

The Chris
McGregor
Septet



Up to Earth

John Surman
photographed by
Val Wilmer



Louis Maholo
photographed by
Val Wilmer



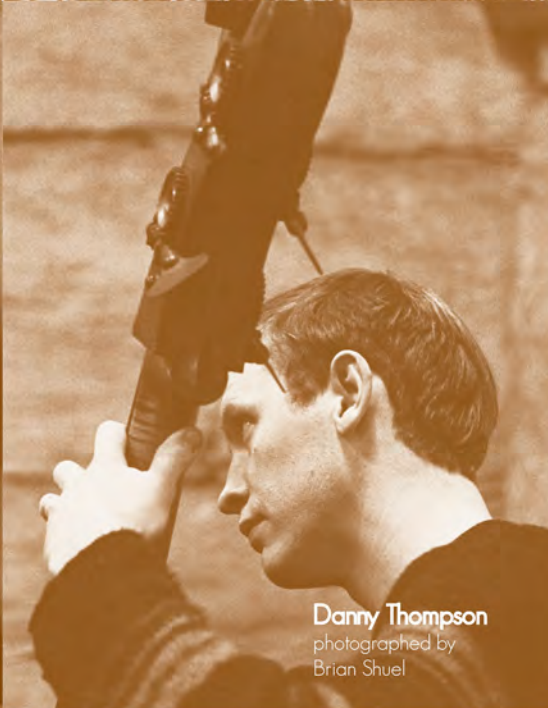
Dudu Pukwana
photographed by
Val Wilmer



Mongezi Feza
photographed by
Val Wilmer



Danny Thompson
photographed by
Brian Shuel



Evan Parker
photographed by
Val Wilmer



It's hard to remember why this record never got released. I suppose it was because my relationship with Polydor had soured and my new ally, Island Records, was not exactly a jazz label. I do remember, however, how exciting were the sessions.

One of great things about hearing these tracks for the first time in many years is the way you can hear the room at Sound Techniques. Every note comes vividly through, thanks to John Wood's engineering skills and the remarkable acoustic of the curious ex-dairy building in Chelsea. (Yes, there was once a dairy just off the Kings Road.)

The Septet that assembled for two days in the summer of 1969 was an evolution of the Chris McGregor group that had recorded "Very Urgent" with me a year before. Missing from the multi-racial group that had shaken and stirred the South African musical and political scene before leaving for the Antibes Jazz Festival in 1965 were sax man Ronnie Beer and bassist Johnny Dyani. It needed two northern hemisphere players, effectively, to replace each of them.

John Surman and Evan Parker were rare Englishmen in that they had 'gotten' the Blue Notes from the minute they arrived on these shores. Most British jazzmen were either dismissive of or intimidated by the South Africans. Here were highly skilled players not content to imitate the Americans, but who, after a nod in the direction of the music's originating culture, proceeded to invent their own African form of it. It was fine for them to come to Ronnie Scott's for an engagement following their triumph at Antibes, but then they were supposed - like the American visitors - to leave. The Blue Notes, as they were then called, decided to stay, which made a lot

of female jazz fans happy and a lot of British jazzers jealous and spiteful.

The South Africans had dreamed of endless jam sessions with illustrious peers once they hit these shores, but there was precious little of that on offer. Only visiting Yanks Albert and Don Ayler seemed excited by the prospect of playing with these exotic virtuosi night after night until the small hours. And the Musicians' Union decreed that they must wait the statutory year from application to admission and who cared if this meant a year of sofas and starvation for those by now very blue Notes. Parker and Surman, however, were excited and welcoming. For these sessions Evan replaced Ronnie on tenor and Surman came in on baritone and bass clarinet.

Johnny Dyani had decamped to Scandinavia, so the American Barre Phillips played bass on one session and Danny Thompson, whom I knew to be an experienced and adventurous jazz player despite his full-time gig with folkies Pentangle, did the other. Did these staid Anglo-Saxons hold back the exuberance of the Africans? I think you will agree they did not.

