

Great Lost recordings

In our regular feature on forgotten or neglected recordings, Barry Witherden recalls the flavour of 1968 in the shape of *Very Urgent* by The Chris McGregor Sextet.



PHOTO VAL WILMER

1967 hit hard when visionaries Che and Trane were taken from us, but 1968 was the year the 60s really ended, when the hopes and dreams of a generation staggered and began to die, the year which saw Dr King gunned down and Dr Castro succumb to the despair of dogma. Unless you were dumb enough to see student "revolutions" as anything more than bog-standard youth rebellion prior to settling back on track into steady job, homelife, or the other time-honoured niches, jack-the-lad or jill-the-school, perennial activist in academia, the media or some elitist masturbatory political splinter-group, 1968 gave no cause for optimism.

We clutched at straws, at personal ways of ignoring where the wind was blowing — the weekly gigs at the 100 Club, for example where I heard McGregor's six-piece in person for the first time, and a music that exemplified what I, naive teenager that I was, thought life should be like: vivid, exciting, open and adventurous. To cap it all, the foot that drove the bass-drum trod on mine on its way to the bar. This, with Moholo's amiable apology, gave me ten points in the Fame Game, and I never cleaned that shoe again. The title of the group's only LP summed up the feel of the times: *Very Urgent*. You'll hardly be shocked to learn that it was almost immediately deleted.

McGregor's band had begun to assemble at the 1962 Johannesburg Jazz Festival, when he linked up with Mongezi Feza, Nick Moyake, Johnny Mbizo Dyani and Louis Moholo, on the way to becoming the legendary Blue Notes — legendary and racially mixed. There were, you will have guessed, problems at home — so, during a visit to Europe in 1964, they decided to settle in Switzerland. A year later they moved to London and, with Ronnie Beer replacing Moyake on tenor, they became the sextet

which recorded in London in December 1967.

I used to catch the band as often as I could. Their gigs were bemusing, little scary even, but always exhilarating, propelling us (and them) toward exhausting but joyful catharsis. Those who heard and saw them in person should count themselves lucky, because the likes of this will not come again. Recall, small and fragile-looking, Mongs' body contorting and tottering, one leg winding round the other, while his trumpet would hover like a bee and sting like a hornet. McGregor, large, shambling, but with darting agile hands, would be bent over the keyboard, his sometimes demonic demeanour of concentration subverted by an avuncular smile at some especially satisfying turn of events. Pukwana, forbidding in his intensity, would provoke his alto into skeins of severe lyricism or tough, exuberant convolutions. Beer, with the lowest profile but essential to the very fabric of the band would stitch his tenor into the complex weave. And Dyani, strong and serious, held everything together.

A live session for Radio Three taped some months later gave an ever better idea, but *Very Urgent* captured the feel of the band as well as any studio date could. Made up of highlights from their standard repertoire — Pukwana's "Marie My Dear", the traditional "Don't Stir The Beehive", McGregor's "Travelling Somewhere", "Heart's Vibrations", "The Sounds Begin Again" and "White Lies" — it took in a major slice of the group's range, from the smouldering grace of tunes inspired by traditional hymns and songs, through acerbic ballads and impudently insistent riff-anchored workouts, to the turbulent adrenalin rushes of the free-jazz excursions. McGregor's spiny piano and Dyani's hortatory bass rivet the tracks together, Moholo's surf booms and splashes, and Feza, Beer and Pukwana lock horns or else cut free, solo. There was certainly urgency, and hope, though hindsight also insinuates hints of desperation into the determined optimism of much of the music of this period.

Moyake, who returned to South Africa when the others moved to London, died in the mid-80s. Feza died in 1975 in circumstances both tragic and suspicious. Dyani, deeply affected by this, would frequently express his anger and frustration with the artistic barriers he and Feza met. Never free from ill-health — Dave Holland and the late Harry Miller often depped for him in the sextet — he died in 1986. McGregor and Pukwana died within a few weeks of one another in 1990. Beer was last heard of building boats in Ibiza.

The incomparable Moholo, though, threw a cymbal at an impudent heart attack in 1990 and was soon back on the stand with not the least sign of diminished power, flexibility or imagination. Check him out on *Spirits Rejoice* (named for one of his beautiful bands of the 70s) on Ogun 101, where he can be heard powering The Dedication Orchestra, which contains more superb players than you could shake a rhythm-stick at. *Very Urgent* (Polydor 184 137) is long out of print, but *Spirits Rejoice* is in its way an eminent alternative. Profits from the album go to the Spirits Rejoice Dedication Trust Fund, a fitting memorial for those Blue Notes now fallen silent. The Fund was established to found a bursary for a young African musician to come to London for study and experience, and its promoters (who include Moholo, Hazel Miller and Evan Parker) are also hoping to provide financial support for a music school in South Africa. □