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THE BEGINNING OF A TRADITION

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1917 was a remarkable year in the history of jazz. The Secretary of the U.S. Navy closed Storyville, King Oliver moved up the river to Chicago, the Original Jass Band made its debut at Reisenwebers in New York. It was the end of jazz's primitive period, the beginning of the Jazz Age, the year the then seventeen-year-old Louis Armstrong led his first band.

One day when someone sits down to write the history of jazz in South Africa, he might find that South Africa's 1917 was 1959. For it was then that six talented musicians became the Jazz Epistles, the first group in the country with real musical aims and a unity of outlook, the first to work as an integrated, well-led, functioning unit, the first to compose and arrange their own music, the first African group to make a longplaying record. And today, just over three years later, there is evidence that the tradition of the Jazz Epistles is continuing. Jazz in South Africa has developed not from one talented individual to another, but from one group to another. Today Chris McGregor's Septet are playing the best jazz South Africa has ever heard, music they would not have been able to play had it not been for the Epistles, but significantly, music the Epistles were themselves not able to play.

I first heard the three leadmen of the Epistles, Kiepie Moeketsi (alto), Jonas Gwangwa (trombone) and Hugh Masekela (trumpet) one Sunday afternoon in August 1959 at New Phefeni Hall in Orlando. Their group had little cohesion, the rhythm was loose, but the music was warm and free with a sound I had never before heard. John Mehegan, the American critic and pianist, who visited South Africa soon after, spoke of the same sound but could not define it. His own playing certainly could not co-operate with it: listen to the two records he made with Moeketsi, Gwangwa and Masekela (Con. 9 and 10). But maybe I am being unfair. My prejudice against these records starts right at the beginning with Mehegan's sloppy introduction: "You are listening to Samson Singo playing the mbira piano of the Venda tribe in the Northern Transvaal—the beginning of jazz in Africa." It sets a tone from which the music never recovers.

When Dollar Brand came up the river from Cape Town to join the Johannesburg trio, the basis for Epistle music was set. Dollar, an enigmatic, moody, introspective pianist, began to shape the Moeketsi-Gwangwa-Masekela sound, arranging numbers to suit its flamboyance, setting the pattern for a jam-session type of combination (much like the Max Roach-Clifford Brown group), which relied less on a completely worked out strategy than on brilliant individuals with some similarity of attitude. Together they gave the Selborne Hall concerts in October 1959 playing their versions of Parker's *Chi-chi* and *Au Privave*, Gillespie's *Night in Tunisia*, Richie Powell's *Parisian Thoroughfare*. Sometimes, when the compositions suited the temperament and limited technical ability of the group, the music was superb: Dollar's *I Got it Bad and That Ain't Good*, Kiepie's *Lover Man*, Hugh's *Memories of You*, Jonas' *Caravan*. Generally it was of a standard never before reached in this country, probably on this continent. When I played tapes of these concerts in Nigeria, one newspaper critic hailed this music as the "brilliant cool jazz from Verwoerd's boys".

As 1960 began, Johnny Gertse, the bass and Mackay Ntshako, the drummer, followed Dollar from Cape Town and the Epistles came into being. Now with a fixed group, they experimented together exploiting each other's talents, eliminating basic faults, writing music to suit the sound they wanted to play. On Continental 14 they recorded these compositions, the Jazz Epistles Verse I.

They never got beyond Verse I. As a group they lived for less than six months. There were too few outlets for them to live as professionals; even when there were jobs, they turned sour. A stint in a Hillbrow coffee-bar lasted a few nights, another in a downtown Johannesburg hotel a little longer. Here the musicians were allowed in the lounge only when playing; they spent their breaks in the kitchen (Kiepie's *Scullery Department*?) or on the escape staircase, drinking illegally.

Talented though they were, the Epistles could not carry on without more incentive and for them, as for almost all jazz musicians here, real incentive lies in getting to the States, or at least to Europe. As a group the Epistles could never get there, as a group they could not get anywhere here. So they left individually. Masekela and Gwangwa to study at the Manhattan School of Music; Moeketsi to play for a while with the King Kong band in London; Brand, Gertse and Ntshako to play as a trio at the Club Afrika in Zurich.

Just at the Epistle's rhythm section had come up from Cape Town, so jazz in the north has constantly depended on the waves of musicians that come up from the coast. At the 1962 Jazz Festival at Moroka, although the first prize was won by theetime Mackay Davashe's *Dazzlers* (with Moeketsi), groups from the coast dominated the Festival: Chris McGregor and Cups-and-Saucers from Cape Town, Dudu Pakwana from Port Elizabeth, Eric Nomvete from East London. Good though the music was at the Festival, there was no single group which had the combined talent and personality of the Epistles.

