

CHRIS MCGREGOR

: An African Way Of Swing

IN THE clouds a few thousand feet above Chicago, a small aircraft is running into trouble.

"I think we've gone past the airport," says pilot Chris McGregor, pointing to a big blob on the radar screen. "We'd better turn around." He plots a course, then taps a dial on the instrument panel. "Give me a shout when that thing reaches 236." The plane begins to turn.

"Are we high enough?" mutters copilot Nick White. I shrug my shoulders. Suddenly the dials go haywire. The cloud breaks and we can see the ground rushing up towards us. To my surprise, it appears to be turning cartwheels.

"What's happening?" I ask, alarmed. The word "CRASH" flashes before my eyes.

"Oh dear!" McGregor gives a deep throaty chuckle. "We're dead, that's what's happening."

It's not often I begin an interview by plummeting out of the skies into an early grave, even if it is only on a flight simulator – prize toy in the flat McGregor is, er, crashing in during a brief visit to London – but a cup of tea quickly revives us. Then we're off on a different trip, one that starts half a century ago in South Africa's Transkei province, takes us through Cape Town, Antibes, Zurich and London, where the arrival of McGregor and his fellow Blue Notes (Dudu Pukwana, Mongesi Feza, Johnny Dyani, Louis Moholo) stirred up such ferment in the mid-Sixties, then whisks us off again around Europe and back to Africa with – hang on to your hat – the wonderful, tumultuous McGregor big band, Brotherhood Of Breath.

The Brotherhood, renowned for their whooping, zonking, free-form swing,

South African pianist and band-leader CHRIS MCGREGOR drops out of the sky to tell Graham Lock about his roots in African village music and outline new plans for his legendary bunch of huffers and puffers, Brotherhood Of Breath.



JAK KILBY



Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood Of Breath

have not been seen much in the UK these last few years but they remain McGregor's chief project and have recently toured in both Europe and Mozambique. Intriguingly, their latest LP *Yes Please* (1981), on the French In And Out label, offers a far more formal, structured music than the raging, raggedy glory of earlier Ogun shots. What, I wondered, had brought about this change?

"There is a direction that's becoming stronger," McGregor says thoughtfully. "I feel a need for simple things, after all the chop of the Seventies. So *Yes Please*, that structured thing... I wanted to make it light. How can I explain?" He sips his tea, brow furrowed. "The aim was on the group happening rather than individuals. And this is an African thing. The music I grew up with in the Transkei is a very communal music, and I have clear memories of the beauty of things directed towards a group. So this development... it's part of the fact that I'm realising that I'm an African."

CHRIS MCGREGOR looks more hippy sage than African. A tall, stocky, affable man with humorous eyes and ready smile, his most distinctive features are a long grey beard and even longer grey hair worn in a ponytail that hangs all the way down to his ample waist. But African he is.

He was born in the Transkei nearly

fifty years ago, into a Scottish missionary family, and his father taught at the local mission school. He began playing piano at the age of six and first heard jazz on the radio, "Fats Waller, Duke Ellington"; but the predominant influence of his childhood years was the Xhosa tribal music of the Transkei countryside.

"The tribal people, the Red Blanket people, stayed with the old ways," he recalls, "so that music, that way of life, was still going on and it was a very musical culture. People travelling would announce themselves by singing from a hill-top; everyone had their own musical visiting card."

McGregor left the Transkei for college in Cape Town, where he studied European classical music by day and played jazz by night. Though he proved an able student, especially adept at composition, when he left college he became a full-time jazz musician.

"I found I couldn't line myself up behind that Occidental tradition," he says. "I felt it wasn't feeding me, that it wasn't mine. Something in my creativity wasn't being satisfied at all. I didn't realise then what it was but I know now I grew up with different stuff."

He spent the next few years playing around the city's clubs, bars and cafés. Cape Town, a large seaport with a local tradition of liberalism, boasted a cosmopolitan culture that was unique in South

Africa and, at the beginning of the Sixties, jazz thrived. Dollar Brand was making a name for himself, and the hit musical *King Kong* featuring Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela and Kippie Moeketsi was in full swing. In areas that were not racially zoned, like the edges of the black District Six (later physically torn apart by apartheid legislation), musicians could find plenty of work.

"We'd play every night, rehearse every day. We even had a residency in a curry-house. Regular employment!" McGregor laughs. "Oh boy, what ever happened to that?"

