

chris - the brother I loved

With his imagination and his fingers, **Chris McGregor** created a rich legacy of music, infused with the complex rhythms and harmonies of Africa. **TONY McGREGOR** remembers his brother, the jazz giant who died in 1990

The Blue Notes... Chris McGregor with Dudu Pukwana, Mongezi Feza and Sammy Maritz (standing)

(Pic: DAVID GOLDBLATT)

rolling green hills, not unlike those of the Transkei, we arrived at a rambling, rather ramshackle building. "Le Moulin," the driver announced tersely, and I got out of the car just as Chris came out to greet me, arms outstretched, long grey hair and beard flowing, and that deep, loving voice: "Hey, Anthony!"

We spent some time talking, getting my things sorted out, walking around the farm. Maxine, Chris's wonderful wife, was out driving with her sister who was also visiting, so Chris and I had

light and shade like the blades of grass blown by the wind - now in unison, now in contrary motion, but never still, always full of energy and life.

I think it is no accident that he always seemed most at home musically with a rhythm section with similar African roots. During his last, most creative years he was urged on by the dynamism of drummer Gilbert Matthews and bassist Ernest Shololo Mothle. During the early Blue Note years, the time of often desperate struggle, it was

IN 1964 CHRIS left for Europe with the Blue Notes, a band made up of people he enjoyed playing with, many of whom had been on the big band album of the previous year.

The group consisted of Dudu Pukwana on alto, Nikele Moyake on tenor, Mongezi Feza on trumpet and Louis Moholo on drums, Mbizo Dyani on bass and Chris. Ronnie Beer, another tenor player, joined the group in 1965.

In 1968 Chris's first album recorded outside South Africa was released on the Polydor label.

FROM a young boy running over the rolling hills of the Transkei, quickly picking up the rhythm and melody happening all around him, to the owner of a peaceful farm in a beautiful valley in the South-West of France - this is the story of Chris McGregor, the brother I loved.

In between lay the years of study, the years of listening and learning, which took him from the lecture halls of the College of Music in Cape Town to the shebeens and beer halls of Langa, Nyanga, Soweto, and countless places between. Then on to the jazz clubs, cafés and eventually the concert halls of Europe.

And always listening, picking up the rhythm, the melody, the harmony of whatever was happening around him.

One of my favourite memories of Chris is of the time I arrived at the Moulin de la Madone (his farm in France) on my first visit to Europe in 1979. I was suffering from deep culture shock, not to mention the effects of a gruelling three-week tour of Germany and Switzerland with a party of journalists from South Africa. I had left the party the day before in Geneva and had flown to Paris, then taken the train first to Bordeaux and then Tonneins. There I found a taxi driver who agreed to take me to the Moulin. I had no idea where it was. I was exhausted and felt lost.

After a drive of about forty minutes through

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At suppertime Chris asked what I fancied for the evening meal. "How about *omelettes au herbes sauvages*?" he asked.

As we walked together Chris picked leaves from a variety of wild plants next to the road and in the fields.

Back in the kitchen - an amazing room with onions and garlic hanging next to windows garlanded with spider's webs, posters on the walls and a grand piano in the corner - eggs were broken into a large pan and mixed with the leaves he had picked.

We ate the best omelettes I have ever tasted with thick chunks of bread - a far cry from the super-refined, homogenised food I had been eating for three weeks.

For me this episode epitomises some of Chris' most wonderful qualities - his connectedness to the environment around him and his ability to create a tasty and nutritious meal from what was at hand - be it a meal for the palate or a meal for the ears. He took what he found and then transformed it with his imagination and skilled, strong fingers.

HIS IMAGINATION and fingers created a rich legacy of music which has been an inspiration to many musicians and a source of joy and sometimes wonder to many thousands of music lovers in Africa and Europe.

Chris's roots, through all the years in Europe, remained firmly in Africa. Through all his music the complex rhythms and harmonies of Africa, both rural and urban, pulsate and shimmer like a heat haze over the veld, weaving patterns of

I think it is no accident that he always seemed most at home musically with a rhythm section with similar African roots. During his last, most creative years he was urged on by the dynamism of drummer Gilbert Matthews and bassist Ernest Shololo Mothle. During the early Blue Note years, the time of often desperate struggle, it was Louis Tebogo Moholo on drums and Johnny Mbizo Dyani on bass who provided solid support and a foundation for the sometimes wild flights of creation. Louis and Johnny also formed the core of the first Brotherhood of Breath big band - as Gilbert and Ernest did in the last, great incarnation of the band.

We are fortunate that much of Chris's music still exists on record. From the three exciting tracks on the 1963 Moroka-Jabavu Jazz Festival album to the 1989 Brotherhood of Breath with Archie Shepp concert in France, Chris' genius as arranger, leader and pianist can still be heard and, within the limitations of recording technology, experienced.

After the 1963 Moroka-Jabavu Jazz Festival Chris put together a big band, his first, for a three-week period, with sponsorship from the Festival sponsors. This band made a recording - Jazz, The African Sound - which was remarkable, not only for the quality of arrangements, the exciting musicians featured and the great compositions played, but also for the recording quality.

Featured on the album were established greats like Kippie Morolong Moeketsi and then up-and-coming young musos like Barney Rachabane, Bra Duds Pukwana, and the 17-year-old trumpet wizard Mongezi Feza - who nearly blew them all away!

The album showcased Chris's arrangements of two songs by Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), two by Kippie and two of his own compositions.

This gem of an album has been unavailable for many years, but is soon to be re-released by Gallo Music Publishers.

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In 1968 Chris's first album recorded outside South Africa was released on the Polydor label. It was called *Very Urgent* and featured the same musicians - with the exception of Nikele Moyake, who had died tragically.

On this album the Blue Notes showed their mastery of the freer form of jazz then in vogue in Britain and Europe, as well as their deep African roots.

The song *Don't Stir the Beehive* harks back powerfully to a Transkei evening with herders whistling and calling to each other, snatches of song and the random rhythms of insects in the thorn trees. Listening to this track I can almost smell the cooking fires and see the sun setting behind the hills in a dusty purple and orange haze. I certainly feel the longing for home that pervades the track.

In all the recordings Chris made - whether with the Blue Notes, the Brotherhood of Breath, or with other musicians such as District Six (Brian Abrahams' wonderful group) and Courtney Pine - this rootedness in Africa is apparent.

BUT MORE THAN the great musician, I miss the great person, a giant both physically and intellectually. I wish that his many recordings (I know of about 14 in total) were more readily available to his brothers and sisters back home. But even more I wish he could have experienced the amazing flowering of music, the music to which he devoted his life - both here, in this country he loved so dearly, and internationally.

It seems so much like a vindication of all he strove for.

