

THE BASC

- C H R I S M C G R E G O R -
(24 December 1936 - 26 May 1990)

Having won the first prize at the Castle Jazz Festival in 1963, pianist Chris McGregor and his band the Blue Notes left South Africa to perform at a festival in Amsterdam in 1964. The band opted to go into exile, with McGregor only making one brief visit home in 1987 before his sudden death in France last week.

As one of South Africa's first racially integrated bands, things were difficult for the Blue Notes in the 1960's. "It was the apartheid system that drove Chris to live overseas in exile", explains Cape saxophonist Basil Coetzee, who was active on the local music circuit at that time.

The son of a mission school teacher, McGregor spent much of his childhood in the Transkei. On finishing school in Cape Town, McGregor performed regularly at venues such as the Vortex, The Naaz, Club Zambezi and the Ambassadors, and by 1962, had formed his band the "Blue Notes" together with Dudu Pukwana (alto sax) Louis Moholo (drums), Johnny Dyani (bass) and Mongezi Feza (trumpet).

In 1963, the group won the Castle Jazz Festival jazz prize, and shortly thereafter, the band left for Europe. After their Amsterdam performances, the members remained in exile, this core of musicians forming the nucleus of the early exiled South African jazz scene:

"Other individual musicians had gone into exile before them, but the blue Notes were the first organized unit that went into exile", says Basil Coetzee. Indeed, the Blue Notes paved the way for the early British appreciation of South African jazz, and after the group's dissolution, the individual members worked with other musicians, spreading the influence of their music. Chris McGregor spent much time studying and performing in London, but took up residence in France. By all accounts, he preferred a quieter lifestyle, and it was at his country home that he remained based.

In 1970, McGregor assembled a new group, known as the Brotherhood of Breath. Although the personnel evolved over the years, the group has remained in existence to this day under McGregor's leadership, and last year released the album Country Cooking. After the tragic passing of Mongezi Feza (1975), and Johnny Dyani (1986), McGregor continued to work frequently with saxophonist Dudu Pukwana. Louis Maholo, and bassist Ernest Mothle regularly travelled from their homes in exile in London, to work with McGregor on European tours and recordings. Other South African artists, including Capetonians Brian Abrahams and Robert Juritz have recorded and performed with him in the past two years.

"Chris has done a lot for the music, keeping himself involved and active with the others in exile", says Coetzee. "It was so near to him coming home, but the pressure of exile adds to any physical ailment. Our music and the people all lose from this", concluded Coetzee.

Chris McGregor is survived by his wife, Maxine, and two sons, who live in France.

- Steve Gordon.