

LEWIS NKOSI

Dollar Brand

"I believe I have found the language, I think I know the way." The words are Tom Wolfe's but they could issue just as appropriately from the mouth of Dollar Brand, the South African jazz pianist who has coined out of many elements and influences a musical language which is both tender and violent, serious and comic, a language which periodically reveals the menace of interior sounds and voices from the midnight violence of our South African streets recollected in the tranquility of exile.

Tranquility is perhaps a word one should never use in relation to Dollar Brand, either to describe a sense of physical repose, which he positively lacks, or artistically, to describe a form or reconciliation between the private and the public. He seems to be someone who continually experiences the public world as hostile and a threat to his private vision; and in turn his hostility and aggressiveness seems to the public a little gratuitous. Sometimes listening to him it has seemed to me that part of the disturbing violence which comes through his playing is the necessary result of this inability to compromise his private self or pay any attention to the social graces of the public relations man.

He drifted into London recently, hopefully home-bound after a three-year sojourn in Europe. He had played with a Danish string orchestra in Copenhagen for which he wrote all the music; and somehow that big band jazz sound had given him clues for the next phase of his musical development. In my house he was listening to the tapes he brought back from that "gig" and he was inwardly searching: "Listen to those whaa! . . . whaa! . . . sounds, man!" He was standing up, hands lifted in the air. The whole brass section of the orchestra was blaring; and there was Africa in the fierce tintinnabulation of instruments clashing like the cries of jungle fauna: "Those are the effects I want to get into my music. The piano has

become too limited for me. I can play it with my eyes closed." And in order to extend the limits of his favourite instrument, the piano, he had hoped to get back to South Africa where he was to put together a big band of home musicians. "Then," he said, "I can take this band on a tour of African states. Ja, Africa, man! That's the only place where music is still social. People live music."

IN THEIR SMALL FLAT in Dover Street, he and his singing wife, Beaty Benjamin, had their bags packed and were ready to leave in the afternoon. I was with them in a radio studio when the telephone call from Johannesburg came through freighted with the immeasurable burden of South African tragedy: apartheid. As it happened, the tour was being cancelled because the South African authorities would not only prevent Dollar Brand from playing before mixed black and white audiences but wanted the blacks also segregated into separate ethnic audiences of Africans, Indians and Coloureds. Financially, the concert tour would be a dead loss even before it started, and understandably the sponsors were pulling out, thus terminating Dollar's hope of a paid visit to South Africa. This news, coming at a time when Dollar Brand was ceaselessly flirting with the idiom of urban popular music as well as the melodic colourations of traditional African music, came as a bombshell. The lunacy of the official decision was beyond any logic.

Anguished and homeless, finally cut off from the life-sustaining tradition of native culture, we all got drunk that night. If Dollar Brand has suffered loss, South African audiences—even the cultural life of that country—will sustain greater losses. From Dollar Brand's minor tragedy can only come growth, for it is the mark of the adult artist to know and accept that in a deeper, symbolic sense maturity means: "You can't Go Home Again".

IF DUSTY SPRINGFIELD'S South African "mixed audience" fiasco was, as one newspaper termed it, "a storm that shook the pop world", then the cancellation of the Dollar Brand group's tour of South Africa, after a three-year spell in Europe, is going to ruin completely the Republic's jazz scene.

Internationally - acclaimed pianist Brand, bassist Johnny Gertze, drummer Mackay Ntshoko and vocalist Beaty Benjamin are all nonwhite. They were scheduled to arrive at Johannesburg's Jan Smuts airport on 12th March to start a four-month tour of the Republic's main cities before moving to the United States to which they have been invited by Duke Ellington.

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Jazz
Epistle 5

