

music



Joni Mitchell, left, teamed up with Charles Mingus for the lp "Mingus," her first jazz recording, and the last work for Mingus before his death in January.

'Mingus': Joni's Jazz Minglings

"It was as if I had been standing by a river — one toe in the water — feeling it out — and Charlie came by and pushed me in — 'sink or swim' — him laughing at me dog paddling around in the currents of black classical music."
— Joni Mitchell on working with Charles Mingus on their collaboration on the lp entitled, "Mingus."

By Angelo Lewis
Constitution Staff Writer

BY NOW THE EVENTS leading up to the last musical statement the late Charles Mingus made — a collaboration with jazzman Mingus and Joni Mitchell, the premier musical female artiste of the decade — are legend. Mingus, dying from Lou Gehrig's disease out of the public eye, heard about Ms. Mitchell's music from a friend. He had an idea for a project that would have Mitchell distilling T.S. Elliot's "Four Quartets" down into street language, over which would be played a "full orchestra playing one kind of music, and overlaid on that would be a bass and guitar playing another kind of music, and over that someone would read excerpts from Elliot in a very formal literary voice." Ms. Mitchell told Downbeat Magazine's Leonard Feather. Honored to be considered for a musical marriage by a man whose music she had long admired, the songwriter considered the idea, but rejected it, telling Mingus she'd "rather condense the Bible."

Some time later, Mingus approached Ms. Mitchell with six songs he'd written for her to add lyrics. For the next year and a half, Ms. Mitchell worked on what was her first collaboration and Mingus' last.

Mingus, arguably the most interesting jazz composer since Duke Ellington, died in January of this year and the work, "Mingus," which he left in the hands of Ms. Mitchell to complete, shows signs of becoming the most commercially successful venture with which his name has been associated.

As of this writing, Mitchell-Mingus' "Mingus" lp holds firm in the bottom half on all three major record sales charts and has placed as high as the number four album on the jazz charts.

Until recent years, with the advent of rock-fusion groups such as Weather Report and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, a jazz record was said to have solid sales if it sold in the 100,000 to 200,000 range, sales Mingus' albums have never topped.

Mitchell-Mingus' at times haunting and remarkably apt portrayal of Mingus' and the jazz life is undoubtedly a fine effort.

It by no means, however, represents the best work of either artist. And in that respect certain critical acclaim seems hard to justify. One jazz magazine, for example, called Mitchell's singing "the first real advance in the jazz art of vocales since Lambert, Hendricks and Ross."

Ms. Mitchell has always excelled as a songwriter generally and a lyricist especially. The six songs of "Mingus" — including one written exclusively by Mitchell — splendidly reveal Mitchell's lyric gift, with the album's one Mingus' standard, "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," coming across as a profound evocation of the lives of two jazzmen: Lester Young and Mingus.

"When Charlie speaks of Lester/You know someone great has gone/The sweetest swinging music man/had a Forkie Pig hat on/A bright star/In a dark age/When the handstands had a thousand ways/Of refusing a black man admission/Black musician/In those days they put him in an underdog position."

The album also splices between the songs smattering of conversations that included Mingus. One such exchange with extraordinary prescience involves an exchange between Mingus and a man identified only as "The Swede."

"The Swede" is basically trying to convince Mingus that he "is going to be here many more years," while Mingus, all jive and flash down to his last breath, humors the comforter with confidence telling him, yes, he's got it all figured out, down to a burial conducted by the yogie Vendania Society in India and how a burial by a big church just wouldn't be appropriate.

There are snippets of conversation such as this all through the album. Although in an other context they might prove irritating, here they serve to underscore the spirit of the man known as Mingus and Ms. Mitchell's understanding that this work is something more than just a tasteful collection of songs. It marks, in its small way, a

part of musical history. It is a tribute to the man whose death may have marked the demise of big-band jazz.

Mitchell's choice of musicians — some are from the group Weather Report — are fortunate. Bassist Jaco Pastorius has shown a remarkable affinity for Mitchell's work on previous albums authored by Ms. Mitchell. Here his bass is mixed way up and at times — such as in "A Chair in the Sky" — plays a rich counterpoint to a spare wall of sound made up mostly of Mitchell's guitar, Herbie Hancock's piano and Wayne Shorter's soprano saxophone.

The albums defects are several. The principal one is that this at times sounds very much like a "project" lp, that is, a self-conscious piece of work that at times endures Mitchell's striving to measure up to the work of a musician she probably (and justly) considers her artistic superior.

The second defect grows from the first. The self-consciousness at times make the written charts seem very stiff, very, atypical of a jazz feeling, embodying little swing.

"Sweet Sucker Dance," in this regard, rambles on interminably. But the song with the unlikely title of "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" breaks through the structure and struts its swing nicely.

Since her unjustly neglected album, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," Ms. Mitchell has been exploring, as she's said, "the currents of black classical music."

Well and good. She's to be admired for her dedication to an art that struggles for new influences instead of settling for a formula that sells.

But Annie Ross (of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross), Mitchell isn't, although on her album "Court and Spark," she's proved she's capable of singing the lyric of "Twisted" note for note.

This album will more than likely grow on you, especially if, like this writer, you're both a fan of Ms. Mitchell and of Mingus. But, if you're chiefly a fan of the latter, you still might need to pick up a copy of "The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady" or "Changes Two" to get that Mingus feeling.

At the very least, Mitchell-Mingus' album will make you want to do that.