

Jazz's Jamaican Envoy

It is a small wonder that jazz, an American music that draws on a wide range of cultural influences, should have chosen New York, the most polyglot city on the planet, as its home base for most of its history. And it's equally appropriate that the Jamaican pianist Monty Alexander, who begins a weeklong engagement at Birdland on Tuesday, has made New York his home for most of the last 50 years.

"My music is the product of having experienced different cultures and different vibrations," Mr. Alexander said Monday in a phone conversation from his Midtown apartment. Most of us first heard the 66-year-old pianist in the early 1970s, when he represented the new generation of be-boppers and was the pianist of choice for such modern giants as Ray Brown and Milt Jackson.

Some may remember his earlier career, when he was brought to the city by Frank Sinatra's right-hand man, Jilly Rizzo, to serve as house pianist at the famous Jilly's; the experience motivated Mr. Alexander to become one of the major interpreters of the songs of Sinatra as well as the Great American Songbook (he has also collaborated memorably with Tony Bennett). Yet even before that, while growing up in Kingston, the pianist had yet a previous incarnation as a session pianist on embryonic reggae and ska recordings.

In recent years, Mr. Alexander has both returned to his roots and united several of these musical facets, most famously on two breakthrough jazz albums of the music of Bob Marley, "Stir It Up" (1999) and "Concrete Jungle" (2006). He may be the first—and is certainly the most successful—musician to combine Jamaican music with North American jazz, but he downplays the achievement as "just being myself."

"Growing up in Jamaica," Mr. Alexander said, "there were two things that happened that I remember distinctly: The first was all the groovy songs and sounds coming from the USA, and the other were all the rhythms and the beats that were happening locally with the folks in Jamaica."

The Birdland show is his "Harlem-Kingston Express" presentation, and features a full contingent of multiple bassists and percussionists, a second keyboardist, and the Israeli guitarist Yotam Silberstein, "to get everybody moving below the waist," as he put it in his unmistakable Kingston accent.

Mr. Alexander's new album, "Uplift" (Retrieval Records), opens with "Come Fly With Me," on which he evokes Sinatra and Oscar Peterson in the same breath, while "I Just Can't See For Lookin'" honors the piano innovations of Nat King Cole. The album includes his distinctive treatments of a parade of iconic standards, among them "Sweet Georgia Brown" (with echoes of both Bizet and Monk's "Bright Mississippi"). He ends by bringing it all together with Blue Mitchell's "Fungii Mama"—a melody that combines hard bop and calypso, throwing out humorous nods to Monk and "The Flintstones," without departing from an "I Got Rhythm" foundation.

"Uplift" also features several island-flavored originals, which are brilliant examples of how to swing, Jamaican style. "No matter what I'm playing, I like to spice it up," Mr. Alexander said, "whether it's Cole Porter or Bob Marley."