

Dudu Pukwana

DAVID REDFERN



ALTHOUGH he had already achieved an eminence in the jazz field, Dudu Pukwana was, even at 52, poised for greater things. He was in place to be carried even further upwards by the tide of African culture burgeoning as part of the indistinctly defined "world music" fashion which is currently sweeping the continents. His popularity with both young and more mature audiences was growing, partly because the raw directness of his playing, something he had always had when others trod more gently, was coming to fashion. He was an eclectic and deeply emotional jazz soloist not unduly concerned about finesse or sophistication.

"Really, inside, I'm a rocker. I don't care about technique as long as I can cook," he said.

Born in the African township of Walmer in Port Elizabeth, Pukwana came from a musical family. He began playing the piano at six and worked as a semi-professional musician while still at school. When he was 18 he took up the alto saxophone, learning on an instrument owned by Nick Moyake, whom he idolised.

His first regular job as a pianist was with a vocal and dance group called The Four Yanks, later The Manhattan Brothers. Still surviving, The Manhattan Brothers were flown over from South Africa to appear at the Wembley concert in tribute to Nelson Mandela, and here Pukwana was reunited with them as he, on alto this time, played in the band which backed the group.

In his youth, Dudu worked with a variety of groups in South Africa before forming his own band, The Jazz Giants. When he appeared with them at the 1962 Johannesburg Festival, he won the award for Best Jazz Saxophonist of the Year. But it was with The Four Yanks that the bandleader Chris McGregor, who himself died last May, first heard him. The McGregor band had been invited to play at the opening of a youth cultural centre in the African township of Cape Town.

"The pianist playing with The Four Yanks struck me immediately, so I collared him afterwards and bought him a drink. We found out we'd been listening to a lot of the same things, so he came and stayed with us and we started working as a quartet with him on alto."

McGregor expanded to form his Blue Notes, adding Mongezi Feza on trumpet, Nick Moyake on tenor and Louis Moholo on drums. They were popular enough that racially-mixed groups were common in South Africa and together became impossible to ignore. Now they acquired pass-

ports and left for London. By now, McGregor was deeply involved in running the band, and most of the composing for it was left to Pukwana. His highly original work caught the European audiences immediately, and this period culminated in the seminal residency at Copenhagen's Montmartre Club, home of much in contemporary music development in the middle Sixties.

After visits to Paris and Switzerland, the group finally settled in London. Dudu continued to tour with and compose music for Mc-

Gregor's Brotherhood of Breath, playing major festivals and recording a film soundtrack. He had an individual triumph in the performance the band gave at the 1974 Berlin Jazz Festival. Earlier, Pukwana also toured with Johnny Dyani's band, Witchdoctor's Son, and in 1969 he formed a *kwela* band, Spear, which recorded two albums and went back to South Africa to tour. Not surprisingly, Pukwana was welcomed as a hero. This led to a collaboration with the trumpeter Hugh Masekela and the trombonist Jonas

Gangwa. They recorded together as The African Explosion and played in the United States, where they attracted the attention of musicians like Miles Davis.

Back in Europe, Dudu formed another band with a colourful name, Assegai, and worked with Harry Miller's Isipingo, Keith Tippett's Centipede and such free jazz improvisers as John Surman, Mike Osborne, John Stevens, and Han Bennink, recording with many of them. He was given two grants by the Arts Council to write extended works, which he subse-

quently recorded. In 1977, he took the reformed Spear to Nigeria for the International Festival of Black Arts in Lagos and the following year formed the group Zila, which he ran until his death. Zila means nothing more glamorous than "we are here", but its music was explosive and Pukwana's urgent and aggressive improvisations often brought audiences to a state of ecstatic excitement. With the band, Dudu appeared frequently at European festivals and made many broadcasts on television and radio. The group also recorded several albums.

Pukwana had strong feelings for his South African heritage, and remained true to its music until his death. The roots remained dominant in his playing, but he listed amongst his favourite musicians who had influenced his work Ornette Coleman, Duke Ellington, Ben Webster and Stevie Wonder.

His manager for many years, John Jack, remembers him as a strenuous, emotional man, always exuberant and often very demanding of those who worked with him. "He was never tranquil. There was always some great excitement hovering around the corner, and if he wanted to talk about it, he would phone you at any time, day or night. He called me in such a way about a year ago, wanting me to help him in writing a book about his life. I'm sorry we never got round to it."

Known to be a man who liked what Johnny Hodges referred to as "a little taste", Pukwana was not so long ago discovered, after an intensive search by some concert organisers, playing darts in a pub some 45 minutes after his recital in a local concert hall had been due to start. Completely unabashed, his concern, more than for the concert, was that they insisted on removing him immediately, even though it was, as he put it, "my throw".

Of large and burly appearance, he vibrated with nervous energy and, despite being unexpectedly a very shy man, he was always exuberant on stage. John Jack believes his full potential was never tapped. "Despite his shyness, he could stimulate other musicians into doing great things. Earlier this year, he made what we now see as his last recording with Zila. Because of the current market situation, its issue was shelved, but no doubt it will come out now that he's gone."

Steve Voce

Mtutuzel "Dudu" Pukwana, alto and soprano saxophonist, pianist, composer and bandleader, born Port Elizabeth 18 July 1938, died London 29 June 1990.