

JAZZ SCENE

Chris McGregor: now's the time

THE OTHER day I found myself button-holed by a local drummer who tried — albeit ineffectually — to convince me that America was no longer responsible for the direction of jazz and that Europe was, and I quote, "Where it's at."

Certainly we have produced some outstanding musicians recently and in a nation as self-effacing as the British, a little chauvinism is occasionally welcome, but taken to the excess of suggesting that the only American jazz of any merit is that inspired by European sources strikes me as more than a trifle ludicrous.

It takes a man as thoughtful and sensitive as Chris McGregor to put his finger on the truth about this mundane "Where it's at" business. "I'm very happy to be in a position to say that the Transkei is where it's at!" The South African pianist grinned in his typically good-humoured way.

"There's beautiful music to be heard all over the place," he went on serious-

ly, "And to say now it's here and now it's there represents a kind of hipness to which I cannot be party. All kinds of human beings are here on the earth and all are capable of doing their own creative thing."

The pianist evoked the words of the German mystic, Boehme, to explain his own attitude to music.

Mirror

"Roughly paraphrased, he said that God's creation is like a mirror of his own diversity in which the different people and their cultures are reflected, and I think you can recognise the truth where you find it, if you have ears to hear. Don't be blinded by cultural setups — and I mean cultural in the broad sense — and don't be deceived by the labels placed on music."

Chris McGregor is very concerned that cultural barriers be swept aside to allow musicians to express themselves anywhere and everywhere to as many people as have ears to hear. "I am not a 'politically' free musician," he explained, meaning "free" in the sense as stipulated by the critical fraternity.

"I'm just a FREE musician, and I like every kind of



McGREGOR: new big band

music. The critics are responsible for these misconceptions, true, but musicians who don't trust themselves in situations different from what they're used to handling, do it, too. For example, I can respect Sonny Rollins' music and I can do it if I have to without just turning it on for somebody

who thinks they've got Sonny Rollins down."

In the end, he maintained, the musician's main responsibility is to himself and "to being a unit of the Universe." He also feels that it is fatal for any artist to fall into the trap of being expected to produce a certain type of thing.

"As an artist you will always look for the sustenance of a culture, but in a world where people are close like they are today, there will always be a culture to support you. And if you can't find one and are consequently uptight about it, you're putting yourself exactly where you are!"

On June 19 at Camden Town Hall, Chris will be debuting his new big band. The Brotherhood of Breath will include in its line-up the trumpeters Harold Beckett and Mongesi Feza, trombonist Malcolm Griffiths, saxophonists Mike Osborne, Evan Parker, Kenneth Terroade and Dudu Pukwana, drummer Louis Moholo and, hopefully bassist Barre Phillips and the redoubtable John Surman.

Return

The return of the McGregor big band is long overdue according to faithful followers from the Old Place days and so the concert should be quite a trip.

The main reason for his delay in reforming the big band is that which has affected every aspect of McGregor's up-and-down career: he was not quite ready.

Now's the time, however, and Chris explained that he is "throwing together a whole bunch of musicians who do things that strike me as real and who do things which touch my heart. It's to see if we can't make a beautiful thing together. I'll be doing quite a lot of writing and I want to try all the things, a lot of different ways of making music."

In reply to the suggestion that his notorious lack of business acumen has hindered his progress, the pianist countered: "I've got an over developed business sense in this way — the business of music defeats its own purposes constantly, because the people with whom you do business are not aware of the soundness or otherwise of the product. This means that I constantly find myself at a disadvantage because I'm trying to do too much in the space given to me. I lack judgment in some ways but I can make projects. I tend to take people at their word, though. If a musician who has worked with me before says his music now costs £30, I believe him, and so if the gig won't pay £30, then I don't call him."

Problem

"That's been my main problem over the past year and you always have this special hangup if you're a leader. I believe in the profession of 'bandleader' but if to a degree you find there's a kind of credibility gap between yourself and society — though I hate to talk of 'society' — you don't want to inflict it on your fellow musicians."

And thereby hangs the drawback of being a leader. Chris continued, "The trouble is that there is a sense in which exploiters use bandleaders and I've been trying to find a way out of that. The guy who has the setup knows that there are ten guys who want to play with you and so I'm reluctant to get involved. I'm so reluctant that the cats can smell it a mile off!" he laughed.

"You can see them whispering to their confederates: 'Dacey, that one . . . It's walking the uneasy tightrope between affluence and adversity.'"

VALERIE WILMER