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Chris McGregor

CHRIS MCGREGOR, the white South African jazz pianist, flautist and arranger who has died aged 54, refused to compromise his musical beliefs or his feelings on racial equality.

This tenacious conviction was manifest from his student days when he defied the oppressive apartheid laws to play with black musicians.

The son of a teacher in a Church of Scotland mission in the Transkei province, Christopher McGregor was born at Umtata on Christmas Eve, 1936, and as a boy revelled in the ethnic music of the Xhosa people.

At Cape Town College of Music he studied classical music by day and played in "jam" sessions at night with black and white musicians. This defiance of apartheid attracted official attention and later,

when McGregor formed the Blue Notes with black musicians, the band suffered constant harassment from the police.

In 1964 the Blue Notes accepted an invitation to play at the Antibes Juan-les-Pins Jazz Festival — a decision that resulted in them leaving South Africa for good, although McGregor's white status enabled him to return from time to time. Their exiled compatriot Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), the pianist, helped them to obtain work, but frequently they had to busk.

The Blue Notes played a heady, ragged, vibrant mixture of African music and American bop which did not prove particularly popular with the general public but they refused to compromise. They secured an engagement for a year at the Blue Note Club in Geneva and then at a venue in Zurich

called, ironically, the Afrika-ner Café.

In 1965 they came to London to appear at Ronnie Scott's "Old Place" in Gerrard Street where they established their reputation in England. But it was an engagement at the *avant-garde* Montmartre Café in Copenhagen that saw a shift in the Blue Notes' style: the brash and seemingly dissonant elements of "Free Form" were incorporated into an already heady mixture.

In 1970 McGregor formed the "Brotherhood of Breath", whose members included white and black South African exiles as well as the Barbadian trumpeter Harry Beckett and the English saxophonist Evan Parker.

McGregor, who latterly lived in France, is survived by his wife, Maxine, and two children.