

Afflicted by the dread 3.76 freaking-out disease

Brotherhood of Breath

100 club

Miles Kingston

Many years ago the 100 Club was the traditional jazz palace of England. Even when jazz receded and pop music burst its banks, the club never forgot its allegiance to the old sound, and the club's calendar still tends to read like an old New Orleans poster. It is much rarer to see the club packed for a jazz group with its feet firmly planted in the Seventies, yet last night the Brotherhood of Breath played to squashing room only.

It is difficult to say what gives a contemporary jazz group a big following, but I think it is the possession, conscious or not, of a gimmick. Most pop groups' gimmicks are conscious; Beethoven's gimmick, his greatness, was not. And the sad thing is that most jazz groups do not have a gimmick, worthy or unworthy. Good as they are, they mostly exist on a plateau of musical excellence without much character, often pulling off the hard trick of being good and tedious at the same time.

What makes Brotherhood of Breath different is the hard core of South African musicians that Chris McGregor brought here with him 10 years ago. There

are still five of them in this 13-piece band, which is otherwise studded with British stalwarts, and although they no longer use much original South African material, the little repeated phrases, the rhythms, the melodic simplicity are all directly from their background. It is the use of this vernacular as a basis for their much more contemporary free blowing and wild escapades that gets through to the audience, culminating often in a great demonstration of almost naked fire and strength.

Which makes it sad for me to say that I did not much enjoy them last night. True, there were excellent patches, especially one very slow piano solo against long saxophone chording; true, they sometimes pulled off what they were trying to do. But I am old-fashioned enough to wish that they would again use the real South African source material.

More seriously, I think they are afflicted by the Dutch elm disease of today's jazz: the poisonous belief that because it is fun to freak out, to blow wild with 12 other men, it is therefore also fun for the audience. It is not. It is no better or worse than the frantic Dixieland final choruses we got rid of years ago; a pity, because the group has all the ingredients of success within its grasp. I am boorish enough to feel that they have not the blend yet. For a group that has managed to do this in its own limits, you could do much worse than try the little-mentioned but vastly improved Chris Barber Band at the 100 Club next Thursday.