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AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

JazzTimes

APRIL 2022

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IN CONVERSATION
WITH MELVIN GIBBS

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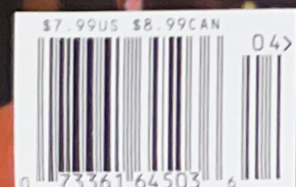
Simple Truths


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MINGUS AT 100

The Legacy Continues





The Meaning of Mingus

100 years after the titanic bassist, composer, and bandleader was born, the significance of his legacy keeps going through changes

By Shaun Brady

"I'M TRYING TO PLAY THE TRUTH of what I am," Charles Mingus once told Nat Hentoff. "The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time."

More than 40 years after his death on January 5, 1979, Mingus continues to change. At least our idea of Mingus: what he represents to the history and evolution of jazz; how his example defines the artist's responsibility and risk in speaking truth to power; the way he embodies the uneasy relationship between performer, image, and flesh-and-blood human being.

Mingus' centennial on April 22 offers an ideal opportunity to once again grapple with the gargantuan persona of this jazz icon. Genius and madman, visionary composer and canny showman, sensitive artist and tempestuous bully, crusader for justice and two-fisted tyrant—each of these depictions is rooted in fact while obscuring a more nuanced reality. The outsized image is only appropriate for such a self-styled mythologizer, whose notorious *Beneath the Underdog* warps, elaborates on, and explodes Mingus' biography in much the same way that his music reshaped the traditions of blues and gospel.

"I'm going to use the word 'complicated,'" Charles McPherson said recently, with more than a touch of understatement. The saxophonist spent 12 tumultuous years with the bassist between 1960 and 1974, broken only by a brief stint working for the IRS that ended, he said, because "those people are weirder than Mingus."

McPherson continued, "There were a lot of moving parts and a lot of them were conflicting. There's no subject and object with Mingus. He was music. That's all he thought about and did, writing music. He was totally self-absorbed, maybe to a fault, in the music, and he was what he produced. He was a pure artist."

The complexity of Charles Mingus was not only evident to those who shared the bandstand with him. Personality, history, voice, and artistry are inextricably bound together in his work in a way that they are with only a select few musicians. Pull on a strand of his raucously elegant compositions and you begin to unravel the personal identity; righteous anger and deeply felt emotion quickly expose

the hazy outlines of a history, even if they play fast and loose with the specifics. As with Thelonious Monk, it's a delicate balance to interpret Mingus' compositions without either falling prey to mimicry or losing the essence of the original.

Bassist John Hébert navigates that challenge on his new album, *Sounds of Love* (Sunnyside), paying tribute via a combination of his own and Mingus' compositions. "It's so hard to play that music because there's such an indelible stamp of the composer's voice on the music itself," he said. "It's like playing Monk and Wayne Shorter tunes; even within the compositions, the melodies are so unique to that individual artist."

Fellow bassist Charnett Moffett cites Mingus and Jaco Pastorius as two primary influences that he's deliberately avoided studying too closely for fear of becoming a faint echo of their greatness: "Mingus had an extraordinary personality, as we all know. But he was very real to what he was going through in his life experiences. The whole point of playing creative music and jazz is to find your own voice, so Mingus is one of the few players that I deliberately tried to shy away from because his voice is so dominant and strong. If you imitate him in any way, it's going to be exposed immediately."

"It would be laughable and stupid to try to emulate him on the bandstand," added bassist Boris Kozlov, who should know—he's been performing Mingus' music for nearly three decades with the Mingus Big Band and Mingus Dynasty, much of that time as co-musical director. "That would be the ultimate assault on his legacy, but I also feel like he would strike me down with thunder if I were making an attempt to sound like him."

