

The British Free Jazz Movement

by Barry McRae

History repeated itself in the '60s when Britain got a jazz stimulant from one of its former colonies. Graeme Bell had injected his Australian swagger into a staid U.K. traditional jazz scene over a decade earlier. Now it was the turn of Chris McGregor, and he brought the taste of real Africa into a modern movement unsure of any policy, other than that of mirroring American hard bop.

Brought over in 1965 by club owner Ronnie Scott, the Blue Notes combined free jazz with these hard bop elements and were influenced by American free pioneers Ornette Coleman and Cecil

Taylor. What they added was a uniquely personal Africanism, not in the spurious form of the "jungle drums" but as an ingredient that suggested the flavor of High Life music.

Their bassist Johnny Dyani was an enigmatic figure, creative and introspective, but together with powerhouse drummer Louis Moholo, he formed a rhythm section that controlled the equilibrium of the band superbly. McGregor was an explosive pianist and Mongezi Feza a trumpeter whose inconsistency failed to hide an amazingly fecund talent. The outstanding musician, however, was altoist Dudu Pukwana, a man as

capable of playing "changes" with lyrical grace of Johnny Hodges, as he was of producing passionately free tirades.

They did not regard themselves as proselytizers but they introduced the establishment to free climes, and reminded the British free jazzmen that the (then) new music could swing, and could avoid being overstudied.

Their arrival was perhaps opportune because, in the following year, a group was formed, quite independently, to match the Blue Notes' emotional impetus with a very different aesthetic stance. Drummer John Stevens and saxophonist Trevor Watts were its inspiration, but disappointingly the Spontaneous Music Ensemble rarely enjoyed public support commensurate with its skill and influence.

The main objective of the group was to produce jazz which ignored outside pressures and pursued the ideal of spontaneous statement. They aimed to be as free from pre-conceived patterns as a musician in our traditional music environment can hope to be. As the group progressed stylistically, playing "without memory" remained a constant target in all of their experiments, even if their first recording did offer evidence of a degree of borrowing. The flourishing New York avant-garde movement was having a tremendous impact in European circles and, although two members of the group have independently denied the influence of the New York Art Quartet, there can be little doubt that the S.M.E. was drawing on the same tradition.

Stevens played "time" superbly but, seeing him seated at the considerably abbreviated kit he favored in the early

South-African stimulant: altoist Dudu Pukwana and the front line of Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath

photo: Jan Persson

