

Baby Dodds & Zutty

Transcription by Hank Hehmsoth

[LS] WCKR FM New York 89.9 on your FM dial two minutes after the hour of 6:00. My name is Loren Schoenberg welcome to the musicians show our special guest for the next three Wednesday evenings Mel Lewis. A reprise of a show we did about six or seven years ago on the History of Jazz Drums. And we're gonna take our time and get into detail and learn and listen a lot from Mel Lewis. Let's begin with something from the second to last Mel Lewis record. The most recent one is the "Soft Lights and Hot Music," The one before that another great one on the Atlantic label, "The Mel Lewis Orchestra - 20 years at the Village Vanguard" and from that album let's hear Thad Jones' arrangement of "All Of Me."

[music]

Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra from the album "20 Years at the Village Vanguard" on the Atlantic record label. That was recorded in March 1985. I was at the session, but that was not an important thing that I was at that session. The important thing is that the gentleman right here was at the session because it was his band playing and that's Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra. We heard Thad Jones' arrangement of "All Of Me" with Ralph Lalama on the tenor saxophone on that great ensemble. Welcome back.

[ML] Yeah, here we are again. Has it been that long since we did the drum shows?

[LS] We started the drum shows I think in 19, in late '82 and I think they went over into '83 and maybe into early '84. We Those were very good and, as you as you know, a lot of drummers wanted tapes of those shows and they really circulated around and one of the unfortunate after-effects or products of that, was the fact that I actually lost some of my original tapes because I lent them to people and then, lord knows, what what happened to them. So since I had so many requests to do it again with Mel, it just seemed right then we just do it again instead of trying to rebroadcast some old shows. [ML] Yeah well you probably have it would have new things to say anyway you know or a different approach to some of the stuff because you know your minds your mind changes as time goes on/ or thought that you forgot then comes up now. You know it can't it can't hurt.

[LS] No it won't hurt, definitely. We'll be here this Wednesday, the following Wednesday and the following Wednesday after that with the History of Jazz Drums. Right away, I want to stress that if you're a jazz fan or a drummer or a jazz drummer fan or a fan of the drums or just a jazz hound in general, chances are there's going to be a drummer that you're going to want to hear that we're not going to get to. So we can ask you right now to save the phone calls. "How come you didn't... Why didn't you play any records by Don Lamanna or who or whoever, whoever the person might be. You know there's so many great drummers like, you have to draw the line somewhere. And I want to take responsibility at the beginning. I selected the drummers we're talking about after talking with Mel.

[ML] yeah well we can't play everybody I mean if we could it would be we'd be here well would be here for a year, you know, a year of Wednesdays and the rather than three weeks. I mean you can't you just can't hit at all. So what you try and do is was try and hit the main, the influences, the people who were very important, extremely important to the world of

drumming, you know. There are a lot of wonderful drummers out there, you know, that have gone by the way, yeah, I mean, you know, they're gone. We've lost them and, of course, a lot of your young, you young guys out there, have never heard them. You never heard of them! You know, and a lot of you are gonna be surprised, especially you young rock drummers, if you're listening, you're gonna hear things that you thought were new, was new. I mean, yeah, you thought, And you're gonna find out that this stuff is all old hat. You know, it all came from way back there.

[LS] Yeah, we're gonna strike a balance between the seminal innovators, you know, the handful of drummers who actually changed the way the music was played and influenced everyone. And drummers who might not have been an innovator, but people who were great drummers that you might not have heard of. People like Tiny Kahn, or Ike Day, or Harold "Doc" West, or Ben Pollack. or folks like that we'll be mentioning, and playing recordings of. So.. [ML] yeah, nice, yeah, it'll be a lot of fun.

[LS] Twelve minutes after 6:00 again Loren Schoenberg here with Mel Lewis. And I should mention, of course, Mel, as Ted Penn can very aptly, to the point mention before. It's one thing to listen to the radio and listen to records. The big thing is you have to get out there and support the live jazz scene.

[ML] That's it [LS] And of course, Mel is well into his 20., well, beginning the 23rd?

[ML] No, we'll be starting the 24th year

[LS] 24th year.

