

# Trad Jazz and Skiffle Exhibits in Liverpool

## The British Music Experience



*Chris Barber's trombone Schmelzer nr. 4*

Jason Whiton

***The history of British music is steeped in legendary figures who shaped the cultural landscape of the world. A new museum opened in Liverpool in March 2017 that is devoted to this rich history. The British Music Experience brings history to life by featuring exhibits of original instruments, artifacts, costumes, and memorabilia from The Beatles and Bowie to Adele, Oasis, and***

***beyond. And the start of their guided journey begins with two wonderful displays dedicated to the Trad Jazz and Skiffle movements. I was thrilled to explore the museum in July 2017. What follows are some of my observations.***

The Zone 1 exhibits were dedicated to musical movements and performers from 1945-1962. First on the right was the Trad Jazz window. The central display was structured around four notable musicians: Chris Barber, Ken Colyer, Acker Bilk, and Humphrey Lyttelton. The Trad exhibit was filled with interesting artifacts such as vintage record sleeves, sheet music, posters, and concert programs. The assortment of original items really helped to transport me into another era- an effect that was achieved by each of the exhibit spaces. My attention, however, became transfixed on the arrangement of the main items, a wonderful constellation of sparkling brass.

The first to catch my eye was Chris Barber's Schmelzer nr. 4, a trombone he used for a number of years (see picture above). It was thrilling to imagine the instrument in action, and I began to think about Barber's long career playing side by side with the likes of Monty Sunshine, Lonnie Donegan, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry, Otilie Patterson, and recording with Paul McCartney.



*Ken Colyer's trumpet*

Taking us back to the early roots of the Trad scene, the exhibit also included the iconic trumpet and derby mute used by bandleader, Ken Colyer, as well as Humphrey Lyttelton's Selmer trumpet from the 1940s. Again, the objects served as a touchstone to not only this incredible

connected web of important careers, but to the stories and legends about the men and their role in music history. Rounding out the Trad window was a great assortment of artifacts owned by Acker Bilk, including his clarinet and trademark vest-and-bowler costume. Other highlights included a flyer for the 1962 Richard Lester film, *It's Trad Dad*



*Ken Colyer's iconic trumpet and derby mute*

a personal favorite starring Chris Barber, Acker Bilk, Terry Lightfoot, The Temperance Seven, Gene Vincent, and many others, and an original bass drum used by the Omega Brass Band. The importance and impact of the Trad movement did not stop at the Trad Jazz window, however. For the facing exhibit

crackled with a display devoted to an energetic wave of music introduced by the Trad men that became known as Skiffle.



Popularized during the intervals during Trad Jazz shows by Colyer (now switching to guitar), Barber (now on bass), and Lonnie Donegan (on Banjo and guitar), Skiffle music helped to introduce American traditional blues and folk songs to the isles. With the success of Donegan's "Rock Island Line"

recording in the mid-1950s, Skiffle became a national phenomenon and a symbol of independence for the pre-Rock youth generation. To illustrate the enormous effect Skiffle had on British kids, musician/author Billy Bragg cited in his book, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, that guitar sales went from 5,000 per year to 250,000 per year. Add in the many kids who opted to play tea chest bass, kazoo, and washboard, and that added up to whole a lot of Skifflers. Much is often said about the DIY aspect of Skiffle, with its focus on homemade and

cheap instruments, and the museum display brought that message home with an original tea chest bass, as well as Lonnie Donegan's own banjo, guitar, and stage costume.



*Lonnie Donegan's banjo, guitar and stage costume*

But the Holy Grail among the artifacts was a single 10" record, an original pressing of "Rock Island Line", owned by John Lennon. Inspired by Donegan, Lennon took up music, as many other future rock stars did, and formed a Skiffle group called the Quarrymen. Eventually Paul McCartney and George Harrison joined the band, and the rest was history. It was so exciting to see Lennon's copy of "Rock Island Line"- quite literally the record that set John's course toward The Beatles, not to mention the course of our culture itself. The original shellac pressing is on loan to the museum from Rod Davis, a former member of Lennon's Quarrymen. Also on display were artifacts such as record sleeves, kazoo, washboard, and items owned by Chas McDevitt, Marty Wilde, The City Ramblers, and The Vipers Skiffle Group.

sleeves, kazoo, washboard, and items owned by Chas McDevitt, Marty Wilde, The City Ramblers, and The Vipers Skiffle Group.



*John Lennon's single of Lonnie Donegan's "Rock Island Line"*

The rest of my journey through the museum was equally exciting, as one got a personal glimpse into historic careers, movements, and innovators. Some of my other highlights were original costumes and gear owned by The Beatles, David Bowie, The Animals, The Rolling Stones, Blur, and Oasis. Among the rarest items were artifacts owned by Buddy Holly, displayed to mark his importance and influence on budding UK musicians in the 1950s. There was also a nice gallery space dedicated to vintage radios and the role they played in transmitting music to the masses. And just when you thought you were ready for the gift shop and café, the museum funneled us into the Gibson Interactive Studios. This great space was decked out with real Rock instruments (guitars, drums, keyboards), headphones, and educational videos, and we were free to jam and explore for as long as we wished. What a cool way to invite visitors to channel their inspiration into personal expression!

The British Music Experience is located in the Cunard Building on the Liverpool waterfront. Open seven days a week 10:00-17:00. Please note that the museum has quite an extensive collection and items in the galleries may be rotated periodically. For the price of a single admission ticket, local residents can currently get a Local Resident Pass to enjoy 12-month access to the museum. Check their website for more information about special events, films, and educational opportunities. <http://www.britishmusicexperience.com>. To learn more about the long careers of Humphrey Lyttelton, Ken Colyer, Chris Barber, and Lonnie Donegan, please check their official websites, as well as Billy Bragg's book, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*.

Special thanks go to Kevin McManus and Colin Bordley at the museum for providing further information and some photographs, Alan and Alys Hayes (Hidden Tiger Books) for being great travel companions, Billy Bragg for his inspiring talk and q&a during his book tour, Andreas Wandfluh at the Chris Barber website (<https://www.chrisbarber.net>) for his support, Peter Donegan for fielding questions about his family archives, and Bert Brandsma of the Big Chris Barber Band for providing research materials. Additional photographs by the author.

---

*Jason Whiton is a writer/artist and art teacher in San Francisco. He is the creator of Spy Vibe (<http://spyvibe.blogspot.com>), a website dedicated to Cold War-era pop culture and design (over two million visitors). He fronted electric blues bands in his youth, and now enjoys collecting vintage records and researching music history.*

*Dec. 2017*