Dodds, Baby,


At an early age Dodds played drums in New Orleans parade and jazz bands, and in 1918-21 he played in Fate Marable's riverboat bands. In 1922 he went to San Francisco to join King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Dodds recorded with Oliver in Chicago the following year, and before the end of the decade, he appeared on classic recordings with other ex-New Orleans small-group leaders such as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Baby's brother Johnny Dodds. He also played in Johnny's bands during the 1920s and '30s; during the 1940s traditional jazz revival, he was active in New York City as well as in Chicago, including a period with Bunk Johnson's popular band (1944-45). Poor health led Dodds to perform only irregularly after 1949.

Even when he was restrained by the limitations of early recording technology, as in his recordings with Oliver, Dodds's distinctive qualities are evident to the listener. His style incorporated an unusual range of sound colours; his percussion patterns sometimes changed from chorus to chorus, and the offbeat punctuation he provided for soloists and ensembles was often so active that it amounted to interplay. While some of his later work was criticized as being mere showmanship, he was admired by bebop drummers as well as by early jazz performers and audiences.

Among his most valuable documents are two albums of percussion demonstrations, with his own narration; 1940s recordings with the revival bands of Bunk Johnson and George Lewis; and late 1920s recordings on washboard, as well as on drum kit, with Johnny Dodds. His reminiscences, The Baby Dodds Story, written with Larry Gara, was published in 1959.