

1930 is a good vintage! **(On Chris Barber's 80th birthday)**

1930, the year when the soccer world championship took place for the first time, was a good year for jazz trombone players: Chris Barber and Hawe Schneider were born – two musicians who influenced the development of jazz especially in Germany and became very popular at it.

This article is dedicated to Donald Christopher Barber. To present him in the *Swinging Hamburg Journal* is almost superfluous, I would say. But I would like to focus the spotlight on some exemplary stations of his career. A detailed description of it can be found on his website www.chrisbarber.net. I would also like to express my appreciation to Mr Andreas Wandfluh (Switzerland), the co-webmaster of Barber's homepage, for his support with this text.

The band, originally marketed as Ken Colyer's Jazzmen in 1953/54 and which since 31st May 1954 bears Chris Barber's name, has gone through all of the ups and downs of the music world and has had an unequalled impact on Europe's jazz scene. Above all in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and the Federal Republic of Germany Chris Barber's influence has contributed to the popularity of traditional jazz and blues. Even today all musicians of this genre are still profiting from this, no matter how closely their style is related to Chris's or to what extent they criticise his creations.

Chris Barber has been active as a jazz musician and band leader since 1949. On 13th July 1954 the Chris Barber Jazz Band recorded their album "New Orleans Joys" which sold 60,000 (!) copies. Due to this great success, DECCA released singles from this album such as Lonnie Donegan's *Rock Island Line & John Henry* (with Chris Barber on the string bass and Beryl Bryden on the washboard) that stormed the charts and triggered Donegan's solo career. In the same year the skiffle title *Lost John* (with Lonnie Donegan and Dickie Bishop on guitars, Chris Barber on the string bass, Ron Bowden at the drums) reached the TOP 10 again.

Chris Barber's greatest hit, however, was *Petite Fleur in 1959*, already recorded in 1956. Dickie Bishop, the banjo player in Chris Barber's band in 1956, remembers: "We had recorded *Petite Fleur* in a studio and thought it would be a good idea to play this title live on the very same evening in a jazz club. But when the fans saw me come in with my guitar case, I was booed so violently that we changed our minds and cancelled our plan to play that title. Nobody could imagine that this title was to become a million seller."

Believe it or not: hit parade success was not Chris Barber's main target although he became a pioneer for the marketing of traditional jazz. He always strived for serious artistic creations, mainly the interpretation of the blues and the analysis of Duke Ellington's music - along with his interest in playing New Orleans revival jazz in the spirit of George Lewis, as Chris had done with his early jazz band with Monty Sunshine and Lonnie Donegan.

Chris reports repeatedly that he already had a "band within the band" (with Alexis Korner) during the semi-professional time of his "amateur band" in the early 50s. Dickie Bishop told me that the Chris Barber band had met the renowned blues singer and guitarist "Big Bill" Broonzy in 1954 on a trip to Paris - a great inspiration for Barber, Donegan and Bishop. When Lonnie Donegan began his solo career in 1956 and left Chris Barber, Johnny Duncan came in; however, he was mainly oriented towards Country & Western music. Chris refused to join. "No Footprints InThe Snow", he declared; and thus Duncan and Barber went their separate

ways. Since Dickie Bishop had also left the band, Chris Barber closed the skiffle chapter even before the skiffle boom had faded.

On the other hand Chris took advantage of a loophole in the disputes between the American and British music unions. Although American bands were not allowed to tour in Great Britain, American solo singers were allowed to appear and that is why Chris invited blues giants such as Muddy Waters, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee to tours in England – an important trigger for the blues boom of the 60s.

When Monty Sunshine, who had been dominated by George Lewis's style, was replaced by Ian Wheeler, the band's musical flexibility and the "band width" grew enormously as Ian also played alto and soprano saxophone as well as the blues harmonica, thus adding great variability to the music of the band.

In 1964 John Slaughter's lead guitar became a permanent enrichment to the rhythm section. When I asked the piano player Ray Smith, whose brother Dick Smith had become the Barber Band's bass player, why the band had never had a permanent piano player, he answered: "I think Chris just didn't like the idea. Occasionally he tried a piano player a few times, even me, but he simply wanted his jazz band to be different from the others. And that is probably why he preferred the banjo together with the lead guitar." The four piece rhythm group still exists today – an indication of Chris Barber's artistic ideas.

