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Chris Barber success story



The Chris Barber band, with the man himself centre front row.

THE year is 1949. The scene – a dark and dingy jazz club in London.

A battered old trombone, held together by pieces of string, extortionately exchanges hands for the then princely sum of £6 and 10 shillings. The proud recipient of this shabby instrument – a music-mad teenager.

Whatever the selling ethics of the hard-up musician at the time, he more than compensated for any roguery by helping to launch a certain Donald Christopher Barber on the British jazz scene.

At the time, Chris Barber was training to become an actuary – a person who calculates the odds for insurance companies. Today, 35 eventful years later, one may wonder what odds Chris, wearing his actuary's hat, would have laid at that time on not only making a full-time living playing jazz but on becoming one of its most popular international exponents.

His early musical tuition was on the violin and saxophone, followed by trombone and double bass studies at London's Guildhall of Music.

Chris formed his first amateur

BRITAIN'S Chris Barber Jazz Band this year celebrates its thirtieth anniversary, and is this month making its twenty fifth annual tour of Switzerland. Swiss Observer correspondent and jazz enthusiast Colin Farmer, who first saw the band perform in West London in the 1950s reports on the Chris Barber success story.

group the very same year he bought that battered trombone. But the band in its present formation played its first professional engagement in May 1954.

My own happy memories date back to those days when, as a very junior reporter on a West London weekly, I followed the Barber band around the pub and club scene. The band has been performing around the world ever since, including visits to the music's spiritual home, New Orleans.

The original 1954 line-up included clarinettist Monty Sunshine, trumpeter Pat Halcox – who is still with the band – and Lonnie Donegan. Their record of "Rock Island Line", featuring vocals by banjo player Donegan, launched the skiffle craze that

swept Britain.

During the subsequent "trad" boom, Chris was always in the forefront along with many other keen contenders. But the Barber band has always been more concerned with the content and format of their musical drive and direction than others who have gained a more middle-of-the-road following due to blatant showmanship.

Always a popular performer in Switzerland, Chris raised more than a few eyebrows when, in the mid-1960s, he introduced a young electric guitarist into the band. Many shocked purists saw this as a shameful sell-out to commercialism.

But the far-sighted Chris defended the decision. "In fact", he recalls, "I had already been

searching for years for an accomplished blues guitar specialist with a sympathy towards the jazz side. The introduction of electronics was something we as a band felt should be done in jazz".

In fact, any hostility towards the Barber band's new sound was soon forgotten, and the band has never failed to attract an enthusiastic following wherever it performs.

Indeed, one of the main reasons for the continuing success of the band is – in the words of Chris himself: "We are constantly incorporating new sounds, styles and ideas into the programme, so that we can keep the music fresh".

As The Times jazz critic once put it: "Most jazz groups get into gear and stay there. With Barber there are always unexpected changes of gear, direction and tempo, because even after more than 25 years in the business the man's mind is still bright and restless and inquiring.

"Not only does he go on changing, but he keeps on getting better".