

# Photos convey magic of '60s jazz scene

STAR 'TONIGHT'

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"I remember the first time I walked into Dorkay House and up the spiral staircase. Music was coming from the top floor and I could just hear this incredible sound. It may even have been Kippie playing," recalls Basil Breakey of his introduction to the local jazz scene of the '60s.

Many of the leading jazzmen of the time were befriended and photographed by Breakey and some of those images are now on show at the Market Galleries in Breakey's "Jazz Witness: A Retrospective of the Golden Age of Township Music in the 1960s".

"I took pictures because the musicians were photogenic and the music so stimulating. I never thought the photographs would be used — at the time they weren't considered newsworthy and not even record companies used them on sleeves.

"I've travelled a lot since then, living all over the place and it was only about a year ago that the negatives were found by my ex-wife in an old suitcase.

## By DARRYL ACCONE

It was a very exciting discovery."

At least as exciting was the fortunate chain of events in 1961 which first took Breakey to Dorkay House, the musicians' haven of the time. Just a few weeks earlier he had joined Tropix, a photo agency run by Jurgen Schadeberg and Roy Christie.

Always a fan of American jazz, at Tropix he met horn player Dennis Mpali, who introduced Breakey to pianist Chris McGregor (founder here of the legendary Blue Notes and now, living in France, leader of the renowned Brotherhood of Breath), who had just come up from Cape Town for the first time.

"Though the musicians were very young they were producing this marvellous, warm sound quite different to anything else. It was like Cubism in painting.

"Free jazz, improvising within improvisations. It reminded me of Jackson Pollock. They were ahead of their time: it wasn't popular hit parade stuff. I still get cold shivers when I

think about it."

Breakey was hooked. He began following the musicians around the city's jazz haunts: Dorkay House (the Eloff street extension musos' workshop), Downbeat, Cul-de-Sac and Montparnasse clubs and Soweto, venue for larger concerts.

"I was arrested in Soweto a few times. The cops would arrive and bust us for not having permits to be there.

"It was far more difficult for the musicians. By law they had to have passes signed by their employers, but they were self-employed and that was not understood.

"There's an old story about the police bargaining with a musician to let him go if he played 'Don't Fence Me In' for them. He did and they released him, saying 'Jy kan lekker speel!'"

After a year on the "circuit" Breakey began photographing the jazzmen, many of whom had become close friends of his.

"The musicians were intense. They could hear sounds others couldn't. They were magnetic even when not playing.

"Kippie (Moeketsi) was wonderful. He went through such rough times yet never lost his sense of humour or became bitter.

"But it's very difficult to be a fine artist in a closed society — so many of the giants of jazz left this country. It had reached a stage where Chris (McGregor) could have been prevented from playing with his own musicians."

McGregor went on to found the Brotherhood of Breath in England. It remains the world's only big band playing township jazz and is considered by many to be the finest post-Ellington big jazz band.

On a visit to Cape Town about 18 months ago McGregor overflowed Greenmarket Square with listeners jostling to hear his music.

Another of the exiles was Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), Breakey's most elusive subject. "Because I was allowed to get close to the musicians, most of the pictures were unposed. But for years I struggled to get Abdullah Ibrahim in even half-decent light.

"I always got him late at night, until the Strandfontein concert in 1969 where I shot him in daylight. That was a great concert — Ibrahim, Johnny Gertze and Basil Coetzee."

Another memorable time was Louis Mohola's return to see his family in Langa. "He just kept playing, no stops or breaks. Finally all the other musos on the plat-

form stopped. Then Mohola got the kids up on stage with him, giving them rattles and pocket trumpets. And then he just kept going."

Turning to the photographs, Breakey explains: "I was interested not in mere reproduction but in interpreting. I hoped my feeling for the musicians would come across in the pictures.

"At Tropix I learnt a lot from Jurgen (Schadeberg). He had just finished his book on the bushmen. He taught me to avoid the slick, to go for the essence of the subject and not to try to be too photographically clever.

"My technical errors are very evident now. Sometimes I wish I could go back to that time with the knowledge I have now."