



Main pic: Chris Barber chats to Stephen Dale Petit, with Mick Taylor on speakerphone.
Below: Chris with his jazz band in 1957.

we try to reconcile the modest, friendly man sitting across from us, with his vast importance within the fields of blues and popular music. The 60s British blues explosion – John Mayall, Eric, Peter, Mick, the Beano and all the rest of it – simply wouldn't have happened in the same way, or at all, without the pioneering instincts of Chris Barber. That's as true of the scene today. Someone has to light the fuse and Chris Barber is the man caught holding the flame-thrower. His is an amazing story: how a trombone-toting jazz musician and bandleader fell in love with blues, delivered American legends to a new audience in the UK, triggering a passion for the music in a succession of fellow switched-on artists and disciples.

Just as we're about to start the interview with Chris and SDP the phone rings. It's ex-Stone Mick Taylor. Yes, really. He's in the mood to reminisce about his first exposure to the blues in 60s London and what began as a unique opportunity to tap a legend for information develops into something truly special. Three generations of blues obsessives brought together for the first time.

Stephen Dale Petit: Do you both recall the first time you met?

Mick Taylor: Chris, I think I was introduced to you by John Mayall. You tell this story about walking into the Marquee Club and seeing me on stage, playing a Big Bill Broonzy song on 12-string acoustic guitar. There are imaginary memories and real memories... and I don't think that was me! I was very much into the electric guitar.

Chris Barber: I think John Mayall has dodgy memories at times too!



MT: I didn't know about John Mayall until he came down to London. Except for something I read in one of the newspapers about him being this art student that lived in a tree house in Manchester. I don't know if I'm remembering that correctly though...

SDP: I think that's right.

CB: He won't sue you!

SDP: So Mick, can you remember the first blues artist you saw?

MT: In London? That's a tough question! I don't have clear, distinct memories of that time. My introduction to blues was by hearing things on the radio. Programmes like *Saturday Club*...

CB: We did *Saturday Club* with Wolf.

MT: I don't think I saw Howlin' Wolf or Muddy Waters in their prime, so to speak, in London, during the 60s. I know people like Eric Clapton and Keith did. Well, I assume they did, being older than me. I'm a little bit younger than Chris. Well, a lot younger actually!

CB: Yeah, come on! How old are you mate?

MT: I feel about 89 today! I was born in '49. I'm six or seven years younger than The Rolling Stones, and peers like Eric Clapton and John Mayall. I do remember seeing Freddie King but that was years later when I was with John. Chicken Shack were backing him up.

My earliest memories are going to clubs like The Flamingo in Wardour St and seeing Georgie Fame & The Blue Flames and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Roger Dean and then with Eric Clapton, then with Peter Green. Later, I became a member of that band, of course. I remember seeing things on TV with Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Muddy Waters. Sonny Boy Williamson was filmed by the BBC; Howlin' Wolf also.

SDP: Probably on those BBC shows the band backing them would have been Chris' band.

CB: Might well have been, yeah. We had Louis Jordan, Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) on *Saturday Club* too. Sonny

and Brownie were with us but that was too early for *Saturday Club*. They were on something else.

MT: I listened to it on the radio but years later I saw it on TV. I did see some things on TV at the time, obviously. I saw a lot of other stuff on TV that wasn't directly blues, like Tamla Motown. Real hardcore Chicago blues – the kind of stuff you're talking about – was very much an underground thing. Until all those artists that you helped bring over, Chris, became popular in Europe. That turned a whole generation of English musicians onto American music that they then, in a strange kind of way, re-popularised in America.

SDP: Well, they re-imported American music back to the Americans really. There's a great quote where Howlin' Wolf said, 'It took some English white people to hip my own people here in America to me'...

MT: That's very though. It was very segregated in America until '67 or '68. Even my earliest memories with John Mayall around '67, when I toured America with him, you'd rarely see someone like Bobby 'Blue' Bland or any blues artists in a white club.

I think by '69, there was a cross-pollination of all kinds of American music. I remember my first Stones tour, we had Ike and Tina Turner and B.B. King on the bill. They tried to continue that tradition most of the time I was with them. They would also try to pay homage, in a way, to people that had influenced them. People like Muddy Waters.

CB: The Americans changed the laws on segregation, but it didn't desegregate their minds. They were so used to that situation they acted it out even when they didn't have to. It isn't surprising, really, if you look at the attitude some European countries have to people who've only come as far away as...

MT: France! [All laugh]

As always seems to happen in the world of rock 'n' roll and, like-minded individuals tend to cross paths oblivious to the fact that other souls are vibing off the same sounds as they are. Often referred to as a founding father of British blues – making Chris Barber the grandfather, surely – Alexis Korner was an early band-mate of Chris's. He hooked up with harmonica player Cyril Davies when the pair both played in Barber's jazz band. They would go on to form Blues Incorporated in 1961, a swinging doors affair that attracted talent like future Stones drummer Charlie Watts and Cream bassist Jack Bruce. Alexis is an essential link in a chain that connects Chris with the mid-60s explosion fostered by John Mayall.

It turns out that Chris and Alexis were bombing around the same corridors as kids. They just didn't know it until a few years later.

SDP: So Mick, in 1949 Chris played with Alexis Korner for the first time, and he had him in his band a few times...

MT: God! That makes me feel young!

CB: He was older than me, you see. I was at the same school as him, but I was two years younger than him so I didn't know him at school, cos we didn't speak.

MT: I knew you were at the same school. What school was that?

CB: St Paul's...

SDP: ...finishing school for blues musicians!

MT: You've got your source of the British blues boom right there.

CB: Well, Alexis was two years older than me so he wouldn't have known me at school. You didn't talk to anyone two years younger than you at a school like that.

