

# Chris Barber Presents: The Blues Legacy

Lost & Found Series Vol. 1, Vol. 2,  
Vol. 3

MVD Audio (5067x, 5068x, 5069x)

Grade: ★★★

Boasting previously uncollected live recordings by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson and others, this blues trilogy veers wildly from archival treasure to mildly disappointing curio. Culled from live radio broadcasts and concert hall recordings circa 1957-1964, these entertaining sets feature backing from England's premier dixieland jazz outfit, the Chris Barber Band.

Early on, the combo — which features banjo strumming and plummy trombone — seems an inappropriate choice to back the aforementioned blues greats. However, each performer demonstrates great affection for Barber's sound and helps forge a jaunty cross-cultural chemistry not often heard stateside.

As a result, Sister Rosetta Tharpe sounds like she has brought a Dixieland band into church for the first time while joyously yelping such favorites as "This Train," "Up Above My Head" and "Down By the Riverside." By contrast, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee largely work solo. At their mid-career best, they recreate such folk-blues standards as "Midnight Special," "How Long, How Long Blues" and "John Henry." Harmonica buffs will especially dig Terry's turns on "Fox Chase" and "Callin' Mama Blues."

Brilliantly supported by piano legend Otis Spann, an initially uncertain Muddy Waters snarls through a set that includes "Baby Please Don't Go," "Rollin' Stone," and "I Can't Be Satisfied." Unfortunately his guitar leads are so low in the mix that the impact of the respective songs is almost nullified. (The same is true of Tharpe's recordings.) Along with Jimmy Witherspoon's pedestrian performances, these problems comprise the set's biggest drawbacks.

No such problems plague superior performances from Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) and the ever-intense Howlin' Wolf (with Hubert Sumlin), who make Barber's band work as soulfully as their own groups back home. Moreover, Champion Jack Dupree elicits major laughs with his version of "Mother-In-Law Blues." On balance, these delightful moments easily compensate for the set's shortcomings and, in the process, heighten appreciation for the venerable Chris Barber.

— Ken Burke

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