

CHRIS MCGREGOR GROUP

The Chris McGregor Group (formerly called the Blue Notes) has been in England since 1965 now, and has throughout that period provided invigorating jazz in the fierce modern manner. The band comes, of course, from South Africa, and first hit the headlines in that country with its performance at the 1963 National Jazz Festival at Orlando, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Five of the members have been associated with the group almost from the beginning: McGregor on piano of course, with Mongezi 'Monks' Feza (tp), Dudu Pukwana (alt), Johnny Dyani (bs) and Louis Moholo (dm). The current tenor player Ronnie Beer did not join the band until 1965 (after the death of the original tenor man Nick Moyake) but has been a friend and associate of the group members right from the start. The band's music like that of Charlie Mingus has always, it seems, operated on the extremes of an 'unsentimental yearning and an impulsive vehemence. Reviewing a 1963 concert by the band, the South African critic Lionel Attwell wrote: 'For nearly 20 minutes the players revealed the turbulence and harshness of Johannesburg, while conveying the side-street moods of laughter and tears, and the crying need for a people to express themselves.' Alan Bates described the group's music (in 1964) as: 'a fusing of the inherent sounds of suburban African music, basically the Mbenguanga (pronounced Backanga), with those of the American pacemakers—Mingus, Ornette Coleman and company. It is a raw, brash and angular music.' The influences then are: (a) Formulation—American 'new wave' recordings; (b) Environmental—African folk harmonies—McGregor has said (JOHANNESBURG STAR 18/5/63): 'My father—completely untrained musically—tends to play in the scale of F sharp. This is the nearest to playing on the five black notes only, the basis of many folk-songs. He gets it from the Scottish, but the African folk-tunes are also written like this, many of them. Perhaps this is the purest of all scales?'

Another environmental factor, more abstract but equally important, has been the effect of apartheid on this mixed group, which was at least fortunate to find in the Capetown coastal area several clubs that were sympathetic to its interracial make-up. The social climate is even less encouraging today, and it would be impossible for the band to play there in the current line-up.

1964 saw a well-received visit to the Antibes Jazz Festival (to get there McGregor, being white, had to pay ten shillings deposit on his passport—the coloured members of the group had to pay £100 each). This was followed by jobs in various parts of Europe, culminating in a visit to Britain, which turned into a stay after the Musicians Union granted the band membership as exiles (similar concessions had previously been granted to Jewish musicians coming from Hitler's Germany).

One of the highlights of McGregor's stay has been the all-too-few appearances of his big band. It seems unfortunately that the leader has become disillusioned with this band, possibly because he felt that the more schooled British musicians who augmented his group did not possess quite the same natural perceptiveness as the African musicians he led in a big band briefly in 1963. This first big band was recorded

on Gallotone-New Sound NSL 1011 'Jazz—The African Sound'—a label apparently available to Decca.

So we may not hear the McGregor Big Band again. Luckily the small group is thriving, although the always uncertain work opportunities in Britain may well force it to strike out for the continent once more. The group now is certainly playing beautifully, carrying on the tradition of collective improvisation with complete conviction—each man knowing and appreciating what the other is doing. The echoes of Ayler and Shepp are there today, but South Africa never seems far away.

In common with current practice, the McGregor Group is fond of the segue device: a free ensemble will suddenly change into a jumping latin/jazz theme, a slow ballad will erupt into a fierce hard bop. And in common with Shepp, and Mingus before him, the group has a fondness for the occasional lush ballad, and a rugged, 'unsentimental version of *Sophisticated Lady* is a good example. Above all, the rhythmic drive is tremendous, especially now that British bass-player Dave Holland occasionally augments the rhythm section.

The group has at last been recorded, and an album (Polydor 184 137) will be available in mid-May. Featuring the sextet line-up of McGregor, Feza, Beer, Pukwana, Dyani and Moholo, it portrays well the many moods of the group. Long free work-outs are contrasted with the bitter-sweet ballad *Marie My Dear*, but the two best tracks are a very hard bop theme *Travelling Somewhere* and a beautifully sad version of a traditional African tune *Don't Stir The Beehive*—this above all emphasises the old/new concept of the group's jazz, a concept which is of course common (yet, again) to the best new jazz. The music always demands full attention—the casual listener is left out in the cold. Very occasionally the music is repetitive, but never boring—most of the time it can make you cry out in joyous response, and that is really what jazz should be about.

Dave Illingworth