

JABBO SMITH

Jabbo Smith was born in Pembroke, Georgia in 1908, the son of a barber and church organist. After the death of his father he moved, at age four, to Savannah. His mother found it increasingly difficult to care for him and at age six Jabbo was placed into the Jenkins Orphanage Home in Charleston. His mother also found employment in the Home in order to be near to him.

The Jenkins Home placed heavy emphasis on music education and produced a number of important jazzmen who received their first public playing experience while touring with one of several student orchestras. It was in this setting that Jabbo took up trumpet and trombone at the age of eight and began touring the country with a student band at the age of ten. He left the Jenkins home at the age of sixteen and headed North to make his mark on music. He made, and kept, a promise to his mother never to work for less than one hundred dollars a week, a good wage in those days.

Jabbo found employment in a number of top bands, the most important of which were Charlie Johnson's Paradise Ten—an all-star line-up that included arranger Benny Carter on alto—and Duke Ellington, where he substituted for Bubber Miley in a 1927 Okeh recording of "Black and Tan Fantasy." Jabbo turned down an offer to join the Ellington Orchestra in 1927 because he was offered only \$65 per week.

In 1928 Jabbo joined the pit band of the Broadway show *Keep Shufflin'*, playing with Fats Waller on organ, James P. Johnson on piano, and Garvin Bushnell on alto. He recorded four sides with this group under the name of the Louisiana Sugar Babes.

Jabbo was stranded in Chicago in 1929 while on the road with *Keep Shufflin'* following the gangland killing of Arnold Rothstein, the financier of the show and also known as the infamous fixer of the 1919 Chicago "Blacksox" World Series. By this time Jabbo was a seasoned, creative jazz musician and found plenty of work in Chicago.

At the request of Mayo Williams of the Brunswick Record Company of Chicago he formed his Rhythm Aces, a quintet with which he recorded nineteen sides from January to August 1929.

But as Jabbo once remarked, "These recordings for Brunswick didn't go anywhere." Since then, they've been reissued several times. And today they're considered an important piece of jazz history. Jabbo Smith himself has never received the recognition he deserves—as a jazz trumpeter and as a highly original jazz composer.

Toward the end of the 1930s Jabbo gradually withdrew from serious music activity. He led a group for a while at the 1939 World's Fair in New York and gigged in a Newark, NJ club called the Alcazar.

Soon after, Jabbo moved to Milwaukee where he married, did some local playing and enjoyed the security of a steady job with the Avis car rental agency. There Jabbo Smith, one of the top four or five most influential trumpet players of Jazz, languished in quiet oblivion for twenty years.

Finally, around 1960, Jabbo was rediscovered. He led an active musical life after that point: recording, performing, and composing original music. It was the latter activity that he said gave him the most satisfaction and was for which he hoped he would be best remembered.

Jabbo died in January of 1991 at age 82.

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Cladys "Jabbo" Smith: Personal Interview by: Mike Joyce for Cadence in May 1982

Jabbo Smith on the Jenkins Orphanage Band:

Cadence: Let's begin way back with your days in the oprhanage.

Jabbo: I left there when I was about 16.

Cadence: It seems like you came out of there with a really good understanding of music. What kind of music teaching went on in the orphanage?

Jabbo: They had Alonzo Mills, he was my teacher there then. He was very good, started you off with the rudiments, before you get the horn. In a couple of months he'd give you that horn.

Cadence: Did you start off on the trumpet?

Jabbo: No, the trombone. You see, the way he taught you, he'd teach everybody in the same room. So you're hearing what he's telling everybody else. So you play all the instruments. I play all the brass instruments.

Cadence: The orphanage had a brass band.

Jabbo: Oh yeah, they had six brass bands. At the time he called me I was ont he yard, they called me "yard boy," that's when you're not doing anything. They try to give you some sort of trade like carpenter or shoe making or bakery, you know. If you're not doing nothing they call you a yard boy - you're just out there picking sticks up (laughter). So one day Mr. Mills came out and he called "You come here - you come here." And you know how kids are, they'd be beating on pans and things; you'd want to be a drummer, everybody wanted to be a drummer. So I guess he musthave thought you were musically inclined or something. He called me inthat bunch that he had picked out. Then he'd just sit you down and give you a little lecture what music was all about. I have abook over here called "The Jazz Nursery" about these fabulous people. He's about the most famous person, to me, Martin Luther King was all rightm but brother D.J. Jankins was the man. He'd take these kids, just orphan kids, he'd take them from the jails, anywhere, everybody would just send the kids there, and that was fabulous, to keep the little kids out of jail. He would train them.

Cadence: Did you actually tour with these kids?

Jabbo: Oh yes. The idea for the band was to raise money for the orphanage. Jenkins was just a famous man, for the git-go he was just a born leader.

Cadence: What kind of music were you playing with the orphanage band?

Jabbo: That was something beautiful about the orphanage. They's start you off playinf, after you learned your fingering and all, learned what music was all about, then you'd start to playing hymns, like "Nearer My God To Thee" and good things like that. They'd start you playing hymns, marches, then you'd graduate to overtures and things like that. By the tme you get out of there you're well versed, because he started you from the roots.

Cadence: Why did you leave?

Jabbo: Well, you know, everybody runs away. That's the only way you get out of there (laughter). That's one thing I appreciate (about the orphanage), so far I've been over this many

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times in school - New York, I've been to New York so many times as a kid. So when you get out you know where you want to go.

Cadence: When you got out of there you were pretty fast on that horn and you were only 16 or 17 years old.

Jabbo: 16

Jabbo Smith on playing with other bands:

Cadence: How did that "Black and Tan Fantasy" come about with Ellington?

Jabbo: Well, I think Bubba must have been sick or something. And he needed somebody to substitute so he asked if I wanted to do it.

Cadence: Tell me about the Charlie Johnson band, and your own band, the Rhythm Aces.

Jabbo: The Rhythm Aces was Ikey Robinson's , it was just a pick up band. That's what I was syin about those guys back then, they didn't have to have all this music. It didn't have to be written down, we could go to the studio and I could hum these things to these cats and everybosity got it from there. They were fabulous, 'cause they jad fabulous musicians, like Lawson Buford, Omer Simeon and Ikey Robinson and Cas Simpson, just fabulous cats. Charlie (Johnson) had the best band in New York, no doubt about it. He had Benny Waters, Benny Carter, and Edgar Sampson, that's the front line! I used to double on trombone with Charlie. In fact, I think we were the first to have two trombones 'cause I doubled with Charlie. Before that you could see one trombone in the band; now they got 4, 5. Anyway we had Cliff Bradenton (?), myself, Charlie in the brass section; Cyrus Sinclair on the tuba, Bobby Johnson playing guitar, Charlie himself on the piano. This was what was crazy, Charlie would come in in the night and start the band off, and he'd be gone, he'd go somewhere, he'd be gone all night and the band would be jumpin' (laughter). We had to play them shows and everything, that was a beautiful time. Small's Paradise was the spot.

Cadence: You recorded with Fats Waller and James P. Johnson.

Jabbo: Yes, we did this thing, "The Sugar Babies"... They were beautiful people, they were like brothers, just fabulous people. That's the thing I like about musicians, most of them are.