

Don't start me Talkin'

BLUES ARCHIVE

This month we continue **Amanda Palmer's** extended interview with **Chris Barber** and hear how Chris tussled with the unions to bring American bluesmen over to the UK in the 1950s. We also hear how UK music history was in the making through the influence of such artists as Muddy Waters. Photo by Brian Smith



"We realised by '57 that it was a problem. Up until '56 American musicians couldn't play in Britain because of the union situation, very stupid, founded in the 30s when whichever union, either American or British, started it by banning somebody. Whichever order it came in, it just resulted in a stupid situation which was eventually resolved in 1956 by a trick by an agent who devised something which the union couldn't say no to, but which was, in fact, so unworkable it had to be a phoney; *i.e.*: the exchange situation, which in theory, well how can you grumble? You can't lose any jobs if for every American who works here there's a British person works there.

"They put conditions in it which were totally impossible to achieve and therefore, the minute they had a tour proposed to them, they should have known it was a phoney. For example, two bands of identical size playing identical jobs with identical instrumentation for the same money? No two bands in the history of music have done that, let alone Count Basie and Ted Heath! You *know* it's nonsense, but anyway, the unions thought, 'We'll tie them down!' And of course, in came someone to the office of the unions saying, 'I've got a contract here to play in

America, look at it, it says they're bringing in so-and-so.' In fact, the first exchange when Louis Armstrong came in they actually presented a cheque to the British exchange band in front of the union and afterwards they went out the office and gave it back. They tore it up because he wasn't going to get \$28,000 a week like Louis Armstrong did; more like \$2,800! But the union thought they'd done a wonderful job for getting this wonderful chance in America for British bands. This is union politics which is usually anti-art anyway – maybe necessary – but anti art.

"So at the time we'd been saying to the union, 'Look! I know everything else but why can't we get Louis Armstrong in? He can guest in my band, tour and the dates would never exist without Louis Armstrong because [people will come] solely for that and we'll get work from it. People will see what should be done and it would teach people, it will improve everything. And the head of the union said to me, 'Why do want all these Americans? Why don't you get a Russian trumpeter?' So we gave up that. Then we realised that singers are not regarded as musicians. In Britain they were encouraged to join the Musicians'

Union but in America they didn't, they joined the American Guild of Variety Artists or the Variety Artists Federation in Britain. The Variety Artists Federation in Britain didn't mind if AGVA members came and sang in Britain as long as they gave 2% of their fee to the union. Immediately we thought we can bring singers in; self-accompanying singers were allowed. The American Musicians Union allowed people to be an entertainer in that sense. But Louis Jordan toured with us in 1963 and he did one number when he didn't sing. The local union rep came to the concert in Newcastle upon Tyne and he said what a wonderful, marvellous concert. Next week, we got a letter from the union saying our man informs us that Mr. Jordan played one number on which he did not sing. This is against the thing and in future you have got to have an exchange for him. So the union were busy shooting us down [and] the chance for anybody to hear Louis Jordan if they could [but] too late they had heard him! This was all a nonsensical thing. Unfortunately nonsensical rules and regulations have tended to influence the course of artistic endeavour.

"Anyhow, we knew we could bring in singers. I couldn't see any argument against that so we simply