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CHRIS BARBER



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Phenomenon of 1956

THE past year has been outstanding for the swing back to Traditional jazz, but even more outstanding has been the emergence of the Chris Barber band as possibly the greatest attraction in the whole band field in this country. Bookers who only a short time ago would not even have thought of placing a traditional jazz outfit in any of their venues are now lining up in a queue to offer Chris contracts. Record companies are sculling around trying to find any un-issued Barber sides they may have. The Pye-Nixa group, for whom Chris is at present under contract, issue new Barber LP's, EP's and 78's with regularity and already his sales are reaching the proportions of the better 'pop' discs.

How has this come about? Certainly not as the result of high-pressure publicity, for the band employs no publicist and a survey of the press over the past year would prove that it has had little in the way of assistance from this direction. From broadcasts then? Well not really, the band has aired infrequently, the limited hours per year the B.B.C. allows for live jazz has resulted in but a few occasions when the Barber brand of jazz could be heard on the air waves. A gimmick perhaps? Certainly not this, for Chris and the rest of the band are very sincere about their music.

No. The reasons for the popularity of the Chris Barber Band are few and simple. The Band is a good one, composed of musicians who are competent, have a love for jazz with a feeling that matches it. They realise that the stinted library of other traditional groups prevents full expression and results in lack of interest by the fans. They have set out to play well and to be able to present a balanced and varied programme. They have proved that it is not necessary to restrict a library to just a handful of established numbers, but have arranged 'pops' and even sea-shanties to the medium, and made a howling success of it.

Matching the keenness of the members of the band is the time and energy they devote in striving for perfection. And don't think that with their present popularity they are prepared to sit back and take things easy. Far from it. The band rehearse at every opportunity, they are forever criticising their own performances, forever striving for a better sound, a new number, a more interesting arrangement. Yes arrangement; not the written kind to be sure, but head arrangements. Frequently you will find Chris, Monty Sunshine and Pat Halcox humming together, working out something new.



back. She has a blues feeling that is uncanny, for one would never expect such execution from anyone so removed from the authentic background of the blues. She is in a class by herself. Johnny Duncan from Knoxville, Tennessee makes up the other half of the team. Johnny who came in to lead the skiffle group, had a hard task, for his forerunner had been Lonnie Donegan, nevertheless within a very short time he had quite a following of his own. In this case one can be sure that his style is genuine, for he really is a Country-and-Western style singer and the type of blues he specialises in comes quite naturally.

One may well ask "What happens now"? Well, the band may well have reached a point never before achieved by a British traditional jazz band, but it has by no means come to the end of its progress. Only a few days ago the band was placed third in the small band group of the 'New Musical Express' poll, as there were no other traditional groups placed above it this makes it the top trad. band in the country. But acclaim will not finish here, neither will advancement in other directions, for it is both the widening interest in the type of jazz that the Barber band plays and the continued musical expression of the musicians in the band that will surely lead this happy bunch of jazzmen on to further heights in the coming year.



Then there is the sound of the band as a whole. It is a well-knit group, one that has a fine internal balance with a good appreciation of light and shade. It has an easy manner. It is relaxed. It has an ensemble sound that is hard to match in this country, in fact it is this very ensemble sound that is in many ways responsible for the popularity of the band, for although the soloists are strong it is when the entire front line are playing that one fully realises the amount of thought and work that has gone into the music that is produced, added to which the clean harmonic approach gives the utmost pleasure to the listener.

Then there is the vocal team, Otilie Patterson, the ex-school teacher from Ireland startled the critics when she made her debut at an N.J.F. concert at the Royal Festival Hall. From that time she has never looked

Top left: Monty Sunshine, clarinet star of the Barber band.

Middle: The band with the exception of leader, Chris Barber and banjoist Eddie Smith.

Bottom right: Pat Halcox, the cornet player who came from a little known group to star in the Barber band.