[ML] finishing our 23rd year, now celebrate that.

[LS] of Mondays, down at the Village Vanguard. And, of course, you can always hear Mel on Mondays at the Vanguard. And in many ,many other settings and many other places, including this week, a surprise. [ML] This week, surprise, I'm going to work at the Fortune Pavilion with Steve Kuhn, and Ron Carter. Al Foster got a fast call away, so they called me to come in and work with them. I'm looking forward to that. [LS] You'll be there tonight.[ML] Tonight, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Sunday's possible. Check, check by calling.

[LS] Ok, so that's where you can go here Mel this week, if you hear the shows, want to go say hello, something like that, or you know, check out one of the great drummers. Of course, one of the one of the things that happens when you do a show on great drummers with Mel Lewis is that they weren't one of the drummers that you don't get to in the History of Jazz Drumming is Mel Lewis. But that's been remedied by the fact that we've done many, many shows on Mel's career. And Mel's recordings will undoubtedly be doing more. So, in the same way that Alec Wilder's book on American popular song omitted Alec Wilder from the artists, Mel, will come up another show. Well, let's begin. And we'll get underway with the two gentlemen, two drummers out of the New Orleans school, born right around the turn of the century, both whom had early important associations with Louis Armstrong. And through him, and through their own great artistry, are recognized as two of the all-time drummers way back at the beginning, who influenced drummers right up 'till today, through many other drummers. We'll begin with Warren "Baby" Dodds. Warren "Baby" Dodds was the younger brother of the Dodds Brothers. His older brother was Johnny Dodds, who was a legendary clarinetist, and person who played a lot with King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, led his own groups in Chicago, after moving to Chicago. And "Baby" Dodds was his drummer, was his brother, and also the drummer with

him frequently. We're going to begin with an unaccompanied drum improvisation. that "Baby" Dodds recorded in 1946. So let's just hear it."Baby" Dodds, by himself. And we'll come back and discuss it with Mel Lewis.

[music - unaccompanied drum improvisation]

[ML] Warren "Baby" Dodds, now we look... he's playing on a complete drum set there. Except that he's added, certain percussion instruments that were more prevalent back in the early days than they would have been in 1946. But that was a trademark in a way for him. So what he, you know, because he had to play a drum solo, now. How many, a youngster today, would never even consider, to play a whole solo on the rims? Because that solo was played on the rims of the bass drum, the snare drum, which had a wooden hoop. I could tell by the sound, because there was no metal sound, that it was there were wooden rims on the snare drum, which a lot of the old-timers used. They preferred, especially snare drummers, guys who played the New Orleans style of drumming. Including Ray Bauduc and George Wedeling (sp) and them. They all used wooden, and Ray McKinley. They used wooden, rimmed snare drums, on the top, because they because they did a lot of that playing. And it didn't,.. it gave you another sound. That was a tap dance. That was, in no way, anything but an excellent tap dance. And there was all kinds of little staggered tricks and all that on the cowbells. He had a variety of cowbells, hooked together, so that he could slide off, he was sliding off of them. And you know, I enjoy, you know, I know what he's doing. But actually he was dancing. That was a total dance. And it was in perfect time all the way. You know, it was done on the... the drums were definitely calf skins on them. It was an set of drums from that period. The cowbells were tuned beautifully. They all had lovely sounds. And he used, he knew exactly what he was going to get out of out of each rim he used. See? So I mean he knew his drums. He knew the setup. He stayed away from cymbals pretty much. You know. And when you could hear, the cymbals were not the best anyway. You could hear that, that they were not. But he wasn't a cymbal man. He was a very, you know not to be funny, he wasn't a cymbal man. He was a drum player. And somebody could say, you could call that New Orleans drumming. I wouldn't call it New Orleans drumming. I would call it tap dancing. That was a dance.

[LS] One thing that struck me from the beginning was with the bass drum, and with the, there was a sense of a tonality there.

[ML] oh there is!

[LS] I mean I heard in my head some kind of, you know, region of pitch kind of thing.

