

THE WIRE JUN 1990

CHRIS MCGREGOR

A tribute to the great pianist and bandleader who died in May. Words by Val Wilmer, photo by Nick White.

1936-1990

★

CHRIS MCGREGOR gone: it seemed inconceivable. Despite his long exile in France, he had been so much a part of jazz in this country. The Brotherhood Of Breath, named by saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, made some of the most exciting and stimulating music I'd heard since Duke Ellington.

The images kept coming back. The first time I'd seen him, in 1965, hair barely touching his collar, conservative in suit and tie like the other Blue Notes, promoting themselves as the new sound in town. At the farm in Sussex, perusing his Culpepper herbal as we sorted out wild plants to eat; at the Moulin, the beautiful old watermill in Southwestern France, greybearded now with hair down his back, waving a bloody knife after killing a goat and chiding me playfully for "suddenly becoming a vegetarian" that morning.

Chris was a teacher who changed the lives of all those who met him, a reluctant leader who, like his hero Duke Ellington, got the best from musicians – and friends – by letting them be themselves. At a period when the emphasis was on musical freedom, often at the expense of clarity, he made me aware of what 'freedom' actually meant. To him the term was a 'political' category invented by critics, as meaningless and inhibiting as the strictures of bebop had become. Real musical freedom, he explained, meant the capability to look inside your own personal experience and select from it at will.

Chris had many such experiences to draw from. Born on a mission station in the Transkei, he grew up listening to Xhosa music and Protestant hymns. In Cape Town, while pursuing formal studies, African musicians – Abdullah Ibrahim and drummer Mayaka Ntshoko – confirmed for him the importance of self-expression and the spiritual value of swinging. Inter-racial activities in South Africa were a little easier in the 50s than they later became, and Chris moved freely in and out of the townships, defying apartheid to play with African groups. The musicians managed to escape prosecution by staying one step ahead of the authorities; stories are told of hairsbreadth escapes through toilet windows, and on more

than one occasion, the pianist played behind a screen.

But the climate was getting too hot and in 1964 his then sextet went into exile. After the Antibes Jazz Festival the Blue Notes spent a year in Switzerland, before following Abdullah Ibrahim into Ronnie Scott's, Gerrard Street.

It was a fertile period for the arts and jazz was no exception. The Blue Notes rapidly became associated with the avant garde movement and when Scott's moved to Frith Street later that year, Chris formed a big band for a series of legendary nights at the Old Place. It was an immediate magnet for unconventional players such as Harry Beckett, Mike Osborne and Evan Parker, who became part of the 1970 Brotherhood which recorded for Neon and Ogun.

