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CHARLES MINGUS @100:

'I Play Or Write Me'

BY ALLEN MORRISON PHOTO BY JOSEPH L. JOHNSON

Jazz has seen its share of legendary personalities — Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, so many others — but there has never been anybody in jazz quite like Charles Mingus.

MINGUS

THE LOST ALBUM FROM RONNIE SCOTT'S



NEW MINGUS RECORDINGS FOR HIS CENTENNIAL YEAR

Charles Mingus' centennial year will see a bounty of new recordings — both historical offerings and ambitious new works inspired by his influence. The latter category includes a Mingus retrospective on Post-Tone Records called *Blue Moods-Myth & Wisdom*, and no fewer than three releases on Sunnyside: an all-star tribute by bassist John Hébert to his hero featuring Tim Berne, Taylor Ho Bynum, Fred Hersch and Ches Smith; a tribute by clarinetist Harry Skoler that will feature Kenny Barron, Christian McBride, Johnathan Blake, Nicholas Payton and Jazzmeia Horn, with a string quartet; and one by Chicago bassist Ethan Phillips' *Meditations on Mingus*, a 10-piece ensemble.

Meanwhile, Resonance Records, curator of previously unreleased jazz recordings, has unearthed a three-LP (or three-CD) project more than 10 years in the works — *Mingus: The Lost Album From Ronnie Scott's*. The unheard-until-now London club performance features Mingus' 1972 touring sextet featuring Charles McPherson on alto saxophone, Bobby Jones on tenor saxophone, and three remarkable new members: John Foster on piano (and occasional vocals), Detroit drummer Roy Brooks and trumpeter Jon Faddis, then a 19-year-old phenom.

The music was recorded for release by Columbia Records, which stationed an eight-track mobile recording truck outside the London jazz landmark. But Columbia dropped its entire jazz roster, except for Miles Davis, in 1973. The album never came out.

The tapes, which were recorded with great fidelity, include songs where Mingus, cognizant of recording an important new album, asked to retake certain pieces. In an interview with DownBeat, label co-president Zev Feldman gave credit to album co-producer David Weiss for handling the edits that Mingus intended.

"David did this with a lot of skill," Feldman said. "Mingus wanted to retake the endings. He was a producer himself. He knew that something could be a little bit better. He was committed to making these performances as great as they could be." —Allen Morrison

Finally recognized toward the end of his life as one of America's most significant composers, Charles Mingus' reputation has only grown since his death in 1979 from the degenerative nerve disease ALS at the age of 56.

He would have been 100 in April, offering an opportunity to reappraise his place in jazz history: as a composer, bassist and a singular American cultural figure. This year has already seen and will see more tributes and celebrations and re-imaginings of his work — from Jazz at Lincoln Center's tribute in April, to conferences (including a February event at University of California Irvine and a series of concerts and panel discussions at New England Conservatory in April), to a host of new recordings with music written or inspired by Mingus (see sidebar on this page). The Newport Jazz Festival will also include a Mingus celebration later this summer.

Mingus occupies an image in the popular imagination, by all accounts well-deserved, as a force of nature, an iconoclastic truth-teller, a volatile, emotional man with a violent streak. But his many friends and fellow musicians, people who knew and loved him, remember a different side of Mingus: the spiritual seeker, poet, esthete and philosopher; the bandleader who took pains to treat his musicians fairly; and, above all, the artist he was right down to his bone marrow.

Stories about his temper are legendary, if sometimes apocryphal. There's the time he punched longtime band member Jimmy Knepper, the great trombonist, in the mouth over a disagreement about an arrangement, chipping Knepper's tooth and ruining his embouchure; the time in London where he allegedly threw saxophonist Bobby Jones down a flight of stairs at Ronnie Scott's club (like many of the incidents surrounding Mingus, the details may have been exaggerated); the time he attacked a nightclub piano, pulling out the strings with his bare hands; the time, apparently in response to a heckler in the audience, he threw a \$20,000 bass to the ground, destroying it.

There was the infamous incident at the Village Vanguard when he left the stage and chased his friend, the young writer Fran Lebowitz, down Seventh Avenue in Manhattan all the way to Canal Street. Lebowitz has said she no longer remembers what Mingus was angry about. When they could run no more, the pair collapsed on the sidewalk in a heap, exhausted. Then, seeing they were in Chinatown, Mingus suggested they go get something to eat. Lebowitz had to remind him that he was in the middle of a show.

The volatility became part of his mystique, the danger of offending Mingus part of the draw. At the UC Irvine event, his bandmate of 12 years, the peerless alto saxophonist Charles McPherson, recounted an engagement in Vancouver at which, enraged about a group of young men who were talking too loudly during a performance, Mingus left the stage, visited the bathroom, and came back with a toilet plunger, with which he threatened one of them.

"One of these guys gets up," McPherson said. "He's around 6-foot, 4-inches and takes a swing at Mingus and barely misses him. Mingus catches the punch in mid-air and slings the guy halfway across the floor. So I'm thinking, this is gonna end tragically — there are four of these guys, they're big, we're in a strange town. But it dissipated quickly. The next morning, it was on the front page of the newspapers. It turns out that this was a very famous quarterback for one of the Canadian football teams. That evening you could not get in the club. There were people wrapped around the block to see Mingus."

