

# Monty Alexander Trio At Longwood Gardens



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Monty Alexander Trio

The Ballroom at Longwood Gardens

Kennett Square, PA

February 11, 2017

It's generally a good sign for any show if the players onstage are smiling and laughing more than anyone else in the room. If there's been one main constant to [Monty Alexander](#)'s music over his 59-year career, it's an irrepressible positivity that runs through everything in any mode or style. His nimble piano might incorporate the blues and reggae roots of his native Jamaica, the bebop of [Oscar Peterson](#) or the suave charm of [Frank Sinatra](#), and all of it comes out with infectious humor and foot-stomping swing.

The Longwood Gardens conservatory gave attendees a chance to take in February's Orchid Extravaganza exhibit in addition to the concert. A lot of the crowd clearly enjoyed some time strolling with beverages through the paths of flowers for a while before showtime, even if nobody managed to find any secret passage to the lounge (that we know of). Soon enough it was time to file into the ballroom next door, and the elegant glass-ceilinged space made a warmly cozy site for the two lively eclectic sets of the night. The sold-out crowd of about 300 ranged from college-aged to retirement-aged, and it wasn't clear how many quite knew what they were in for, but the trio handily won over the room by the time we walked back out among the greenery for coffee and desserts.

All three were clearly enjoying themselves, but [Jason Brown](#) looked particularly like a kid in a candy store behind the drums. Whether keeping a snappy pulse with sticks or adding shadings on brushes, he always made sure that feet all over the room never stopped tapping. Such a foundation left J.J. Wiggins Shakur (aka [Hassan Shakur](#)) free to stretch the support role on bass in fun ways. He was in fine form holding steady at the low end, shifting voicings in smooth sync with any piano chordings, or perhaps tossing in a snippet of Cream or Henry Mancini for a good laugh while the leader could only smirk and

For his part Alexander spun elements from across his career (Caribbean rhythms, bop phrasings, catchy grooves and beautiful melodic solos) with a flair that always seemed effortless. The band charmed the crowd with a few lovely standards, amiably swinging through "Satin Doll" and "Never Let Me Go," coaxing out the warmth and sadness of Charlie Chaplin's "Smile," then giving "Day-O (Banana Boat Song)" a slinky Eastern vamp towards the end. Perhaps the happiest moment came with [Bob Marley's](#) "No Woman No Cry," which opened the second set with a delightful ray of sunshine.

The original material of course held its own right alongside the standards. "Renewal" made a low smoky late-night-neon-lit-club groove, while the dynamic rolls and swells of "Hurricane" saw the pianist stomping and swaying as if he was being carried away by the song more than anyone. The Bahamas-themed "Eleuthera" helped close things out by painting aural pictures of sun, sand and palm trees. Pieces would be shaded with a little samba as likely as a quick quote of [Thelonious Monk](#).

Alexander's manner was completely down-to-earth throughout, graciously accepting every wave of heartfelt applause and good-naturedly waving it off with a "hey, whaddaya want" shrug and a smile. Even after such a long and colorful career, there's no room for ego when taking simple joy playing with such good friends. It's that warm immediate connection that keeps the players young and the audiences happily coming back for more.