[ML] The bass drum was on the tighter side, which you know, when you're dealing with calf anyway, you have you don't always have control. You can't always get it where you want it. So he might, if it was in a dry studio, or a room, or on a hot day, or in the wintertime, it's just worse, with the dry heat. Sometimes the bass drum gets so tight you can't do anything about it. I'm sure that was not a little bass drum either. It was a big one, but it didn't have the biggest sound. But it had a pure sound. And there was no muffling in it. And I could hear that. And, of course, did you notice that every stroke, I mean the level, it was absolutely even, all the way.

[LS] Yeah it was striking, all all the different, around the...

[ML] yeah the bass

[LS] was so controlled

[ML] Yeah, that's, you know,

[LS] that's a lot of stars

[ML] oh sure that's because nobody knows how to play their bass drums today. I mean they were taught that you don't play the bass drum. I mean, foolishly, that's where the swing comes. I mean that was the whole, that was the beat, yeah under, he played over that. I mean it's so foolish. the young drumming, the fusion drummer today thinks his bass drum is only to play patterns with. But he can't play four beats to the bar with it. He can't! He doesn't even know how. He has trouble doing it. But they can play all these tricks. What that man just did was difficult! Playing 1, 2, 3, 4 for a period of three - four minutes without wavering. [LS] Right, even. [ML] and with the same level. I mean the volume on the bass drum, no matter what he did dynamically with his hands, the bass drum dynamically remained the same. That's control. Now he could have played it softer than that or louder than that. But he set it, he set it at a level, and he kept it there.

[LS] Right now let's move, and hear "Baby" Dodds, Warren "Baby" Dodds, with a band. And this is a special recording band that was put together by Sidney Bechet in Chicago, in September 1940. The Ellington band, of which Bechet had been a member, way back when, was in town. So he borrowed Rex Stewart from the Duke Ellington band and some old friends who were based in Chicago. Earl Hines is on piano, bassist Johnny Lindsay, and Bechet and Rex Stewart and Warren "Baby" Dodds playing an Ellington tune. This is "Stompy Jones". And although it's not the most typical selection for Warren "Baby" Dodds, in terms of the mostly three or four horn front lines he played in, he's well recorded, and you get to hear him now in a band context."Stompy Jones" from 1940.

[music]

[music ends]

[LS] I'll bet you if that had been an in person performance, they would have kept going there [ML] Oh, sure! sound like somebody gave him a half minute or an hour. Check it out guys! Again when he got to his solo, he went right back into that into that woodblock interpretation. The rims and the cowbells and all. That was his thing, and he was a dancer. His style you could call it. It's practically every solo I've ever heard him play that's what he's done. Now in the early days of recording, he had no choice. They wouldn't let him touch a drum. And you can even hear there, he's he's in the back part of the room. He's separated. The drums are off a little bit in the distance there. And then all of a sudden, when he goes to his solo with the wood, with the harder that of the metal and the wood, it comes through. And then it settles back into that snare drum, the press role, which he played beautifully anyway you know. And there's one eight bar phrase there where he plays, he went to the ride cymbal. He played the ride cymbal. Which had been going on, because it started in the late '30s .I still think with Joe Jones, although that they don't know who the really credit for that. But the first guy I heard do it was Joe Jones. The Basie band. And he had a tiny little small cymbal that he played on, that I heard him play behind Prez. And which is really the question I laid on him that got him in that trouble that night when we first met, when I was an 8 year old, or a 9 year old, something like that. But again if you notice "Baby" played at a perfect level. That wasn't the recording engineers. They didn't really know how to, That was up to the drummer. You really had to do it, because it was mono recording. All the balancing was done by the musicians in those days. It was one mic. So I mean he played exactly at the right level. You hear what he's doing

[LS] I was gonna say one thing that'll reoccur more and more, as we go from one great drummer to another, is the fact when they get their solo work, and the things they can do, a lot

of fancy things, but by and large, when the band is playing when the solos are going on, for the most part, they let it go. They let the soloists tell the story and occasionally might add a comment or two. But for the most part they save the stuff for the solos, which is another thing that doesn't happen much anymore.

