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1/6

WHATS ON IN JAZZ & BLUES

JAZZ BEAT

CHRIS BARBER

Special survey
of ten years in
his career

Articles on
CANNONBALL

ADDERLEY

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ERNEST RANGLIN

'RED' ALLEN

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THE BLUES
COME TO
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THE LIVELY JAZZ MAGAZINE



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Chris Barber (right) with Beryl Bryden and Pat Halcox at the London Jazz Centre in August, 1954

TEN YEARS

WHETHER Trad is dead, or its coffin, so recently buried, merely full of stones, we've yet to see. But the band whose sound quite accidentally started it all is now ten years old and very much alive. Chris Barber's Jazz Band made its debut at what was then the Humphrey Lyttelton Club, at 100 Oxford Street, on May 31, 1954.

THE SOUND OF THE FIFTIES

It wasn't so much a new band as a group of familiar musicians with a different leader. Nor was it the first band Chris had led. But it was this group, the old Ken Colyer band minus Colyer and with a young trumpeter called Pat Halcox in his place, which first minted the sound that was to become a major force in British popular music in the fifties. Why the formula should have attracted people outside the little world of jazz fans isn't quite clear, but attract them it did, largely through the host of imitative bands which sprung up in its wake.

SURPRISE

On this tenth anniversary, Jazz Beat talked to Chris about the whole movement. We asked him:

When you first broke away from Ken Colyer, did you think that the sound you made would ever become popular outside local jazz circles?

Well, we were all very young, and we thought our kind of music so important that people would only have to hear it to like it. So we weren't as surprised as we should have been. But from a rational point of view, I suppose we were.

And after you'd begun to reach a bigger sort of audience than traditional bands had been getting till then, did you ever try to hang on to your popularity by deliberately trying to keep up with popular taste?

No. We had enough trouble keeping up with our own tastes, let alone anyone else's. *Petite fleur*,

which was a kind of accident, made us try and follow it up; but we weren't cut out for it. No, we simply go ahead and do the things we can do, and like, and hope enough other people are going to like them.

And now that Trad is dead?

Well, to start with, if you mean traditional jazz, it isn't dead. The people who liked it when it was at its peak still do, but they're older now, with responsibilities. What money they've got has to go on homes and washing machines and children and so on. But they're still there. Give it to them on the radio or television, and they still love it. It's another group altogether that goes out and spends the money — the teenagers, who are better off, in relation to their responsibilities, than the people who came into it all when trad got going.

When the younger married people get their standard of living up high enough, we may well see "little booms" in all sorts of things which seem unfashionable at the moment. They still accept it; but they can't afford to buy it.

What about those other two musical booms you've had a hand in — skiffle and Rhythm & Blues?

Well, as far as the skiffle thing was concerned, Lonnie (Donegan) was the driving force. And it took the form it did because he was more towards folksong and country and western in his tastes, and both Ken Colyer and I leaned more towards the blues proper. That's what led to that odd mixture of the two elements. As far as I know, skiffle may well have got its start when a band I had did a version of *Midnight special* down at the Orchid Ballroom, in Purley, in 1952.

But the strange thing was, if the instruments and the time had been right, R & B would have had a much earlier start. Right back in

AFTER

1950, as a sort of side attraction to an Oliver style band I had, we had something we called a Race Blues group — Alexis Korner on guitar, Roy Sturgess on piano, Brian Laws on drums and myself playing bass. Alex and I did the vocals. We did Big Maceo, Tampa Red sort of stuff. If circumstances had been just a little different, that could well have grown into an R & B group as we know it now.

TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS

As it was, there came Ken's band, then my own, and then in the late fifties all the guest vocalists like Rosetta Tharpe and Muddy Waters. Then we saw Muddy on his home ground in Chicago, and it was a revelation. And *Mojo*, which is the anthem of the R & B movement, was being sung here by Otilie from 1959 onwards.

But we'd been brought up on traditional instruments. If I'd been any good on electric guitar, we'd almost certainly have tried it then,

CHRIS BARBER talks

to Peter Clayton

and maybe brought all this R & B thing on a few years earlier. As it was, I felt the need for electric guitar and harmonica, and I invited Alex Korner and Cyril Davies, who knew what it was all about, to guest with the band. In this way, we were doing the first regular R & B broadcasts in this country when we included Alex in the old Trad Tavern programmes in 1961.

BLUES INCORPORATED

And we used to put them on for the last set on Wednesday evenings at the Marquee, which led indirectly to the formation of Blues Incorporated, and so to all the other groups that are at it now.

Otilie, who'd started off as a young girl under the influence of Bessie Smith's records, was by then doing something she knew about at first hand, and as far as I know, she was the first person in this country to sing in the modern R & B idiom. I know I'm biased, but I don't think she's ever been given credit for that.

ON THE BANDWAGON

So we're not jumping on any bandwagon now we've got Ian Wheeler on harmonica sometimes, with Pat on piano and me doing some of the singing. We've been working in this direction for years.

Have you any idea what will happen next?

Beat apart, pop music as a whole is going much more negroid. Which means for a start that we're all surrounded by a much tougher sort of rhythm. We've all come to like it more and more — not that I ever did like that "Tip-toe through the tulips" kind of trad anyway — and obviously that element is going to get stronger. These changes grow on you. So, whatever happens, I think the band will continue to produce a steadily "tougher" rhythm. Apart from that, all I can say is we'll go where our changing tastes take us.