



Chris Barber tries to estimate the size of his influence upon the British blues movement.

Barber himself. The music was no longer an underground affair thanks in large part, as Stephen Dale Petit puts it, to the groundwork laid down by Chris in the late 50s and early 60s. Suddenly, there was a lifestyle. Records were more accessible. Venues across London, and in the provinces, were booking blues bands to pull in the punters.

MT: Do you remember the blues scene in London, Chris? Not so much the early 60s, although it may have been there then. I didn't know about it until the mid-60s. It was like there was a spider's web of clubs and venues all over London, like The Fishmonger's Arms and The Marquee. It was mostly pubs actually.

CB: They had been with traditional jazz bands first, then they switched over gradually to becoming blues clubs. Partly or mostly... I was a co-owner of the Marquee with Harold Pendleton. We were looking for somewhere to play in town because we hated the acoustics in the 100 Club. For brass instruments in the 100 Club, [the way that building is built] they should be shot. It hits you back in the face!

MT: Have you ever written a book about all this Chris?

CB: I'm in the middle of doing a book now with Alan Shipton. A very good writer.

MT: You should. Your memory is...

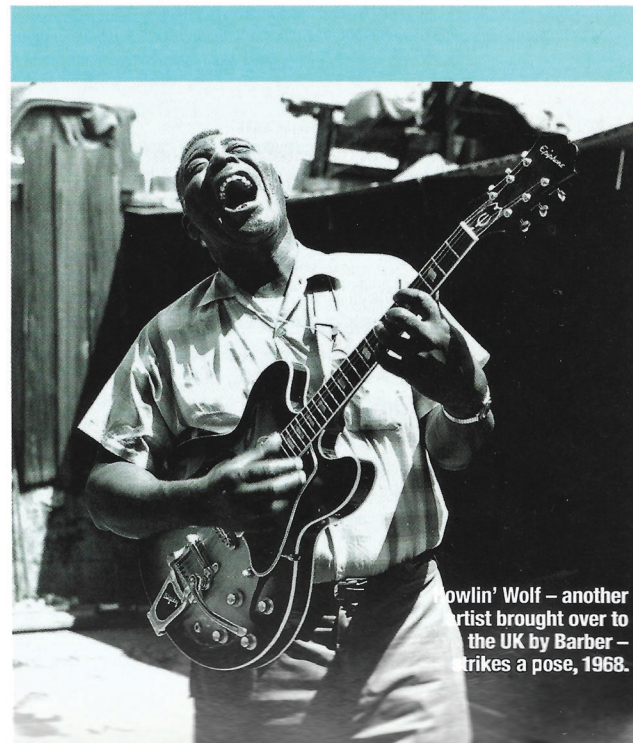
CB: Well, I remember too much sometimes. I remember things that were frustrating then... I realise that I could have changed them, but I didn't at the time know how to do it. You do your best...

MT: It's a history of the time we lived in. It's about fashion, it's about music. If you're talking about British blues, that is something that really does go back to the early 50s. It would have been nice to be there at the beginning...

CB: When the first blues people came over, it was really fantastic. We had Sister Rosetta Tharpe first. We did 22 concerts in 25 days with her.

SDP: That was with your band...

CB: Yeah, that was in '57. Then we brought in Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee for the following year. Then in between, the first visit of the Modern Jazz Quartet to Britain. John Lewis the piano player of the Modern Quartet, which is a very famous band; he was, in fact, an enormous serious blues enthusiast. He said to me, 'Who



Howlin' Wolf – another artist brought over to the UK by Barber – strikes a pose, 1968.

have you got coming next?' I said, 'Sonny and Brownie.' He said, 'Why haven't you got Muddy Waters?' I said I don't know where to find him!

MT: So how did you find him?

CB: I said to John, I'll send a postcard to the first cotton bush on the left on a plantation. He said, 'No, don't be stupid. He's got an agent and a Cadillac!'

MT: He probably would have done! I've got wonderful DVDs now of the old Newport blues festival, with Howlin' Wolf wearing a purple suit. Immaculately dressed. They used to call him the Black Elvis.

CB: Wolf was funny. He used to pace round the stage like Guy the gorilla in London Zoo. But he wasn't a hard man. He was a lovely guy. But he had this great image. He'd look you in the eye and you'd think, 'Oh my God!', you know.

A lot of these guest artists toured with us, gospel ones and blues ones. My then-wife and I would invite them for dinner at the house. Of all those, including several serious gospel singers, the only one of the whole lot that quietly said grace before eating was Howlin' Wolf. The only one. All the gospel singers said, "Where's the whiskey!"

Wolf didn't make us embarrassed for not saying it ourselves. I was just aware of what he was doing. He was a very nice, gentle, straight guy. He just had a fierce look about him.

MT: He had a hard life. It's good that they did finally gain acceptance universally...

CB: Very good, yeah.

MT: And that they're still appreciated. It's just hard to see anything like that happening again. Because the world has changed. What life is all about has changed.

Chris Barber's hosting of blues artists on British soil created an atmosphere whereby American artists – folk blues revival skeletons plucked from obscurity, Motown acts, even Dylan and the like – connected with a ready-made audience hungry for new sounds. Booker T. & The M.G.s and Stax labelmate Otis were famously stunned by the reception they received in London in 1967. The dominos that Barber toppled when he toured Muddy, Sister Rosetta, Memphis Slim, Wolf, Sonny and Brownie, you get the picture, ultimately led to the guitar hero era of the mid to late-60s.

