

ZERO

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CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST LIFE AND THOUGHT

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VOL. III

ZERO
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Volume III

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While exploring various individual aspects of Buddhism, each of the articles, interviews, photographs, and poems also addresses itself to a bridging of the two worlds—the centuries-old world of Eastern spiritual dedication and the recently evolved technological world of Western (American) culture...the result is pure excellence, in design and content.

—New Magazine Review

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Stewart Brand

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Allen Ginsberg

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Cover photos by Joel Rubiner

STEPHEN DAVIS

TEN TAKES ON CHARLES MINGUS

Some people who knew Charles Mingus were more in love with the *idea* of Mingus, the concept of Mingus as the brawling Buddha of jazz, than they were in love with the tempestuous and often difficult Mingus himself. This writer included. Mingus wore all black, carried a knife, saw ghosts at night, talked animatedly with spirits, and was guided by Pluto, ruler of nightclubs and jazzmen. When he had his musicians' "evil" working, Mingus was the evilest. But he could also be the *gentlest*, in those black clothes, so dignified and right; in that black conical broad-brimmed hat, the kind the wild Methodists used to wear in 18th century England. He toted that huge black bass case lovingly around for 40 years, gently, as though a woman lived inside it: and in a sense there *was* a woman in there—"Celia," "Orange Was the Color of Her Dress," "Sue's Changes"—Mingus' portraits of his women are like Reubens', fully fleshed, lyrical in love and lust, with subtle lines of strong character around the eyes.

When most people who love jazz music think of Mingus, they remember a monolithic figure perched on a stool, cradling the burnished bass like a lover, driving a group of the best improvisatory musicians in the world with the subtlety of a cocked eye or a sledgehammer insult. In his prime he would stop and start a tune three or four times, onstage, until the offending musicians got it right. That's why he called his groups the Jazz Workshop. Mingus hated formality, but he demanded excellence and imagination from his players and respect from his audience. On several different occasions I saw him bark at chattering, ice-clinking audiences to shut up. Three or four times I saw him actually

put down that big bass and wade into his crowd to physically silence a heckler. There are those who say that Mingus was a tyrant, a rude and crude genius, mentally unstable and violent. Whatever he was, he was a Master, and he was, in the end, relentlessly, a *man*.

2

I met Mingus in 1971, late in his flamboyant career and some years after my own love of his incredible music had turned into an habituation. I was assigned to write a profile of him for *Rolling Stone*, and had spent a lot of time reviewing his career and listening to his recordings. Mingus was born in Arizona in 1922, the son of an Army musician. Raised in Watts, he fought to survive. He took up the bass in his teens, later studying with Red Callender and the formidable H. Rheinschagen, formerly of the New York Philharmonic. During the late 40s, while the bebop avant-garde (Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie) altered the pitch and yaw of jazz, Mingus apprenticed with more traditional masters—Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton (with whom Mingus first recorded his own music), and Red Norvo. Word of his prodigious feats with his instrument preceded his appearance in the East; when he finally arrived in New York in the early 50s he found himself in league with the cream of jazz: the aforementioned Bird and Diz, Fats Navarro, Max Roach, Bud Powell, Miles Davis. For the rest of the decade Mingus ran his jazz workshops as a finishing school for master musicians like Roland Kirk, the blind and crazy reedman, crazy like Mingus; Jackie Byard; Booker Ervin; and young tenorist Danny Richmond whom Mingus transformed into his lifetime drummer and alter-ego. Here was Mingus at his bluesy, spiritual, Holiness Church roots best, stunning the cool and sophisticated tonight-at-noon world of jazz with the power of soul. Later, in the early 60s, Mingus started to elaborate on his long “extended form” compositions with the astronaut-reedman Eric Dolphy. This band would bray like a lecherous mule, and Dolphy would

scree on alto through Mingus' antifascist music (titles like "Original Fables of Faubus," referring to a racist governor of Arkansas). Tales of Mingus' instability and volatility began to circulate. He broke his trombonist's jaw with a punch. He would spend a night in jail for this and that. His psychiatrist wrote the liner notes to one of his best albums. Claiming he was being robbed blind by the companies he recorded for, Mingus was the first major jazz musician to strike out on his own, recording and selling his own albums. By 1965 he was tired. He had composed some of the finest music ever written for jazz instrumentation. He was a legend in his time, but he was also depressed. So he retired for six years, living on the lower east side of New York, hanging out in bars and taking photographs.

The night before I met Mingus to interview him, Crazy Joe Gallo was liquidated in a clam house in Little Italy. Mingus was upset. Gallo had been nice to him, Mingus said. The Mafia, they're people too, right? And, he said, at least they paid the band on time. Mingus had signed a management contract with Joey Gallo in 1964, he told me. Gallo had gotten the band some work, but then there were problems. Crazy Joe was also managing Stan Getz, Mingus said, and told Getz that if he didn't get off junk his kids would be killed. This scared Mingus so much he checked into the psycho ward at Bellevue just to legally get out of the contract with Gallo.

