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## Joni Mitchell's 'Mingus' album is a milestone in jazz

Charlie Mingus was an unforgettable man, a big, bear-like person who made his bass seem small. In his prime he was considered one of the three or four best bassists in jazz. But he was more than that. As years went by, he proved to be a jazz genius, a composer and arranger who transformed his blues and rhythms into marvelously exuberant pieces. His energy was remarkable.

Joni Mitchell is unique in rock music, if that is, indeed, her field. Like so many exceptional people in music she defied categorizing. She is a woman who writes songs about her own life which fit the universality of us all, and sings them with a personal flair. She is neither rock nor folk yet she combines those elements for her final result.

Mingus and Mitchell have collaborated in the most unusual album of the year. It was his final work before he died in January of "Lou Gehrig's disease," a creeping ailment which at the end had him paralyzed in a wheelchair, unable to speak.

A few years ago, Mingus decided Mitchell should perform some of his music. He gave her several melodies. She supplied the words, and though she had arranging suggestions from him along the way, his paralysis meant that in the end, Joni Mitchell had to assemble a jazz group and plan the ideas on her own.

The result is the new Joni album for Asylum, titled simply "Mingus." It has six songs, four of them collaborations, the other two songs textured by Mitchell so that they are both about Mingus and suggest his musical style.

What she has accomplished is striking for its ability to be Mingus. The two songs for which she did both words and music are so like Mingus you'd swear he inspired them from his final resting place in India. And the four songs he partnered are recreations of Mingus at his peak, including the great "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," which he had written in memory of Lester Young.

Further, Joni again has supplied the paintings which become the atmospheric graphics for the "Mingus" album. There are four, including a full cardboard page version of Mingus which captures all his intensity, his bear-like bulk, and his terminal paralysis.

But it is the music that makes "Mingus" a brilliant, ground-breaking album that manages to be jazz and still transcend the music. The one thing it certainly is, is Mingus.

Charlie was church and street and Africa. He was bark and bite. He was exciting and careening and exhilarating. He ranked with Duke Ellington as one of the finest American composers, by bringing all those qualities to his music.

Joni's two songs capture much of that. In "God Must Be a Boogie Man," she writes of Mingus as "he must be three," one of them unmoved, the other using attack as a defense, the other sweet. "Which would it be/Mingus one, two or three?"

Which one do you think he'd want the world to see?" And in "The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey," she uses wolf-like howls for the melancholy feeling that, while not specifically about Mingus, mourns for life's inequities, and that certainly mourns for Mingus.

She uses a good group of musicians, from bassist Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter on soprano sax, Herbie Hancock on piano, Peter Erskine on drums, Don Alias on congas. There is, throughout, the kind of charged chaos typical of a Mingus composition that always came together at the end.

The album is so musical, on the Mingus melodies such as "A Chair in the Sky," "Sweet Sucker Dance," "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," and the superb "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines."

Along with Joni's vocals, there are plenty of spaces left for ensemble and solos, particularly by Jaco, to further give it a Mingus touch.

In this era of jazz fusion, the mixing of jazz with rock and electronic instruments, Joni Mitchell's "Mingus" album emerges as a dynamic jazz milestone, an extension of the music Ellington and Mingus were creating before their deaths. It provides both a voice and a spirit, the subliminal heart of what jazz always has been.

It shows us the depth of Joni Mitchell, the soul of Mingus, and the unlimited scope of jazz in its abilities to make us both think and dance. This is one of the finest musical albums of the 1970s.

Dale Stevens is entertainment editor of The Post.



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