

Sing: Chris

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PERSONAL BACKGROUND

FROM AN APPLICATION FOR A
CULTURAL GRANT

CHRIS Mc GREGOR

I have loved music for as long as I can remember. As a young child I learnt to sing all the songs to which I was exposed — songs sung to me by my parents, my nannies; songs that I heard in the mission church; songs I heard on the radio; African folk songs that I heard all the time during my childhood in the Transkei. My favourite toys were always musical toys and the need to express myself in music has always been my deepest urge.

When I was five years old I built my own first musical instrument — bottles hung from a clothes-line filled with water to different levels so as to produce different pitches which I arranged in an ascending scale. On this "instrument" I spent my childhood hours playing everything that came to my mind.

For my fifth birthday I was given a toy Glockenspiel with numbered notes and a book of children's songs notated both in the Glockenspiel's number system and in staff notation. By comparing these two notations I taught myself to read staff notation. Then by comparing the Glockenspiel with the piano I discovered that the principle of the piano was the same except that the piano was obviously less limited.

By this time my family moved to Cape Town where we stayed with a friend who was a music-teacher. This teacher became aware of my musicality through these activities and began instructing me. So began my first exposure to the tradition of classical European music.

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When I was nine my parents moved back to the Transkei where I was sent to boarding school in Umtata. Here I had music lessons but I found myself more interested in playing music that I heard by ear and carrying on with my childhood game of working out my own thoughts at the piano. Eventually my teacher left and I was left to my own devices. I improvised and worked out my own songs and played everything I heard that interested me. I played popular songs for school-dances, sing-songs, etc. I had no more orthodox training until my matriculation year (at Paarl Boys' High School) when I studied with a Mrs. Joubert, of Wellington. My studies with her were of piano repertoire only; she found that in theory and harmony, etc., I had nothing to learn for matric music -- my continual exploration on my own meant that I was well used to handling musical materials and elements and so found no difficulty with these for the examinations. But I was already having difficulties of another kind -- I was beginning to realise that my conclusions concerning musical techniques did not always agree with the text-book conclusions that were offered to me.

Thinking that perhaps this was because of a shallowness of knowledge of the European musical tradition from which the "text-book" conclusions were drawn, I threw myself heart and soul into my studies at the South African College of Music in Cape Town. For a time I was satisfied to regard myself, as my lecturers and professors did, as a potential composer or pianist in the Western tradition, and as long as this lasted my studies at the College were successful. But I found that my deepest musical inclinations had no place in this tradition, or, to put it more accurately, that there were tremendous difficulties involved in trying to place them in this tradition. My habit of "playing my own thoughts" musically occurred in a way which somehow didn't mean the same thing when written down and this caused a great rift in my thinking. I had either to "tell lies" musically in order to write things down (this is how the problem presented itself to me) or to be satisfied with playing only for myself. I was beginning to find some relief in making jazz music a very important adjunct to my studies.

This I had better elucidate here. Jazz music is an art of the spontaneous. The jazz performer and composer are the same person and the acts of composing and performing are essentially simultaneous. This is the cause of much confusion in general thinking about jazz music, and musical people thoroughly ingrained with the European tradition insist that this inevitably leads to shallow music-making. The fact is that it can lead

to music—making of an almost incredible depth in performance. The performance will reflect the depth of the performing musician's thought at that very time. The discipline involved (and it is no mean discipline) is for the musician to be constantly in touch with his deepest musical thoughts and to develop the facility to express them at any moment. The similarity between this process and my long-standing habit of "playing my own thoughts" will be immediately apparent, although it took me some time and much suffering to realise that this is actually the natural way for my musical thoughts to express themselves. My difficulties with writing down my musical thoughts were not due to any lack of facility in recognising the relationship between a sounded note and the written symbol (on the contrary, the speed and ease with which I could write down anything played or sung to me constantly amazed my fellow students and lecturers) but to the at first unconscious and then later conscious realisation that I could never write them down so as to mean the same thing as they did when they occurred to me. The need to be a composer and a performer *at the same time* was at the root of my musical thinking and I was already beginning to come into contact with a language and a tradition in which the accepted norm was that a musical thought is something to be played, not written down and given to somebody else to play: this language and tradition being, of course, jazz.

So my interest and involvement with jazz music deepened and strengthened and I soon found my activities in jazz leading me into new problems and new solutions, and into contact with other musicians facing similar problems, from whom I drew inspiration and whom, apparently, I also inspired. I began to form amateur jazz groups with fairly serious intent, and it began to dawn on me that I was coming to grips with the basic problems of my musical life and thought. My studies at the College of Music gradually seemed more and more unreal, concerned with theories instead of realities, with history instead of tradition, with dead notes instead of living music. When I started working with "Cup and Saucer" Nkanuka, the great Cape Town tenor-saxophonist, and other local jazz musicians, I realised that we had a common ground in the folk songs I had been aware of from childhood, and which had been so much a part of me. Dollar Brand, who taught me much, confirmed in me my will to be in touch with my deepest thoughts as much as possible, and to play them as freely as possible. Makaya Ntshoko, the drummer, and Maurice Goldberg, the alto-saxophonist, more than anyone else taught me the value of the wonderful phenomenon jazz

musicians call "swinging", for which there is no precedent and no real equivalent in any other music.

I find it impossible to elucidate this term which is crucial in the appreciation of jazz. It denotes a certain warmth of rhythmic feeling only obtainable by a very special kind of muscular and spiritual relaxation which I don't think can ever be taught. But I am certain that it is the outstanding musical discovery of the 20th century, comparable to the discovery of harmony centuries ago — in the same way it opens a completely new musical dimension. The exploration of harmony has occupied European musical thinking for at least ten centuries — it occurs to me that the exploration of "swinging" by jazz musicians has only just begun.

Not surprisingly, in view of all this, I failed to get my B.Mus. at the College of Music, and in my impatience to come to grips with my musical leanings and work them out in life as opposed to working them out academically, I decided to form my first group and try my luck in the world. From the outset I was faced with the problem of racial discrimination because the best bassist I could find was an African, Martin Mjijima. I did not let this influence me because I realised from the start that to compromise my musical judgment would make a mockery of every step I took; I had decided already that I was at the service of my musical instincts. I may as well state that this has become a guiding principle for me; the suffering which ensues from denying my musical instinct is harder for me to bear than any other hardship I have so far had to face. My musical instinct must decide what, how and with whom I shall play.

I will not here go into the details of my professional life. I have formed groups of various sizes and tried to keep them together, at least long enough to explore some of their musical possibilities, taking whatever jobs were offered us and trying to interest club-owners in featuring jazz music and promoters in promoting concerts when no ready-made jobs were forthcoming. It has not been comfortable financially, but I have learned much from working with musicians of widely differing temperaments and musical inclinations. The groups I have formed usually have broken up because of the financial problems we have been faced with; to study with a group playing pure jazz music completely honestly, is inclined to be a hard job musically and not very rewarding financially, so my weaker sidemen of the past have often succumbed to more lucrative offers from musical and variety shows, straight "commercial" bands, etc., where the work is less demanding musically.

But gradually over the years I have gathered around me a few musicians with genuine artistic vocation and very substantial talent, and my present group is one which I feel confident can last and grow into a beautifully cohesive unit. I have been able to accept the dispersal of former groups with only moderate regret because I have been conscious of having much to learn on my own and of the fact that the groups were not by any means ready for larger tests than those we faced. But the break-up of this group would be a tragedy for me personally, for my sidemen and, I think, for jazz music in this country.