

Gathering Brubeck's forces

93
BY GYLNIS O'HARA

"Ordinary bands here play in tune now ... they're not so drugged they can't stand," says Darius Brubeck, jazz music educator and performer.

He was talking about progress since his arrival in South Africa in 1983. He's 47 years old now, director of the Centre of Jazz and Popular Music at the University of Natal, and the first to start a jazz studies course at an African university.

He's also cemented his reputation through his work as a conductor for projects like the highly successful Sun City jazz concert a few years back, an event that showed that we really do have it all, given resources like sufficient rehearsal time and payment.

"As far as the music itself is concerned, so much has improved," he said. "There's more professionalism and pride, a better self-image, which equals better music."

However, "there's not much improvement in the support of music". Although he was hopeful of the new Ministry of Arts and Culture.

Along with Indian classical musician Deepak Ram, he has also just released "Gathering Forces II" (B&W) which mellifluously and gently blends African, American and Indian musical traditions.

"Living in Durban made it feasible," says the band leader, "it reflects exactly what Durban is to me".

It was his interest in Indian music, in fact in all three music's, that encouraged him to leave America and settle in that town in the mid-eighties. Coupled no doubt with falling in love with and marriage to a South African, Cathy Brubeck, whom he met while she was producing a concert in New York called "Ellington is Forever".

Deepak Ram has studied Indian flutes and tabla since he was a child, lectured full-time in the



Modest ... Darius Brubeck.

Department of Music of Durban-Westville and is reading for a Masters in composition at Rhodes. He is now based in London.

The legendary Brazilian percussionist Airtó Moreira is a guest artist on the album, having done a whistle-stop tour through this country last year, giving small concerts, performing with medicine men to further his belief in music as a healing process, and working on some recording projects with local musicians, including this one. (Another one just released, titled "Finding

Oneself", was with pianist Moses Molelekwa.)

Other musicians on "Gathering Forces II" include Chris Merz, ex-lecturer at the university (saxophone); Matthew Brubeck - Darius's brother - who plays with US jazz groups and the Berkeley Symphony (cello); Mark Killian (keyboards); Candace Whitehead (violin); Concord Nkabinde (bass); Stacey van Schalkwyk (flute); Bhisham Bridgall (tabla); and Kevin Gibson (drummer, percussionist).

"Indian music is a highly articulate, elaborate

system ... it abandons chord progressions and scales and goes off into other things."

Being the quiet, modest type, he balks at the idea that he may be the first musician to put together Indian, African and Western music. "Oh no, there was John Coltrane, John McLaughlin and the Eric Dolphy/Coltrane sensibility is very African."

"Oh, come on, Darius, say you're the first," says his PR, envisaging a good headline. But no, he won't, it wouldn't be true or right.

Still, the music he and his gathered forces

produce is a very rare and beautiful sound. As he says, the sonorities of the album are different, what with a combination of flute, strings, drums and percussion, as well as the different scales.

What makes it even more special is that the recording was done at a live performance. "It was the only chance we had to get the music down and at the same time I was recovering from a nearly lethal dose of food poisoning.

"I'm always open to more concerts. I think of myself as a project person. Every single thing I do is completely different."

He does not have a vast South African discography, having recorded "Gathering Forces I", "Live In New Orleans" with Lulu Gontsana and Victor Ntoni and "African Tributes", with the NU Jazz Connection in 1993, celebrating standards. He has, however, appeared on at least a dozen US albums.

"Live performance is more important anyway. It's often better than the records.

"This country is really going to start revving up, either domestically or exporting talent. We already have the exile generation coming and going at will. Now there's a generation of young people who have not been demoralised, kids of the '80s are confident. They've seen a great victory in this country. There's a belief in this culture, the psyche is healthy if music is an indicator."

That doesn't mean there's no space for people like Darius:

"I'm white and foreign and I feel I have a future."

On the other other hand, though, people must accept that "there's nothing rare about a white American jazz pianist ... We should move towards being more 'normal', not being more segregated but less so."