For better, and often, for worse, Mingus lived the romantic ideal of the artist's life: tempestuous, moody, obsessive, given to periods of elation and deep depression. During one such period in the late 1960s, he checked himself into New York's Bellevue psychiatric center, then struggled to be released. In an interview for the liner notes of a new historical Mingus release, Lebowitz said, "I know a million artists, I know a million people who say they're artists ... but Charles was profoundly an artist."

He was fueled by ambition as much as anger. After becoming the pre-

eminent bassist of the post-bebop era, he went beyond that to become one of the most significant composers in jazz. An autodidact, he read widely, and despite his depression in the late 1960s, managed to finish a crazy, kaleidoscopic, obscene, often wildly exaggerated autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, published in 1971, a book that, along with a Guggenheim fellowship, helped revive his career. The book, as entertaining, outrageous and contradictory as he was, focuses more on boastful accounts of his sex life and his struggle to find his place in society as a multi-racial man — his forebearers were African American, Swedish, German, Chinese and Native American — than it does on his music.

His fourth and final wife, Sue Ungaro Mingus, has thrown cold water on the autobiography. The legendary New Yorker jazz critic Whitney Balliett, in a 1971 essay, reports on a late-night conversation around the time of its publication in which she confessed, "I don't really like Charles' book, and I've told him. I think the sexual parts are too savage, and I think that Charles himself doesn't really come through. It's the superficial Mingus, the flashy one, not the real one." Ms. Mingus, now 91, still manages Jazz Workshop Inc., which publishes Mingus' music and manages three highly acclaimed Mingus repertoire bands: The Mingus Big Band, The Mingus Orchestra and the smaller Mingus Dynasty group.

Mingus channeled his anger into his art and his outspoken politics, which were often inseparable. His songs included the classic "Fables Of Faubus," a caustic take-down of the segregationist governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus, infamous for ordering the Arkansas National Guard to prevent Black students from attending Little Rock Central High School. Other socially conscious titles included "Freedom," "Meditations On Integration," "Remember Rockefeller At Attica" and "Oh Lord, Don't Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb On Me." Aggrieved at the mistreatment and outright rip-offs of Black musicians by the music industry, he founded, along with then-wife Celia and his friend and partner Max Roach, his own record label, Debut Records, in 1952. Its most famous release, by far, is the all-time classic *Jazz At Massey Hall*, featuring Bird, Dizzy, Bud Powell, Max Roach and Mingus, who was so inaudible on the original tapes that he overdubbed his bass parts in studio after the fact.

His music encompasses a range of influences as broad as his non-musical interests, a point made by his friend and sometime collaborator, the late composer, conductor and musicologist Gunther Schuller. "All of this incredible volatility in his personality, and variety ... that all comes out in his music," Schuller said in the 1997 documentary *Mingus-Triumph of the Underdog*. "His music is one of the widest ranging musics you can find composed by one single human being." He is decidedly a modernist, yet the music encompasses blues, gospel, early New Orleans jazz, swing, bebop, flamenco — and European classical, both in form and content, influenced by his wide listening to Bartók, Stravinsky and others. Densely layered, the music is one moment earthy and funky, then abstract, almost free, occasionally veering off into astringent atonality and the avant-garde.

Although Mingus often expressed disdain for free-jazz — or at least for certain practitioners thereof — in later pieces like "Mind-Reader's Convention In Milano," he often encouraged his group to play with that kind of freedom. "Even when playing more conventional pieces," said Brian Priestley, the English writer, musician and Mingus biographer, "Mingus always wanted the individuals in the band to go as far as they could into their own thing. Several different people have said [of their experience playing with him] that he always wanted people to play 110% all the time."

"His music had a lot of moving parts," McPherson said in a Zoom interview for this article from his San Diego home. "A lot of things make his music what it is. The influence of Jimmy Blanton, the great (Ellington band) bass player — the first real virtuoso of the jazz bass. Also Ellington — you know, Mingus loved Duke Ellington. His whole concept of a band was to capture the big band ambience of Ellington and transfer that to a smaller group. And he loved Charlie Parker. He was also very knowl-

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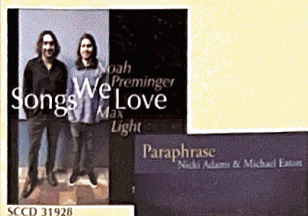


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Mingus at the 1964 Monterey Jazz Festival.

edgeable about Western classical music, and was influenced by Stravinsky, Prokofiev, people like that. Mix that all up and add his own genius, then you got Mingus."

Balliett, in his New Yorker profile, wrote of a Mingus gig he witnessed at the Village Vanguard: "He brought out refurbished versions of numbers I hadn't heard him play since the '50s, among them 'Celia' and 'Diane.' They were full of his inimitable trademarks — long, roving melodies, complex, multipart forms, breaks, constantly changing rhythms, stamping, howling ensembles, and the raw, against-the-grain quality he brands each of his performances with."

