

Obituary: Chris McGregor

African jazz on white keys

LONG before World Music and the marketing of African pop, Chris McGregor, the jazz pianist, had shown the way. One would not expect his purely instrumental form of music to make a lot of money, but his importance in pushing British jazz in a new direction has become clearer with time: certain characteristics of Loose Tubes, for instance, can be traced back to his Brotherhood Of Breath.

Describing himself a country boy at heart, Chris never settled in London, moving with his family first to Sussex and then to an old mill house in France where he has now died at the age of 53. He liked the sun and a lifestyle that reminded him of his native South Africa, where his father had taught in a mission school in the Transkei. White people were few, and Chris was brought up with that mixture of Protestant hymns and African sounds that have dominated music this century.

While I was interviewing him in north London fifteen years ago, I discovered we had been contemporaries at Sea Point Boy's Junior School in Cape Town, another fifteen years previously. Chris eventually studied at the College of Music, supplementing his knowledge of straight music with what he picked up each night at the jam sessions.

His Blue Notes group, including Pukwana, Louis Mohale and Mongesi Feza, came together in 1962. A racially-mixed band was not to official South Africa's liking, so that the more popular they became the more problems they had with the authorities. When they were invited to the Antibes festival two years later, the Blue Notes went into exile.

After a year in Switzerland they came to Ronnie Scott's for a week and remained in Lon-

don. This was the time when jazz, like all creative arts, was undergoing an upheaval. The Blue Notes went through a phase of extremely free music, but McGregor's more distinctive contribution emerged within a big band that played intermittently at Scott's Old Place in Gerrard Street.

A larger group gave added weight to the criss-crossing of rhythms that was so much part of the African style, more self-generating because more central to musical development than the soloist-plus-riff pattern developed in the aggressive context of American jazz. The version known as the Brotherhood came together in 1970 and has been re-formed several times right up to the present.

The excitement they generate does not easily transfer to records. That degree of precision expected is not what the Brotherhood were about. Dudu Pukwana's MRA, with its irresistible shuffle rhythm and that burnished sound from the saxophones so reminiscent of Tadd Dameron's bands, remains the classic swinger from their first Neon LP. Live At Willisau on Ogun, and the recent Country Cooking on Venture, should be in any representative collection. Chris also recorded a solo piano LP for Musica.

Anybody who spent time with him will remember his warmth, his expansive turn of phrase and the glint that warned us a joke was coming. How excited he must have been by the changes promised for South Africa and how sad it is that he will never have the chance to live again in the country which his musical and personal principles forced him to leave.

Ronald Atkins

Chris McGregor born December 24, 1936; died May 26, 1990.



Chris McGregor . . pushing British jazz in a new direction

PHOTOGRAPH BY