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OBITUARIES

## Chris McGregor

"IT ALWAYS surprises me," said Peter Clayton, "that people as gently- and soft-spoken as Chris McGregor and the Rhodesian Mike Gibbs can extract such a whirlwind of noise from their fellow musicians." McGregor and Gibbs — rather than their black African countrymen — have provided that continent's most trenchant contributions to jazz, a music with its roots in Africa, but very much without a prophet in its own land.

"People in Europe don't identify with the drum or relate to the drum culture, and that's a pity," said McGregor. "They don't realise that I play the piano rhythmically. To me the piano is my favourite drum, just a drum with melody." McGregor's piano style often used unusually powerful percussive effects.

McGregor's father taught in a Church of Scotland mission school in the Transkei province. Chris was thus exposed both to the hymns of the mission church and to the music of the Xhosa people. Later he was to incorporate both Bantu and Zulu elements into his music.

He studied for four years at the South African College of Music in

Cape Town. His subject was western European classical music and he came to be influenced by the works of Webern, Schoenberg and Bartok. While at the college he spent his evenings playing jazz on piano in the local clubs with both white and black musicians. He formed his first band, the Blue Notes, using some of the African musicians he heard at the 1962 Johannesburg Jazz Festival. These included Mongezi Feza on trumpet, the tenor saxophonists Nick Moyake and Ronnie Beer, the bassist Johnny Dyani, Louis Moholo on drums, and one of the most powerful players produced locally, the alto saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, who is now based in London. Their music combined bebop and other jazz forms with Kwela, the local folk music. Running a racially mixed band proved impossible in South Africa and when the band was invited to play at the Antibes Festival in 1964 the musicians decided not to return to their homeland. They settled first in Switzerland, where their

compatriot Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), a pianist who had preceded them to Europe, helped them to find work. For a year they played mainly at the Blue Note in Geneva and at the Afrikaner Café in Zurich. Still largely unknown here, they arrived in London in 1965. In that year Ronnie Scott moved his club into new premises in Frith Street: he more or less handed the Gerrard Street club over to young, unknown bands, and the Blue Notes was one of them.

In 1966 the band was given a four-week engagement at the Montmartre Club in Copenhagen, which was then specialising in avant-garde jazz, and had featured such free-form players as Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp. From then on the Blue Notes mixed free jazz with their African roots.

In 1970 McGregor enlarged the band and changed its name to the Brotherhood of Breath. In contrast with other South African musicians like Ibrahim and Hugh Masekala,

the music of the Brotherhood was complex and often violent. The complexity came from so many things happening at once, rather than any sophisticated composition, and the band's standard method was to use multiple simultaneous riffing. Following nobody's rules but their own, they used old devices from the swing era, touches of New Orleans jazz, Kwela, atonality, collective cacophony, and everything down to the musical equivalent of the kitchen sink. Although much of the music was written, the line between argument and improvisation was never clearly marked. The group attracted several of London's leading free musicians including the fine tenor player Evan Parker and toured Britain and Europe, building a strong reputation. Several albums were made and McGregor wrote and recorded with the band the soundtrack for the film of Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*.

Using both bands, McGregor toured in Africa with the Blue Notes in the early Seventies while continu-

ing to consolidate the reputation of the Brotherhood. He moved to south-west France in 1974 and commuted from there to London and the rest of Europe. He played many solo piano concerts at this time and recorded three solo albums. In 1975 he recorded an album with the Blue Notes in tribute to Mongezi Feza, who had died that year. However, the Brotherhood of Breadth remained in being and an augmented version of the band toured Britain for the Arts Council in 1983. All the music was composed and arranged by McGregor.

Chris McGregor was uniquely able to catch in his music the exuberant, heart-on-sleeve qualities of South African jazz, and his bands provided vitally important platforms for black South Africans who would perhaps otherwise have remained unknown in Europe.

**Steve Voce**

*Christopher Andrew McGregor, pianist, band leader, composer, born Umtata South Africa 24 December 1936, married Maxine Lautre (one son, two daughters), died Agen France 26 May 1990.*