

Marabi in exile: From Transkei to London

Described as the only white jazz performer to become truly South Africanised, Chris McGregor has lived as an exile for more than 20 years. On a brief trip home, he spoke to EDDIE KOCH

JAZZ exile Chris McGregor recently flew out of Jan Smuts after a brief trip home — and left behind some vivid impressions of the unique contribution to the development of South African music that he has made since he left the country in the mid-Sixties.

McGregor's modesty causes him to downplay the achievement of his bands — the Blue Notes and the Brotherhood of Breath — as being just "a curious mixture of *avante garde* jazz, African rhythms and *mabaqanga* music". But one expert on the history of South African jazz, Professor Chris Ballantine, has a different view:

"McGregor is the only white jazz performer who has actually crossed over and become truly South Africanised. His bands are among the few who have achieved a real fusion of the multiple musics which represent what South Africa is and might be."

The lifetime of dedication that went into the making of this kind of music began when the young Chris McGregor was growing up in the Transkei during the Forties.

"My father didn't exactly encourage me to learn music," he says, "I was supposed to learn the alphabet before dabbling in that stuff. But the Transkei was a place with a lot of rich music and I was a kid with open ears."

Traditional Xhosa songs and church hymns that filled his father's mission school with sound had a big impact on his early musical development. Later, at school, he formed a small jazz combo.

The experience was to prove invaluable when McGregor, the brilliant university student, dropped out of a degree in classical music at the South African College of Music because he felt it was not relevant to this country. The Sharpeville massacre had just happened, old man McGregor had been forced out of his job by Bantu Education and the young musician was burning with anger because the barricades around Langa barred him from the halls where he used to jam with big swing bands in the township.

"I was extremely upset about apartheid and racism and made a few conscious commitments there and then. One of the very first things I decided was to go exactly where my ear led me — regardless of the consequences."

WEEKLY MAIL, February 20 to February 26, 1987

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McGregor, left, the Blue Notes boy and...McGregor, right, more than 20 years on and looking more Sixties than the Sixties

Picture: PAUL WEINBERG, Afrapix

That ear lead McGregor to Cape Town's clubs and dives where a jazz renaissance was taking place. He used to listen to a young man called Dollar Brand play into the early hours of the morning and watched in awe when Kippie Moeketsi, Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwangwa visited the city with the cast of King Kong.

This burst of energy taking place in South African jazz provided McGregor with fertile ground to nurture his own band. Together with Dudu Pukwana (alto sax), Louis Moholo (drums), Nick Moyake (tenor sax), Johnny Dyani (bass) and Mongezi Feza (trumpet), he formed the Blue Notes.

The group went on the road and after a few intense years of playing in townships across the country in defiance of the Group Areas Act, the Blue Notes came to be ranked, together with Dollar Brand's Jazz Epistles, as the best jazz combination in the country.

Although they were absorbing the diverse musical influences they found on the road, the Blue Notes were consciously modelling themselves along the lines of bebop artists like John Coltrane and Charlie Parker rather than creating an indigenous style.

Then in 1964 came the turning point. Tired of death threats and being forced to disguise McGregor as a "coloured" to get him on stage in the townships, the Blue Notes grabbed an offer to play at the Antibes Jazz Festival in France — and followed the stream of musical *emigres* leaving the country in protest at the debilitating effects of apartheid on their art.

By the next year the band was living in England and had played in regular gigs at clubs like the Blue Note in Paris and Ronnie Scott's in London where they rubbed shoulders with some of the top jazzmen in Europe.

It was in exile that the Blue Notes rediscovered their South African influences and began to self-consciously create what Chis Ballantine calls their distinctive blend of "post-bebop experimental jazz and marabi based South African music."

beginning to investigate its African origins.

In 1968, the Blue Notes linked up with a number of American, British and Austrian musicians to form the 14-piece Brotherhood of Breath — a new phase in their attempts to self-consciously fuse European jazz and South African *mbaqanga*.

"For me this conscious kind of South Africanism came in exile. It was caused by homesickness and a certain disenchantment with what from South Africa had seemed like a magic and distant world — we realised we had our own movement and began insisting on our roots."

The big band was able to get a slot in most international jazz festivals and its unique style became regular fare at anti-apartheid anti-racist concerts overseas.

But life in Europe was not simply a story of lucky breaks and stunning success. Perhaps more than any other band, the Blue Notes have suffered those tragedies of exile that seem to dog South African musicians. Within months of leaving South Africa, Nick Moyake died of a brain tumour. In 1975, Mongezi Feza died of double pneumonia contracted in the unheated cell of a London mental asylum and just two months ago Johnny Dyani dropped dead on stage in Germany after suffering from jaundice. Soon after Feza's death the Brotherhood disbanded — coming together again briefly in the early Eighties and for a tour of Mozambique in 1984.

But Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana and Louis Moholo are still in touch with each other and each is still actively making new jazz fusions in Europe.

And when McGregor walked through the terminal at Jan Smuts he left armed with a pile of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Stim and Juluka LPs, the experience of a jam session with Johnny Clegg and a firm offer to appear in a series of "revival" concerts in Johannesburg later this year.

"The organisers want me to replay some of

They were having a significant impact on musicians at a time when European jazz was

the old Brotherhood pieces," he says. "I'll give them some of that but you can be sure there'll be some new ones too."