

hired them ourselves. So then we thought, 'Who is there to bring in?' This is '57 and we thought, Rosetta Tharpe. We all had her records, she played the guitar and sang; we found she was contactable through an agency, so we did. She was absolutely marvellous, a brilliant artist and performer and very, very good to work with. And helpful, especially for Otilie [Patterson, band vocalist] because she was a duetist, a born duetist. Rosetta Tharpe made all her best records, which are duets, with Marie Knight and she was encouraging Otilie to sing exactly with her and it was marvellous. And she was a great person anyway.

"And at about the same time someone thought of signing Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. They were known to have done things like music for Broadway plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; therefore they did actually work. I mean, one didn't know whether people who you had on records from 1935 actually went out and worked. You might assume they sat at home, made records and then went back to their share cropping you know – it's all a matter of the mists of antiquity and mythology. However, we did know that Sonny and Brownie worked, so we contacted them and they came in May '58 which was marvellous.

"And shortly after Rosetta Tharpe's visit in '57, on the first tour of the Modern Jazz Quartet in Britain brought in by the United Jazz Federation of which I was a part, I'd formed a friendship with John Lewis the piano player and leader of the Modern Jazz Quartet. John is by way of being one of the world's greatest addicts of Chicago blues piano. And he said to us, 'You've got Rosetta Tharpe but why don't you get Muddy Waters? He's the one you've got to get.' So I said, 'Well, I don't know how.' So, he said he'd find him and he did. We have to thank the unlikely person, John Lewis, in that his music is so delicate, that he was the one who told us to find Muddy. So, then we arranged to bring Muddy and Otis [Spann] over in October '58.

"Funnily enough, we knew Muddy's records and I can remember we didn't know what to expect really. Nor did he of course, never having been outside of America, never been outside the blues environment at all. We never had a rehearsal with Muddy. Our first concert was in Newcastle-on-Tyne. We'd been [told] if his dressing room wasn't quite comfortable enough, Muddy Waters wouldn't stand for this. So we were rather worried about what Muddy Waters wouldn't stand for. Well, Muddy couldn't care a damn; he was a very nice, down to earth person. But they arrived in Newcastle probably about half past six and we had a concert at eight o'clock, maybe seven thirty. So I said to Otis, 'What key does he do 'Hoochie Coochie Man' in?' He said, 'A'. Right, that was the rehearsal! Newcastle City Hall, it may have changed now, but the doors that come onto the stage from the side have got round windows in them and first half of the concert we've played [and] people like Muddy had never heard Dixieland jazz or New Orleans jazz very much. They were vaguely aware of it but [it was] not part of their scene, and every now and then you'd see them looking, seeing what was going on through the window. Anyway, it came to the second part of the concert and we did one number and then I said, 'So, Muddy Waters!' and we started playing do-dee-do-dee-do and Muddy's face lit up because they suddenly realised we did know what we were doing. They came on and it was marvellous.

"Much was made at different times about Muddy being very loud. He wasn't, it's as simple as that. I've heard amplifiers, I've played with Jeff Beck you know – this is loud. Muddy was not loud, in fact Rosetta Tharpe was just as loud as Muddy. He was just perfectly alright as far as we were concerned. My estimation is that a lot of jazz people are so pre-programmed that if they see an amplifier they say it is too loud, which is not even worth discussing.

"We got critics saying 'how dare the band include xxxx', ignoring the fact that we had actually paid for them to come. We got them in so we could have a chance to play with them really. Without our doing that they would never have heard them. They didn't understand that and probably never will. You've got to get anything you can get hold of. In Britain at that time, there was none to get hold of – so we did.

"But Muddy was, I think, the most influential. I know, for example, that's where Eric Burdon came to hear the band. He had just gone to the Newcastle Tech and

it was his first day in college and being Eric, irrepressible, he gets up and sort of calls out, 'Who's coming to the Chris Barber concert?' And John Steel, the drummer, said, 'I am!' and they went to the concert and it was Muddy Waters. And that was it. Naturally it would be you know. And I think of others then that saw Muddy the first time [but] I was too busy doing it at the time to know what future guitar player was in the audience.

"I'm not sure that Muddy had a big impact on the public at that time. I mean, they accepted it because they knew they had been told that blues is a part of jazz. I think Rosetta Tharpe made more of an impact but that's because what she did was much closer to the idiom they understood. Sonny & Brownie the same thing. Muddy's was a bit more exactly into a Chicago blues style which they didn't know about. I mean, nobody much else did. Alexis had been spending years playing in the folk clubs and getting told to turn the amplifier off because it wasn't real blues. Of course, the impact of Muddy on us was we wanted to do that music. We were already trying to get somewhere, but once you've done it with the person in question you find out something about it. For example, from the time that we worked with Muddy, Otilie started doing 'Got My Mojo Working' for the last number of the concert. Another one of Muddy's we called 'Come Along To Me' but it's called 'Don't Go No Further' on the record, one of Willie Dixon's compositions. We were doing that stuff thereafter. So that was the beginning of the Chicago Blues – it was the first Chicago blues style playing in Britain.

"So we went on with doing that because it was the only way to get the people in. We didn't know then what we know now. We could have done what we wanted in all kinds of ways but we were very much still under the thumb of the old show business establishment and if you don't toe the line with the things they say are normal, you're said to be uncooperative. You know, we were so popular we could have told them all to go jump in a lake and they would have. We didn't know that at the time so we lost opportunities, which is a shame. We gradually worked our way through, getting things done our way and if we hadn't ever done that the Beatles and the groups when they started up in the Sixties would never have got anywhere because they wouldn't have been allowed to play anywhere. They were too outrageous.

"But meanwhile we had broken down a lot of barriers. Why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? I mean, playing in ballrooms in the Fifties, they wouldn't allow the dancers to jive because they got in the way of the people who were doing the quickstep. And they only let you jive if you played the samba. So we used to announce the 'Muskrat Samba', pretend it was a samba and just play it you see. And the jivers would jive and we'd go back to a quickstep afterwards. If the Beatles and groups had arrived in ballrooms in situations like that, they'd never have been allowed to play. The whole thing with the groups could never have happened without being able to play anywhere. If you can't play to anybody you can't make an impact to change things. Anyway we were playing everywhere, at all the places we could get. We didn't know our strength otherwise we would have had more blues singers in, even more jazz people in. Who knows what we could have afforded? But I recollect in 1959 I tried to persuade every promoter I knew to help us to put on a type of travelling festival; my band, Muddy Waters' band and Paul Barbarin's band from New Orleans. I got quotes from them; they weren't that expensive really. Nobody had the vision. Now if I had realised I could have said to them, 'Well, if you won't do it I won't play for you next year.' But I didn't think of saying that. I never knew we had the power to say that. Otherwise, if Muddy Waters' band had been here in 1960 it would certainly have changed things totally. And indeed, Paul Barbarin's band from New Orleans, that would have changed things too."

Chris Barber has some regrets about the things he was not able to achieve for blues musicians back in the late 50s, but for most of us today, we are more than grateful for all the things he DID manage to make happen through his love of the blues. He, literally, provided a stage for the blues in Britain from which so much has developed.