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Big Road Blues

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Fri 28 Mar 2008

Chris Barber Presents... The Blues Legacy Series: Lost & Found

Posted by Jeff under [1950's Blues](#), [1960's Blues](#), [Music Reviews](#)



The thought of “lost” blues recordings always gets me worked up even though I usually get disappointed with the final result. Such is the case with Chris Barber’s [The Blues Legacy Series: Lost & Found](#), a three volume series touting unreleased live recordings of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Jimmy Witherspoon, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Champion Jack Dupree and Louis Jordan. According to the liner notes: “The formation of the ‘Lost & Found’ Series came into being; when the Jazz & Blues legend Chris Barber came across some old 1/4 inch magnetic tape. On these, he discovered the unique sounds of Sonny Boy Williamson in concert, recorded many decades ago, in England. Chris set about investigating his archives further, only to find more of these tapes...”

The bulk of the recordings were made between 1957-1964 at the very beginning of the blues boom that swept across Europe. I was always under the impression that interest in blues really took off in Europe with the inception of the [American Folk Blues Festival](#) in 1962. I’m not sure what kind of blues audience there was in England in the late 1950’s; I don’t think labels like Chess were easy to come by back then and it wasn’t until 1960 that Paul Oliver published his pioneering *Blues Fell This Morning*. Certainly the audiences on these recordings are enthusiastic but I would certainly be interested in more information regarding the British blues scene of the period.

Firstly, just to make clear, the 1958 Muddy Waters recordings from the Manchester Free Trade Hall have been previously issued. These are Muddy’s earliest live recordings and his first tour of England. Vocally Muddy is in magnificent form, his vocals miked right up front, unfortunately his guitar is submerged in the mix. It’s also too bad that Muddy’s band didn’t make it over with him although thankfully Otis Spann did and his piano playing, although low in the mix, is a thing of beauty. Most of the program features just Muddy, Spann and Barber’s drummer Graham Burbridge which is just fine. More problematic is “Walking Thru The Park” featuring Barber’s band wailing along behind Muddy with their brand of traditional jazz, a jarring contrast that simply doesn’t work. Unfortunately this is emblematic of many of the recordings.

Like Muddy, Sister Rosetta Tharpe is in terrific vocal form and like Muddy she suffers from a guitar that’s virtually inaudible which is a real shame. Again Barber’s band and Tharpe’s vocals make for an incongruous mix on numbers like “Every Time I Feel The Spirit”, “Up Above My Head I Hear Music In The Air”, “Old Time Religion” where they virtually drown poor Rosetta out. Where’s Lucky Millinder when you need him? The latter number plus “When The Saints Go Marching in feature white vocalist Otilie Patterson who, to be fair, is not a bad vocalist but comes across as a bit staid. Fortunately most of the Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee sides from their 1958 date at the Manchester Free Trade Hall feature just the duo who are in reliably fine form. Several other sides from the same year are from a BBC broadcast which liberally feature Barber’s band

as well as Otilie Patterson. To be honest the duo's sides have never excited me all that much although in small doses they're quite enjoyable. Similar issues plague the Sonny Boy Williamson performance from 1964. The band is present on just about all the tracks much to the detriment of Sonny Boy's subtle, nuanced blues. I believe some of these sides have been issued before but I'm not sure if it was a legitimate release. Much better are his AFBF performances of the same year backed by Sunnyland Slim, Hubert Sumlin and Willie Dixon.

The Jimmy Witherspoon and Howlin' Wolf sides fare much better. Witherspoon is in superb voice, delivering an aching, world weary version of "Have You Ever Loved A Woman" and his classic "Times Are Getting Tougher Than Tough" from a 1964 date that get fairly sympathetic backing. A 1980 set for Dutch Radio finds him in still superb form just prior to the cancer that would ravage his voice in his later years. Howlin' Wolf alongside trusty guitarist Hubert Sumlin are simply electrifying on a torrid "Dust My Broom" and a dramatic, powerhouse version of "May I Have A Talk With You." I have to admit that the riffing horns on "Howling For My Baby" are quite effective as Wolf storms through this one.

From a historical standpoint these are fascinating recordings but a mixed bag musically. Overall there's enough good performances to recommend these, at least the second and third volumes, although all the artists involved have better live recordings on the market. One must also give Barber his due for taking a chance on these artists at a time when the blues was anything but a sure bet.

[Muddy Waters - Blow Wind Blow](#) (MP3) 

[Howlin' Wolf - May I Have A Talk With You](#) (MP3) 

[Jimmy Witherspoon - Have You Ever Loved A Woman](#) (MP3) 

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