

**Chris McGregor's music fuses mission revivalism with South African tribal rhythms. Tomorrow his re-formed big band kicks off a European tour at the Camden Jazz Festival. Rod Chapman reports.**

THERE HAS been much to celebrate on the London jazz scene already this month, what with the Sonny Rollins renaissance, a new Mike Westbrook work and now a sparkling Camden Jazz Week. But the most joyous celebration should come at the closing Camden concert, with the first British appearance of South African pianist Chris McGregor's re-formed big band, Brotherhood of Breath.

Brotherhood inspired much the same sort of cult devotion in the London jazz fraternity of the early seventies as the Grateful Dead among the Haight Ashbury faithful a few years earlier. Where most American big bands were slick, all natty blazers and chat-show music stands, Brotherhood were free blowing and unpredictable. Conspiratorial clusters of hornmen would nurture riffs at different parts of the stage, mixing the kwela music of the townships with New Orleans, swing and European free form, before peeling off to burst into a solo or tag on to another section of the band.

British dates grew increasingly sparse after Chris McGregor decamped in 1973 to a watermill in the Lot et Garonne region of South-west France — "a place where I could get some work done; I never found it easy to write music in a London flat", he says.

The band was prominent at summer festivals in France and Switzerland for a few years more, but the gigs petered out some three years ago. "We never actually stopped", says McGregor, "but I needed to reflect a little, and I had a feeling I was visiting everyone else in the band with my problems".

However, memories of those heady Brotherhood concerts lingered on with European jazz aficionados, one of whom, Christian Mousset — who runs the Angoulême jazz festival in South-west France — pushed McGregor persistently to reform the band. McGregor finally acceded this year, but only on the grounds that, "we would have to be going for something as stable and solid as I could make it".

Mousset came back with an offer McGregor couldn't refuse: the city of Angoulême would sponsor Brotherhood's 13 musicians for five days of



Chris McGregor: religious experience. Picture by Garry Weaser

## The veldt sound

rehearsal there, with accommodation and fares all paid for, following which the band would do a local concert in the summer and record an album on a label put together by Mousset. This led to more French dates and a ten-gig European tour this autumn, which kicks off at Camden.

The new line-up suggests that the burghers of Angoulême will get value for their money. It comprises five stalwarts of the old band — including the marvellous London-based trumpeter Harry Beckett — interspersed with South African musicians on the European circuit, such as bassist Ernest

Mothle, and players from the French avant-garde scene like soprano saxist Louis Sclavif.

The repertoire is likely to be the mixture as before, with themes shimmering in and out of the ensemble playing and different musicians guiding the direction as the mood takes them. "I'm not really too clever about questions of style, we just work our way through everything available," says McGregor. "It's the spirit that matters — to stay in time with the spirit that moves."

Although he delivers this portentous phrase self-mockingly, the view of South African musicians that music

should be a religious experience permeates the band's playing. McGregor himself stems from that tradition: his father was a Scottish missionary in the Transkei, and the young pianist's early influences were the mission hymns mixed with the music of the local Xhosa tribe — both of which underpin Brotherhood's sound.

Further musical education for McGregor meant a course at the Capetown College of Music, delving into Bartok and Webern by day while joining in the local jazz clubs at night and at the Sunday dancing school run by Dollar Grand — the other star of the Camden Concert and

McGregor's mentor ("They'll be coming to see Dollar," he says with characteristic modesty).

The pianist put together the first of five big bands during this period — on leaving college, teaming up with the black musician who later became the legendary Blue Notes: the volcanic altoist Dudu Pukwana, drummer Louis Moholo — whose African Drum Ensemble plays Camden on Wednesday — pocket trumpeter Mongezi Feza and bassist Johnny Dyani.

"We played mixed audiences — there were still places you could do that — but never actually confronted authority head on; we were pretty much underground," says McGregor, "we weren't involved politically but, using who we were, we inspired people who were". The band were on the road for two years, which kept the authorities guessing but increased the personal pressures, and the next step had to be Europe.

Following more personal intervention by Dollar, who had already alerted European audiences to South African music, the group made its debut at the 1964 Antibes festival, then busked on the Cote d'Azur as a wild street band before playing the Swiss club scene for over a year. They hit London in the mid-60s and at the end of the decade, McGregor formed Brotherhood with a £400 Arts Council grant.

The flip came at a time when, McGregor now says, "my career seemed to be in the doldrums," and put together the South Africans with young British musicians who jammed with them at Ronnie Scott's Old Place like John Surman and Mike Osborne. Others came in after the first concert in 1970, including the pioneering free form tenorist Evan Parker — an unlikely candidate for a big band one who, says McGregor, added greatly to Brotherhood's bag. A group of black promoters tried to get the band over to South Africa but the attempt foundered when a Johannesburg lawyer learned who the band was.

McGregor, a large, amiable man, listens frequently to new players as Brotherhood does the concert rounds again. "If what they do suggests adding colour to the palate, I'd be likely to approach them." But the palate is already rich, with McGregor's piano work providing many of the colours; his solo gigs put him on a par with Cecil Taylor and any other modern jazz pianist and, like Ellington or Basie, his big band role as a leader is unobtrusive but vital.

A South African revivalist evening is certainly in store for Saturday, and McGregor's rejuvenated spirit as well for the future of new Brotherhood. "I'm a sucker for big bands — and they're sometimes amazingly easy to keep together." With a little help from the friends in Angoulême.