

## MONTY ALEXANDER - Biography

Nearly sixty years after he moved to the United States from Kingston, Jamaica, his hometown, Grammy nominated legendary pianist Monty Alexander is an American classic, touring the world relentlessly with various projects, delighting a global audience drawn to his vibrant personality and soulful message. A perennial favorite at Jazz Festivals and venues worldwide and at the Montreux Jazz Festival where he has performed and headlined concerts 23 times since 1976, his spirited conception is one informed by the timeless verities: endless melody-making, effervescent grooves, sophisticated voicings, a romantic spirit, and a consistent predisposition, as Alexander accurately states, “to build up the heat and kick up a storm.” In the course of any given performance, Alexander applies those aesthetics to a repertoire spanning a broad range of jazz and Jamaican musical expressions—the American songbook and the blues, gospel and bebop, calypso and reggae—and gives the hardcore-jazz-obsessed much to dig into while also communicating the message to the squarest “civilian.” Documented on more than 75 recordings and cited as the fifth greatest jazz pianist ever in *The Fifty Greatest Jazz Piano Players of All Time* (Hal Leonard Publishing), the Jamaican government designated Alexander Commander in the Order of Distinction in 2000 and in 2018 The University of The West Indies bestowed him with an honorary doctorate degree (DLitt) in recognition of his merits.

Alexander is most widely known as an upper echelon master of the swinging piano trio function, as he has demonstrated with several top-shelf groups, including iconic units with bassist John Clayton and drummer Jeff Hamilton, and with the legendary bassist Ray Brown and guitarist Herb Ellis. The most recent demonstrations of his creative, charismatic trio sensibility are the percolating 2011 dates *Uplift* and *Uplift 2* (JLP), following the sublime 2008 albums, *Calypso Blues: The Music of Nat King Cole* and *The Good Life: Monty Alexander Plays the Songs of Tony Bennett* (Chesky). Also in 2008, Alexander was featured pianist on the Tony Bennett-Count Basie Orchestra, *A Swinging Christmas*.

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, Alexander also performs frequently with Harlem-Kingston Express, a double trio in which he coalesces his love for hard-swinging jazz with musical flavors that reflect his Jamaican heritage, shifting between an acoustic trio and

master Jamaican practitioners of electric bass and drums. He debuted the project at Jazz at Lincoln Center in 2009, and documented it both on the Grammy-nominated 2011 CD, *Harlem-Kingston Express: LIVE*, and its 2014 Soultrain Award nominated followup, *Harlem Kingston Express 2: The River Rolls On* (Motéma).

Born on D-Day, June 6, 1944, Alexander was playing Christmas carols by ear at 4, entertaining neighbors and relatives by 5, taking his first piano lessons at 6. He resisted formal instruction, but still, as a child, absorbed all the musical flavors that comprise his mature sonic palette.

Alexander began playing in local Kingston clubs at 14, when he also made his first recordings, some as leader of a group called Monty and the Cyclones, others as a sideman for such legendary producers as Ken Khouri (Federal Records), Duke Reid (Treasure Isle), and Clement Coxsone Dodd at Studio One. These early sessions for Federal, which Alexander describes as “not calypso music, but the beginning of Ska,” included such subsequently famous talents as trombonist Don Drummond, tenor saxophonist Roland Alphonso and guitarist Ernest Ranglin.

After moving to Miami in 1961, Alexander sublimated Jamaican roots towards establishing a jazz identity. By 1963, he was ensconced in New York City, working regularly at Jilly’s, the West 52nd Street piano bar owned by Frank Sinatra’s close friend Jilly Rizzo. There, for the next four years, Alexander’s trio swung until the wee hours for Sinatra, a mix of celebrity entertainers, tough guys, and iconic jazz musicians like Miles Davis, Count Basie, Milt Jackson, and Roy Haynes. As the 1960s progressed, he also held regular gigs at Minton’s (the iconic Harlem lounge where bebop gestated) and at the Playboy Club, where he met and became friends with Quincy Jones. During these years, he also met Ray Brown and piano giant Oscar Peterson, who recommended Alexander to Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer, the proprietor of Germany’s MPS label, for which he made a dozen records between 1971 and 1985.

On two other MPS albums, the still-sampled *Rass* and *Cobilimbo*, Alexander explicitly explored Jamaican folk forms, sharing solo and ensemble duties with Ranglin. On *Jamento*, a

1978 recording for Norman Granz's Pablo label, he introduced his "ivory and steel" concept of "marrying" steel pan and hand-drums to the acoustic piano trio, foreshadowing his decision on the 1996 album *Yard Movement* (Island Jamaica Jazz) to play acoustic grand piano with a reggae ensemble incorporating electric guitar and electric bass. He would continue these explorations on a series of recordings for Telarc—a collaboration with drummer Sly Dunbar and bassist Robbie Shakespeare titled *Monty Meets Sly and Robbie*; interpretations of Bob Marley's music on *Stir It Up* and *Concrete Jungle*, and of a broader Jamaican spectrum on *Goin' Yard*.

Alexander's Jamaican roots also include witnessing the legendary singer-pianist Nat Cole in concert in 1953 at Kingston's Carib Theater, an experience he regards as transformational, as was his participation in the 1991 CD *Unforgettable*, Natalie Cole's 7-Grammy Award winning homage to her father. Other signposts include his performance of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with a full orchestra under the direction of Bobby McFerrin at the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, playing piano on the soundtrack of *Bird* (1988), Clint Eastwood's Charlie Parker biopic, and on Quincy Jones' *For Love Of Ivy* (1968) film score.

In 2012, the Institute of Caribbean Studies in Washington, D.C. honored him with the Luminary Award. In 2012 he also received the German Jazz Trophy, A Life for Jazz. In 2015, the great modern pianist Donald Vega released *With Respect To Monty*, which included his interpretations of seven Alexander compositions.

2019 will mark the tenth year anniversary of the Monty Alexander Jazz festival held in Easton, Maryland, every Labor Day weekend since 2010, where Alexander serves as the Artistic Director and perennial performer.

*"Even now, it's one world of music for me," Alexander says. "I try to remove all the lines. Even though I do this thing and that thing and the other thing, at the end of the day it's Monty Alexander. I still seem to make people happy."*