But after the Festival came a group which had. Chris McGregor joined Dudu Pakwana's Jazz Giants, and this new Septet were playing last summer at the Mermaid in Cape Town, occasionally at a coffee bar in Sea Point or at concerts in the City Hall. Since February they have been working in Johannesburg and have given two memorable concerts at Wits University. The group is led by McGregor on piano, has Martin Mjijima on bass, Christopher Columbus on baritone (all from Cape Town), Dadu Pakwana on alto, Nick Moyake on tenor (from Port Elizabeth), Elijah Nkwanyana on trumpet and Eli Mabuza on drums (from Johannesburg).

Musically McGregor's group is a substantial advance on the Epistles. Much of the Epistles' music was based on the sound systems of Parker, of the then (by S.A. standards) avant garde Clif-

ford Brown and Richie Powell. McGregor's Septet have had the advantage of listening to all that has happened in American jazz since then: the funk and soul of Mingus, Silver and Coltrane, the tonal developments of Coleman, Dolphy and Oliver Nelson. And whereas the Epistles seldom made full use of their instrumentation, often kept boringly to one-after-the-other solos by their leadmen, McGregor has four horns and uses them to make a wide variety of harmonies, together in various combinations, alone for particular effects. Lifting though the Epistles were, McGregor's group has the hard drive of soul jazz.

Dollar Brand was a leader interested more in the sound he could get out of individuals than how these sounds worked in an overall musical plan. Chris McGregor is essentially an arranger with a pronounced concern for unity through a formal design. In their admiration of Ellington, they show their differences. Dollar admired Ellington as a composer, for his melodies, McGregor reveres Ellington as an arranger, for the way in which he balances sounds. On the South African jazz scene McGregor is an anomaly someone with a University musical background. As a student at the South African College of Music, he switched from art music to jazz, feeling that the sound he wanted to express, an essentially South African sound, could not be created in the classical European tradition of Bach, Mozart and Haydn; that what he wants to say in South Africa today cannot be said through the medium of a symphony orchestra, but through working with the sort of musicians that he has chosen. So McGregor writes and arranges his music to suit the talents of these people, *Vortex Special* or *Ukuphuma Kwelanga*, for instance, or an adaptation of Mingus' *Boogie Stop Shuffle*.

Almost without exception he feels that in his present group he has found the right people. Christopher Columbus, the baritone, with professional experience going back to 1944, has the background and temperament to adapt to McGregor's new ideas; Nick Moyake, whom McGregor calls a "Coltrane without the hysteria" has the drive and the subtlety to cope with the brilliance of altoist Dudu Pakwana. Dudu is the drama man of the group, aggressive with his own special sound. Having assimilated much from Eric Dolphy, his music is always startling, driving powerfully over the complex structure of his improvisations. When not playing himself, he mouths everyone else's part, soaking it all in until his own turn comes and then he bursts loose in commentary on what the others have said. Whereas Kiepie's alto sound was relaxed, often humorous, Dudu's sound is obsessive and relentless.

Kiepie and Dudu are the luminaries in an already definable school of saxophone playing in South Africa. Unlike the U.S.A. where there has been a strong tradition of tenors and trumpet in South Africa the alto is the instrument which seems best to express the way people hear the jazz sound. The trumpet is no more difficult than the saxophone, it is cheaper (a trumpet costs £30, an alto £50), and yet there is no trumpet tradition in South Africa. Possibly the absence of marching bands in South Africa has something to do with this being so; certainly Hugh Masekela leaving so early affected the advancement of trumpet playing. But when pennywhistlers graduate to jazz they switch automatically to altos, and it is undoubtedly the predominance of saxophones that has given South African jazz its different sound. This sound, while in part being caused by technical incompetence, is mainly the result of an approach to sonority which is unique to all African urban music, kwela, Zulu jive vocals, and the like; and it is this that makes an arrangement although literally taken over from an American source, nevertheless sound different.

Unlike the Jazz Epistles who relied so heavily on individuals McGregor's concentration on group music might allow a replacement to fit in when someone leaves. For this reason his Septet seems to stand a better chance of survival than the Epistles. But the problems which jazz musicians face in South Africa are immense. While being able to hear Ornette Coleman, in the isolated country in which they work, the jazz scene is still that of Louis Armstrong. Virtually no overseas musicians come to South Africa, and while this has helped in allowing musicians to develop their own sound, free access by American musicians would have given the music here stature and would have forced local musicians to come to finite conclusions about their own music. As soon as anyone becomes any good, he moves away. The general sense of repression has other bad effects: musicians cannot move and perform freely, audiences, already small, cannot mix, the radio, potentially major outlet, is barred to African musicians.

That in a country without one permanent jazz club, with virtually no facilities for tuition, no financial backing and hardly an audience, jazz is played is remarkable enough. That in three years the same country has produced two groups like the Jazz Epistles and the Chris McGregor Septet, is a miracle. Jazz will undoubtedly develop further in South Africa: musicians will go overseas, others will come back, new groups will form, but they will not have started from the beginning. There is now a tradition of group playing a tradition which started with the Epistles and continues today with McGregor's Septet.