

OFF-BEAT

PETER CLAYTON

Fresh hunting grounds

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IF IT were not for his height, Chris Hunter could probably get away with half fares on the buses. His chubbily impudent face still has a slightly un-set, early teenage quality about it, while his whole bearing suggests that blend of sauce and charm which is all that stands between growing lads and massacre by their infuriated elders.

In fact he is 26, and the most important ticket he has bought recently was not for a bus ride in North London but for a one-way air trip to New York. Last Thursday he took his saxophones and his formidable talent for playing them to the land where jazz saxophonists are so abundant that the idea of there being room for one more seems absurd.

Apparently there is room, however, for young Chris. He goes not as a complete outsider needing to fight his way into the gladiatorial arena of American music, but as a guest with something akin to an invitation from those already there. During his short career he has been noticed, and now the day of reckoning has arrived.

He came to the discerning attention of American musicians by way of two key groups of engagements. One was with

Mike Westbrook, who took Chris Hunter to New York for performances of his jazz cabaret "Mama Chicago" and another musical entertainment springing from the work and life of William Blake. The other has been his position in the Gil Evans Orchestra—not merely as a member of the British contingent which Gil uses over here, but also in the largely American band that Evans has assembled from time to time for concerts in New York, Hollywood and Japan.

Two weeks ago Gil Evans told me: "I'm taking Chris back with me," and although that might be an over-simplification of what has actually happened, clearly the perceptiveness of Gil Evans (who is nearly three times his protégé's age) has played an essential part in uprooting Chris Hunter from Britain and re-planting him in New York.

All this is an immense distance away from the days when, as a real teenager, Chris was what he himself describes as a very bad saxophone pupil. "I wasn't motivated," he told me, trying out his American, "until I heard a Tex Beneke solo on a Glenn Miller record." He had been playing alto saxophone a long time by then, but thereafter worked hard at it.

When I first heard of him he was a star member of the

National Youth Jazz Orchestra. Before plunging into professional music, he worked for a time as an apprentice printer and on the design side of an advertising studio in Islington. He quite liked the work, "but I couldn't really handle an hour for lunch," he explained, summing up an entire temperament in those nine words.

His sound, particularly on alto saxophone, is fashionably hard and bright, almost without vibrato. While some saxophonists who favour that approach achieve a detached, nearly electronic effect, Chris generates a good deal of heat and can thus be emotionally exciting as well as technically facile.

Behind him are one album under his own name, another with a jazz-rock band called Hi-Tek, and some appearances on record with Mike Westbrook. In front of him is merciless, competitive, stimulating and—if the dice fall right—rewarding New York.

The attributes which made him unable to handle an hour for lunch may paradoxically be precisely the ones which will enable Chris Hunter to dedicate himself to the music in that almost ascetic way that jazz demands. We wish him luck, which is all he needs. He seems to have everything else.