The Blue Notes came together in Cape Town in the early Sixties but, as their fame spread, they began to play farther afield. Between 1962 and 1964, when they left South Africa, the band spent nearly all of their time on the road. But there was an ulterior motive.

"We began living on the road as a way of avoiding the restrictions of apartheid," says McGregor. The trick was not to plan your itinerary or book gigs in advance.

"We'd just turn up, play a concert and then leave before there was trouble. We discovered that moving was an antidote to apartheid. There's something symbolic in that," he chuckles, "dance, stay on the move, and you'll beat apartheid."

But were there no problems with The Blue Notes being a racially mixed band? I ask. (McGregor was white, the other musicians black.)

He shrugs. "Well, to the extent that we were on the road, it was almost like we were 1000 feet up. We only came down to earth when there was a road-block and then we pretended we were a gang of labourers with a captain. We had some well-rehearsed routines: I became the boss and these were my boys and we were on our way to fulfil a contract somewhere."

So you never got into serious trouble? "Only minor scrapes. Especially compared to people I knew who were locked away for 180 days and variously tortured. But usually we were not actually breaking the law."

McGregor's instinct for sidestepping trouble goes back to the time he first became aware of apartheid, at the age of nine or ten, when a group of school friends rounded on him for saying "Good morning" to an elderly black man. "From then on I adopted a kind of invisibility policy. I just wasn't there any more when things got shitty. I suppose that could fairly well describe how I went through most of my years in South Africa."

He smiles ruefully. "But it's amazing how visible you can get through being invisible."

In fact, it was The Blue Notes' success, and subsequent notoriety, which contributed to their decision to leave South Africa. They were, says McGregor, becoming the focus for a lot of "strange stuff".

"We excited people, and when those



Chris McGregor — 1984

JACK WHITE

armed policemen see a crowd of excited black people, they start fingering their fingers. It was a nervous, trigger-happy atmosphere and I was glad to get out of it."

IN 1964 The Blue Notes were invited to play at the Antibes Jazz Festival. They spent the rest of that summer busking around the Côte d'Azur; then, thanks to old friend Dollar Brand, they got a regular gig at Zurich's Afrikaaner Café. After a further twelve months scuffling in Switzerland, they were offered a residency at Ronnie Scott's and so, in 1965, London became their home base. The Blue Notes' Afro-bop, with the volcanic Pukwana sax, Feza's darting trumpet, and a truly stormy rhythm section, proved a crucial force in the city's burgeoning New Music scene. But it was a month at Copenhagen's Montmartre Club in 1966 which really turned Chris McGregor around.

The Blue Notes' material had been written by Dudu Pukwana while McGregor took care of organisational matters: now, with four free weeks, he could concentrate on his own music again and assimilate the new sounds that were in the air – Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Don Cherry.

Though a willing talker, Chris McGregor gets a little uneasy when I ask him to explain the changes he was going through at that time.

"Talking about these things assumes quite a lot of consciousness about what you're doing and I'm not the kind of person who conceptualises all that much. Things grow inside you and, er... you don't really know, you don't make conscious choices: you're a player and things creep into your playing. You just get a feeling for areas you want to explore."

Which were? I press him.

He frowns. "It was to do with African polyrhythm. I started hearing the possibilities of things happening on a lot of different levels rhythmically. There was a wheel turning then, things flowing together in a way they no longer seem to be. Not that I want to raise any barriers, er..." he pauses. "Perhaps it would be easier if I said why I'm not that much associated now with what you'd call free jazz."

I nod.

"It's..." he pauses again, then bursts out laughing. "Ah, I don't know what I'm gonna say now! I think it's that African thing again. Since that time I feel much more African, I really have to see it from an African viewpoint. And in African music there's a lot of polyrhythmic structure that's quite, er, a lot more advanced than most of what you find in the West." Perplexed, he tugs at his beard, then shrugs. "I don't know how to say it any better."

Although The Blue Notes galvanised the British jazz scene, it was McGregor's 1970 big band Brotherhood Of Breath who really shook the foundations with their gleeful and exuberant approach to

swing. Their music, says McGregor, was a conscious extension of the tradition epitomised by his idol, Duke Ellington.

"I'm an absolute nut for big bands. I love the colours and the energy flow of big groups. I've always been ultra-attracted by that organisation and putting-together capacity that was so uniquely Duke's. I love playing, arranging, composing – the lot!"