SDP: Then you've got Alexis a few years down the pike, and he definitely influenced John Mayall.

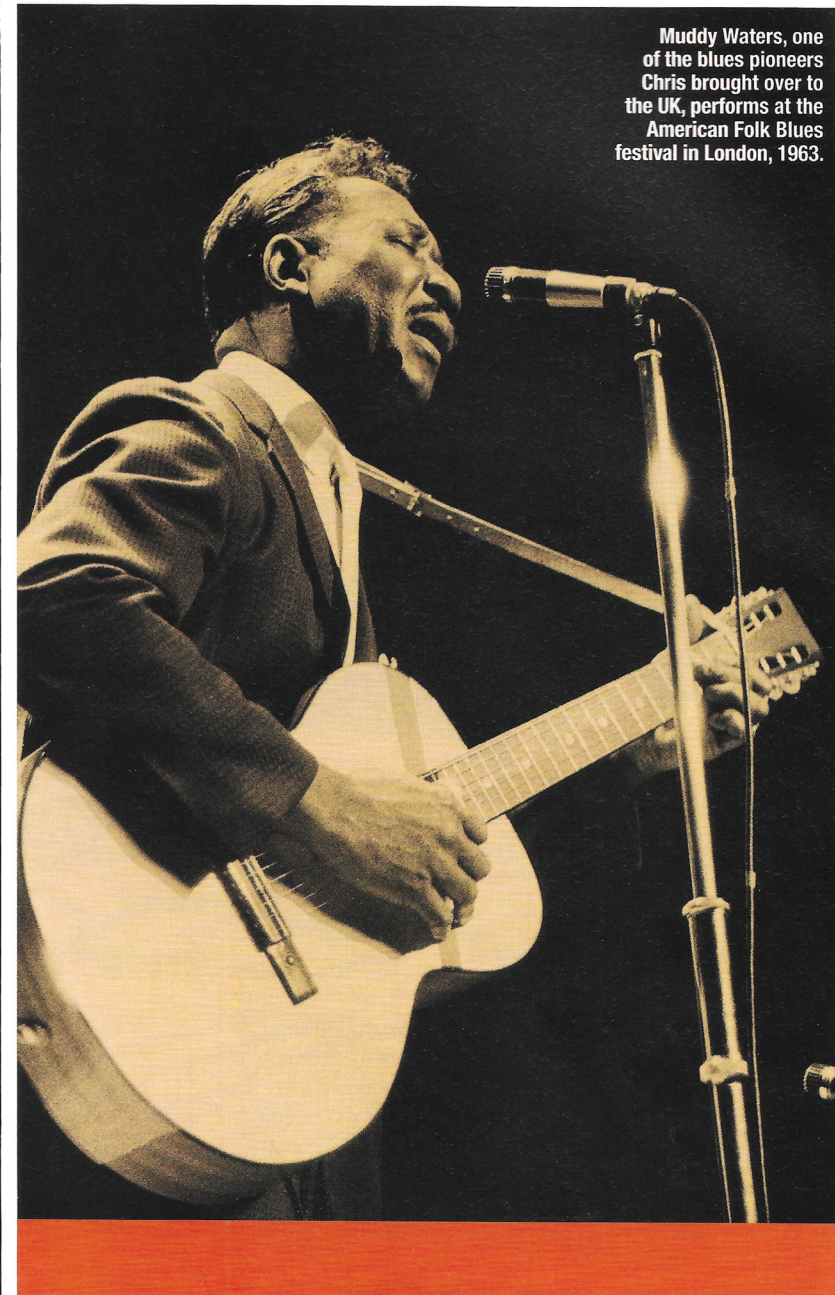
MT: He was an influence on me too. I knew Alexis quite well. I inherited John Mayall's flat in Porchester Road; Alexis lived in Queensway.

CB: Yeah, in Moscow Road. Just behind it.

MT: There was a very brief period after I left John Mayall and before I joined the Stones when I did a few gigs with Alexis as well. We became good friends and he introduced me to lots of people. He had what was, I guess, the forerunner of Paul Jones' radio show these days.

CB: That's right.

MT: I have to say most of the stuff I learned was from John Mayall. John was the catalyst for me getting into blues in a big way. He was the one that turned me on to the original blues labels. Although I'd



Muddy Waters, one of the blues pioneers Chris brought over to the UK, performs at the American Folk Blues festival in London, 1963.

been listening to blues music two or three years before I'd joined John, he opened all the doors for me. I started exploring different types of blues, the different places in America where it came from, how it sounded different in different areas...

SDP: How did you get hold of the records Mick?

MT: I found various places in London where I could buy Freddie and B.B. King albums, Gospel music, The Blind Boys of Alabama, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, those kinds of people. You really had to have a passion for that kind of music and try to eke it out. It was very much a word of mouth thing between musicians. You couldn't look things up on the Internet.

CB: It wasn't easy...

MT: I do remember one place called Transat Imports in Lisle Street in Soho. Now part of Chinatown, I suppose.

CB: Just about yeah. I think so.

MT: It was open on Saturday mornings. I remember looking through the albums there... Just blues and jazz imports from America. I tell you another guy that I was impressed by as a guitar player in the 60s when I first joined John Mayall, and that was a guy called Davey Graham. Do you remember him?

CB: I knew Davey Graham, of course. Davey was good.

MT: He did an album called *Folk Blues And Beyond*. It wasn't just blues. It was exactly what the title says: it was folk, blues and a bit of jazz. I heard this whole eclectic mix of American music.

When the British blues scene was at its height in the mid-60s, no one was happier to see young musicians finally 'get it' than Chris