"It's funny about Mingus," said Vincent Gardner, first trombonist of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. "As deep as his music was, he really was a groover. He loved to have a nice deep pocket and swing, get everybody feeling good. He had a real strong dance element when he wrote pieces like 'Haitian Fight Song.' He could make you bounce your head and tap your feet."

Gardner, who served as the musical director for JLCO's Mingus celebration, planned to include such classics as "Don't Be Afraid, The Clown's Afraid, Too," "Meditations On Integration" and a Sherman Irby arrangement

of "Fables Of Faubus," as well as later-period material including "Freedom" and the little-known "Song With Orange."

'ORGANIZED CHAOS'

Mingus told his musicians he was looking to create a kind of "organized chaos" on the bandstand. "When we played his compositions," McPherson recalled, "if it was too perfect, he'd say, 'It's great, but it's too clean.' But if we were too 'unclean,' he'd have an issue with that — it wasn't organized enough. When I think about it now, as an 82-year-old person — I was in my mid-20s then — I think what he meant was that, even though he wanted it to sound clean, he wanted the ambience of spontaneity, as well ... a certain controlled recklessness. Just reckless enough to convey the spontaneity, but not so reckless that you mess up and don't do the thing."

"It might have been Schoenberg who said that written music should sound improvised, and improvised music should sound written. That is exactly what Mingus was trying to convey," McPherson added.

Bassist Christian McBride, interviewed via phone, agreed: "Miles Davis used a similar term when he described what is now known as his second great quartet, and that was 'controlled

freedom.' So Mingus had 'controlled chaos' and Miles had 'controlled freedom,' which meant it almost went off the rails, but it never did. You know, like the excitement of almost falling off the cliff."

For Mingus, music was intensely personal and purely a vehicle for self-expression. Once, Miles Davis, in a November 1955 interview with Nat Hentoff published in *DownBeat*, critiqued Mingus' current writing, comparing it unfavorably to "Mingus Fingers," an early work Mingus wrote for the Lionel Hampton band during one of his first big touring gigs in the late 1940s.

Mingus responded by writing an "open letter" to Miles published in this magazine a few weeks later, which said, in part:

"Miles, don't you remember that 'Mingus Fingers' was written in 1945 when I was a youngster, 22 years of age, who was studying and doing his damndest to write in the Ellington tradition? Miles, that was 10 years ago when I weighed 185. Those clothes are worn and don't fit me anymore. I'm a man; I weigh 215; I think my own way. I don't think like you, and my music isn't meant just for the patting of feet. ... When and if I feel gay and carefree, I write or play that way. When I feel angry, I write or play that way — or when I'm happy, or depressed, even. Just because I'm playing jazz, I don't forget about me. I play or write me, the way I feel, through jazz, or whatever. Music is, or was, a language."

MINGUS, THE BASSIST

If Mingus hadn't been a genius composer, he would be immortal just for his bass playing. "Mingus is like [Ellington] ... a great composer, great bandleader and, of course, a wonderful bassist. That goes without saying, but maybe it's in that order," Eddie Gomez told Resonance Records co-president Zev Feldman. In his autobiography *Myself Among Others*, the late George Wein, who presented him frequently at Newport and in Europe, described him as "a fantastic bassist. I didn't know whether anyone had ever played the instrument with that sort of creative facility."

He is often given credit for helping to transform the bass from a time-keeping instrument into a melodic one. "He's certainly one of the originators of that," McBride said. "He was stylistically a bridge between Jimmy Blanton and the younger ones," the next generation of bassists, like Scott LaFaro, Paul Chambers and Richard Davis. "They all looked up to Mingus."

Ultimately, Mingus' goals were beyond jazz. In fact, he was an early critic of using the word "jazz" to describe his music.

During his stay at Bellevue, he reflected on his own talents and ambitions in a letter to journalist Nat Hentoff. After listening to a recording of the Juilliard String Quartet playing

Bartók quartets, he was overwhelmed with his admiration for the musicians and their selfless, relatively anonymous pursuit of art, comparing it unfavorably to his own pursuit of jazz stardom, commercial success, and a higher ranking in the critics polls.

He told Hentoff, "It's not the composer so much that prompted this writing. ... Their names were not announced, just 'The Juilliard String Quartet.' That's the way it should be ... they're good, good players ... close to perfection, very important men. They have the abil-

ity to transform in a second a listener's soul and make it throb with love and beauty — just by following the scratches of a pen on a scroll. Hearing artists like this reminds me of my original goal, but a thing called 'jazz' took me far off the path, and I don't know if I'll ever get back. I am a good composer with great possibilities, and I made an easy success through jazz, but it wasn't really success — jazz has too many strangling qualities for a composer. ... Oh, to be a nameless member of a quartet like I heard today."

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CHARLES MINGUS @100:

'I Play or Write Me'

BY ALLEN KORNBLUTH PHOTO BY JOSEPH L. JOHNSON

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