

SPIRITS IN ACTION

An artist's life story can teach by vivid example the universal rules for making and living art. Maxine McGregor's celebration of her husband's life is just that: a compelling tale of the art, life, and politics of a masterful composer / bandleader whose work for over two decades in Europe and England changed the face of creative improvised music. Penetrating the mystery of making art in an hostile social atmosphere, the book chronicles the music's rise in the repressive South African regime of the late 50s early 60s and the changes that occurred in the music as the composer and his band moved through Europe, eventually settling in the U.K. Written after the composer's death in 1990, *Chris McGregor And The Brotherhood Of Breath* is an intimate lesson of origins, how the free improvised sound of Ayler and Coleman mixed with traditional African themes to create a vital new music. It is also a document of the friendships and alliances that made possible such a creative outburst.

The daily life of the BlueNotes and many other artists in early 1960s South Africa was a risky business. Pass Laws effectively separated the races, creating a weird limbo for artists who chose to cross colour lines delineated by the racist state. McGregor himself was caught up in the police state having to affect a disguise to perform in an all-black jazz festival. Creating an audience for the BlueNotes involved a process of playing small cafe bars and staging their own shows in theatres throughout the state, inviting arrest and detention if they were caught up in a security police sweep.

"I adopted a kind of invisible policy... but it's amazing how visible you can get through being invisible. With the BlueNotes we were becoming the focus for a lot of strange stuff. We excited people, and when those armed policemen saw a crowd of excited black people, they started fingering their holsters. It was a nervous trigger-happy atmosphere, and I was glad to



CHRIS MCGREGOR AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH:
My Life With A South African Jazz Pioneer by Maxine McGregor
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get out of it." In 1964, the BlueNotes left South Africa for an engagement at a jazz festival in Juan-les-Pins, France, first stop of a long journey of exile.

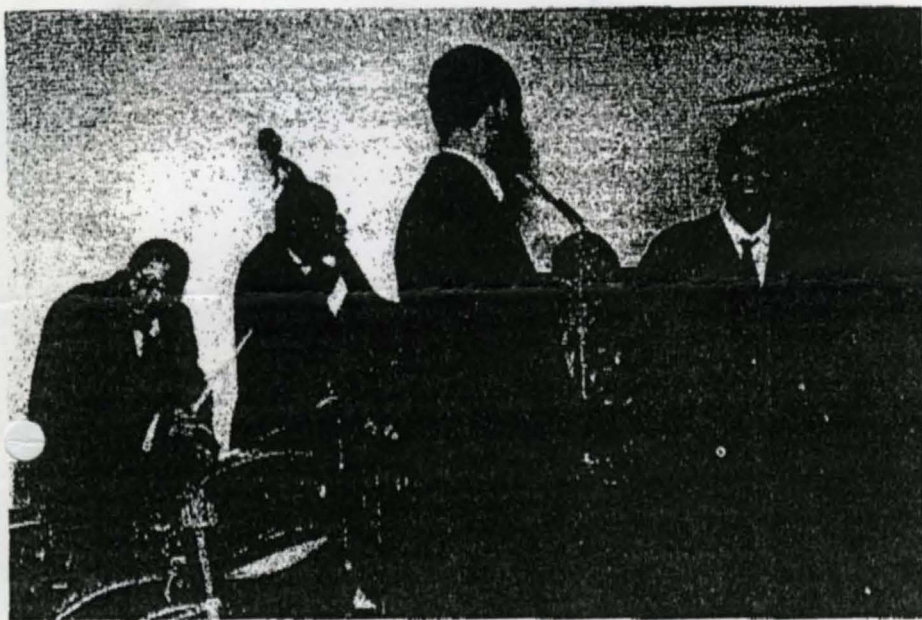
This feeling of being a fugitive within one's own country was later in his life mirrored by the desolation of living as an exile in the U. K. and Europe. He never lost the African roots of his nature, saying that as he grew older, he began to feel more African than ever. The spirit of the continent was an essential part of McGregor's nature, one that he actively cultivated in his music. In a radio interview, the composer talked about the music's roots and its connection to African culture, suggesting an experience beyond the dimensions of sound.

