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CHRIS McGREGOR

Chris McGregor, the South African-born jazz pianist, died at the age of 53 in France on May 26. He was born on December 24, 1936, in Umtata in what is now Transkei.

CHRIS McGregor was an ebullient bandleader who helped pioneer the fusion of jazz and African rhythms. It is ironic that his death comes at a time when so-called "world music" is growing in popularity, and when his native country is beginning to abandon the ideology which forced him into exile in Europe.

With his straggling beard and swaying pony-tail, McGregor cut a Bohemian figure on the stage. But behind the exotic exterior was a serious musician with a firm grounding in classical theory, and a tenacious belief in the contribution that African folk styles, such as Kwela, could make to standard improvisation.

McGregor was born the son

of a teacher in a Church of Scotland mission school. He was soon exposed to the hymns and traditional music of the Xhosa nation. While studying classical music at the College of Music in Cape Town, he became part of the city's jazz network, participating in evening jam sessions with musicians both white and black.

The Blue Notes, the celebrated band that he formed in 1962, boasted some of the country's best jazz players, including saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, trumpeter Mongezi Feza, bassist Johnny Dityani and drummer Louis Moholo. With McGregor's percussive piano as a base, the group's vibrant approach to bop immediately attracted attention.

The problems faced by a racially-mixed band, however, soon became insurmountable. In 1964, taking up an invitation to play at the Antibes Festival, the musicians de-

cided to settle in Europe, moving first to Switzerland. Audiences had their first taste of the Blue Notes the following year when the group appeared at the Gerrard Street venue which had been the original base for Ronnie Scott's Club.

By the time he had moved to London, McGregor showed increasing interest in free jazz, and in 1966 the band took up a four-week residency in Copenhagen at the Montmartre, a club which had provided a platform for some of the most extreme elements of the avant-garde. In 1970 McGregor expanded the lineup, transforming the Blue Notes into the Brotherhood of Breath, an occasionally chaotic big band which, as one critic put it, mingled "catchy rhythms with collective cacophony".

With English free jazz improvisers such as saxophonist Evan Parker on hand, the McGregor results can be heard

on the 1974 album *Live at Willisau*. That same year McGregor moved to France. He later re-formed the Blue Notes to record *Blue Notes for Mongezi*, a tribute to Mongezi Feza, who died in London in 1975. McGregor also cut three solo piano albums, while continuing to take the Brotherhood on tour. Though his music lacked the serenity of fellow-exiles Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela, he returned with a more accessible Brotherhood album, *Country Cooking*, in 1988.

Sadly, his contract with Virgin covered only one record, but the Queen Elizabeth Hall concert, also in 1988 and which coincided with its release, found McGregor still in exuberant mood, his grey hair flapping in the air as he urged on the horn players. His ballad, "Maxine", proved an evocative tribute to his wife who now survives him.