

# The beat out of Africa

*Brian Morton pays  
tribute to the jazz of  
South African exiles*



*District Six: highlight of Camden's Jazz Against Apartheid on 24 March*

JAZZ WAS born in chains, but almost everywhere it has represented a kind of freedom. The black American poet Langston Hughes called it "mad, wild, frantic, crazy — and not to be dug unless you've seen dark days, too".

Dark days abound in the Cape. Perhaps only in "modern" South Africa is there a society that more or less reproduces the social conditions in which jazz sprang up, so it's no accident that much of the most vibrant contemporary jazz has South African names among the credits.

Nowhere more so than in Britain where, for almost 20 years of rock 'n' roll doldrums, a small knot of exiled South African musicians have kept the jazz fires stoked between "booms". In 1964 the white pianist Chris McGregor took his mixed-race Blue Notes to

a jazz festival at Antibes. They decided against going "home" and with help from another exiled piano man, Dollar Brand (now known as Abdullah Ibrahim), settled in Europe, first in Switzerland, then in London, where they formed the core of McGregor's new big band. Twenty years ago, almost to the day, the Brotherhood of Breath had an impact that left most listeners winded.

The dark days were not over. Exile is an evil star and the much-vaunted "freedom" and "exuberance" of the music barely camouflaged the pain and rage. There were losses: first, trumpeter Mongezi Feza, later, bassist Johnny Dyani, both victims of inadequate medical care and incomprehension. In between, Harry Miller — another inspirational bassist, al-

most as important for his foundation of the Afro-British Ogun record label — died in a car accident in Holland. As recently as last year, the exuberant Louis Moholo collapsed at his drums, victim of a heart attack. Happily, he survived.

What survived with him was a very special music, an almost perfect combination of affirmation and protest, anger and joy, musical simplicity and astonishing complexity. Chris McGregor had been weaned on a fiery combination of the Presbyterian hymnbook and Xhosa tribal music. Cape Town College added Schoenberg and Stravinsky, who are in there still, even if you can't hear them. Like all great bandleaders, McGregor has been almost as important as a catalyst. The often shambolic Brotherhood of Breath spawned a whole generation of extraordinary Afro-British bands — saxophonist Dudu Pukwana's Spear and Zila, Miller's Isipingo, Dyani's Detail, Moholo's Vive La Black — that have expressed their politics of liberation in the music, rather than in slogans, as in most "committed" jazz. (Nelson Mandela, free and unfree, has been a white pop icon; explicit references to him by black South African musicians are relatively and surprisingly rare.)

Among the most impressive is a fiery quintet led by drummer Brian Abrahams. District Six are the highlight of a Jazz Against Apartheid event to be held on 24 March as part of this year's Camden Jazz

Festival. They also have a new album, *Ingoma Yabantwana (Songs for the Children)* out on their own D6 label. District Six was the Capetownship where Abrahams (and Abdullah Ibrahim) grew up, and which no longer exists.

The distinctive quality of South African jazz is an quiet searching among the discord for a home key. The album's opening "McGregorian Chant" is trumpeter Jim Dvorak's tribute to the man who inspired District Six's compelling mixture of fury and almost academic distance. Like McGregor, Abrahams and his four companions (racially almost an ironic inversion of the original Blue Notes) is committed "to spread the rich culture of South African music", and to do so without compromise to either commercialism or a political simple-mindedness that sees the reality of South Africa as black and white.

*District Six play tonight at the Town & Country Club, Highgate Rd, London NW5, and as part of Camden Jazz Festival's Jazz Against Apartheid event on 24 March.*