

MusiC

# HOMAGE TO BROTHER CHRIS

by Ida Frech and Inessa Armand





*Chris McGregor is hardly known among the new generation in South Africa. But in France, he was passionately known as "The great bearded and shaggy haired artist". In the early 1960s, he was already on the blacklist of the South African Police. He was considered dangerous, for he had formed the first multiracial jazz group, and hence was defying the laws of apartheid. Since then, South Africa has been changing, thanks to the struggles on all fronts.*



In the recent days reforms have begun to unfold and this reminds us of brother Chris, who is no longer here to witness the beginning of the end of the monster apartheid that he had fought against. It is for this reason that we are paying homage to brother Chris, who in his life time was an active fighter against apartheid. We shall dwell on the musical activities through which he fought apartheid, and his ideas on the system of apartheid.

Chris was born in a small town of Somerset west on the Christmas eve of 1936, in the province of Transkei. His father was of a teaching profession, working for the Scotland Church of Pondoland in Transkei. His family had a modest life and was embedded in Christian faith. His play mates were the Xhosa children while he was the only white boy in the group. And thanks to them, he picked up Xhosa music and Xhosa tradition. When he joined the kindergarten at 5 years of age, he began trying his fingers on the school piano. His music was Xhosa but rather particular. It was the music of Xhosa sacrificial rites which had always been part of him, through his playing mates. It was this childhood background that left a life long impression on his future; his rooted nationalism for his native land and his vision of multiracial South Africa.

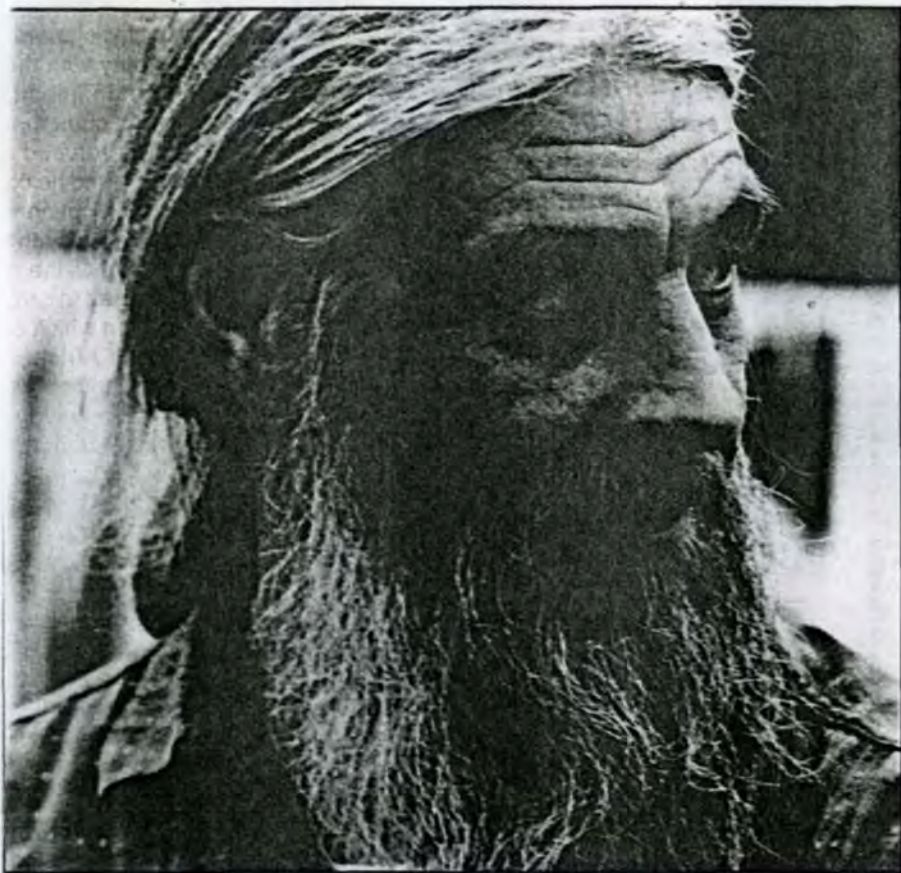
At the age of 10, he heard Duke Ellington for the first time in the radio, and he was completely overcome. It was this event, as it were, which became the turning point in his life. He was determined to be a jazz pianist and a composer. This decision prompted two ambitions: to register in the Vienna School of Music and finally organise a "Big Band".

In 1950, he began his college life in the Cape. It was this part of South Africa and this period that planted the seed of his struggles to establish a multiracial jazz group, authentically South African.

He came in contact with black jazz musicians and he began to play with them. This contact, made him an important cible of the police. He was often threatened by the police, yet he refused any retreat. He was already in it and he could not come out of it. The only option was not to give in, but to continue with his friends and resist. In spite of all the misdeeds of the police, he refused to give in, for it was a political question which concerned the future of South Africa. He believed that man is a cultural being and should be judged so. He was culturally South African (a multiracial South African) no more, no less.

