



post-gazette **NOW**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A historic legacy of the blues

5.21.08

Wednesday, May 21, 2008

By Jim White, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

How did real live American blues first get to Europe? I'm sure that's a question most of you have been asking yourselves lately.

While I'm sure there were probably a lot of ports of entry, one of the most influential was England in the late 1950s, when British trombonist Chris Barber exercised his fascination with American jazz and blues by importing some of the biggest U.S. blues stars of the day for a series of unique concerts.

Recordings of the concerts were lost in the early '70s, and for the most part, these historic performances were just memories. As fate would have it, and it often does, Barber recently discovered the concert tapes in a vintage American car he had brought out of storage for restoration (the Blues Highway is always there when you need it).

The result is the very excellent [Blues Legacy Lost & Found](#) series, a three-CD set of concerts recorded between 1957 and 1980.

It's an amazing set of shows, featuring Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Champion Jack Dupree, Muddy Waters and Otis Spann, Louis Jordan, Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), Howlin' Wolf and Hubert Sumlin and Jimmy Witherspoon. All of them with Barber's jazz band, or parts of it.

It's a fascinating blend of cultures, musicians and musical styles, and their success is a tribute to how much musicians just love their music.

While he wanted to bring basic American blues to England, Barber was very much a jazzman with those sensibilities, and his band, with its traditional American jazz sound, was called on to provide a framework for the bluesmen. But the blues players fit in, as well. Barber comments on some of the tracks, before the '50s Barber makes the song intros.

On Vol. 3 of this set, in a 1964 session that features Sonny Boy Williamson on a dozen tracks, Williamson seems very comfortable in front of the band, and some distinctly hot jazz horn riffs.



On Duke Ellington's classic "C Jam Blues," Barber introduces Williamson with a nod to the fact that harp players played very much like jazz musicians, especially sax players.

And Sonny Boy does just that, in a marvelous outing that his blues fans probably never got to hear. He plays in front of Barber's band much like a honking sax player, soloing, and if my ears are right, improvising until the band kicks in. It's the interplay of great musicians at work. No singing here, just splendid playing, with multiple harp solos carrying the load. Very amazing.

As a teaser, here's a YouTube promotional video for the series. Even this sounds great.

The discs are all full of this kind of musical joy. On Vol. 1, from a 1957 concert, Sister Rosetta Tharpe runs through a stirring gospel set capped by an exciting version of "When the Saints Go Marching In." The liner notes point out that Tharpe, who was used to performing with a band, brought her arrangements with, spread them out on the floor for the Barber band members, who just scratched their heads at the idea of reading sheet music. Their collaboration became another triumph of music.

Running all throughout this series is the freshness of a full jazz band supporting these blues musicians whose music was their mother tongue. It's one thing to hear the horns behind Jimmy Witherspoon, but another to hear horn solos work their way around a Sonny Boy song, then have the harp respond in kind. Williamson's "Bye Bye Bird" is another tour de force, with the band romping in and out for choruses around Sonny Boy's work.

Not all is a romp, though, as Sonny Boy solos on his own traditional tune, the dark "Your Funeral, My Trial."

Muddy Waters runs through a set of some of his standards from the day, and Champion Jack Dupree, an often-overlooked piano player sounds fresh and pure.

Also worth noting is the singing of Otilie Patterson from Barber's band, whose own blues flowed naturally, and she is paired on some fine tracks, especially with Tharpe. She also joins in on a version of Waters' "Walkin' Thru the Park."

It should be clear enough that I think this is a splendid set of recordings. It's hard not to be impressed by the quality, plus the obvious enthusiasm of all in these concerts. And it's a fresh look at how the blues moved into England. These are said to be the first American bluesmen to visit England, starting a wave of imports that eventually turned around, and came back to the U.S. with the Stones and other British bands.

I seem to have rambled on here long enough. I think my enthusiasm is showing. It wouldn't be hard to go over these CDs track by track and write a lot more, but even BlueNotes has his limits.

So it's great history, great music and what more can anyone ask?

There's also a companion DVD of the current Barber band, offering a set of its jazz standards. No blues players are included here, but it's an excellent showcase for the band's extensive talents.

First published on May 21, 2008 at 12:00 am