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**playback**



## Joni Mitchell's 'Mingus'— An Interesting Collaboration

**by joel menally**

I have publicly confessed on any number of occasions that I don't understand jazz. I am not proud of such a monumental personal failing. But no one ever taught me the secret handshake.

Add to that the fact that in recent years Joni Mitchell has been getting more and more obscure to the point that she has nearly succeeded in achieving opaque.

I once sat down and tried to write everything I had learned from the music of Joni Mitchell. I got bogged down right after "Joni Mitchell writes long songs."

When it was announced that both of those forces were coming together in an album collaboration between Ms. Mitchell and the late jazz great, Charles Mingus, I expected the musical equivalent of the stuff Lamont Cranston used to cloud men's minds.

As it turns out, the new Joni Mitchell album, "Mingus" (Asylum), is an interesting experience even for a jazz illiterate.

Most of the songs are collaborations with Joni's words set to Mingus' music. The two exceptions—songs that are 100 percent Mitchell—are in keeping with the dark tone of the rest of the album.

And it is dark. Mingus died last January as this project was taking shape. Joni writes that he had heard and approved every song except "God Must Be A Boogie Man" which she wrote two days after his death.

Interlaced between the songs are snatches of noisy conversations with Mingus as he talks about his life and his death.

The album opens with a tape from a noisy, happy birthday party for Mingus—his 53rd or 54th, no one seems quite sure which. It closes with "Goodbye, Pork Pie Hat."

In between, there are some long songs. This time there is little question about the nature of the point they are making. Especially when the wolves start howling.

That chilling accompaniment goes along with "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey." The song examines the dark side of each of us as well as the evil in our collective society. The tone is set by the malevolent guitar of Ms.



Mitchell.

Other songs are not as blunt, but they are no less cynical. "Sweet Sucker Dance" sadly describes life as pretense. "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines" is one of life's few winners and he is a jerk, a "Midas in a polyester suit."

Joni Mitchell's voice wraps itself around those words and her guitar punctuates them.

Despite the anger and bitterness of Mingus' music, there are some lighter moments. The recorded conversations are worth it just to hear Mingus dare to shatter a myth about all black jazz and blues singers by allowing as how "I never had it too hard, you know."

"Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" is a tribute to another jazz musician whose early career and racial battles paralleled those of Mingus. With the death of Mingus, it takes on a different shade of meaning.

In spite of myself, I found the style growing on me. Da doobie, doobie, doobie brothers. . .

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There were a couple of reasons that I wanted to like John Cougar before I ever even heard him.

One was the sheer audacity of that name. (He is really John Mellencamp.) The other was that it is about time there was a big rock star from Seymour, Ind.

The best reason of all, though, is listening to his album, "John Cougar" (Riva).

Here is a big new unknown star on the level of Steve Forbert and John Hiatt.

Cougar currently has moved to the big city of Bloomington, Ind., where he writes good urban rock songs. (Is that legal in Indiana?) He creates hookers named Punchin' Judy and urban cowboys named Jeffrey Jack and they hang out at places like the Sodom and Gomorrah roadhouse.

He has a good blues edged rock voice that is particularly good on the sad "Taxi Dancer" and his tribute to "The Great Midwest" where "they get up on Sunday, go to the church of their choice, come back home, cook out in the backyard."

The last major talent to come out of Bloomington, Ind., was Bobby Helms singing the legendary "Jingle Bells Rock." You may find this hard to believe, but John Cougar is even better.

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