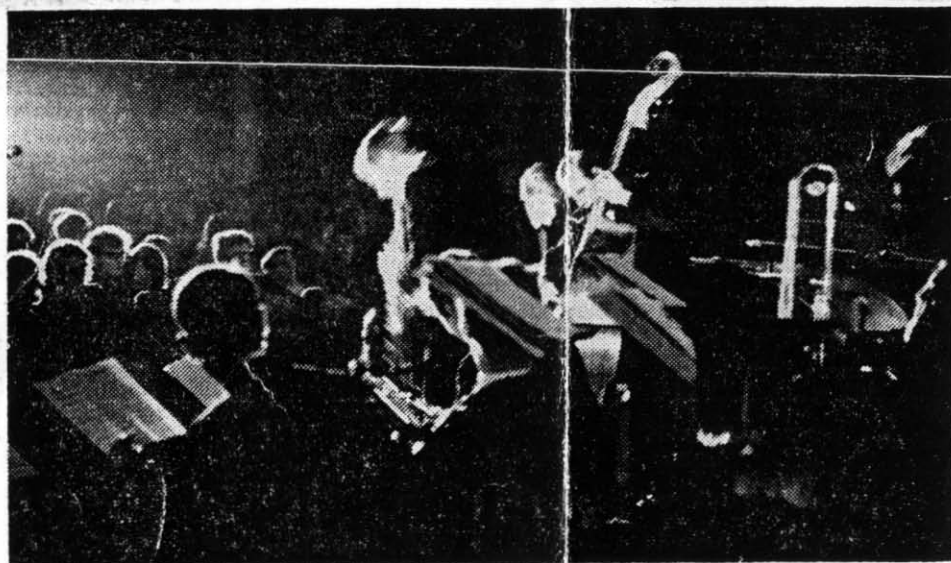


1988



Big band revivalists

BY RONALD ATKINS

TIME was when jazz to the general public was symbolised by the large dance orchestra, "large" being defined as from twelve to sixteen musicians. The dancing public of the 1930s demanded them, so they fulfilled a function. Once the dancers turned to rock 'n' roll and its offshoots, the bands lost much of their economic viability. Arrangers were also running out of ideas, and the musicians were becoming frustrated, anxious to perform as themselves and not as section-men or sight-readers. Today Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Woody Herman remain; otherwise the species is virtually extinct.

Enough of the spirit has survived, however, to make a big band revival currently the most stimulating event on the London scene. Enthusiasts still exist for whom the essence of jazz lies in orchestral power, and musicians still attend voluntary rehearsals with bands which seldom play before an audience. Even those

most concerned with self-expression find that submerging their egos within a collective format provides a necessary balance.

At the Old Place—the Gerrard Street half of the Ronnie Scott organisation and the home of some of our brightest young musicians—it seemed natural for one or more of the resident leaders occasionally to expand his group by borrowing from the other quintets and sextets. The first of these composite bands appeared at the club in March, led by the South African pianist Chris McGregor. In May another pianist, Mike Westbrook, gave a concert of his suite "Celebration" which was subsequently featured in the lush surroundings of Scott's Frith Street emporium. Tonight at the Old Place it is the turn of bassist Graham Collier to lead twelve men of his choosing.

These three have brought new lustre into the hackneyed world of

orchestral writing. McGregor's scores for his sixteen-piece band are in a sense the most conventional but their impact is fresh, often intoxicating. The strong African lilt of his themes and melodic fragments is perfectly tailored to his aggressive, forward-looking soloists. Built around three of his compatriots and including the entire Mike Westbrook group, McGregor's band is genuinely all-star. A saxophone section with Dudu Pakwana, Ronnie Beer, John Surman and Mike Osborne guarantees that sparks will fly.

With French-horn, tuba and just one trumpet among his twelve pieces, Westbrook has aimed for density of sound; in the process his music has gained in discipline. "Celebration" lacks the melodic distinction one might say melodic relevance, of McGregor's work but its textures form a thrilling backdrop for Westbrook's burgeoning soloists. As a concert-length jazz original the suite

exudes a certain massive splendour.

Possibly the most intricate of our arrangers, Collier has divided his men into orthodox sections though his scores allow for plenty of cross-cutting. Compared to Westbrook's, Collier's normal group can sound disciplined to a fault but, from the evidence of rehearsals, the added personnel has unearthed extrovert qualities in his music; this augurs well for his reception tonight.

These projects deserve a future. McGregor takes his men to Birmingham on August 28. "Celebration" may be recorded and Westbrook's new suite, written for a band to include two bassists and two drummers, receives its first performance on August 12 in Plymouth—appropriately, since the band is something of an institution down there. Collier is assured at least of a programme on German television next February. All three are naturally open to further offers.