[ML] No, because now everybody today, everybody's trying to play, everybody plays a solo from the downbeat, soloing. Drummers today have this idea that they have to be heard. or you might miss I one of their ideas, so they stick everyone they can think of it into every... After a while, to me, it becomes absolute boredom after one chorus. Because I said well I just heard him, heard everything he knows. That ain't where it's at. The whole thing is is to be an accompanist, This was accompaniment. He played he swung, he swung the soloist. He sat back there, and just played under him. And when he got his turn, he took his turn. And that's the way it's supposed to be it's the way it was always meant to be. And that's the way it always should be. Now, how much you stick in depends on how much you can hear. And if you're really hearing, you'll put in only what's necessary. And if you can't hear, then, or you're not listening, then you're gonna put in a whole bunch of nonsense and that's what's going to come out. And the result is over playing. It just doesn't make any sense. But that's one of the problems of today anyway. I mean that's the difference between a lot of today's music. There's too much based on technique. How fast can I do this. How many how many notes can I get in. Like we were just saying before, How many notes can you get in one bar. But why can't you play four beats on the bass drum in one bar. Even. Figure that out. Guy can't play four beats with his bass drum, but he wants to find out how many he can get in with his hands. How fast can he play in four beats. But he can't play four beats. It's a strange. And it wasn't that way in those days. These guys were were built around teamwork. [LS] It's funny, it's the same analogies with the horn players. Some who can play tremendously complicated chord progressions at fast tempos, and doubling up on all the stuff. And meanwhile you ask him to play a ballad, just a plain old melody, of a nice old tune, and it sounds like cats dying or something. It's awful. It's the same kind of principle. You can't crawl before you can walk. And there's a lot of people who are doing it, I guess. How did you learn about listening? Was it something just came naturally to you, or your dad? [ML] Nah, it must have been, I think it was all natural. Because I can't recall being told anything about any of these things. I think it was just that I was a listener! I just love music. I think anybody that, especially the guys like from my generation, and those who want to of today's. But in our day I think the whole thing is with hearing the music, it was so wonderful that you just became a listener. I listened to everything. And listening became my habit. So that when I was playing, I don't remember how I started playing, either. I just was playing. Now I was still listening. I don't recall ever not being a listener, so I guess as I played, I figured, well, I can't play unless I'm listening. That was just a natural reaction, was to listen. And then as far as doing what they say, playing with taste. I've been accused of always doing the right thing. It's a nice accusation. But when they said "how'd you get to be that way?" and I really can't answer. It's just because I'm listening. I guess I always realized that if I start putting in too much or start putting in things that don't make any sense then I'm not listening. It also takes away from my listening. Because I enjoy listening to the people I'm playing with. To me, music is a pleasure. And if I'm gonna sit back there and solo all night, then obviously I'm not listening to anything. Now there are times when I'm playing a lot of stuff, but I'm hearing it, because my ears are so trained. I'll get behind Joe Lovano, who's a Coltrane style tenor player. And he plays a lot of

notes well I want to give him what will inspire him. But I'm still listening. And I feel like Elvin did, behind Coltrane himself. You hear it and you supply the taste that belongs with it. And believe it or not, folks, you can hear, You actually can hear everything coming out and you're not just playing away. But a lot of guys do it, just make a lot of noise and it has nothing to do with what the player is playing. I'm really hearing every note, every note, he's playing. Every direction he's going. I can hear him stop. I can hear him go. I will play more when he's playing less. I'll play less when he's playing more. Now that comes from listening. Otherwise you wouldn't even know it. This is from practice which means from experience. But if you're playing with somebody like a Lester Young style player or swinging like on the record we played when we opened the show behind Ralph Felama (sp), who's playing very simple swinging lines, all I'm gonna play behind it... there's nothing goes better behind that other than that Chinese cymbal going ta ta ki ta, and getting a fine walk going through there. That is the sound. With the bass walking on that and in punctuation from the piano. Nothing occasional little things coming out of the left hand, very simple. That is the taste. That's what should be happening behind that kind of a tenor solo. Now if I were to play, I got all that space. Most young guys today would hear all that space, and would be playing a drum solo behind the man's tenor solo, which isn't gonna endear themselves to anybody.

