



R: wizard of jazz

Breath of fresh air

CHRIS MCGREGOR is the Wizard of Jazz. He's an alchemist who brews up a mixture of African, European and American influences. He puts a spell on a dozen or more musicians from widely differing backgrounds, and he calls the whole potion, "The Brotherhood of Breath."

When he sits behind his piano onstage, he carries this wizard image with him.

He's a big strong man, and often all you see is his head and shoulders, and perhaps a beaver hat, bobbing up and down. You feel sure he's playing heavy music—but you rarely ever hear what comes out of his instrument.

And that's what's bugging Chris — bad pianos. When I saw him playing at the North West Poly recently, it was obviously an off night. And the piano made it worse.

But what was so annoying was that just a few yards away, locked in a room, was a beautiful grand piano. The idea seemed to be that it was too good for jazz musicians. So Chris won't be playing there again — unless they get a good piano.

He told me: "Nobody has heard me play piano on the London gig circuit... at places like the Phoenix or the 100 Club. People don't take the music seriously over here — or they wouldn't provide such bad pianos."

The contrast between continental and British gigs hit Chris hard, for the first gig in London after his

recent tour in and around Germany, was at the NW Poly. In Germany it was Steinway grands all the way.

Now he wants to do something about it. "I see the answer as putting on my own concerts. The only times things have been successful here in the past, have been when I've organised them myself."

"When you do a gig for — say the Jazz Centre Society — you can pack the place out, and they still give you the impression THEY are doing YOU a favour."

"By organising my own concerts I'll be more in control of what's happening. Sure, there'll still be middle men. But they'll be working for the band — not the band working for them."

Maybe that way the Brotherhood would become a more financially viable band. Up to now, it's been subsidised by Chris.

He wrote the music for a film called Kongi's Harvest, which was based on a play about modern Nigeria. The money he got from doing the score was put directly into the Brotherhood.

"There'd be gigs where the money wasn't good — and I'd make it up out of my own bread so everybody could get a reasonable fee."

"And then there are rehearsals. I reckon it costs me £15 a time to get a new number off... with copying and so on."

"What I'd like would be to have a situation where I could pay the men a guaranteed wage. I'd like us to work intensely for six months, rehearse for three months and have a three-

month lay-off each year."

After a gig and an overnight stay in London, Chris gets on a train which takes him back to nature. For the past 18 months he's been living in a farmhouse in Sussex, about sixty miles from London.

Living and playing at home in London became impossible, so the family and the grand piano moved south. In South Africa, Chris lived in the country and so he's used to country life. Down on the farm he's got a vegetable plot, a few chickens, and geese and a goat.

"I like it a lot. I can write, and practise as much as I want. Nobody bothers me. And it's only 1½ hours from London."

"I get up to town a lot. I'm here just now rehearsing the band, and a few new members."

The current line-up is, Harry Miller, bass; Louis Moholo, drums; Evan Parker and Lol Coxhill on tenors; Radu Malfatti and Nick Evans, trombones; and Elton Dean and Dudu Pukwana on alto. The trumpet section is the same: Mongezi Feza, Harry Beckett and Marc Charig.

"Our European tour was a success musically if less so financially. There was no concert where we didn't begin on time. I think that's a fair achievement considering we were getting to bed sometimes at 3 am, and getting on the road at 9 am for a long journey."

"At one place, in Lausanne, Switzerland, they didn't want us to start on time. They said: 'Everybody knows jazz concerts don't start on time.' People were still coming in. There's no trouble organising the Brotherhood. I believe in people. I trust people. I don't believe that man, by nature, is inherently evil."

I hope Chris gets his way straight. If he gets paying concerts organised, he can pay his sidemen without trouble. And that way he can keep the band really together.

KEN HYDER