



Chris Barber realised that for jazz music to be palatable for a wider audience in Britain, it needed a melodic hook

Still blowing up a storm

Chris Barber, arguably the godfather of jazz in Britain, talks to Jack Watkins about 100 years of the movement and how he's keeping its flame burning

READING the early pages of Chris Barber's autobiography, *Jazz Me Blues*, it's easy to get sidetracked by his connections. His father Donald, taught by John Maynard Keynes at Cambridge, was a distinguished economist who turned down Clement Atlee's offer of a safe seat that would have led to a job as Chancellor and his mother, Hettie, was the first Socialist mayor of Canterbury.

At St Paul's School, Mr Barber was a classmate of Stanley Sadie, the musicologist who edited the first edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Music-*

ians. Mr Barber also chose the musical path, carving out a career that eclipsed them all.

This year is the centenary of the release of the first jazz records, by the New Orleans-based Original Dixieland Jazz Band. As most anniversaries are milked for maximum commercial yield in the 21st century, it's surprising more of a fuss isn't being made of it.

The 10-piece Big Chris Barber Band is doing its bit, however, with performances the length and breadth of Britain, including at Cadogan Hall, London SW1, on September 18: the material is a range of jazz or jazz-related

styles, including New Orleans, ragtime and the blues, to the more complex arrangements of Duke Ellington and Modern Jazz.

You could hardly experience all this in better company. Mr Barber, who is now 87, has achieved true eminence as a trombone-playing bandleader and his commitment to raising standards among European musicians is as firm as it was in his earliest public concerts more than 65 years ago.

'There are lots of young musicians who want to play jazz today, but not all succeed in doing it terribly well,' points out the affable Mr Barber. 'The present-

ation doesn't always have a lot of feeling behind it. We don't try and sell our music as teaching people, but we do like to show we're trying to play it in the right way and I like to tell people a little of the background to what they're hearing, without going too deep.'

When Mr Barber first started out, standards were very low indeed. 'You'd read a review about how good someone was, but when you went to see them, it was obvious they weren't performing to a technically high level. Improvising is part of the music, but you're still meant to play



The saint goes marching in: Chris Barber has been dazzling Britain with his band since the 1950s

proper notes, not something halfway between an A and a B flat. They thought that playing jazz meant playing off-key.'

Jazz reached peak popularity in Britain in the 1950s, but it's not true that it wasn't played here before then. 'The Original Dixieland Jazz Band came over in 1919 for the opening night of the Hammersmith Palais,' Mr Barber reveals. 'The floor could accommodate 3,000 dancers. Imagine the noise of 3,000 people dancing the quickstep! However, they complained the band was too loud, even though it was playing without a microphone.'

Some interwar dance bands incorporated 'hot' numbers, such as *Chinatown*, and the popularity of the Charleston gave further room for jazz-influenced offerings. 'There was something pretty close to jazz being played in some London nightclubs. American jazz players would work in the orchestra at places such as The Savoy. Kurt Weill's *The Three-penny Opera* [1928] is set in Soho and the music is supposed to be that of a cheap, second-rate nightclub band playing bluesy

stuff, so it was there, but it didn't get wider recognition.'

Postwar, it was the enthusiasm of young British musicians like Mr Barber, Humphrey Lyttelton and Ken Colyer that catapulted traditional jazz to the forefront. Lyttelton's trumpet playing, inspired by the finest solo artist of them all, Louis Armstrong, convinced Mr Barber that it was something worth doing professionally. Colyer, who for a time headed Mr Barber's band, preached that the New Orleans style of jazz, in which the front line of players impro-

vised collectively, represented the music in its purest form.

However, Mr Barber recognised that, for the music to be palatable to a wider audience, you needed to offer them a melodic hook. One of the finest examples of his work, which combined the New Orleans feel with a broader accessibility, was a version of an old song, *Isle of Capri*, which the band—under the name Ken Colyer's Jazzmen—featured on its historic *New Orleans to London* LP in 1954. This 10in album was the first British jazz record to have a significant

effect on the home market. *The Martinique*, another Barber adaptation of an older piece, is a further classic worth seeking out, originally released as a 78rpm on the Decca label after Colyer's controversial departure.

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In later years, Mr Barber, a blues enthusiast, embraced other, more modern jazz forms, but he still features New Orleans marching band numbers such as *Bourbon Street Parade* in his shows. I sense he fears such sounds are struggling to be heard in an increasingly dense musical marketplace. He tells the story of how, in the earliest days, his band regularly performed before the cognoscenti in the basement of the Catholic Church of the Annunciation, at Bryanston Street, W1.

'The night before the Coronation in 1953, we went out and marched and played in front of the one million people who were gathering overnight on the pavements around Marble Arch. No one noticed—we didn't hear anyone say "Oh, did you hear that New Orleans jazz?" But there was a period, not so long ago, when they would have recognised it. Now, I think they've probably forgotten again. But we keep going, just doing the music as best we can, you know?'

The Big Chris Barber Band goes on tour from September 9 to December, with venues including Buxton, Harrogate, Peterborough and Basingstoke (www.chrisbarber.net)

Where to hear jazz this autumn

September 11 Charlie Parker with Strings, Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, London W1 (020-7439 0747; www.ronniescotts.co.uk)

September 22-24 The Scarborough Jazz Festival, East Yorkshire, with a strong focus on swinging modern jazz (01723 821888; <http://jazz.scarboroughspa.co.uk>)

October 13-15 The Herts Jazz Festival, Hawthorne Theatre, Welwyn Garden City, with tributes to greats such as Gerry Mulligan and George Shearing (0300 303 9620; www.hertsjazzfestival.co.uk)

November 10-19 The EFG London Jazz Festival celebrates its 25th anniversary at venues including the Barbican, Wigmore Hall and the Southbank Centre (<http://efglondonjazzfestival.org.uk>)