



"THE WAY the music business is organised," says the saxophonist Chris Hunter, "you might just as well do the pools for all the chance you have of making it as a jazz musician in Britain. The fact is there are guys who are younger than me, more talented than me, who will probably never be heard at all. Because no English record company has the balls to put up the money to produce jazz albums — it's just unheard of."

Well, almost unheard of. Last week saw the release of *Early Days*, the first album by Chris Hunter. It is a remarkable record, for not only has Hunter spirited himself in through the back door and made his jazz album, he has made it with a measure of style and self-assurance one would hardly expect from somebody just turned 23.

Hunter is the first to admit that *Early Days* is the fruit of a remarkable stroke of good fortune. His real performing experience before making it had been limited to a stint with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra, a handful of recording sessions and 18 months with the Mike Westbrook band, culminating in the recording of Westbrook's *Mama Chicago*. It was Westbrook's management company who, in an act of faith in the young sax-player's potential, gave him carte-blanche to record a solo album for their own independent label, Original. Hunter chose the material; picked his own accompanists; worked out the budgets; co-produced and probably made the tea as well.

In the quality of its performances, the overall spirit which informs them, *Early Days* is a good omen not only for Hunter but for British jazz in general. Hunter's playing, and that of his sidemen — all young, and all, with the exception of guitarist Brian Godding, graduates of the National Youth Jazz Orchestra — bursts with all the freshness and enthusiasm one might expect, but displays a finesse and control one might not. Hunter's choice of material balances a sense of adventure with a love of tradition, mixing tunes from disparate sources and even eras, including Stevie Wonder's *Too High* and Ellington's *Prelude to a Kiss*. Nonetheless it hangs together with seamless continuity.



Chris Hunter — picture by Frank Martin

MICK BROWN on a new breakthrough for British jazz.

## Solo turns up trumps

Listening to *Early Days* and talking to Hunter, one is struck by the same impression one gets to a greater or lesser extent on hearing virtually any British jazz album — the commitment and enthusiasm for jazz from a performer who has had to discover and educate himself in the tradition rather than inheriting it as a birthright. Hunter grew up in Muswell Hill, North London, a long way from Kansas City, a fair child soprano, but a recalcitrant student on piano and violin.

He was 13 when his father bought him his first saxophone, with a view to entertaining the family with *The Yellow Rose of Texas* and the like; but for two years it stayed under the bed, until the day he was transfixed by an 8-bar solo in the middle of a Glenn Miller tune, and decided the instrument might offer more than he'd originally supposed. Thus hooked, he moved on to the music of Cannonball Adderley, Stan Getz and John Coltrane, playing the records at half speed and full volume, the better to copy the solos note for note until he had begun formulating an individual signature of his own.

He studied printing and graphic design after leaving school, but always with a feeling that anything other than playing jazz for a living would be second best — but

how many people make a living playing jazz? The summer of 1977 he spent with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra, touring in Europe and in Russia, where the audiences were ecstatic and the food atrocious. This gave him, he says, probably the best grounding any horn player could have in Britain. "because you really don't get an opportunity anywhere else to just get up and blow." Then it was back to a design studio for six months, playing sax part-time, impaled on the horns of the familiar dilemma about what is secure and what would be satisfying.

A telephone call out of the

blue from Mike Westbrook, looking for a last-minute stand-in for a tour of Europe and Scandinavia made his mind up for him. "I'd never met Mike before. He called me on a Wednesday and said 'We leave on Monday.' I took a deep breath and said 'I'll do it.'"

He has, he reiterates, been incredibly lucky, but he harbours no illusions about a solo album being the prelude to anything but more struggle in the future. The jazz musician's lot in Britain is not a particularly healthy one.

People just cannot make a living in this country playing jazz. The handful that do

really have to slog their guts out; it's virtually impossible unless you're prepared to compromise and play on David Essex tours and so on."

Hunter admits that he expects to spend much of his time from now on working in Scandinavia and Europe, away from the tight circle of sympathetic pubs and provincial jazz clubs which constitute the jazz scene in Britain. It is nice to have the occasional blow there, he says, but disheartening to try and carve a career. By comparison, the Moers Festival in Germany, where he played recently, was "like Woodstock — thousands upon thousands of people sitting out in the open for jazz — and there is no reason why it shouldn't be like that here."

That British musicians have to make do with much less stems, Hunter believes, from a fundamental lack of vision on the part of the powers that control the music industry, a lack of faith in British musicians, who at their best, he says, are the equal of their American counterparts: an indifference on the part of the record companies who sorely underestimate the potential audience for jazz in this country; and, above all, a lack of the fundamental education which could awaken more people to the beauties of jazz.

"If people could be awakened to that, to every kind of music, if people were more interested in watching a concert, or playing in one themselves, than in buying washing machines — it would make life so much richer."

**THE OLD VIC**

The Old Vic Company's new Season opens on Sept. 2, 1980 with

**PETER O'TOOLE**

in *Macbeth*

directed by Bryan Forbes

**BRYAN MARSHALL** in *Lancelot and Guinevere*

dramatised by Gordon Haskovsande directed by Martin Jenkins

and **TIMOTHY WEST** and **MAUREEN O'BRIEN**

in *The Merchant of Venice*

directed by Michael Meadowcroft

BOX OFFICE 925 7016      ONK CARD 26 1821