In the Brotherhood, Blue Notes plus some South African expatriates plus the more adventurous young British players jostled together cheek by jowl, the band's personnel reading like a Who's Who of Seventies' Brit-Jazz: Harry Beckett, Marc Charig, Nick Evans, Radu Malfatti, Harry Miller, Evan Parker, John Surman. Et cetera. Their LPs – two for RCA, two for Ogun – present a fierce, potent mix of African polyrhythms, American swing and European free-form that could reach truly Brotherly heights. Together with the intergalactic forays of the Sun Ra Arkestra, they swept the big-band tradition into territories barely dreamed of before, let alone charted.

But, as the African elements in McGregor's music come to the fore – like the "lightness", the structures, of *Yes Please* – it seems there is now less room for improvisation. Is that the case?

"Ha," his eyes gleam, "that is something to talk about. In the West people talk about jazz as if improvisation is the cardinal thing, as if jazz equals improvisation. But for me that begs too many questions. I have this strong imaginative reference to African village music and the thing I know about that music is that it has a strong centre. It builds up, a lot of people do things together that they *know*. What is that? It's not a composition but it's in the culture of the people – they know the moves. Yet it's not all pre-arranged, you have people interpreting the moves in their own way, though those individual flights will always come clearly from the feeling of the moves that have been established."

"So the key isn't improvisation, yet the music is very alive – there's such a mix of old and new, solo and group. It's very fluid, dynamic, creative, and in my music I'm looking for something like that. So, in African music improvisation isn't meaningful in *essence*. Creativity is but that's something else, that's what Brotherhood Of Breath is about, creating in groups. And I find I can accept the orthodox disciplines of jazz more easily now, because we no longer have those community traditions but we still need that community feeling and if it means a certain amount of structuring to create, like, a kind of instant tradition, instant reference points, then that's OK – as long as the structures don't become strictures."

He looks up and laughs. "Really, that's all. That is musician's work. It's a great life, too. I wouldn't edit my story at all. When I think back there's nothing I regret, nothing that seems to me to have been wrong or off-key."

"You have to be fifty years old to realise, though," he chuckles deeply. "That's maybe the one thing there is to regret, that we get too soon old and too late smart."

A perfect sign-off line, from the master of structure.

and despite a separate solo career (check out Ogun's *In His Good Time* and the two volumes of *Piano Song* on Musica), the Brotherhood remains McGregor's most cherished project: his ideal is to have the band on the road full-time, à la Duke. "Not as an institution," he insists, "but as a community. We'll get there too, I'm sure."

Meanwhile, he's touting tapes of recent Paris concerts around the record companies; and the band's tour of Mozambique last year has inspired a new work, with singers and dancers, which he hopes to complete by the summer. The Brotherhood are still breathing strong.

As the afternoon ticks by, our talk spins on and on. We cover some heavy topics that there's no room to report on here: politics, philosophy, Sisterhood Of Spit! But let's just squeeze in a bit of that \$64,000 question – music's role in solving the world's problems. It is, asserts McGregor, "absolutely crucial. Music orients minds and spirits. I really don't think there's anything more important you can do."

Doesn't that responsibility impinge on your creativity? I ask.

"Ah, no, you can't do anything except try and remain true to what's pushing you," he declares. "You can direct your inspiration to a certain extent but it's very little. I think we all have guardian angels who direct us... yeah, really!" – he sees the look of disbelief cross my face – "Who direct human thoughts, aspirations, orientations. And for musicians it's important to stay next to the one who's telling you. So you can't really direct it: except at great risk. If you try, you dry up. Or you find yourself just going through the motions and that's the worst pain ever. That's like... when people say they'd rather die, I believe them. It's like denying the well-springs of your being."

Hmm? Guardian angels? But I'm half-persuaded by the passion of McGregor's belief. He frowns, still thinking it through.

"I know there's a problem in that some people who are used to seeing things in a very, er, distinct way may find it hard to know what it is that's pushing them. I don't quite know what to say about that." He absently rolls a strand of beard between thumb and forefinger. "I guess you have to approach it with your instincts, just grab hold of whatever's coming and follow it through."

He looks up and laughs. "Really, that's all. That is musician's work. It's a great life, too. I wouldn't edit my story at all. When I think back there's nothing I regret, nothing that seems to me to have been wrong or off-key."

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