

Don't start me Talkin'

BLUES ARCHIVE

Chris Barber's name is synonymous with traditional jazz in Britain but he is less well known for the crucial role he played in promoting the blues in this country during the 1950s and 1960s. Without his enthusiasm for the blues and his efforts to get American artists over to Britain, it is unlikely that the British blues or rock scene would have developed in the way that it did. Here he talks about those early years and his passion for blues music in a two-part, extended interview with **Amanda Palmer**. Photo by David Redfern



"I first heard jazz, or at least I thought it was, on BBC Radio in 1942 – the Light Programme. I think the presenter made a mistake and didn't play 'Run Rabbit Run' or a Vera Lynn record and one listened to the radio all the time in the war – hoping to get good news from the front. (It wasn't usually). And there was a record played – a jazz record – and it sounded, sort of, different and I remember I wrote to my father, the one letter I wrote home in three years at boarding school, and said, 'Send me some jazz.' So he bought the *Gramophone* magazine and there were two 5-star reviews and he sent me those, one of which I've still got, Coleman Hawkins 'Body and Soul'.

"So I began looking for jazz. I discovered this strange

music ... different. Pretty soon, by getting the odd book about it, realised there was more to it than that, there was a kind of mystique. So right away I was interested in blues and any [jazz] book written at that time always treated the blues as a very important part of it. And there had always been people in Britain who had dug the authentic blues. Records were released here. I mean the Memphis Jug Band released in the 30s on Recal Zonophone. It may have been a mistake of course, but they really did release it – 'K.C. Moan' – lovely record. And really, it was very soon I was interested in blues, so before I ever heard a live jazz performance, I was buying blues records anyway.

"So there was I back to London from the boys' boarding school in the country when the war ended and found record shops selling jazz records – they also sold blues records and I began buying blues records. I discovered also, very fortunately, in 1946 that our next door neighbours, half of the family lived in New York. I said, 'Would you mind if I gave you the money in pounds and you got them to go into record shops and send me the records?' So RCA Victor, on the Bluebird Race Series as it was called then, had started a new series and I got all those sent to me; brand new records. Of course I was getting blues records from America before I had even thought of buying a trombone, or running a band, ever. I just loved the music. I was hypnotised by it, not just the jazz or the blues, but all of it. And I still am.

"And then I heard a jazz band for the first time which was the George Webb Dixielanders. I remember getting there a bit late [story of my life] just after it started, and I got to the door at the back of the stalls and there was this amazing music going on, live. You know, you can like jazz and blues on record very much. When you get the real thing live it is absolutely overwhelming by comparison. I heard this thing and of course I was hypnotised by it and this led me to eventually becoming a big fan of that band and then Humph [Humphrey Lyttleton] took it over, and the trombone player sold me a trombone. So that was, you know, my fate sealed; but I was buying and collecting blues records. My first serious collecting of old blues records I bought probably from Charing Cross Road. I've got two of Robert Johnson's 78s to show for it, for example, and Blind Lemon Jefferson's – although that was the sort of thing one was looking for then. Immediately I was very fond of what I found of the 30s, early 40s blues artists – the ones I got on Bluebird records from New York. Tampa Red, Big Maceo, Lonnie Johnson of course I had on old records anyway you see, and people like that; Tommy McClellan and so on. These were all marvellous to me and just as important to me as the King Oliver and the Louis Armstrong records were. But when you play the trombone, you start a band. You start off with King Oliver not with Blind Lemon Jefferson because you do, that's what you're playing. There was a *coterie* of friends you might say – we liked the music together. Alec Revell who played in my first amateur band on clarinet was one, and also Bobby Melville as she was – Bobby Korner – and we used to go to things and talk about records mostly and Bobby met Alexis then. Blues was as important to us as jazz, so when I started my first amateur band Alexis played