[LS] We're talking with Mel Lewis. That's Mel Lewis's voice you're hearing. And he's here with me until nine o'clock tonight and again 6:00 to 9:00 next Wednesday and the next Wednesday, on the History of Jazz Drums. its 6:35 this is WKCR-FM in New York 89.9 on yourFM dial. And we're talking off of hearing some "Baby" Dodds recordings. And for those of you who don't play, or haven't heard that much music in person, I guess a good analogy might be, with this listening business, have you ever had a conversation with someone who you know is not listening to you? You're talking to them, "yeah, mmhmm, yeah, really" That's exactly what it feels like when you're playing with someone in a band, who's not listening, who's chattering away. And you know they're not listening to a word you're saying. It's the same thing. Or if a rhythm section as a whole, is playing too much behind the soloist. It's like hearing three people talking at the same time. You can't tell. They're not listening to each other, you don't know what one person's saying, you can't tell, it's mass confusion.

[ML] In drumming, you're one drummer. You're sitting behind an instrument that makes noise. It really does make noise. It can be loud. When you're sitting behind cymbals and things like that you're chattering away, behind a soloist, that could be standing four feet in front of you, and maybe you really can't hear him! You have to strain to hear him. Well, what's the first thing you should do? Cut your volume down. That's number one. Because you have to hear over your drums.

[LS] That's another thing you do. BTW, let's apologize for the strange noises that are going on inside the studio.

[ML] you know what causes that it's because that's the heat. But half the radiators in this building are half turned down or half off, instead of being one or the other. That's what creates all that noise.

[LS] One thing that I know Mel Lewis does, I don't know if we've talked about it, is that you play your drums. You play your drums so they sound, you tell me if I'm wrong, but I think I've heard you say it, but you play your drums so they sound right to the audience and to the people that are listening. In other words, the way they sound exactly where you are at the drumset, is not

how they sound out there. And that's such a that's such a deep thing, and it would seem like a basic concept of drumming. But I guess a lot of people, a lot of drummers, play drums so it sounds exactly how they wanted to sound, at the drumset.

[ML] I get the raw sound. The raw sound comes in my ears, the pure sound, the sound of what a drum sounds like after it has traveled through space. That's the sound everybody else hears. It's the same concept of hearing your own voice. That you do not sound the same as somebody you're talking to. They hear you differently. You don't hear. None of us really ever hear. That's why we always scream when we hear ourselves about a playback, or saying "Oh, I hate my voice. I didn't know I sounded like that! I sound terrible!" You don't sound terrible. It's just that you're not used to hearing yourself as you actually sound. When you talk into a microphone, that sound that goes out, that's you. The sound you hear inside your head is not you. I mean, that's you. But that's as close as you're gonna... You're hearing it from another angle. That's the way I hear my drums. From inside. But outside is what I'm concerned about. That sound. So if I get the drums to sound like I want them to sound out there, back here. That means deadening them. That means actually killing the sound. So now I say, "Well, my drum sound great here!" They don't sound great out in front. Now they've lost it.

[LS] How do you know what calibrations to make? Just from experience, or from listening to other drummers?

[ML] I guess from listening, because I used to sit out in front and listen to the drums of the drummers whose sounds I enjoy. The guys with the individual sounds, like Max Roach, Art Blakey, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Sid Catlett. Not just their style, but their sound. They all had a sound. And going up and playing. I've played on almost all their drums at one time or another, and they don't sound like that out in front. Although I'm not gonna get the same sound out of their drums anyway. But I can hear. I know exactly They got the same thing going. The drums are open. They ring. They know. But you don't hear that out front. You hear a totally different situation. Whether they talk about it or not, they know it.

[LS] Right! Whether those conscious or instinctive or whatever.

[ML] I got an opportunity to talk about it, that's what I'm doing. Hopefully to help somebody. But if I didn't, I still know it regardless.

