

Ronald Atkins

MIKE WESTBROOK: *London Bridge Is Broken Down*, (Venture VEB13).
CHRIS MCGREGOR: *Country Cooking*, (Venture VEB17).
WYNTON MARSALIS: *Live At Blues Alley*, (CBS 461109 1 (2 LPs)).
CHICK COREA: *Eye Of The Beholder*, (GRP A-91053).
EDWARD WILKERSON: *Eight Bold Souls*, (Sessoms 0002).

THE NEW Westbrook collaboration was sponsored in France and first performed in Amiens last year. This studio recording of *London Bridge Is Broken Down* lasts over two hours — one reason for choosing the CD package (2 discs) over MC (4 sides) or LP (7 sides) — and is played by the 22-piece Sinfonietta de Picardie and a jazz nonet.

As such, it is easily the most ambitious project yet tackled by Mike Westbrook who, even before he and his wife Kate launched their remarkable series of music-dramas, has always thought big.

Songs in French, English and German link London Bridge to the Westbrook's *Cortege*, written in 1979, while dark-toned, scudding passages heard most notably in the Wenceslas Square section were developed in *On Duke's Birthday*.

A more fruitful comparison takes us back to *Marching Song*, not all that dissimilar in

terms of programming: during the 20 years that separate it from London Bridge, Westbrook has not just hugely expanded his orchestral palette but made his sprawling canvasses grip the attention on record as they do in performance.

The opening section is built around the poem, *London Bridge Is Broken Down*, written and sung by Kate Westbrook, and includes snatches of the familiar refrain towards the end. This leads to Wenceslas Square, Berlin Wall, Vienna and Picardie.

Many of the songs relate in some sense to death and/or war, from the lilting waltz, *Vogel*, and the elegiac *Les Morts* ("the dead are all on the same side") to the ironic music-hall parody of Siegfried Sassoon's *Blighters* and the rollicking finale built around *Aucasin et Nicolette*, which Kate puts over with a venomous panache — it should go down a treat in France, while with luck someone here might pronounce it blasphemous.

Settings are beautifully conceived and the piece brims with motifs anticipated or revived — no wonder the Westbrooks are lining up an opera. Sample any of the songs or the most un-Strauss-like *Vennese Waltz* or, for a reminder of how Westbrook's bands used to sound, the yearning ballad *Fur Sie*. A towering achievement.

Chris McGregor and Mike Westbrook both starred in the British jazz resurgence of the 1960s. Where Westbrook has moved on apace, McGregor keeps the formula much the same whenever he re-forms the *Brotherhood of Breath*. At a

time when African derivatives are rife in jazz McGregor, who did it first and did it better, ought to be strongly placed.

Without the galvanic uplift provided by Dudu Pukwana and Louis Moholo the *Brotherhood* is now more polished but, as a unit, less inspirational. Even so, *You And Me* and *Country Cooking* show how it should be done.

Recorded at a Washington club in December 1966, Wynton Marsalis stretches out the routines found on LPs like *Black Codes* and *J Mood* in *Live At Blues Alley*. The difference between live and studio versions of, say, *Delfeayo's Dilemma*, reminds me how a piece like *So What* from *Kind Of Blue* was blasted out of recognition whenever Miles Davis played it. Some truly astonishing trumpet playing, though Marsalis has reached the stage when he needs to find his Gil Evans.

Like Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea seems to be reverting to the acoustic keyboard, saving electronics for ensemble textures. Much of *Eye Of The Beholder* recaptures the bubbly exuberance of his groups with *Flora Purim*, which suits Corea far more than the heavy rock that followed.

Lastly, an oddity from Chicago. The *Eight Bold Souls* draw inspiration from the Archie Shepp band with Edward Wilkerson, who wrote and arranged the music, sounding like Shepp on saxophone. Uneven, as was Shepp, but *Favorite Son* and the spectacularly Ellingtonish opening to *Shining Waters* are two reasons for giving *Souls* a listen.