BORN ON APRIL 22, 1922, Mingus grew up in the Watts section of Los Angeles. He studied cello as a child with dreams of becoming a classical composer, though the barriers for Black musicians at that time, combined with his adoration of Duke Ellington, shifted his focus to jazz. The basic ingredients for his music came together in those early years: He would forever walk a tightrope stretched taut between the church music he was raised on, classical ambitions, Ellington's blues-rooted sophistication, and a roiling

anger at the injustices forced on him on account of his race.

"He was treated so poorly by this country," Hébert said. "Like so many musicians before and after him, he was not given his due because he was Black."

Bebop added an additional, complicating twist to Mingus' intricate vocabulary, though he maintained an uneasy relationship to the movement throughout his career. Initially resistant to the new sound emerging on the opposite coast, he gradually came to deeply respect and work fruitfully with its founders, Charlie Parker in particular. He would incorporate the music's fiery complexity into his own writing, as he would the boundary-pushing experimentalism of the avant-garde (which he had a significant hand in inspiring), though he stubbornly maintained misgivings about both even as he engaged with and often transcended them.

His independent streak was perhaps Mingus' defining characteristic, as it led to so many of his most pioneering ventures. That includes the short-lived but inspirational Debut Records, co-founded with Max Roach as one of the earliest

attempts at an artist-owned independent label. His Jazz Workshop ensembles were ever-evolving laboratories for blurring the lines between composition and improvisation, eschewing notes on paper for teaching by example and shaping pieces through personal interpretation. But he also expanded the scope of jazz composition through multi-part suites, tone poems, and constant reinvention.

"He was ahead of his time in a lot of ways," Kozlov said. "So many things that were radical back in the '50s or '60s are now commonplace and almost mainstream, and Mingus was the pioneering vision: his use of tempo changes on songs that became standards, the harmonic

sensibility, the polytonality, key changes in the middle of a chorus. He paved the way for a lot of things that you can put your finger on, but there are also a bunch of things that are unique to him that you cannot put your finger on."

That includes the forcefulness of his bass playing, an instantly recognizable sound that combines a burly robustness with raw aggression and rough-hewn precision. Moffett got the chance to perform for Mingus as a 10-year-old prodigy, goaded by his drummer father Charles Moffett to show off for "this old guy that was supposed to be great." (Mingus' response, as Moffett remembers with a chuckle, was something

"There's no subject and object with Mingus. He was music. That's all he thought about and did."

— Charles McPherson



'70s Mingus, with (L to R) John Foster, Roy Brooks, and Charles McPherson

along the lines of "Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's playing a lot of notes.")

"Mingus had a way of attacking the strings that was very powerful," Moffett described. "Yet it was very loving and very warm. Nobody swings like Mingus. You never hear Mingus *not* swing, and he could do it in a way that could shake the whole earth."

You can hear that forceful attack at length on a vital new collection, *The Lost Album from Ronnie Scott's*. On Record Store Day, which follows the Mingus centennial by a single day, Resonance Records will release this remarkable three-LP/CD set capturing a blistering 1972 performance at the legendary London club. The band features McPherson, along with trumpeter Jon Faddis, saxophonist Bobby Jones, pianist John Foster, and drummer Roy Brooks, all of whom are given ample space to stretch out on expansive investigations of pieces like "Fables of Faubus" and "Orange Was the Color of Her Dress, Then Silk Blue."

THE SEXTET THAT MINGUS LEADS

on *The Lost Album from Ronnie Scott's* is a transitional one, but the mix of long-timers and new recruits showcases the alchemy he used in assembling a band, delighting in the friction and flow of the players he convened. It was that aspect that Hébert focused on when devising *Sounds of Love*. Recorded live in 2013, the date brings together a quintet of fierce individuals who've enjoyed parallel but rarely intersecting careers: saxophonist Tim Berne, cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, pianist Fred Hersch, and drummer Ches Smith.

"The whole point of the record is having those different voices and seeing how they react to each other," the bassist explained. He drew particular inspiration from 1975's *Changes One*, which featured an earthshaking band with Walrath, saxophonist George Adams, pianist Don Pullen, and drummer Dannie Richmond (see pg. 12).

