

JAZZ

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MINGUS AT 100

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HARRY SKOLER

*Professor of Woodwinds at Berklee College of Music since 1997, clarinetist Harry Skoler reaches for the stars on his fifth album, *Living in Sound: The Music of Charles Mingus* (Sunnyside). Throughout this strikingly evocative project, the clarinet virtuoso — a Mingus obsessive since his teens — offers efflorescent improvisations through arrangements of nine Mingus compositions by Ambrose Akinmusire, Fabian Almazan and Darcy James Argue, with a to-die-for rhythm section of Kenny Barron, Christian McBride and Johnathan Blake, joined on various tracks by trumpet titan Nicholas Payton, vocalist Jazzmeia Horn and a string quartet.*

In 2018, I had a ruptured artery and almost didn't make it on the operating table. After I pulled through, I went into a dark malaise for quite some time; I didn't want to listen to music, or play, or practice or think about ever recording again. Then, one day, I felt an overwhelming desire to record, and asked Walter Smith III, who had just been named chair of Berklee's Woodwind Department, if he would produce a record. He said yes, we started talking about ideas and decided on Mingus.

My life growing up was a holy hell for me. I experienced chronic and complex trauma, both physical and psychological. When I listened to my first Mingus recording — *Mingus Moves* — it was the first time I felt like I had a family. I listened to it over and over, with headphones on, next to the turntable. It was so intimate, so all-encompassing.

As we started to put the record together, I got everything by Mingus that I could, looking to find not only pieces that were familiar to me, but other ones that were screaming my name. I feel that Mingus was a victim of trauma, and that some basic structure of being connected me profoundly to Mingus in a way that changed my life — and still changes my life on a daily basis. When I read some things that Mingus wrote, viewed him in the documentary *Triumph of the Underdog* or heard about his conflicts and his fights and his activism — to me, it's very much like the music, whether it's a very gentle piece or something very different. It's an appropriate non-filter. It resonates with me.

Mingus didn't have any magical way of making me feel this way or that way. But what he could do is trigger something within, and I could feel those things myself. With everything that I've heard about Mingus, just anecdotally, I would think that perhaps this is not a safe individual to want to have a conversation with — or maybe play in a group with. But at the age of 65, I feel Mingus is one of the few people who gives me a feeling of complete safety, and a place of love, and a place where I can talk to somebody in a different way than I can talk to my family, a different way than I can talk to my peers.



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