

Monty Alexander

Jazz Meets Jamaica Uptown

By Carter Van Pelt

The distance between the heart-beat of the Rastaman in the hills of Jamaica and the swinging jazz legacy of 52nd Street in New York might seem substantial, but in his career pianist Monty Alexander has managed to forge a tight connection between the two. Despite jazz credentials that extend to the music's core—associations with Milt Jackson, Ray Brown, Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Rollins—Alexander has never abandoned his Jamaican heritage, and as a result, he occupies unique territory in the histories of two genres.

Now approaching 60, Alexander exudes a dignified, patriarchal charm in person, emphasized by the touch of gray in his hair. In conversation, his affability is amplified when he animates and abruptly drops the proper English heard in "polite" Jamaican company for the broad patois of yard.

Born in Kingston in 1944, Alexander was naturally immersed in the local music scene of the late '50s, which was deeply influenced by post-war American jazz and r&b in addition to the folk rhythms of mento and its neo-African cousins. "I come from a middle-class home . . . I just had a natural leaning to the roots and the soul of Jamaica. My mom wanted to make sure I go to church on Sunday, but my dad was the one who loved the idea of seeing me playing with the musicians."

Alexander's father took him to see Nat "King" Cole at the Carib Theater and even helped him skip school to see the Jamaican appearance of Louis Armstrong. "I was wearing braces on my teeth," he recalls, "and I found out a way to attract concern. I would take the wire out of my braces and make it stick out in my jaw, and I went to the headmaster and said, 'I have to go to the dentist.' And my father was a part of the whole plot. So we went to the dentist, put the wire back, and went to Louis Armstrong's concert."

Further encouraged by his father, Alexander took his prodigious skills on the piano, via the naturally portable accordion, to the new Kingston studios where he was an unknowing participant in sessions that laid the cornerstone for an internationally influential continuum of genres. His memories of the pre-ska days at Federal studios and the seminal efforts of Coxson Dodd and Duke Reid make for fascinating conversation. "I would have never thought in a million years that our provincial attempts, having some good fun, getting the music out, sharing it with the people, would have reached outside of Jamaica."

Alexander recorded singles with Higgs and Wilson, Clue J (Cluett Johnson) and the Blues Blasters, Owen Gray, Keith and Enid, Archie Stephenson, as well as titles under his group moniker Monty and the Cyclones—for Dodd's Worldisc and All Stars labels. One of Alexander's early singles was a Jamaicanized take on

George Gershwin's "Summertime," a Teen label side recorded at Federal studios and released in 1960. The track reveals how key elements of ska were plainly evident before the music was identified as its own style or genre. "Summertime" features Alexander on accordion with a hard rhythm on the upbeat. This rhythm would become characteristic of the ska horn part credited to Dennis Campbell and is usually regarded as the predecessor to the guitar chop or organ bubble in reggae.

This element was not entirely foreign to Zion revival or mento, but according to Alexander, the B-side to "Summertime," called "Dog It," suggests the real influence at hand. "That was the first rhythm weh when you play, the singers wanted a beat behind them. The beat that the producers like Coxson and Duke Reid liked, as well as the musicians, was music coming from Louis Jordan and Bill Doggett, and all those guys were heavy on playing rhythm figures in the background."

"This reggae rhythm, more than [from] anybody else, comes from Bill Doggett. [He] had a way of playing his organ when they were playing a shuffle beat, and you started to hear this funny [rhythm] like the bubble they call it [in] reggae. I'm sure of this, because he had a few albums out that

A young prodigy present at the creation of some of Jamaica's earliest recorded popular music, jazz keyboard virtuoso Monty Alexander went on to international acclaim, but he's never forgotten his roots.

became hits . . . And when they started cutting ska, this rhythm thing, they just eased into where Bill Doggett had already gotten them . . . Of course when the Jamaican musicians did it, it came off with its own flavor, even though some of them were sincerely trying to imitate it. They couldn't help but come off with this mento flavor in there, and that's how the whole thing had its own sound."

Alexander's overriding impression of
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