"I love all those guys as individuals," Hébert continued, "and then you bring them all together and it just creates this force. They're not just sidemen at that point; Mingus was picking musicians whose sound he could hear in his music and then giving them complete freedom within that music. For me, doing that was going to be weird or it was going to be amazing, and I didn't really care which. I

MINGUS

THE LOST ALBUM FROM RONNIE SCOTT'S



Original tapes for *The Lost Album from Ronnie Scott's* and the finished product

on the album.

"It almost feels like Mingus Lite," admits Kozlov, who also continued his tradition of including a Mingus tune on each of his own recordings by cutting "Eclipse" for his new Posi-Tone release, *First Things First*. "I was glad to be a part of the session, but it sounded so different from how Mingus Dynasty or the Big Band have been playing over the years. But I trust Marc, and he had this idea that it would make the music more accessible."

The Mingus Big Band, Mingus Orchestra, and Mingus Dynasty have been keeping the composer's flame alive ever since his death from ALS, under the dedicated guidance of his indefatigable widow, Sue Graham Mingus. Having lost their longtime home when New York's Jazz Standard closed during lockdown, they've recently resumed their rotating Monday-night slots at the Django in Tribeca. The bands are gearing up for a number of events and releases to celebrate the Mingus hundredth, including a new big-band album as well as "legacy releases, master classes, clinics, jam sessions, book releases, archival showings and specially curated events in New York City."

All of this follows 2020's *@Bremen 1964 & 1975*, another vital addition to Mingus' live discography featuring two key bands: one with Eric Dolphy, Johnny Coles, Clifford Jordan, and

was almost hoping for a disaster, because sometimes the best moments come from complete chaos."

That sentiment echoes McPherson's description of Mingus' approach as "organized chaos." As the altoist elaborated, "He didn't like things to be too clean, to a point where the music sounded processed or too pristine. At the same time, he did not like too much disorder or things being too raggedy, because that's the other end of the spectrum. So he straddled that aesthetic."

While *The Lost Album from Ronnie Scott's* finds Mingus at his most out-leaning, a new tribute from Posi-Tone swings the pendulum to the other extreme. With *Myth & Wisdom*, the first in a proposed series of releases under the "Blue Moods" umbrella, producer Marc Free has gathered a group of Posi-Tone regulars to record a set of remedial takes on Mingus material, smoothing out the rough edges in hopes of enticing novice listeners. The idea is a controversial one, even to those

Jaki Byard, the other including Walrath, Adams, and Don Pullen. Both feature the bassist's favorite drummer, Dannie Richmond.

Saxophonist Ricky Ford recalled that when he joined Mingus' band in 1976, his resistance to aping his predecessor helped lead the bandleader into a new burst of creativity. "He wanted me to play like George Adams," Ford said. "I didn't feel like playing like George Adams, so I decided I'm going to play like myself. And it was a big challenge to find myself because I was just starting out. But I did my own thing, and because of this Mingus started writing these long-ass charts: 'Three or Four Shades of Blues' and 'Cumbia and Jazz Fusion.' It was a 360-degree turn from what he'd been doing because George Adams and those guys weren't going to read all of this music. He figured out a way to utilize the talent."

That heavy reliance on a band of individuals to mold his vibrant compositions into new forms is also key to successfully finding one's own way into the pieces, said Gerald Veasley. The bassist formed his Electric Mingus Project in 2009 as a way to delve into a rich body of music as well as work with several of his colleagues at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, including saxophonist Chris Farr, trumpeter John Swana, and vibraphonist Tony Miceli.

"As I understand it, Mingus was not so much into codifying the music by writing it down but by teaching it to musicians," Veasley said. "So as you're letting the music tell you where it wants to go a little bit differently, it's almost natural. The way he conceived the music was so organic that it lends itself to rearrangement without struggling to find ways to put your own spin to it."

