

CHRIS BARBER - 17.4.1930 – 2.3.2021



A very sad message has reached us!

On March 2nd, 2021 Chris Barber died at the age of 90 years. Thus, one of the best known, most interesting and versatile jazz musicians in Europe, has left the world's musical stage.

Having been born into a middle-class family in Welwyn Garden City on 17th April 1930, Chris showed a special aptitude for numbers and calculation and began studies in mathematics and statistics, however, as jazz records began to filter into post-war Britain, he changed direction and entered the Guildhall School Of Music in London to study trombone and double bass.

He formed his first band in 1949 and the following year changed to a 2-cornet frontline based on the classic King Oliver Creole Jazz Band of 1923.

It was on 31st May 1954 when Chris Barber took over leadership of the Ken Colyer Jazz Band due to Ken being dismissed because of "artistic differences", that the CB success story really began. Ken was replaced by Pat Halcox from the Albemarle Jazz Band and he stayed with Chris Barber for over 54 years, making it the longest partnership in jazz history!!

Chris was not only a pioneer of European traditional jazz from 1950 till 2019 but also a significant promoter and developer of the European jazz, blues and R&B scene. Although his music was based on traditional jazz, he experimented with new styles and different musicians from all over the world and incorporated them into his repertoire at an early stage. One of the first musicians to accompany the Chris Barber Jazz Band was Jamaican alto saxophone player Bertie King, with recordings made on October

30th, 954 at the Royal Festival Hall, London. He also pioneered skiffle music, together with Lonnie Donegan, which catapulted Donegan to international stardom.

An integral part of the band was Irish blues singer Otilie Patterson whose authentic blues interpretations of, not only classic material, but Irish folk tunes and Shakespeare sonnets, brought a major following of fans from 1955 – 71. Ill health unfortunately stopped Otilie from touring, but when she returned to the stage again with the Barber Band from 1981 – 84, her popularity was as great as ever.

From 1957 on, he succeeded in bringing American musicians and singers to Europe as guests with his band, introducing UK audiences and musicians to Blues, Gospel and R&B. Unforgettable concerts with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Boy Williamson, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Professor Alex Bradford, Muddy Waters & Jimmy Witherspoon (to name but a few), caused young British musicians to take notice of the American music first hand and it is largely due to Chris Barber that the British and European pop scene of the 1960's developed. Chris also gave up and coming bands such as The Who a chance to play at The Marquee, a club he ran together with promoter Harold Pendleton in London.

Chris Barber also brought jazz musicians from varying backgrounds and styles to tour with the band – saxophonist Joe Harriot from Jamaica, Fats Waller guitarist Al Casey, Count Basie sideman Eddie Durham, Louis Armstrong sidemen Joe Darensbourg and Trummy Young, Modern Jazz Quartet pianist John Lewis, Ellington sidemen Ray Nance, Russell Procope & Wild Bill Davis, and more recently, Doctor John and Van Morrison.

Also musically the Chris Barber Jazz Band developed further - from an archaic and puristic Dixieland Band to a more modern stylish group, but still based on the traditional roots. In 1964, Chris surprised and shocked certain parts of the jazz community with the engagement of the young guitarist John Slaughter, which led to a dramatic broadening of the sound that had already begun a few years earlier with Ian Wheeler on clarinet, alto saxophone & blues harmonica, joining in 1960. Prior to this, the band had already celebrated many highlights with Monty Sunshine (1953/54 till 1960) who landed the million-seller hit "Petite Fleur" with his wonderful clarinet tone.

In 1968 Ian Wheeler became a freelance musician, and his part in the Band was taken over by John Crocker with clarinet, alto saxophone and tenor saxophone, further broadening the musical spectrum.

Never one to stand still and constantly aware of current musical trends, Chris's collaborations with producers Georgio Gomelsky, Steve Hammond and Paul Buckmaster in the late 1960's and early 1970's lead the band down paths of experimentation with rock music, the avant garde and complex time signatures.

The very rarely found recordings, based on rhythms of Macedonian folk music in the early 70s, confirmed the further development of the band, which from 1968 on also became called The Chris Barber Jazz & Blues Band.

Chris and his musicians have been strongly connected to the music of Duke Ellington from the beginning. Stevedore Stomp in 1954 was one of the first Ellington compositions in the band repertoire. With the further expansion of the band to 8 musicians in 1978 - first with Sammy Rimington for 2 years and then again with Ian Wheeler - followed further very successful years of the Chris Barber Jazz & Blues Band, often accompanied

by guest musicians from various styles such as Trummy Young, John Lewis (MJQ) and many, many more.

In 2001 the band was again expanded to a total of 11 musicians with the addition of an extra reed, trumpet and Bob Hunt on trombone and band arranger, and toured the world as "The Big Chris Barber Band until 2019.

The Jazz & Blues world has lost a great musician, innovator and ambassador! Thanks to the countless, still existing recordings from over 66 years Chris's music will remain unforgettable. RIP, Chris and thanks for hundreds of hours with your music in my life.

Chris is survived by his wife Kate and children Caroline & Christopher from a previous marriage. Our condolences go out to them at this time.

For the Archive and Website Team

Toni Ginsel, Andreas Wandfluh, John Service

March 2nd, 2021