

obituary

theatre



Chris McGregor

Jazzman dies in France

JEREMY DOWSON

THE death of pioneering Afro-jazz pianist Chris McGregor at his home in France at the weekend will be much mourned by the jazz community both here and overseas.

McGregor's last local appearance was at The Argus-Carling Circle of Jazz concert in Greenmarket Square on October 11, 1987.

In his 28 years in South Africa and 26 years abroad, the Cape-born minister's son with the distinctive flaxen ponytail earned himself the reputation of being one of the country's few white jazz performers who successfully fused American, European and African styles.

Born in the Cape in 1936, he grew up in the Transkei, where his father ran a mission school. Traditional music made an early impression on him.

He studied classical piano at the University of Cape Town but soon dropped out, preferring to spend his evenings jamming with township jazz bands. At times he had to blacken his face to be able to perform at township venues unhindered by the authorities.

Having gradually fused the styles of modern classical, church and mbaqanga music, he formed the Blue Notes with Louis Moholo, Johnny Dyani, Mongezi Feza and Nick Moyakhe, who collectively went on to win the National Jazz Festival at Orlando Stadium in 1963 before a crowd of 50 000.

In 1964 Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes jumped at an offer to appear at the Antibes Jazz Festival in France, providing as it did a springboard into the European jazz circuit. The band members, who for a while included saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, later settled in London where they played regular gigs at clubs such as Ronnie Scott's.

In the early '70s McGregor formed the 14-piece Brotherhood of Breath, who played a less bebop-based mixture of avant-garde jazz and African rhythms.

In 1974 he and his wife Maxine, daughter Andromeda and son Kei — named after the river — settled in France, where they created a home out of a rambling 18th century mill near the village of Monclar in South West France.