Boris Kozlov actually encountered Mingus as a composer long before he ever heard the bassist play. Recordings were scarce during Kozlov's youth in Moscow, but he discovered the composition "Pussy Cat Dues" while searching out new material for his band. His reaction helps reconcile Mingus' unavoidable imprint with the malleability he baked into his compositions.

"I made an illegal homemade photocopy of a *Real Book* and I was playing through tunes at the piano," he recalled. "Even on the page, 'Pussy Cat Dues' jumped out as a highly original piece of music. Obviously the page cannot do Mingus justice because



John Hébert pays tribute to Mingus on his latest album

"I could listen to Mingus and nobody else for the rest of my life and two reincarnations and not scratch the surface."

— Harry Skoler

there's such an immediacy of delivery in his playing and in his bandleading. But beyond the extreme emotion and passion, his composing skills were immaculate. You can dissect his music with an academic musicologist's knife, but you can also look at it from the standpoint of the blues—and the blues is not, as we know, 12 bars; the blues is question and answer."

MINGUS' CENTENNIAL LANDS at a moment in this country's history that would surely be discouraging to

the composer, who delivered caustic rebukes to the racism and injustice he confronted through pieces like "Fables of Faubus," mocking the segregationist governor of Arkansas, or "Remember Rockefeller at Attica," a response to the deadly 1971 prison riot.

"I always looked at Mingus as the Dr. Martin Luther King or Malcolm X of jazz," said trombonist Frank Lacy, a 30-year member of the Mingus Big Band who also fronted the ensemble as vocalist on its most recent release, 2015's

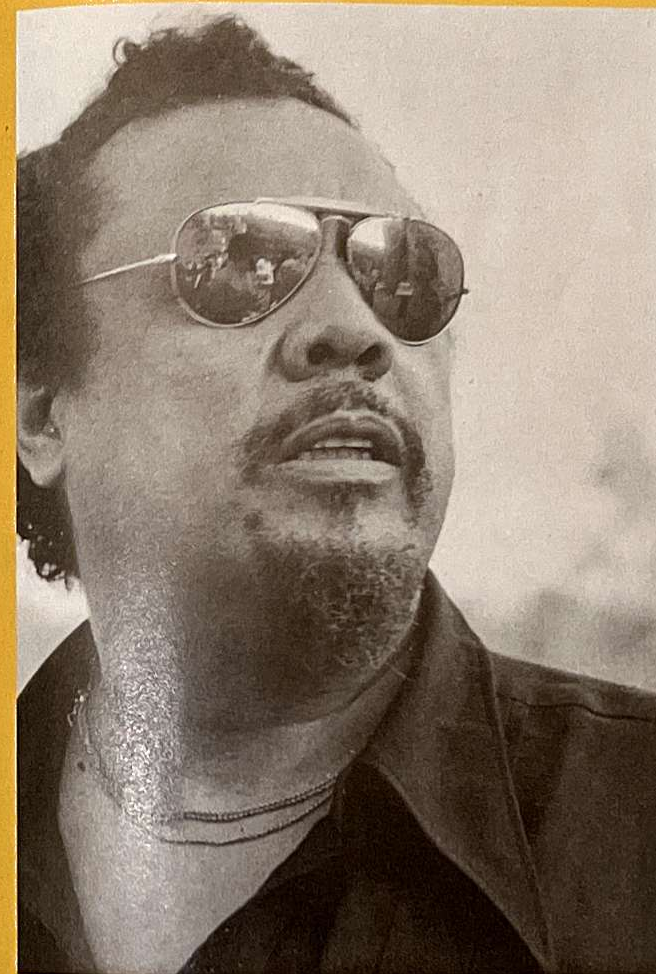
Mingus Sings. "His music stood up for civil rights. It's a testament for all jazz artists—or artists of any nature—to speak up with their music. It's a noble thing, a courageous thing, and at the end of the day, a positive thing."

