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Chris Barber: As We Like It

It was early 1959. Rock'n'roll was about to suffer the worst year of its history, with many of its prime movers set to leave the stage, whether through death or and number of unfortunate career moves. Pop music for adults seemed to be as strong as ever, while pop music for teenagers was poised to take over from rockabilly as the musical style favored by the increasingly more powerful record and radio industries.

In the midst of the chaos, a gentle reminder of an earlier time emerged, in the form of a plaintively melodic clarinet instrumental called "Petite Fleur," by Britain's Chris Barber's Jazz Band. Its composer, New Orleans clarinetist and soprano sax master Sidney Bechet had recorded the tune only seven years earlier, during his extended stay in France. But the tune seemed to reflect back to an earlier era, a gentler time when music was more often played in parlors than dance halls. Barber's recording focused wholly on the clarinet of Monty Sunshine, over a low-key backdrop of guitar, bass, and (my memory tells me) lightly brushed drums. (Ironically, on Chris Barber's biggest hit, his own trombone was nowhere to be heard.) There was little in the way of jazz improvisation, but it was instead smoothly tuneful. Even so, it was certainly far meatier than most of what passes for "smooth jazz" in recent years.

That one hit, which reached #5 on the U.S. charts, was pretty much it for Chris Barber on the American scene. The truth is, he had already made a less publicized, but perhaps in the long run more significant contribution to the American scene a few years earlier. It was on Barber's first 10-inch LP that his banjo player, Lonnie Donegan, recorded the Leadbelly classic, "Rock Island Line" (with Chris Barber on bass, released under the name "The Lonnie Donegan Skiffle Group"). That record became such an enormous hit that it sparked a "skiffle music" craze in England, thus influencing many of the young British lads who would go on to become leading lights during the British Invasion of the mid-60's. What's more, it provided many American baby boomers (myself included) who were just a bit too young to be affected by the Weavers our first entrée into the Folk Revival of the late 1950's.

Barber himself would go on to become one of the great triumvirate of "trad jazz" bandleaders (the British name for Dixieland jazz) of the early 60's (along with Kenny Ball and Mr. Acker Bilk). Barber also played a highly significant role in bringing many American blues legends to Britain for the first time in the late 1950's, thus paving the way for the British blues boom of the 60's, which once again impacted heavily on rock history. (A number of radio broadcasts from these tours, including previously unissued performances by Muddy Waters, Champion Jack Dupree, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, among others, have been issued recently under the series title *The Blues Legacy: Lost and Found.*)

Thus, while American audiences have pretty much lost touch with Chris Barber over the past half-century (although he has toured here several times), his influence continues to this day. I'm happy to report that Chris Barber himself continues to this day as well, as proven by a highly entertaining new DVD, "As We Like It", recorded in 2007 and credited to "The Big Chris Barber Band". He was 77 years old when this was filmed, but that hardly means he's ready to retire and rest on past laurels. Indeed, this "Big Chris Barber Band" extends the Barber trad sound not only in terms of the instrumentation, but also in terms of versatility. There's trad/Dixieland, there's a considerable dose of blues with a touch or two of rock, a few arrangements of spirituals, and there's a lot of Duke Ellington-inspired swing here as well.

Note that this isn't labeled as the Chris Barber "Big Band" - at eleven pieces, with two trumpets, two trombones, three reeds, and four rhythm - it's smaller than most "big bands", yet larger than a typical Dixieland band. This increases the band's flexibility, allowing for a wider range of musical styles.