"It shows to my mind a certain psychic continuity which is very important in the music. It is something beyond any individual, almost a tidal movement." When asked why he had named the orchestra project, Brotherhood of Breath, he replied, "I had to look for a name that expressed the fact that I was beginning to feel a certain universal pull in the music."

Chris McGregor formed the BlueNotes after a few years of moving through the thriving community of South African jazz musicians. The book tells of his meeting with Dudu Pukwana as being pivotal to the group's creation and direction. Influenced by the jazz of A. Blakey, Horace Silver, and Duke Ellington, the BlueNotes were also affected deeply by the music swirling through the cities of late fifties South Africa. McGregor talked about that mixture of influences by way of debunking assumptions that some people made about the exclusively American roots of jazz.

"African kwela and mbaqanga music coming into contact with modern technological society tends to become something which one could call jazz music. Historians talk readily about the melting pot that was New Orleans and everything that took place there. I think that in the world there are other New Orleans, especially in Africa".

Maxine McGregor's book is a remarkable effort that finally documents a music that has been mostly over-



looked. Her tone and sense of the events brings the reader straight into the thick of a community of artists and exiles, forging a music uniquely their own. The BlueNotes (McGregor piano, Dudu Pukwana alto saxophone, Nick Moyake tenor saxophone, Mongezi Feza trumpet, Johnny Mbuso Dyani bass, and Louis Moholo drums) were a rarity, a unit that developed a rapport that verged on the telepathic. This ability to take the music out into the street and then instantly reconnect to play a theme as an ensemble was something that the composer sought to duplicate for years after the eventual breakup of the BlueNotes. He later remarked: "It seems to me very difficult to take collective improvisation as the basis of existence of a big formation... in the Brotherhood, there is not just written music, ear counts enormously also, as well as the notion of a common cultural background. In the previous orchestra (Brotherhood circa 1970) the nucleus of South Africans sometimes produced music that appeared totally improvised, but that was not the case. It was just that, because of our origins, we could synchronise with each other instantly through a rhythm or a melody. Improvisation is a multiform notion, connected to a tradition, a culture, a social life."

The author's understanding of the musicians' lives and her empathy with their struggle as exiles brings an unusual quality of immediacy to this biography. It is enlightening to hear her describe the musicians' lives, free of the clichés that abound concerning jazz music. In the face of poverty and record industry indifference, the stories of success still seem sweet. From a review of their London debut at Ronnie Scott's; "The emphasis on feeling — feeling as spontaneous excitement — is the predominant quality of Chris McGregor's music. It moves organically, from a delicate theme through individual solos, converging in a frenetic and orgiastic climax (the influence of Charlie Mingus was evident here)".

The book spans roughly three decades from the early formation of the BlueNotes to the years of the Brotherhood, a big band that challenged the prevailing climate of jazz music by incorporating total free improvisation within the context of the written score, a notion that was exhilarating for some and plainly disturbing for others. Johnny Dyani, the formidable bassist of the BlueNotes decided that he disagreed with the direction of the music taking shape and left the country to go settle in

Scandinavia, forming the band WitchDoctor's Son. His position in McGregor's later bands was filled by other South African bassists, Harry Miller and Ernest Mothle, two musicians who understood the crucial rhythmic pulse that the pianist was looking for in the music.

As beautiful as the music was on occasion, the strain of pulling together a unit of fiercely individual artists and rehearsing a program of ambitious music, only to be faced with making no money for their trouble was a stretch for all concerned. The marginal acceptance of the music within the fairly staid atmosphere of 70s London also created some friction within the band.

"In South Africa the spirit behind the resistance is expressed in the music... the kind of jazz we played is not obviously political, but I think our generation of musicians were the first to make an impact on South African cultural thinking. To come from there to here, where in a strange way what you do doesn't really matter to anyone, is a difficult thing to adjust to."