The staggering talent that existed in London at that time – Eric, Peter, Jeff, Jimmy, Mick, no surnames required – found themselves at the mercy of a genuine American bluesman who had paid his dues in a way they could only dream of. It doesn't take long for the legacy of Jimi – again, no surname necessary – to crop up in a conversation about young guitarists. While Chris is respectful of Jimi's abilities, the showmanship part of the late guitarist's act is something that appears to leave him cold.

CB: The number of young black musicians in America that mention Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy and so on. Assuming they would like to sound like them, they don't get as far as sounding like them. Not to me...

MT: I'm sure it all filters down and influences all kinds of music. I've heard loads of young blues guitarists – well, not lots, but a few – in America on a couple of 'Tribute To Jimi Hendrix' tours who were amazing. Some of them had a real feel for Delta blues and John Lee Hooker-type blues...

CB: The feel is what it's about. Not having the technique to play fast and furious with the teeth and all that...

MT: I can't remember the guys' names right now. They were all on a tour that I was part of in 2007. I wish I could remember some of their names. There was a guy called Kenny Wayne Shepherd. I remember him. White guy who's a good blues guitar player... or 'Hendrix clone', whichever way you want to put it. (All laugh)

There were a couple of guys who were heavily influenced by Jimi Hendrix, but because they're a lot younger, they may have first come into contact with the blues through him, but they dug deep and started listening to where the music had come from. Just like we did. **SDP:** Jimi is someone for me 20 years down the line or whenever it was, who introduced me to the blues. He was one of the ways into it for me.

CB: We all get there somehow.

MT: His career was, unfortunately, very short, but he made such a huge impact, which is why he influenced so many people.



Precious memories: Barber and Sister Rosetta Tharpe jam backstage while performing together at Chiswick Empire, 1957.

CB: (Hendrix drummer) Mitch Mitchell was always moaning, "All he wants to do is play the blues." I listened to Jimi Hendrix playing, and he hardly played the blues. He's obviously playing fast guitar. Just this wild sound, playing with his teeth and so on. It was wonderful, but he didn't spend so much time on what you would call overt blues. So, it amazed me that Mitch was always grumbling. **MT:** There's a few clips of Jimi playing guitar on his own. I heard him play on his own in the dressing room a couple of times, and he was a wonderful blues player. When he went on stage he became very much part of the English rock thing and felt that he had to put on a show. He was actually quite shy off stage. With a guitar in his hands he was a total extrovert. Think about the people he played with, like Little Richard...

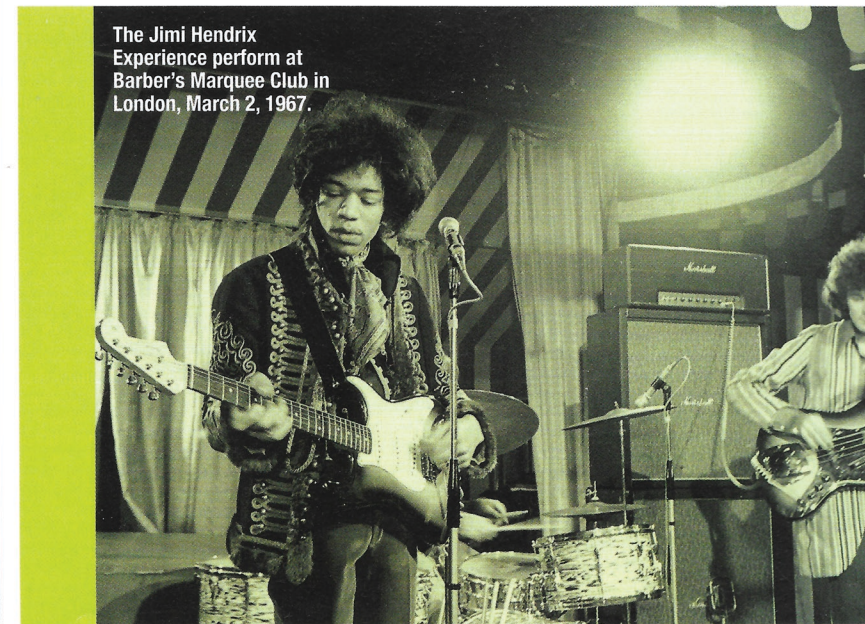
SDP: ... and the Isleys...

MT: If you go on the road, on the chitlin' circuit in America, you play with all kinds of blues musicians.

CB: If you play one of those clubs, you'd best be playing the blues... Or else!

MT: It's just most people know Jimi Hendrix for his flamboyance and pyrotechnics on the guitar but, no, he was a genuine Delta blues player.

It's no distortion of the facts to say that blues is currently enjoying a popularity that it hasn't experienced since the 60s. Like John Mayall says in this issue's cover feature, the music never went away. The same goes for Chris Barber. As he did in the 50s and 60s, the man has never stopped taking the music to the people that still



The Jimi Hendrix Experience perform at Barber's Marquee Club in London, March 2, 1967.

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