Marabi in exile: From Transkei to London

Described as the only white jazz performer to become truly South Africanised, Chris McGregor has lived as an exile for more than 20 years. On a brief trip home, he spoke to EDDIE KOCH

JAZZ exile Chris McGregor recently flew out of Jan Smuts after a brief trip home — and left behind some vivid impressions of the unique contribution to the development of South African music that he has made since he left the country in the mid-Sixties.

McGregor's modesty causes him to downplay the achievements of his bands — the Blue Notes and the Brotherhood of Breath — as being just "a curious mixture of avante garde jazz, African rhythms and mabanga music". But one expert on the history of South African jazz, Professor Chris Ballantine, has a different view:

"McGregor is the only white jazz performer who has actually crossed over and become truly South Africanised. His bands are among the few who have achieved a real fusion of the multiple musics which represent what South Africa is and might be."

The lifetime of dedication that went into the making of this kind of music began when the young Chris McGregor was growing up in the Transkei during the Forties.

"My father didn't exactly encourage me to learn music," he says, "I was supposed to learn the alphabet before dabbling in that stuff. But the Transkei was a place with a lot of rich music and I was a kid with open ears."

Traditional Xhosa songs and church hymns that filled his father's mission school with sound had a big impact on his early musical development. Later, at school, he formed a small jazz combo.

The experience was to prove invaluable when McGregor, the brilliant university student, dropped out of a degree in classical music at the South African College of Music because he felt it was not relevant to his country. The Sharpeville massacre had just happened, old man McGregor had been forced out of his job by Bantu Education and the young musician was burning with anger because the barricades around Langa barred him from the halls where he used to jam with big swing bands in the township.

"I was extremely upset about apartheid and racism and made a few conscious commitments there and then. One of the very first things I decided was to go exactly where my ear led me — regardless of the consequences."

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That ear lead McGregor to Cape Town's clubs and dives where a jazz renaissance was taking place. He used to listen to a young man called Dollar Brand play into the early hours of the morning and watched in awe when Kippie Moeketsi, Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwangwa visited the city with the cast of King Kong. This burst of energy taking place in South African jazz provided McGregor with fertile ground to nurture his own band. Together with homesickness and a certain disenchantment to get him on stage in Germany after suffering from jaundice. Soon after Feza's death the 'big band was able to get a slot in most international jazz festivals and its unique style became regular fare at anti-apartheid concerts overseas. But life in Europe was not simply a story of lucky breaks and stunning success. Perhaps more than any other band, the Blue Notes have suffered those tragedies of exile that seem to dog South African musicians. Within months of leaving South Africa, Nick Moyake died of a brain tumour. In 1975, Mongezi Feza died of double pneumonia contracted in the unheated cell of a London mental asylum and just two months ago Johnny Dyani dropped dead on stage in Germany after suffering from jaundice. Soon after Feza's death the Brotherhood disbanded — coming together again briefly in the early Eighties and for a tour of Mozambique in 1984. But Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana and Louis Moholo are still in touch with each other and each is still actively making new music. McGregor as a "coloured" to get him on stage in the townships, the Blue Notes grabbed an offer to play at the Antibes Jazz Festival in France — and followed the stream of musical emigres leaving the country in protest at the debilitating effects of apartheid on their art. By the next year the band was living in England and had played in regular gigs at clubs like the Blue Note in Paris and Ronnie Scott's in London where they rubbed shoulders with some of the top jazzmen in Europe. It was in exile that the Blue Notes rediscovered their South African influences and began to self-consciously create what Chris McGregor calls their distinctive blend of "post-bop experimental jazz and music based South African music."
they were having a significant impact on music at a time when European jazz was the old Brotherhood pieces,” he says. “I’ll give them some of that, but you can be sure there’ll be something new too.”