After a long gig in Copenhagen's Cafe Montmartre, the transition into the new music was permanent, an evolution that astonished many close to the band. Chris McGregor heard the music of Albert Ayler and was immediately committed to playing without the limitations that had previously been present in the music. He had met the Ayler brothers when they visited London and was impressed by the strength of their music and direction. For McGregor, the jump into the new thing was not a question of why, but one of how.

"Just being with them — Albert who's so happy — it was a spiritual blessing. Things were pressing on me like, how can I do it? How can I get out that speed, that energy? And should I try this and try to work that so as not to lose contact with people?" >>>>>

The same questions were being asked throughout the music

world at that time. Drummer John Stevens worked with Chris McGregor in the late 60s and saw (as they all did) that the music had to move beyond technical display and embrace the higher elements. Stevens cut through all questions of technique with characteristic brevity: "What improvised music really offers us is a potential community of people to create together in spontaneous fashion. When you listened to Dudu, he would actually be saying something very eloquent and very poetic. When someone is playing a load of arpeggios, what are they actually saying? It may sound like a lot of skills but what are they saying?"

The story is the personal reality behind the creation of the music, a reality that was life-changing for the musicians. Their comments often express the joy and frustration of that development. Drummer Louis Moholo, one of the few (Han Bennink is another) for whom freedom posed no obstacle, described the feeling that pulled him into the new direction: "When we first came here I started hearing some other vibes. I was away from South Africa... away from the chains. I just wanted to be free, totally free, even in music. Free to shake away all the slavery, in everything, being boxed in to places — one, two, three, four — and being told you must come in after four. I was a rebel, completely a rebel. And then there were people like Evan Parker whom I saw was also a rebel. From then on, I just played free. I met John Tchicai, Steve Lacy, Peter Brötzmann. John Stevens and I were actually the first drummers to play free music in Britain, if the truth be told... Free music is it, man, so beautiful. The word 'free' makes sense to me. I know that's what I want. LET MY PEOPLE GO."

Throughout the book many beautiful stories surface. Maxine McGregor's love of the music is only surpassed by her love for her family and the spirits that connect them to the land and the music. Her personal connection to the extended family of

musicians is as much a part of the book as the development of the

music. The musicians' deep love for their work is well documented in tales of endless touring throughout Europe and the U.K. (often under stressful conditions). Incidents spring up that combine the comedic and the surreal.

"Hazel Miller tells of a late-night return from Cardiff when they saw a barn on fire. There seemed to be no people around so the musicians went to investigate and found a number of trapped horses. Dudu took charge and they managed to evacuate the horses while Mongezi awoke the startled owner and announced: Your stables are on fire but we've got most of the horses out."

Over the years, the strain of exile and the demands of artistic temperament put an end to the BlueNotes though their legacy was carried on in McGregor's next project, the Brotherhood of Breath. The Brotherhood was a loosely-knit organization of musicians who were drawn to the music that Chris and the BlueNotes had been creating, as well as the possibility of discovery that the big band held. The Brotherhood existed throughout the 70s and 80s in three distinct formations, creating a music that pushed the sound barrier and challenged the musicians to really say what they meant. Considering McGregor's disclaimer, "I have an obsession with form", the unabashed freedom within context that was central to the Brotherhood's message proved to be a significant milestone, though not an easy path to follow.

Evan Parker remembers; "The strange thing was that in that band, I always

wanted to play the charts straighter. The nights when it worked it was magic, and then nights when it didn't, it was chaos!... (he) was always positive, supportive, as if he was saying to us: If this is what you want to do, well, you must do it. He put a lot of work into those arrangements and some nights they weren't played at all."



McGregor's focus was always clarity of statement, one that grew (perhaps) out of his artistic medium, the piano and the pen. After numerous tours with the Brotherhood, often going into the red in order to play the music that he loved, he began performing solo and trio concerts with the same pulse and sense of adventure as the bands before them. Always an independent, he disagreed with both schools of thought on the avant-garde; he felt at odds with strict time feel and with the avant-garde rejection of regularity as well.