Exuberance can be a corny word, but in this case, it is justified. A cursory listen will place this disc in the 'free jazz' category and not without justification. But the anger that burns off the disc in recordings by the Aylers and Archie Shepp is either absent here or takes such a different form as to be unrecognizable. And who had more cause for anger than these exiled South Africans? That was one of the things that struck me so forcibly when I first encountered the Blue Notes in 1967 at Ronnie Scott's "Old Place". Loud, wild, fast, abstract playing to be sure; but it seemed that for them, the best

revenge on the murderous Boers was not anger, but joy and yes, exuberance. How else to describe the surges of energy that pour forth from this disc? Dissonance there may be, but never ugliness. Anger can be sensed in the restrained power of the playing, in the cartoonish self-importance of the "Union Special" march in "Yickee Tickee", in the defiant pride of the improvisations. There is comradeship born of struggle in the instinctive propulsion of Louis Moholo, Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana and Mongezi Feza, but they don't exclude their guests, they carry them along like wild horses luring the stud-farm beasts out for a gallop.

Perhaps I have an unfair advantage. Do I hear the humour, the gleeful destructiveness, in the music because I was lucky enough to sit in the studio listening to Chris and Dudu's hilarious banter? I wouldn't trade my memories of those two shining characters for anything, but this music tells that story better than I ever could.

One needn't look much further than "Yickee Tickee" for evidence of what made these musicians so fascinating. It starts off like a classic bebop anthem, all angular riffs and cocky phrasing. But there is nothing cool about this track: the theme has a grizzly five-o'clock shadow before the end of the first eight bars, and is soon inspiring solos quite unlike anything heard in New York in the 1950s.

"Moonlit Aloe" begins with typical McGregor 'homage-to-Ellington' horn parts but wastes no time in veering off into the moonbeams - only Mingus managed this kind of exquisite double-play. Everyone has a chance to shine here, but one is left with a desolate sadness contemplating the immense talent cut off in its prime when Mongezi Feza died of TB a few years after this recording.

On all tracks, the players trip lightly around and over each other, almost playfully. McGregor's piano keeps it all connected, somehow, no matter how wide an arc described by individual orbits. And on "Years Ago Now" he dances all over the track in a display of dazzling virtuosity. One day, when critics start to absorb the compositions, the arrangements, the orchestras, the tours, the solos, the visions, the leadership and the musicians he inspired, Chris McGregor will be appreciated for the giant he was.

Why don't people make this kind of music anymore? On the other side of the Atlantic, the anger that fuelled it burned out, or was doused by drugs, death, exhaustion and prison. This music, on the other hand, is optimistic in a way that is almost impossible to contemplate when considering the sorrows of exile the South Africans endured and their struggle simply to be able to play together. "Up To Earth" is certainly South African music, but even more, it is Sixties music, created before we learned the fate of our tragically finite earth. And before 'avant-garde' jazz became polite and fit only for the concert hall.

I still treasure my first encounter with this music at the Old Place, a raucous den where the hat was passed, bottles crashed on the floor, waitresses sat down at tables to listen and the music was so powerful no one gave a damn if people tried to talk through it. When the horns fell away and McGregor played quietly alone, no one dared speak and no signs or shhhs were necessary.

Joe Boyd, March 2008



Chris McGregor
photographed by
Val Wilmer

Fledg'ling would like to thank Janet Arbreu, Joe Black, Joe Boyd, Tim Chacksfield, Maxine McGregor, Hazel Miller, Matthew Suff, Richard Williams, Val Wilmer and Robert Wyatt for all their help in preparing this album for release.

Up To Earth was recorded in 1969, another previously unreleased chapter in the recorded legacy of Chris McGregor. The recording sessions for this remarkable and distinctive album brought together a dream team of South African exiles and some of the finest young players on the British scene. The music is joyous, optimistically drawing together their South African roots and European free jazz.

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | Moonlight Aloe (Chris McGregor) | 10:42 |
| 2 | Yidyitkee* (Chris McGregor) / Union Special* (Chris McGregor) | 8:34 |
| 3 | Up To Earth (Chris McGregor) | 7:20 |
| 4 | Years Ago Now* (Chris McGregor / Louis Moholo) | 11:20 |

"Those who heard and saw them in person should count themselves lucky, because the likes of this will not come again."

Chris McGregor - piano
Barre Phillips or Danny Thompson* - double bass
Louis Moholo - drums
John Surman - baritone saxophone, bass clarinet
Evan Parker - tenor saxophone
Dudu Pukwana - alto saxophone
Mongezi Feza - trumpet

Recorded at Sound Techniques, London
Engineered by Ron Pender and John Wood
Produced by Joe Boyd, Witchseason Productions Ltd.
Digital mastering by Denis Blackham at Skye Mastering
Artwork designed by mrsuff
Fledg'ling FLED 3069

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