



BLOWING up a storm with jazz man Chris Barber. Page 13

'On the slide' since 1949

A NEW SET of CDs has just been released in this country that has been a timely reminder of the debt that the British music scene owes Chris Barber.

Inspired by the King Oliver Creole Jazz Band, Chris had formed his first Barber New Orleans Band in 1949 at the tender age of nineteen. During the late 50s and 60s, he and his band were constantly hopping across the Atlantic, where their brand of Dixieland jazz was highly respected by audiences and musicians that could easily have taken umbrage at an Englishman reintroducing their own music to them - coals to Newcastle fashion.

Along the way, Chris and the rest of his band met and played with some of the most important and innovative black musicians of the 20th century... giants like Big Bill Broonzy, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Sister Rosetta Tharp, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee and Muddy Waters... and then brought them back to the UK on a series of ground breaking tours that changed the face of British music for ever. But sadly, none of the live music was recorded... at least that was always the assumption.

"What none of us had realised," says Chris, "is that someone at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, where we played a lot of our concerts, was secretly recording them. We just thought they were balancing the sound for us!"

"Over the years, rumours started to circulate about these recordings and some poor quality bootleg versions appeared in private hands. Then, recently, the person responsible came forward and handed over the tapes."

The resulting three-CD collection "Blues Legacy: Lost & Found" is a treasure trove of delights - recordings that remind us of musicians who have played such a major part in shaping the music we enjoy today. What is particularly fascinating is the seamless way in which Chris's band blends with the musicians - providing backings that defy national and cultural boundaries.

This is a tribute not only to the universality of great music but also to the way Chris and his musicians spent so much time in the States absorbing the original influences of rhythm and blues. They went on the road with these people although their venues had to be carefully selected: at that time in the States some places forbade black and white musicians sharing a stage. "Discrimination took some strange directions in those days," says Chris, "and was often expressed in small niggly ways. Going out and socializing with black musicians was difficult in some places - we had to meet them in their homes."

"Racism was also more open than you would imagine. We went to New Orleans and were met at a reception by the Mayor. Later on that day we watched a parade and, there, at the head of the Ku Klux Klan, was the Mayor!"



Chris Barber has been filling out concert halls for nearly 60 years. And, along the way, has been responsible for not only making jazz one of the most enduring forms of music in the country, but also introducing black American musicians into this country who inspired bands as diverse as Fleetwood Mac, Cream and the Rolling Stones. He talks to Tony Watts.



The tours that Chris led in the UK when he brought a succession of musicians to British audiences proved hugely influential. In the audience were young, aspiring musicians like Long John Baldry, Eric Clapton, John Mayall, and the future members of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. All of them have since acknowledged the fact that this exposure to the raw authentic sound of blues played a key role in the way their music developed.

The impact on the American blues musicians themselves was also profound. They suddenly had huge recognition, playing in massive auditoriums. "There is a myth that they weren't appreciated in the US - they were," says Chris, "but they certainly weren't that well paid and although there were white people coming to

see them, they mostly played to black audiences."

Famously, when the Stones made it big in the States, they cited many of these black blues musicians as their influences - helping to introduce them to a new generation of white music fans.

Of course, for a whole generation of people whose musical "stamp" was the the 50s and 60s, Chris Barber and his (often changing) line up was a staple of the trad jazz scene. He set out on the road to a music career in 1949, soon making his mark in the Humphrey Lyttleton band. In 1953, along with Monty Sunshine and Lonnie Donegan, he joined forces with Ken Colyer - an interesting side note is that Lonnie's breakthrough hit of Rock Island Line in 1956

featured Chris on trombone. He was still with Chris's band at the time, but that success encouraged him to go off and focus on developing the skiffle sound - one of the most distinctive styles of music of the 1950s, inspiring youngsters up and down the country to try and make music for themselves - including The Beatles.

With the replacement of Ken Colyer by Pat Halcox, Ken Colyer's Jazzmen became "Chris Barber's Jazz Band" in 1954, nominally a six-piece band but regularly featuring a changing array of vocalists which helped to keep his style and approach fresh. And one of the interesting facets of the band was that it had no keyboards. "That began because we had no piano player," says Chris, "but it became a distinctive part of our style

and I think makes for a very clear sound."

Over the years, the band evolved into the eight-piece unit, blending brass, reeds, and electric guitar into a unique mix of blues and jazz. Thousands of recordings have followed in those years - and over 10,000 concerts. Today, his sound is as rich as ever - and even bigger now that he has ten musicians behind him.

But the start of his career, as he tells me, was helped no end by Sunday observance. "We were getting a little work, in the clubs and so on, but not earning that much and still living at home," he says, "and not playing enough to really get a lot better. But then we started to get bookings from the seaside resorts. The end of the pier theatres couldn't put on performances in those days because of the Lord's Day observance. But you could play music!"

"For venues that couldn't afford big acts like Ted Heath, we were perfect!"

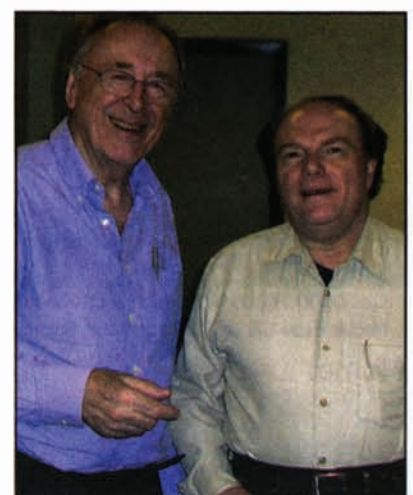
Of course in those days while jazz was hugely popular, its fans were strictly divided into two camps: trad and modern. "It wasn't just about the music," says Chris, "it was also about attitude and lifestyle. It's great that trad jazz has lasted the course - and that there are plenty of young musicians taking over."

So now it's time to put Chris on the spot. After a lifetime of playing and appreciating music, which would be his "Desert Island Discs"? The first five prove a fascinating, classy and eclectic mix.

"Louis Armstrong has to be in there - with 'Hotter than that', and Jelly Roll Morton's 'Deep Creek'. I'd want a Louis Jordan track," (Chris has recorded with him), "so Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan with 'T'aint Nobody's Business'. Charlie Parker's 'Cool Blues' and Duke Ellington's 'Black and Tan Fantasy'."

And for his sixth I ask him for one of his own recordings. But he cannot choose. "A number should change every time," he says. "Otherwise it defies the spirit of jazz."

Here in Britain, we all too often assume that the Americans not only invented jazz but produced all the best exponents too. But surely, in the pantheon of jazz, Chris Barber has now earned his place.



Chris Barber with another veteran entertainer - Van Morrison