"Music must have a rhythm. I'm fed up with this avant-garde that says you must have no time. I want a rhythm I can relate to because any move anyone makes has rhythm... some is graceless and some is informed by grace, but it's the rhythm of life... To me, the piano is my favourite drum. For me, the piano is just a drum with a melody."

The tradition of the artist's book, full of fragments, sketches and ideas, is an old and venerable one. These personal

histories articulate the mind of the creative artist in ways that their works only suggest. Maxine McGregor's book is a polished biography that retains the raw edges of the lives that it reflects. It is after all a story of a music's evolution (still in progress) and a chronicle of two artists' lives together.

"Every moment is eternal and music can at the same time achieve and communicate the ecstasy of it" □

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The BlueNotes, caught here in Durban, South Africa just before escaping the country for exile in Europe, were an already seasoned unit at the time of this show. Released at last from Maxine McGregor's archives, the recording is very clear, definitely influenced by artists like Blakey and Silver though also with that characteristic lilt of South Africa. It is a joyful sound that kicks. The irresistible sound of Dudu Pukwana's alto saxophone dances through the tracks, making the tenor depth of Nick Moyake seem a bit stiff by comparison. The tenor is featured to nice effect on the ballad treatment of *I Cover The Waterfront*, playing the melody with a nod towards Lester, dreamy yet conscious of the noisy crowd.

Chris McGregor's *Vortex Special* rocks the house, the rhythm section of Louis Moholo and 16 year-old bassist Johnny Dyani swinging the band and the dancehall crowd. Mongezi Feza had developed fast as a young trumpet player. At age 18, he already had an individual approach, bright and brassy. He stood his ground with the more experienced older hornmen in the band, but it is Dudu's alto that captures the crowd, making a strong

impression with his own composition, the evocative *B My Dear*. Dudu's roots were clearly in Bird's language but here he had his own thing together, as he said himself, "Really, inside I'm a rocker, I don't care about technique as long as I can cook."

Fast forward nine years past the breakup of the BlueNotes and the immersion of all the artists in the fire of Ornette, Ayler, and Coltrane. Dudu Pukwana is burning on the live release of the big band project that Chris McGregor put together. The *Brotherhood Of Breath*, a live release from the nascent Ogun record label, is a startling encounter with the band after the two releases on RCA in 1970 & 1971. Creating some of the most significant music of the period, the Brotherhood here get loose in front of a responsive Swiss audience, taking the tunes built on simple vamp figures (*Tunji's Song* and *The Serpent's Kindly Eye*) and hypnotizing the crowd with long solos against the rhythm section's steady foundation.

Mongezi Feza's solo on *Tunji's Song* is an accurate gauge of just how far the musicians' concepts had stretched since the initial studio sessions in the

late 1960s. He slurs and growls through the horn with a kind of density that was beyond his years. The dye is cast at the beginning of the session with Evan Parker's solo in the first few minutes of *Do It*, the tenor kindling a fire against the cold evening air, stoked by Louis Moholo's roaring drums. *Restless* is another piece where the insistent rhythms of the band stir up sparks. McGregor's piano sound on the CD is ill-served by the outdoor location recording but he rips into it with a concept that seems to remotely echo Cecil Taylor's attack. It is also heartening to hear the very free alto playing balanced against the brass on this date, Pukwana swerving around corners, smearing notes against the rhythms.

Much of the power on this session is generated by the freedom of the horns moving through improvisations anchored by piano, bass, and drums. Harry Miller's solid time finding a deep pocket in Moholo's pulse. The Brotherhood at this point were at an advanced state of evolution, mixing the lessons of the decade before with the modern compositions from within. It is somewhat amazing to consider that this was the first release from the Ogun label, a side project of Hazel and Harry Miller. The currents that sweep through the band on *Davashe's Dream* demonstrate the cool logic of McGregor's arrangements. The art of juxtaposition was essential to McGregor. Listen to the intense tension of Dudu Pukwana followed by Mongezi Feza's unhurried song-like phrasing.