[LS] Let's go back to "Baby" Dodds and conclude our trio of selections, from Warren "Baby" Dodds, the first drummer who has come up on this History of Jazz Drums. And this is a drum improvisation #2, recorded the same day after the first one we heard, which was drum improvisation #1. These are from January 1946, "Baby" Dodds.

[music]

[end music]

[ML] Well, now you see what he did there. He played an introduction on the snare drum. He rolled. He used that in different variations as a chain for each section where he changed. He went right back into his tap dance routine with the wood block, with the wooden sounds, the rims. And at one point, all of a sudden, he threw in a little press roll, on the end, on the last two beats of a chorus, and then proceeded to go into a 2/4, where he doubled. So basically he stayed in the same tempo. After he finished that section he made a stop, put a very short pause, rolled again, and sent himself back into a twelve, into a slightly brighter tempo, a triplet. But in every time, the rolls, by the way, they were smooth as silk, each time, he had a beautiful roll. And there was a consistency in that roll each time he played it. It was the same basically

the same volume again. Here we're gonna change again. And same thing with the bass drum. See? It was a little louder than it was on the other one. It was heavier, but it stayed, again it stayed at that level, But in each case, he tap-danced.

[LS] It did sound, I mean I could see Bojangles Robinson.

[ML] He's always going back to that dance. So that's what "Baby" liked. Obviously that was his thing. He certainly could have changed it at any time. He didn't. He never went into a snare drum solo. He didn't bother. The rims were the thing and it all sounded like good, good tap steps to me. The kind of things that you heard Bojangles do later on. Or before, I should say. Or when you'd used to hear the great dance teams. Because the type of things they would do Because they're all playing drums. I remember Teddy Hale and Baby Lawrence, and all these people that were the ones that I grew up with, and the Step Brothers. They were the dancers of my generation and Nicholas Brothers. They all played drums.

[LS] It also seemed to be something melodic about the shapes of what he was playing. I hear kind of melodies in there.

[ML] Exactly. And that's where it came from. Now they either picked up their steps from him, or he picked up his steps from them.

[LS] Or maybe a little bit of each.

[ML] But obviously he loved to dance. I hope that when you listen to all he did was so little there because it was just a small.. there was nothing there. He really had very little to work with. And when you think about all these huge 15, 16 piece drum sets today, that you see and you hear nothing coming out of. Except doogadoogadoogadoog. I mean it's all they play. It's nothing. I would wish that the young rock drummers and the young drummers today will, I hope they will hear this. I hope they will listen to what I'm saying. I hope they will research these things and go out and find out what they're missing. And find out why it's so important to listen to these things, and to go to the library if they have to, whatever they have to do to get a copy of this kind of thing, and study it to find out that what they're doing is really nothing. And what this was was art. [LS] We should mention that these drum improvisations #1 and #2 were originally on the Circle record label, label put together by Rudy Blesh. But they've been reissued and you can get them and they're on a record label called the Audiophile record label. So you can go to your local jazz store and ask them for it. The name of this record I believe just the "Baby Dodds Trio". And it's on the Audiophile label and that's out of Louisiana now, a man named George Buck has it. I'll try and get to the address before the end of the show, but if I don't, now you know it's on the Audiophile label under "Baby" Dodds is is the name. You can, they are actually in print believe it or not. the "Stompy Jones" with Sidney Bechet came from a series of recordings that were put out on the RCA label and there have been available in a variety of modes over the years. It's 6:47 Loren Schoenberg here, and our very special guest this evening, Mel Lewis. Drummer Mel Lewis, of course every Monday night at the Village Vanguard with the Jazz Orchestra, and this Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday at the Fortune Garden Pavilion with Steve Kuhn and Ron Carter and the trio. And a lot of other things which you'll be told about as the gigs, and as things come in. 6:48 our next drummer up is Zutty Singleton. And Zutty Singleton again, a New Orleans drummer, early friend of Louis Armstrong's and like "Baby Dodds", "Baby Dodds" played with Louis on the Streck First Line on the steamboats, back in the teens Their photos by 1919 of bands with Louis and "BabyDodds" playing. Zutty Singleton also

played with Louis very early on, and was very, very close an old-time friend of Louis'. We should mention that this is not just abstract.