Tours with the former Ellington musicians Ray Nance (1974) and Russell Procope as well as Wild Bill Davis (1976) were also indicative and probably caused the extension of the front line to four musicians. Hence the band was able to play pieces by Chris Barber's favourite composer Duke Ellington. At that time the band was renamed "Chris Barber's Jazz & Blues Band". Not all of the old fans were enthusiastic about the change of the New Orleans Revival group into an orchestra playing and merging jazz and swing as well as blues and rock. However, Chris Barber also won new listeners and probably therefore survived in the 60s.

Instead of listing the names of all of Chris Barber's excellent musicians throughout the decades, I'd like to mention only few: first and foremost the trumpet player Pat Halcox, often underestimated by the critics, who played with the band for 55(!) years. I would like to wish him all the best on his 80th birthday on 18th March 2010. We should not forget the clarinet and saxophone player John Crocker, who influenced the band's sound for over three decades, nor the excellent drummer Pete York, also known as one of the best rock drummers. With every respect for all the other drummers, my personal favourite was the deceased Graham Burbidge, member of the band from the 50s to the 70s. I do have to mention one of the best bass players of the international jazz scene, Vic Pitt, also esteemed by Lonnie Donegan after the production of his album "Muleskinner Blues" in the 90s. Otilie Patterson, Chris Barber's musical and private partner for many years – probably Europe's most outstanding blues singer ever – is still beloved by many fans and therefore deserves special mention.

Take Me Back To New Orleans was one of Chris Barber's own compositions that typified his artistic development and was characterised by cooperation with the drummer Freddie Kohlman and the piano player and singer Dr John.

Since 1974 there have been several concerts reuniting the 1954 group (Barber, Halcox, Sunshine, Donegan, Bray, Bowden): the first time on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the band, then in 1981 when also Ken Colyer joined four concerts in Berlin, Hamburg, London and Liverpool. In 1984 a live recording with the front line of the first Ken Colyer

jazzmen (Colyer, Barber, Sunshine) was made. In 1994 an extensive celebration of the band's 40th jubilee began in Great Britain and on the continent. The first half of those concerts was given by the 1954 Chris Barber Jazz Band and completed by a Lonnie Donegan skiffle act, and the second half was played by the Jazz & Blues Band. A special delight for me in 1998 was a concert played by the Barber Band in the Royal Albert Hall ("Skiffle – The Roots Of British Rock") which I experienced as a fresh breeze after the jubilee phase 1994-1996.

Jazz purists may realise that Chris Barber is also competent in the field of classical hot jazz of the 20s. As proof of that I'd like to mention the LP "Jazz Holiday", recorded in the mid-80s with "Rod Mason's Hot Five".

In the world of pop, Chris Barber attracted special attention with the CD production "Van Morrison: The Skiffle Sessions Live In Belfast", which was recorded in 1998 hitting the TOP 20 charts in the USA and Great Britain at the beginning of 2000. Here together with Van, Dr John and Big Jim Sullivan Chris completes the Lonnie Donegan skiffle group.

At the start of the new millennium Chris Barber restructured his band into "THE BIG CHRIS BARBER BAND" with a 2nd trumpet, a 2nd trombone and a 3rd reed, obtaining new means of expression in classical jazz and blues music, especially in compositions of his life-time favourite composer Duke Ellington.

During the last decade many of the faithful companions had to leave the band due to their age: Ian Wheeler, John Crocker, Vic Pitt, Pat Halcox; only John Slaughter still belongs to the Big Chris Barber Band. In spite of changes Chris is still jazzing on a musical top level, thanks to new highly professional musicians who have been integrated into the band and who have further developed the style without neglecting the roots.

Well, it is hard not to extend these lines to infinity. Just a few more highlights: the 1959 Monterrey Jazz Festival was a milestone of Chris Barber's career as well as his appointment as an honorary citizen of New Orleans in 1959. In 1991 Chris was bestowed "The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (OBE) for his musical merits. In 2006 Durham University awarded Chris Barber the honorary title "Doctor Of Music". The respective text by Prof. David Fuller can be found at the following link:

http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ceremonies/congregation/barber_chris.pdf

On behalf of Swinging Hamburg e.V. I would like to congratulate you, dear Chris, and wish you all the best for the new year of your life.

Lutz Eikelmann