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Chris McGregor

Chris McGregor and his Orchestra
"Jazz — The African Sound"
Gallotone/New Sound NSL 1011

THE fate which overtook big hands in the United States with the passing of the Swing Era was shared by those in most Continental countries. Only a very few anywhere managed to survive, and even they, the best though they were, frequently fell upon hard times. In South Africa, from the late 1940s through the 1950s, all attempts to keep a major jazz band going were in vain, although those which were started included many promising line-ups. Big bands now seem to be on the way back to popularity, especially in America. It is too soon, however, to expect that South Africa will be able to support one. The first attempt to do so seems to have failed.

This was a 16-piece line-up brought together in Johannesburg recently under the leadership of pianist Chris McGregor. It grew out of the 1963 South African Jazz Festival about three months ago and after the festival it enjoyed a memorable two-night stand at a Johannesburg cinema. Since then its members have tried to preserve their association through playing periodic club dates. It would seem from this that the time is not yet for the establishment of such a group. Which is a pity, for this long-playing album made as a souvenir of the occasion as much as for any other reason, shows this to have been probably the best aggregation of musical talent over the past 15 years.

The record, like the two cinema concerts which prompted it, is unique in several respects. For one thing, all six cuts featured are of South African jazz compositions — "Switch" and "I remember Billy" by Kippie Moeketsi; "Eclipse at dawn" and "Kippie" by Dollar Brand; and "Early bird" and "Now" by Chris McGregor. For another, the line-up is multi-racial. For the third, the group does achieve what the record title claims: an African jazz sound. This is a big, bustling, muscular blending of the old familiar swing with a flavour which anybody who has listened to African music in recent years will recognise as springing straight from the townships. At times this flavour is most subtly imparted, but it is always there.

The band members are worth listing in full: Dudu Pukwana (lead alto), Barney Rabachane (second alto), Nick Moyake and Ronnie Beer (tenors), Christopher Columbus Ngcukane (baritone), Kippie Moeketsi (alto and clarinet), Bob Tizzard (lead), Blyth Mbitjana and Willie Nettle (trombones);

Dennis Moali (lead), Ebbie Cresswell, Mongesi Feza and Noel Jones (trumpets); Sammy Maritz (bass), Early Mabuza (drums) and Chris McGregor (piano). Each gives evidence of being a top-notch musician and short though their association had been before this record date, they achieve a tight and workmanlike cohesion.

The solo work could, perhaps, have been more evenly distributed among the sidemen and sections. As things stand, much of it goes to Kippie Moeketsi — who is always a pleasure to listen to — with lesser space for Nick Moyake and Mongesi Feza. The band was, however, chosen within a rather short space of time and no doubt the arrangements had to be written with a similar haste. Where the band is particularly strong is in its section work. The lead men all do yeoman service and the three-man trombone section is a tower of strength. It is always in their driving hard and it, with the very fine rhythm group, provides a wonderfully solid foundation.

Where Chris McGregor gets some delightfully fresh combined sounds and colourings is in imaginative blending of the saxes. This comes through best, perhaps, on "Kippie," where two tenors and an alto, and later an alto, a tenor and a baritone, are used. A curious but most appealing sound is also achieved on "Eclipse at dawn" where Kippie's clarinet is blended with Dudu Pukwana's alto and Mongesi Feza's muted trumpet. The trumpet section generally works hard but is inclined to fall away later. On two brief occasions, too, the band's usually clean and tight melodic line becomes a little cluttered and confused. There seems to be just a shade too much sound and movement overall.

These are, however, the small criticisms which do not detract in any way from the warmth, the charm, the talent and technical skill and the general appeal of a fine album. "Eclipse," "Now" and "Billy" are probably the best cuts, but there are parts of all six which provided excellent jazz. Chris McGregor's arrangement captures the essence of Dollar Brand's very personal approach to jazz (strongly influenced by Thelonious Monk) on "Eclipse" and there is a titillating piano run which, though all too brief, gives a swift glimpse of Monk. Brand and McGregor. Kippie makes the running here with a lovely, freely-conceived solo. Nick weighs in on a tenor which carries strong overtones of early Coltrane and the trombone section is a real joy.

"Now" has an attractive theme which is beautifully carried by the sax section and highlighted by a most restrained and wonderfully disciplined trumpet solo by Mongesi Feza. The saxes and trombones make this something spectacular. The ensemble sound is refreshing and Sammy Maritz's bass is a powerhouse in the rhythm section. The saxes are quite stunning again on "Billy," which is a slow and rather moody piece. The trumpets are well handled here and so is the piano. There is some fine drumming by Early Mabuza on the tearaway "Early bird," the lovely blending of the reeds on "Kippie" and Moeketsi's striding out alto solo, which gives brief nods in the direction of both Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman, on "Switch."

Yes, this is an album with many fine moments. It would be a great pity if this band broke up without at least one more LP being cut as a souvenir of this memorable moment in South African jazz progress.