

Jazz icon

Chris Barber "Can't Stop Now"

Jazz icon is Van's right hand man

By Kenny Mathieson

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WHEN Van Morrison takes the stage for his two sold-out appearances at The Ironworks this weekend, he will be joined by arguably the most successful British jazz musician ever.

Trombonist and band leader Chris Barber first worked with Morrison in a concert which they co-headlined with the late Lonnie Donegan in Belfast in 1998.

The concert was a celebration of skiffle, the popular idiom of the 1950s in which both Donegan and Barber were pioneers. Van Morrison had his own early roots in that music, and was a Barber fan long before his own rise to international stardom.

"I was one of the first guys Van ever heard on record, and that means a lot to him," Barber recalled.

"After the Belfast show we got talking, and he said to come along and play at one of his gigs. That was quite difficult, because he had a lot of great arrangements, but none of them included a trombone player, and as you know, trombone is written in a different key and clef, so I had to extemporise a bit. Van seemed to enjoy it, and we have continued to do it when it suits us.

"I like the fact that he is a stickler for things being played right. I am the same way in my own band. When I turn up to play with Van I never really know in advance what we will be playing, although there are a few numbers that are pretty much always there. You have to remember that jazz and blues and rock all came from pretty much the same place, and the trick is to be able to adapt to the particular phrasing and appropriate style of the tune you are playing."

Barber has led his own band since 1954 and is well used to filling major venues all over Europe. The six-piece Chris Barber Jazz Band became the Jazz & Blues Band with the addition of electric guitarist John Slaughter in 1967, and more recently he has led his 11-piece Big Chris Barber Band, as featured on his new

CD release, "Can't Stop Now", with elegant arrangements by Bob Hunt and three contributions from guest vocalist Andy Fairweather-Lowe.

"We had always been devotees of early Ellington, and had recorded a number of those tunes with the six piece band as best we could over the years, but with the bigger group we can do them properly, especially with Bob Hunt doing the arrangements. He knows Ellington inside out, and really understands how his music works," he added.

The trombonist seems to thrive on a relentless touring schedule that would put many a younger musician to shame, and does not subscribe to the theory that life on the road is a punishing experience.

"It doesn't bother me. I don't see it as hard, but it is boring," he acknowledged.

"You travel all day and by the time you get to the gig it's too late to do anything else. If the gig you play is good, then nothing is too much trouble — if the gig is horrible, then everything is too much. And I don't ever ask musicians to do anything I'm not doing myself."

Although he added the Blues tag to the band's name relatively late, the blues were always a firm part of the group's repertoire, and a forthcoming series of live recordings will look back to the 1950s and 1960s when Barber was a prime mover in bringing a number of major American performers to Britain for the first time.



Chris Barber (left) and Van Morrison will join forces at The Ironworks.

In our contemporary world of instant access it is hard to remember that in the 1950s American jazz and blues artists were effectively barred from playing in this country by restrictive union rules, and even recordings were in short supply. Barber recalls himself and another notable UK blues pioneer, Alexis Korner,

scouring Dobell's record shop in London for new recordings from America, but was aware that there was no substitute for first hand exposure.

"We wanted to learn to play the music properly, and we knew the best way to do that was to get close to the sources," Barber recalled.

"The problem was at that time the Musicians Union had a ban on American musicians playing here. Then Big Bill Broonzy came over and did a few things — I saw him at the Albert Hall in 1951, and wondered how it was possible. "Eventually it turned out that the MU didn't care about singers — they belonged to a different union, and we took advantage of that to bring in Sister Rosetta Tharpe in 1957 and then Sonnie Terry and Brownie McGhee in 1958. We toured them with the band and we paid them because the promoters wouldn't pay extra for them!"

Those ground-breaking tours have gone down in British music lore, but there have been few opportunities to actually hear what they sounded like until now. A new series of recordings under the banner "The Blues Legacy: Lost & Found" will put that to rights.

"By sheer chance one of the concerts we did frequently in those days was the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, and like most public halls, it had a rubbish sound system. However, there was a chap in Manchester who was a friend of the lady who did the sound, and she allowed him to run his tape recorder during the gigs, so tapes were made of all these concerts," he said.

"It was illegal, of course, but now I'm very thankful he did it, because he has captured a very important historic period in the history of jazz and blues in Britain. Some of the tapes have been issued as poor-quality bootlegs, but we have the original tapes, and we will be issuing ours in good sound on a label we have set up called Blues Legacy, probably starting in February.

"They will feature Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Boy Williamson, Muddy Waters and others. We played with Howlin' Wolf as well, and he was rarely, if ever, recorded with a brass section."

* Chris Barber appears with Van Morrison at The Ironworks tonight and tomorrow.

* Van Morrison is expected to appear at 8pm and the bar will shut at 7.45pm.

You can see the online version of the newspaper by clicking on:

www.inverness-courier.co.uk/news/fullstory.php/aid/4599/Jazz_icon_is_Van's_right_hand_man.html

