

How 'the world's laziest musician' became Britain's Best Loved Jazzman

2001 Company Silver Medallist Chris Barber talks to Sheila Tracy



Chris Barber was destined to be an actuary until jazz got in the way. His father, a statistician and economist with a double First at Cambridge, was also a good amateur violinist, so at the age of seven Chris was presented with a small fiddle. When his London school was evacuated to Royston during the war, he travelled to Cambridge for a weekly music lesson with an elderly

French gentleman called Mr Maurice.

"Mr Maurice always said I could play like an angel if only I would practise. I didn't practise. I wasn't interested really, although I loved music and we had records at home, one of which I remember was the Beethoven Violin Concerto played by Fritz Kreisler. I'm an admirer of that sort of classical violin playing, not the later more modern kind. We

had dance records but I didn't like them, I used to break them. That may have been Freudian!

"The BBC didn't specialise in jazz much in those days, it was all *Run Rabbit Run* and Vera Lynn. I've got both engraved on my heart. But I heard an announcer, no doubt sitting there in evening dress in Broadcasting House, play a jazz record on the Light Programme. It was Eric Winstone's *Oasis* (a pastiche of Ellington's *Caravan*) which, a few months later, I would never have classed as jazz, but that's how they announced it. I thought, that's for me.

"I must have heard one or two more, and I wrote to my father (the only letter I wrote home in three years at boarding school) saying I'd heard some jazz on the radio and would he send me some. He, being a very intelligent chap, did so. He bought *The Gramophone* for the classical music, and as the jazz section mentioned two five-star records, he bought them both and sent them to me. Harry James's *Ol' Man River*, and Coleman Hawkins' *Body and Soul* – one of the best records ever made, and I've still got it. 9099 HMV.

"I had to go to Cambridge by bus every week, and that meant I had a bus fare. But I had a bicycle, so I held the violin on the handlebars with one hand and the back of a lorry with the other and got in for nothing, and the return fare was enough to buy one 78rpm record – five shillings and four pence ha'penny.

"Millers in Cambridge, which is still there to this day, carried a good stock of jazz records, and there on the shelves were Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, and I bought a record every week. When the war ended in 1945 and I went back to London I had about a 100 records, which at the time was pretty unusual for a kid of 15. So I'd become this mad jazz enthusiast, the jazz kid – and I'm afraid I still am.

"During the war at Royston we used to cycle from our school to Bassingbourne airfield, where the 8th Airforce were stationed with the B17s. We would lie in a ditch with the planes landing 10ft over our heads. That was the airfield that Glenn Miller left from, not that I knew anything about Glenn Miller. There was a dump nearby, and we'd find new paperback books that had been read once and thrown away. I found Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*, one of the best jazz books ever. Knowing what I know now, it's full of nonsense. But for someone willing to be impressed by the wonderful names and the history of it all, it was amazing. So I read that, and it made me even more of a jazz fan."

Chris Barber never associated his violin with jazz but continued to listen avidly to records, an addiction which was fed by the fact that his next-door neighbours had family in New York who agreed to send him discs not available in Britain. He made