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PREVIEW/INTERVIEW: The BIG Chris Barber Band (Cadogan Hall, 9th September)



Chris Barber Photo credit : Luc Lodder

CHRIS BARBER is one of the great figures of British jazz. He formed his first band in 1949 at the age of 19, so this year he will be celebrating his 67th anniversary as leader of the band, with a concert which also - surprisingly - marks his Cadogan Hall debut. He spoke to Rob Adams:

Chris Barber pauses to think why, in his sixty-seven years as a band leader, he has never played Cadogan Hall in SW1 before and his joking answer – that it's probably too small – is no intended slight to the home of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. In fact, there's a grain of truth to it.

The Barber Band, which became, alongside Kenny Ball, Acker Bilk and Humphrey Lyttelton's bands, one of the biggest draws during the 1950s, made a very quick progression from playing jazz clubs around London to appearing at venues such as the Royal Festival Hall and the Royal Albert Hall, both of which have considerably larger capacities than the Cadogan Hall's 950 seats.

How they did this was down to professionalism, playing New Orleans music with skill and detail and, says the trombonist, canny awareness of the Lord's Day Observance Act.

"We had these six residencies around London, Monday to Saturday, in what were called jazz clubs but were really back rooms in pubs mostly, and we realised that theatres weren't allowed to have people in costume onstage on Sundays because of that Act of Parliament," he says. "So summer variety shows had to close for the night. Quite often theatre managers in seaside resorts would put on Sunday concerts to entertain the holidaymakers instead, but those featured palm court orchestras, that kind of thing. So when traditional jazz – I never liked the term trad; that sounds like a soap powder to me – became popular we started to get a few of those theatre gigs and we did amazing business."

Working seven nights a week gave the band professional status, although Barber concedes that since they hadn't been playing their instruments for very long in the early days, they might not have been exactly faultless. And being professional musicians, whereas most of the other bands on the scene had day jobs, they could accept bookings that involved a lot of travelling and overnight stays – and they got all the gigs they could use. Thus they were able to build a following all over the UK which remains loyal to this day.

How the now eighty-six years old Barber has subsequently kept a band going for all this time, latterly leading the eleven-piece BIG Chris Barber Band that will appear at Cadogan Hall on September 9, rather than the original sextet and his eight-piece Jazz & Blues Band, he can't say.

"People often ask me what keeps me going and it's more the case that we haven't really ever thought about stopping," he says "We've always played better in theatres or concert halls, I know that. We're not trying to convince people that they're in New Orleans or anything like that but we show up when we're meant to show up, we play what we know and what the audiences know and have come to expect, and they seem to enjoy it. Then they come back the next time."

As well as Barber's favourite jazz repertoire – the New Orleans classics of his heroes King Oliver and Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington items from the late 1920s – the Cadogan Hall concert will honour some of the blues greats that Barber was responsible for introducing to British audiences in the 1950s and early 1960s. Bringing musicians such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Big Bill Broonzy, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe over from the U.S. to tour with the Barber band made Barber himself a hero to John Mayall, Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, and the Rolling Stones, among others, and made him a key figure not just in the British blues boom of the 1960s but also in the development of British pop music thereafter.

Having also had the godfather of British blues, Alexis Korner, in his band at one point as well as giving another band member, Lonnie Donegan the platform to start the skiffle boom through his interval slots during the band's concerts in the mid-1950s, Chris Barber has a history that goes well beyond the jazz world and earned him an OBE for services to music in 1991.

Not bad for someone who'll tell you that he missed out on his chosen career – as an actuary – because he didn't have the patience. (pp)

LINK: Details and tickets for 9th September

On Tuesday, August 02, 2016

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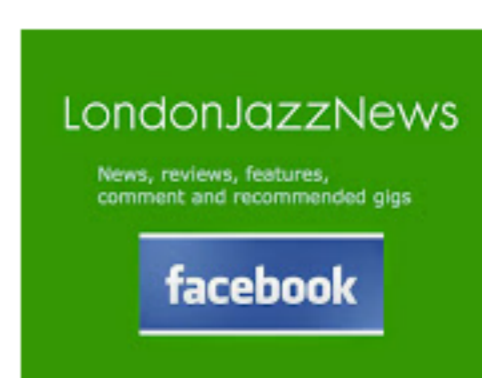
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- (Jazz in London Monthly Listings)
- (Lost venues...)
- 606 Club
- Barbican Centre
- Bexley Jazz Club
- Boisdale Canary Wharf
- Cadogan Hall
- Cafe Oto
- Camberwell Crypt
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- Charlie Wright's
- Crazy Coqs at Brasserie Zedel
- Dover Street Restaurant
- E17 Jazz
- East Side Jazz
- Forge Venue
- Harri's Jazz
- Hedsor Jazz at Bourne End
- Herts Jazz
- Hideaway
- Hugo's, Queen's Park
- Jazz After Dark
- Jazz at the Duchess
- Jazz at the Ent Shed, Bedford
- Jazz at the Manor
- Jazz at the Oxford, Kentish Town
- Karamel in N22
- Kings Place
- Loop Collective, Kentish Town
- Lower Ground Bar NW6
- Map Music, Kentish Town
- Musicians' Company Jazz
- National Theatre Foyer
- Others
- Omnibus Clapham
- Pizza Express Dean Street Brochure
- Pizza Express, Dean St
- Richmond and Twickenham Jazz Club
- Ronnie Scott's
- South Bank Centre
- Spice of Life
- St James Studio
- The Bull's Head
- The Con Cellar, NW1
- Time Out Jazz Listings
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