It turned out that Mingus was a much nicer man than I had expected. I followed him around as he worked with the big band he had assembled to play his new orchestral music. I followed him as he took a quintet to play a benefit at the Queens House of Detention for Men, the night after Mingus himself had been arrested for pulling a knife on a cabbie during a dispute outside Max's Kansas City. Mingus had spent a night in the Tombs and had his wrists sprained when the vindictive cops in the squad car had hitched the bracelets a notch higher after Mingus had vociferously discussed their maternal ancestry. We got to the jail: lots of clanging doors, young cons, with laces out of their flopping shoes so they

won't hang themselves in their cells, wanting Sly Stone or Al Green, and getting instead this aging jazz monument who proceeded to blow them away with a fast "Fables of Faubus." Afterwards, Mingus ate three helpings of fried fish in the warden's private dining room and shouted that if his woman could come, he'd be happy to move right in.

It was the beginning of the 70s. Mingus was back and the music was better than ever. Crazy Joe was buried in Brooklyn. Mingus went on tour in Europe. I typed up my piece for *Rolling Stone* and sent it in, where it was killed by Ralph J. Gleason, who said that Mingus was a wonderful liar and that the Joe Gallo stuff was fantasy. But it wasn't. It was true.

3

A year or so later, and I was editing at *Rolling Stone*. Ralph J. Gleason was reissuing Mingus' recordings for the company he worked for, and asked me to do some liner notes for the legendary *Jazz at Massey Hall* set and for some 1970 sessions Mingus had made in Paris with Charles MacPherson and Lonnie Hillyer, to be called *Reincarnation of a Lovebird*.

Mingus enjoyed the notes, enjoyed the general tone of respect and hagiography. He called one day and said he wanted to do a sequel to his autobiographical book *Beneath the Underdog*, and he wanted me to write it. So I would go down to the huge apartment on East Tenth Street where Mingus lived with his wife, Susan Graham, and we would talk into a tape recorder until late, and if Mingus was feeling well we'd go around the corner to Bradley's, where Jackie Byard was in residence on piano and where Charles could comfortably drink until early morning. Eventually I transcribed some of the tape into wild and wooly recollections of Mingus' adventures with Charlie Parker, and Sue and I started taking it around to editors. It was to be Charles Mingus' book about Music, as opposed to the penetrating psychohistory of *Underdog*. No one was interested. Actually

everyone was interested, but not enough at that point to pay our price. We decided to tape some more.

4

Mingus was both loquacious and gnomic with words. When he spoke quickly it was difficult to understand him, as if he were speaking deeply-inflected West Indian. About half the tape I have of Mingus is indecipherable even to the most veteran stenographers.

The clearest tape I have was recorded one night at Sue Graham's house in Woodstock. We had worked all afternoon without much success. Charles took us to The Joyous Lake for supper and listened as we argued about women and men and men and women, commenting that it was all bullshit before he paid the check. Back at the house he was talking about the day Charlie Parker died. Mingus said that he and Fats Navarro (the artist/addict trumpeter, Mingus' best friend until Navarro's death) were walking past Carnegie Hall at 7:45 on a clear Saturday evening in 1955 when they were both knocked to the ground by a bolt of lightning that had struck the pavement nearby. Mingus recalled his amazement, because the weather was otherwise mild, and no one else on the street seemed to have taken any notice.

The phone rang when they returned to Mingus' apartment. Bird was dead! Mingus hustled over to the Hotel Stanhope on E. 86th Street to get the details from The Baroness, in whose apartment Charlie Parker had died at precisely 7:45 that evening as he watched The Tommy Dorsey Show on television. A juggler was performing, and as he tossed a pin high into the air Bird reached up with delight and said, "I got it!" And had a heart attack and died.

The lightning bolt, Mingus said, was Bird's way of saying goodbye.

5

We continued to work, sporadically. Occasionally I showed up in the late afternoon when Mingus was sleeping

off a night of brooding and composing, in no shape to talk. Finally Mingus decided to go south and take the project with him. One day the mailman brought me a round-trip air ticket to Sint Maarten, in the Dutch Antilles, where Mingus was holed up with his wife and his drummer, avoiding the raging winter up north.

I found Mingus and Sue sharing a house with Danny Richmond and his wife. It was wild: Mingus awake all night, communing with the spirits that surrounded him, then pacing early in the morning in his silk robe, a colossal Havana cigar propped in his big stubby fingers. The house overlooked sunny tennis courts, and smelled of Cuban cigars and Peruvian cocaine. Mingus was taking lithium to keep away the blues, and stayed out of the glaring burn of the tropics; I would often work with him next to the pool, in the shade, while he sustained himself with cigars and pina colada.

While I was working with him on his book, Mingus was also composing the soundtrack to an Italian suspense film, *Todo Modo*, and trying to lose weight. His bulk had increased to unwieldy proportion, and was starting to bother his back. This kept him awake at night, and I would hear him in the next room singing to himself, and muttering strange snatches of conversation with the shades and apparitions that became so real for him at night.

