

jazz in this hot continent

By MAXINE LAUTRE

UP A STEEP, NARROW flight of stairs: a crowded room blue with cigarette smoke, peeling walls, and a couple of grimy windows catching the last light of a Sunday afternoon. . . .

This is Dorkay House (bottom of Eloff Street) home of the African Music and Drama Association, incubator of some of the coolest jazz in this hot continent.

I was there on Sunday, at one of the fortnightly jazz-sessions for aspiring musicians. Usually a scrum of amateurs improvising before their first audience, this has nevertheless been the forcing house of some outstanding Union Artists' talent, which has produced shows like "King Kong."

I was aware of a strong atmosphere of excitement; of tapping feet, swaying heads. From the far purlieus of the room a newly-formed combine was belting out fantastic sounds; the tension was electric.

A Transkei Scot

The inspiration behind this new group is a remarkable 26-year-old of Scottish descent, Chris McGregor. Born and bred in the Transkei, he has lived for nothing but music since he was able to read. He is perhaps the most talented jazz pianist in the country and does all the arrangements for the group.

The combo consists of a five-man front-line, three saxophones tenor, alto and baritone—trumpet and trombone, brilliant rhythm section and McGregor on the piano.

Most of their music is strongly influenced by contemporary American jazz (Charlie Mingus in particular). What McGregor is trying to do is to make use of the sounds peculiar to urban African music, whilst at the same time incorporating the latest tonal developments taking place in America.

McGregor feels there is potential in the five-note scale. "My father — completely untrained musically—tends to play in the scale of F sharp. This is the nearest to playing on the five black notes only, the basis of many folk-songs. He gets it from the Scottish, but the African folk-tunes are also written like this, many of them. Perhaps this is the purest of all scales?"

Dedicated

The members of the combo are all individualists, but share a common dedication to music.

When McGregor first gathered a group in Cape Town in 1961, he used the R100 he had won in the Johannesburg jazz festival—more money than he'd had in ages—to buy a trumpet for one of his players. He lives for nothing but his music (his fiancée gave him up because "he never turned up for our dates and when I asked why, he'd been practising and forgotten the time.")

He exists in a vague sort of a way out of a suitcase, possesses one suit that somebody gave him, and no ties at all.

He has always been interested in music, and read for a B. Mus. degree at Cape Town University but quit a couple of weeks before

dedicated young Dudu Pukwana, whose dazzling solos on the alto sax leave one quite wrung out. (Playing the piano for another group when McGregor came across him, he'd always hankered after a sax. Chris bought him one and he took to it from the word go.

He is intense and deeply serious about his music and practices every available hour of every day, as do all the other musicians.

The comic of the group is the trumpet-player Dennis Mpali. Always cracking a joke while being briefed, it seems impossible that he should know what is going on. Yet somehow, instinctively, when chided for his lightheartedness, he always gets it right. He never worries about anything and shrugs off difficulties with a laugh, saying: "No, no, cuzzie, that's not my department!"

Comic notes

Tall Christopher Columbus winds himself up and down; his baritone sax almost an extension of himself. Impossibly deep, almost comic notes emerge from it at times.

The newcomer to the group is bassist Martin — "what a find!" says McGregor.

The future is vague—they would like to try their luck further afield. First on the list is a five-week tour of the Rhodesias, in a month's time, and after that they hope to play their way through Africa north in a mini-bus. It should be quite a trip!

Music in a blue haze



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