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February 23: Central Hall, University of York
BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH

Chris MacGregor's Brotherhood of Breath arrived at York rather spasmodically, giving rise to that refreshing unpunctuality characteristic of jazz gigs where the audience, unlike any other concert audience, are happy to sit leisurely for the odd half-hour before the band actually gets to blow.

The music was continuous, following the pattern set in the last few years of allowing one number to flow into the next, usually by way of a completely improvised transition. Much of the material was free; space for the next written theme was often prepared by several abortive attempts by drummer Louis Moholo and bassist Harry Miller to establish a steady pulse. When the horns refused to co-operate the beat would disintegrate by way of increasingly complex rhythmic embellishments into a very dense and sometimes impenetrable mass of sound. It is this, maybe, which gives much contemporary jazz its apparently static quality. At times a total of eight horn parts blanketed in percussion made it impossible to listen to the progress of any one instrument; one perceived a statistical field of sound, defined by extremes of register and the emergence of rapid successions of attacks. But there is movement, usually very gradual, eventually unstoppable. Here there were players of experience capable of making a crescendo run for five or six minutes, staying at the top for several more, and bringing things down just when they, as a body, wished. This potential for making the point over an extended period is also to be found in riff-based music, another technique used by the Brotherhood.

The influence of African kwela music was apparent in the employment of very diatonic riff patterns, unlike the use of the flat third and seventh in most rock music. One memorable example was the use, on a steady pulse, of a pattern including nothing more involved than an ascending major triad, apparently in 4/4 time but proving to be telescoped into 11/4, causing everything to move forward rather breathlessly.

It is interesting to note that many of the musicians in the Brotherhood - Nick Evans, Harry Beckett, Mike Osborne, Evan Parker and others - play in several bands or have one of their own. This flexibility of ensemble is prevalent in the new jazz scene to a degree not found among rock musicians. This means that, for instance, Evan Parker and Mike Osborne can integrate their differing improvisation styles into various types of music more freely and successfully than can their rock counterparts, without losing their individuality - noticeable in Parker's

quacking tenor or Osborne's smoother alto. Osborne's use of clarinet, however, disturbed this blending on account of the timbral difference between single-reed woodwind and saxophones and trombones, rather than any lack of instrumental versatility.

One small criticism must be made of the band's amplification. Rock groups from the Stones to Soft Machine seem to run into problems only when dealing with thousands of watts; the Brotherhood with a few hundred or so made MacGregor's piano sound reminiscent of parts of Mantra, and microphones didn't seem to solve the perennial problem of trying to hear the bassist. Obviously this was not the sort of music where Miller could use his electric bass, but the virtuosic performance given deserved clearer acoustic results.

It remains to hope that more "straight" musicians, on hearing the Brotherhood, will be provoked into considering the high level of direct communication achieved by this talented band despite their, at times, very complex music.

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