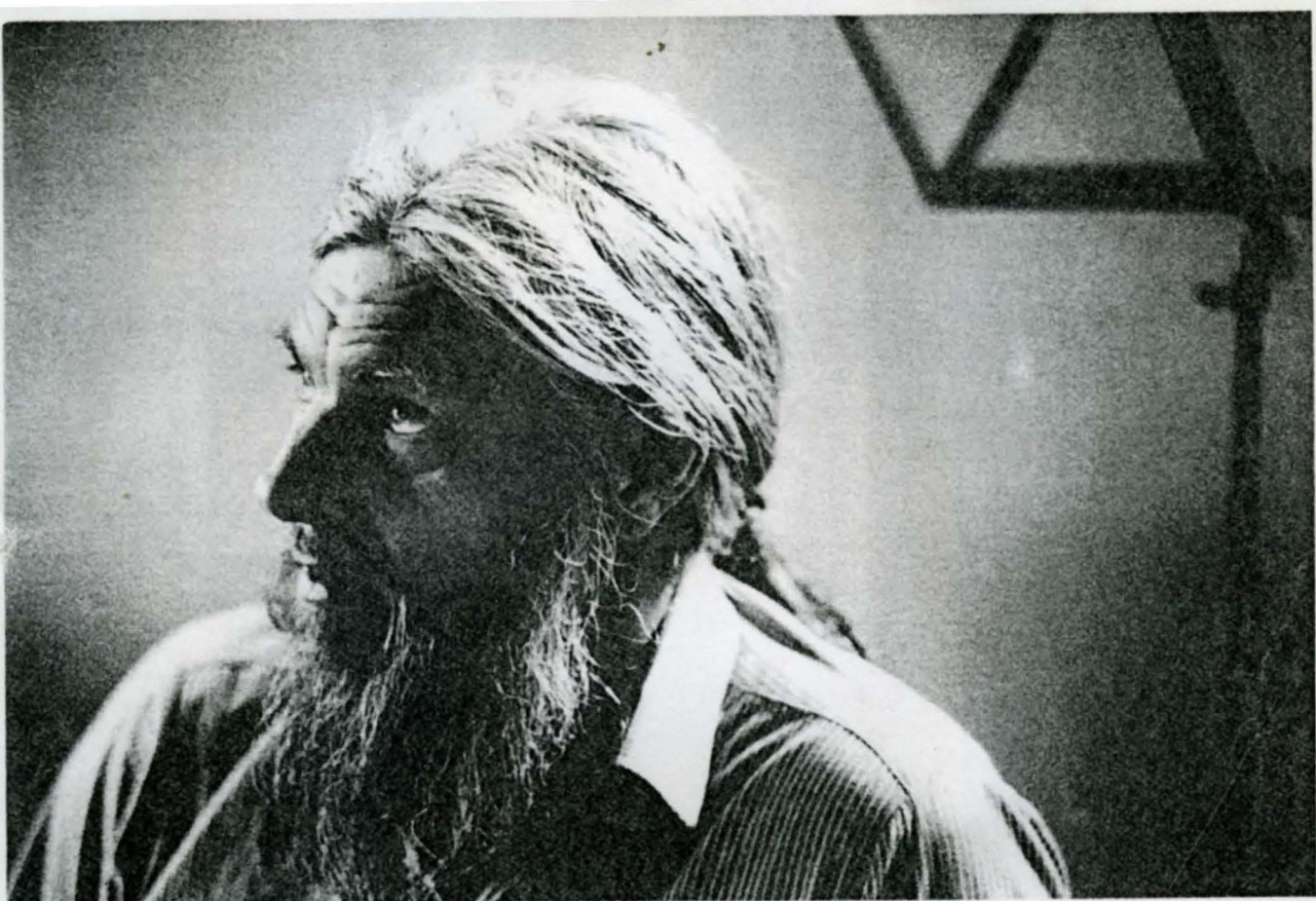
Listening to those records now rekindles the memory of some magical nights. With its heavy-throated riffing and irresistible polyrhythms, the leader's percussive piano spurred on by Louis Moholo's almost insolent drumming, there was no one to touch the Brotherhood.

The South Africans had an enormous effect on everybody they came near, but the truth was that they were always treated as interlopers, a wild bunch who could take you to the heights all right but were somehow a little too much for the conservative British to be taken seriously on a social level. They should have been treated as national treasures, these artists who fertilised the local product with their African reconstruction of American music, but those in a position to give them the financial support that might have enabled them to lead a dignified lifestyle failed to do so.

That Chris was of European descent counted for little; he identified closely with the Africans whose music and lives he shared, and as a result, shared in their fate. Doubtless he would not have wished it otherwise, but such offhand treatment was partially responsible for his decision to leave the country.

In 1974 Chris and his wife Maxine moved with their

continued on page 64



Chris McGregor

continued from page 28

children to France. He devoted himself to the rural life, his piano and composition, making three solo albums and leading small groups in which his piano was more prominent than before. Tours with a reformed Brotherhood included one to Mozambique, another with Archie Shepp. With a new manager at the helm, his diary was full.

Like all great teachers, Chris was humble. His diffidence and reluctance to put himself forward were interpreted as poor organisational skill, but that changed in time as his own playing became more expansive, and in later versions of the Brotherhood, he insisted on more careful rehearsal. The band was touring France when the news came of his death from lung cancer at age 53; they had refused to play two new composi-

tions unless he was there, knowing how particular he was that his music be heard at its best. It was a far cry from the tempestuous early days when the listener was often left with the impression that the band could carry on until kingdom come without him.

If Chris had a fault it was relying too much on the belief that disputes would resolve themselves in time. He refused to engage in argument, preferring to let others get heated while he sought peace in his own way. Who can say that this avoidance of open conflict did not take a toll? Despite the changes taking place in South Africa, he had no plans to return there in the immediate future. As near as anyone does, he had found contentment in his adopted home. How sad that he should have to leave when his future was looking so positive. •