

JONI MITCHELL: "Mingus" (Asylum).

Joni Mitchell's latest album is many things—a collaboration, a tribute, a further step in her musical evolution. Above all, it's a glittering achievement by one of pop music's most talented artists.

"Mingus" is a jazz album, the end point and culmination of a journey Mitchell began three albums ago. "Mingus" started as a collaboration with ace jazz artist Charles Mingus, but it emerges as homage to the man, who died in January. Mingus wrote the music for four of the six songs, challenging Mitchell to come up with lyrics. She succeeded. Brilliantly. Her words are fluid, jazzy, poignant—companions and alter-egos to Mingus' incandescent melodies.

"A Chair in the Sky" burns with the hot and cool fires of passion, sultry, dreamy and jubilant. "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" is both mischievous and reverent. The two tracks written completely by Mitchell are true to the Mingus influence, yet retain the inimitable Mitchell touch.

On "Mingus" Mitchell emerges as a fine jazz singer, an enunciator of the darkness and light of the human spirit. She has the assistance of an able band, including Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock. There are some things "Mingus" is not. It isn't rock and roll and it isn't easily accessible. What it is is a masterpiece.