6

Sint Maartin, half Dutch and half French, was a terrible place for Mingus to lose weight. Every evening he would pack us up in his rented Pinto, squeezing himself in behind the wheel, and drive fast over the island's spine to the French side for a sumptuous meal. His favorite restaurant that winter was a little place called La Calanque, which means a pirate's cove. Mingus would devour a couple of *homard gratiné* and order bottle after bottle of fine wine. He would regale us with the weird voodoo scenes he had picked up on while driving around the island at night. There was the time he drove past the graveyard on the way home, and noticed a

woman in a red dress running behind the car, trying to catch him. He floored the accelerator, but the faster he drove the easier it was for the woman in red to pursue him. Finally, in utter terror, Mingus hit 80 on the dangerous roads and checked his rearview mirror. The red woman was sitting in his back seat, laughing at him. Finally he pulled up in his driveway, only to see the door of his house open slowly and the woman in red lean through and beckon him in. Mingus said he had blacked out, and came to in the morning to find a red kerchief in his back seat.

Mingus paid the checks with crisp \$100 bills, and left big tips. He was generous, and lost no weight.

One night, driving home from the restaurant, the car's headlights fell on a pile of earth next to a construction site. "Sue!" Mingus yelled and he slammed on the brakes. "That looks like it!" Mingus piled out of the car and walked over to the dirt, picking a little up in his fingers and tasting it. Susan Graham turned to me and explained that as a little boy Charles used to eat the earth in the front yard of his house in Watts, and had lately become obsessed with trying to duplicate the taste he remembered so fondly. In the glare of the headlights I could make out the huge shape of Mingus bent over the moist earth, trying to recapture the epiphanic sensations of his youth. He returned to the car, disappointed, a few minutes later.

7

The nights on Sint Maartin were hot, and Mingus spent many of them in the local casino, playing the slots. He had his own technique: he would sit in front of one of the dollar slots, immobile and impassive, feeding the machine and pulling the arm at metronomically regular intervals. This would go on for *hours*, Mingus staring at the machine and humming to himself in a barely audible voice, his mojo working full tilt. One night I watched him for an hour after losing all my money at blackjack. Mingus intimidated the slot willfully, and it spewed forth \$300. The next night he

played the same machine for three hours until he hit a flashing, bell-ringing thousand dollar jackpot. He enjoyed that so much that he slept soundly that night.

8

Mingus' health had already begun to deteriorate from spinal problems by the time I was in Sint Maartin with him. When he went to Italy that spring to record his soundtrack music, he and Susan stopped in Switzerland to check out a clinic that specialized in his disease. The doctors could only tell Mingus to lose weight and keep his fingers crossed.

Mingus still wrote feverishly, five years out of his retirement and determined to further explore his long form compositions to his complete satisfaction. I saw him, early in 1977, at Dick Gregory's lakeside estate in Plymouth, Massachusetts where he was desperately attempting one of the ascetic Gregory's rigorous "air fasts" to try to get some of the bulk off his back. Mingus was clearly unhappy and suffering, but he was still working. He told me he was thinking of a long piece about percussion, to be called "Three Worlds of Drums." I felt sad that Mingus was so ill, now that he was at the peak of his immense powers and that his energies at last were directed at the transformation of his legend from brawler to respected and esteemed artist. You can hear the peace he finally achieved in the bluesy, Ellington-inflected melodies of his last compositions.

In the end he was too ill to play the bass on his final album, which he directed from a wheelchair planted firmly in the recording studio; the recording band needed two master bassists to achieve the sound Mingus usually got from himself. After the sessions he would be wheeled back to his 43rd floor lookout over Manhattan's west side, his "chair in the sky, with Bird in my ear and hawks in my eye." Mingus was having difficulty speaking. He would ask visiting musicians to play "Body and Soul" for him. His thoughts were lost in the magma of his memory.

9

Charles Mingus died in the suburbs of Mexico City in January 1979 after a long battle with his illness. His wife and friends say his last year was the best of his life, marked by a rarely-bestowed second Guggenheim Fellowship (an extraordinary distinction for a musician) and a special serenity that had always eluded this protean, troubled man.

Mingus, the spiritual fighter. His heart was his church, and he had little use for organized religion. But a painter friend in San Francisco had hooked Mingus on the Vedanta Temple, and he was a paid-up member of its burial society. A few days after his earthly passing in Mexico, his widow scattered his ashes into the timeless ebb of the Ganges River in India. I wept with relief that his pain was at an end.

10

On a rain-swept March night, at Atlantic Studios in New York, there was a memorial party for Mingus. One by one musicians and friends spoke their tributes and recollections of their lives with Mingus. Sonny Rollins, too broken up to speak, delivered instead a shattering five minute tenor sax soliloquy/elegy, his soaring testimony to the passing of his contemporary and friend. Joni Mitchell, accompanied by pianist Roland Hanna, premiered some of the subtle and sensual music Mingus had written for her, one of his last projects. It was a wonderful party, and everyone there felt larger for having known Charles Mingus, for having been able in some small way to touch his charmed life.

One great Mingus story was told. In Mexico it had become painful for him to speak, and it was suggested to Mingus that he answer questions with either a yes or a no. One of his last lines was delivered to his wife, who had asked him something involved, where a simple yes or no wouldn't do. As Mingus struggled, he blurted, "*Fuck* yes or no!"