Veasley agrees. As a co-founder of Jazz Philadelphia, the bassist focuses on investigating the ways in which jazz can impact community and vice versa, and Mingus serves as an inspiration for the artist as advocate. "He was one of the early voices to say in a very natural way,

his unfiltered expression came via the incomparable *Beneath the Underdog*. The bassist's ribald autobiography often bears more relation to an emotional than a literal truth, embellishing its musical memories with swashbuckling erotic adventures and vitriolic caricatures of acquaintances and nemeses alike.

"That book blew my mind," Veasley said. "The boldness of a man, especially a Black man, living life that way, or even portraying living life that way, was really interesting for a young man."

In quick succession, clarinetist Harry Skoler discovered Mingus as a teenager through the then-new album *Mingus Moves*, read *Beneath the Underdog*, and had a life-changing experience seeing the bandleader perform at Jabberwocky, a student-run venue at Syracuse University. "I was drawn to his music," said Skoler, who will release his own Sunnyside tribute album, *Living in Sound*, to coincide with the centennial. The album features a dream band including Kenny Barron, Christian McBride, Johnathan Blake, Nicholas Payton, and Jazzmeia Horn. Skoler found his own experience resonating



"I'm going to use my music as a platform to say these things, and I'm gonna say them just the way I feel. I'm not going to make it pretty." But then and now there is a tendency for people to push back on artists making social statements and doing anything other than singing their songs or playing their instruments. We've had certain brave ones who have done it, and they give permission for the rest of us who have these things bottled up inside."

Veasley's introduction to Mingus and

with Mingus' through the book's pages as well. "I suffered a lot of trauma as a young person, and I sensed strongly that Mingus had this history. Regardless of whether *Beneath the Underdog* was partially fiction or not, it was still coming from Mingus. And I identified with that aloneness, that need to grapple with the trauma and the powerful stories that you couldn't necessarily share with other people but ended up in the music."

The traumas that Mingus endured and the complexities of his personality

would explode in legendary outbursts on the bandstand, as has been recounted in endless tales, exaggerated and otherwise. But the same passion fueled both his creativity and his abrasiveness, according to those who knew him.

"Mingus had a strong sense of ethics," McPherson said. "He had a way of looking at you where he could almost look right through you. And if he detected one ounce of being not genuine, he could see that and would pigeonhole you into a certain box. But if he saw a certain purity of soul or intent, that resonated with him and he would never treat you the same way."

"There was never any guile," said Jack Walrath, who worked with Mingus for five years as both trumpeter and arranger close to the end of the composer's life, then spent decades celebrating his music with the Mingus Dynasty and Mingus Big Band. "He could be a real drag and squelched me a lot, and then he could be the sweetest guy in the world. But he was never sneaky. He would sabotage me and sabotage the band, but he also sabotaged himself."

This aspect of Mingus had an element of showmanship to it, McPherson insisted. "Everything that you've heard about—being volatile, confrontational, erratic, or angry—he was all of these things. But he was also aware that these mood swings could express a personality that might be compelling to certain audiences, and he was aware of that. He made sure that when we played a gig, it was never just a gig where we played the music and that's the end of it. It was always him saying something controversial between tunes. This being the late '60s, he had a lot to work with."

McPherson is referring to the turbulent upheavals of the era, but his statement is equally true of Mingus in general: He contained multitudes, which often battled one another. And yet the collisions created sparks that fired some of the 20th century's most multi-hued and fascinating music.

As Skoler concluded, "It's very unusual to find an artist that can go anywhere, in any context, and still be completely them. He's absolutely a hero, a mysterious figure, a triumph of humanity, an advocate for truth and a complete example of courage regardless of consequence. I could listen to Mingus and nobody else for the rest of my life and two reincarnations and not scratch the surface." **JT**