or that. You can have a million explanations, but for me, it's a democracy . . . I feel a privileged sense, being a part of the so-called jazz world, but for me to introduce people who are about jazz to something I'm so joyful about, which I grew up with . . . it's a wonderful experience, because I find myself able to bring people together with the music."

Thanks to CC Smith, Charlie Morgan, and Butch Berman.