The years in between these recordings were troubled by the deaths of his compatriots, but in 1993, Louis Moholo fulfilled a dream and returned to the land of his birth, bringing with him a vital new band for a string of shows. There had been a sea change in his music since Moholo had last appeared in South Africa with the music of this CD reflecting the sweeping changes. *Viva La Black*, an octet assembled by Moholo from the ranks of the best young players on the London scene, wastes no time getting down to business. >>>>>

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With new compositions by Moholo and some held over from the BlueNotes book (tangy writing from Dudu Pukwana and Mongezi Feza still casts its spell) the band explore a music that is both traditional and experimental, their opening piece *Woza* a toast to their spiritual brethren (Dizzy Gillespie, we love you baby), a calling to the spirits. Very fresh saxophone from the section of Sean Bergin, Toby Delius, and Jason Yarde is given the royal treatment from the rhythm team of Moholo, percussionist Thebe Lipere, and bassist Roberto Bellatalla.

Tradition in the music is clearly important to Moholo with interpretations drawn from Duke (*Come Sunday*) Pops (*What A Wonderful World*) and Rahsaan (*Volunteered Slavery*). In a brief bright moment, pianist Pule Pheto deconstructs the intro to the Armstrong song with a too-short solo. The arrangements for the band all seem to favour maximum exposure without straining the audience's attention. Late into the set, sweat pouring off the players, the leader signals to the band to take it deeper into SA roots as trumpeter Claude Deppa plays muted horn on the lovely tune *Lindewe*. This lets everyone on stage (and in the house) catch their breath after a breakneck Pukwana theme (*Bird Lives*). Claude smoothly segues into *Drum Choir*, a piece that spotlights the surging rhythms of Moholo and Lipere as an underscore for a bass solo from Bellatalla. The piece turns the soloist into a third drum, extending the tonal qualities of all three. This release is true to the roots of Moholo's music in its blending of the traditional and a distinctly adventurous edginess. Viva La Black! Viva Moholo!

On IXESHA, the Dedication Orchestra look again at the

music of the South African giants that joined together as the BlueNotes. An almighty blast of reeds and brass section playing is carried along on a wave of rhythms, unmistakably African. The title IXESHA (Time) is a theme throughout the recording in all

Nick Moyake) begins as a cascading vocal chorale, picks up steam with

Neil Metcalfe's flute solo graceful against the brass riff, and digs in with Chris Biscoe's baritone. There is the upbeat joy of *Travelling Somewhere* with Lol Coxhill's careening soprano matched to the marvelous trombone work of Paul Rutherford.



connotations: It's about time as rhythm, it's about time that South Africa was free, it's about time more people shared in the beautiful melodies these composers brought to the world. To quote the liner notes, this is a music illuminated by the African sun.

As the ensemble features a real community of players, all of them associated with the music of Chris McGregor and the BlueNotes, there is a sense of meaning to this music that is uncommon. It is a shared history that is evident in the interplay. As in the study in contrast from trumpet soloists Harry Beckett and Claude Deppa, the Orchestra thrives on shifting tonalities and expressive changes of direction. The hard swinging *Blues For Nick* (a tribute by Dudu for his departed friend, tenor

There is not enough space here to mention all the remarkable playing of this CD, which was recorded over three days in January 1994, IXESHA presents the music of these composers in rich settings. There is the energy music of *Mra*, Harry Beckett locked to the tidal force of Louis Moholo's drumming, the serenity of Keith Tippett's piano on *Angel Nomali*, the happy yet unresolved melody of Johnny Dyani's *Wish You Sunshine* reflecting an exile's uneasiness. Dudu famous theme, *Bird Lives*, brings forward as well a new face, Mike Williams, whose alto saxophone solo on the tune shares the spirit of the composer, the logic of bebop where what was once only imagined is now reality. The disc closes with the elegiac tribute and praise song, IXESHA.

Truly, it's about time. □