

Chris McGregor

THERE are some complex stories behind some of the highpoints mentioned in Steve Voce's obituary of Chris McGregor [28 May], writes Joe Boyd.

The Blue Notes' departure from South Africa, for instance, was preceded by a triumphant tour of the country sponsored by a beer company, much to the fury of the authorities.

Their residence at the "Old" Ronnie Scott's in the late Sixties was a double-edged sword. Their first trip to London had been for a week at the "Real" Scott's. Like many visiting jazz musicians, they had been lionised. Returning as residents, competing for gigs and girls with the rather grey locals, their flamboyant personalities and mostly black skins made people nervous. During my ineffective period as their manager in the late Sixties, we were never able to gain them re-admittance to the hallowed halls of the Frith Street club, while Gerrard Street became a kind of exile.

No one who has heard the Brotherhood on a good night can deny that they created some of the highest points of European jazz during the past quarter-century. But recognition was hard to come by — gigs and record deals even harder. The toll has been heavy: the tragic early deaths of Mongezi

Feza and Johnny Dyani, health problems for other original Blue Notes and now the supremely sad passing of the master of African jazz.

His joyfully sublime "Country Cooking" has been ignored by its own issuing label, his US tours were forever postponed to the following year, and the Brotherhood was always on shaky financial ground. But when he was stricken, he was looking forward to a full summer of work for the big band — his fondest creation, the perfect vehicle for his rich mix of Ellington, Kwela, and Chris's own percussive sensibility.

I remember him best sitting in the studio in 1970, having finished a session on his own sextet album (never issued by Polygram!) and asking me who was recording next. Stuffing something exotic in his pipe and leaning back, he considered the refined folkish music of Nick Drake. "Can I have a go at that?" And grinning broadly he put down, in one take, one of his finest solos, bringing to life Nick's "Poor Boy" with playing that thousands who never heard his jazz records know and love.

His grin was so broad and African and his laugh so profound it made the English nervous and the jazz scene here has been the poorer for their wariness.