In 1962, Chris brought together his friends and formed the first South African multiracial jazz group. The group took its famous name "Blue Notes". He was the only white member in the group. In the group, Chris played the piano, Mongezi Feza the trumpet, Dudu Pukwana alto, Nikele Moyake tenor, Johnny Dyani contrabass and Louis Moholo batterie. In the following two years, the "Blue Notes" made headlines in the South African musical world. But this group faced difficulties with the police. Often in the middle of a concert, the police would break in and disperse the audience. In those conditions it became next to impossible to play. For Chris, it was important to win and for the police it was important to destroy, the germ of South African multiracialism. Hence, in 1964, because of the criminal police acts, the "Blue Notes" clandestinely escaped to Europe, in exile. They immediately hit the headlines; after all it was a group of South African jazzmen and also refugees. Chris is claimed by his fans as incarnating the "paradise of the jazzmen". However, their music had positive impact on the European audience. It fought European prejudices against Africa. The Europeans could not believe their ears, that Africans could play so well. The European magazines then declared that the "Blue Notes" have "exceptional professionalism, and their music was not only original but provoked an enthusiasm beyond imagination. It had deep sincere feelings as it was rooted in Africanism, a more advanced version of the jazz. The "Blue Notes" did not save apartheid but exposed it. The Europeans could not understand how this exceptional group could not be allowed to play in their own country. But it was through this group





and their music that the European's naivety and ignorance of the apartheid was overcome and they condemned the apartheid. In this respect, the "Blue Notes" had positive impact on the European public.

In 1965, after the musical tours from Antibes to Zurich, the group visited London and stayed until 1974. In London, the group dispersed, Johnny Dyani and Louis Moholo in the company of Steve Lacy, went to play in the USA. But Chris and Pukwana Feza stayed together and incorporated Harry Miller and John Stevens. Chris's idea has always been to find a "Big Band". The group composed an orchestra and played the traditional and spiritual jazz; always accepted as the union of all jazz musicians.

A blessing came to Chris, with a scholarship of £400 from "Art Council of Great Britain". With the money, Chris launched a group, "Brotherhood of Breath" and began to record with Neon and RCAC (Fairweather). They also, successfully played music for a film known as "Kong's Harvest" based on the play of Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer. They simultaneously played Sunday concerts at Roundhouse for showbusiness. It was only later that they came to realise that showbusiness was only interested in making money and not in the promotion of music. They called it quits.

Chris regrouped again "Brotherhood of Breath" and this time, it was a larger group, which included Chris, Pukwana Feza, Louis Moholo, Evan Parker, Gary Windo, Harry Beckett and Rady Malfatti. They successfully registered 4 albums with Ogun and 2 records with musical seldom.

In 1974, a turning point came in the life of Chris. He and his wife Maxine, decided to quit London and settle in Lot et Garonne in France. Chris realised that all attempts in London in creating the "Big Band" did not materialise. He decided to become a farmer and live on his own sweat. In 1975, a sad event came into his life, his old friend Pukwana Feza passed away. It was a big blow and the end of the "Blue Notes", as it was Feza and Chris, who really kept the "Blue Notes" alive. The confederacy of South African brothers had lasted 10 years, but it had extremely important contribution internationally by encouraging the public to isolate and condemn the apartheid. However, death had created the demise of the "Blue Notes", an institution that



*The blue notes, Dudu Pukwana, Nkele Mayoke, Louis Moholo.*



they had created to realise their ideals.

But in France Chris continued to play with new friends. In 1975, he played for "La fête de l'Humanité" at La Courneuve in Paris, a famous get together of all communists and their sympathiser. In 1980, he played for the "Festival d'Angoulême". In that period he had formed another "Brotherhood of Breath", which was going to be the last. It included François Jeanneau, Louis Sclavis and Didier Levallet. However, he did not completely abandoned London for he visited it and played with Ernest Mothle and Gilbert Mathews. In 1988, he recorded his last album with Virgin Records known as "Country Cooking".

*He was the first to initiate such multiracial group in 1962, which was considered dangerous with the authorities. Now, after 25 years, such multiracial groups, musical or theatrical, were cystallising, in spite of the apartheid laws. Chris realised that there were already elements in the information of these groups, whch represented the image of the future South Arica.*

As for political ideas, they were essentially aiming at destroying the apartheid as a system. In fact, the option for exile, when he loved his country so dearly is because, he was a target for the South African police. Hence in exile, he had used his talents, the piano, to fight the apartheid. Chris always associated himself with progressive institutions, one of which was Amnesty International, where he played in their concerts so as to expose apartheid. His performances were well appreciated and hence was



*The Blue Notes 1964 Zurich, Switzerland, Mongezi Feza Dudu Pukwana, Johnny Dyani, Louis Moholo, front: Chris Mc Gregory.*

able to influence a large public for the cause of those who fought apartheid. Chris visited South Africa in 1985, to accompany his mother to her resting place. He then visited in 1987, and he was happy to notice considerable changes. He found that there were already all types of solidarity movements cutting across all the races in South Africa.

In 1990, when apartheid declared beaches multiracial, Chris considered this a smokescreen. He considered free elections to be absolutely necessary, as this was in fact the demand of the large majority of South Africans. Chris pointed out that, there are millions of blacks in the bantustans, deprived of land, education, health and all basics of life. In the present conditions, the black population lives in absolute poverty and it is deprived of political culture. Chris considered South Africa having enormous diversity, hence

the need for political decentralisation giving power to the locally elected organs. Chris agreed on the international boycott, but he suggested that it should concentrate on the backbone of the economy, including diamond and uranium.

In the same year of 1990, brother Chris was no more. His death was caused by lung cancer, which he suffered for years. His wife, Maxine, a woman of enormous spiritual and physical courage had fought for his life but all in vain. Brother Chris was buried in exile, in Europe, where winters are long and cruel and where summers are short and timid. Brother Chris is buried away from his native Transkei, away from the ancestral pantheon, which formed the source of African jazz and most important, which gave him South African nationalism and the courage to fight for multiracial South Africa.