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Charles Mingus: Serious r

Jazz is a proven medium over the years, and is unique in one respect: it has always allowed its elder statesmen to age with dignity and pride. Duke Ellington lived well into his seventies, and played right up to the end; Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald are two examples of performers doing their thing well past the time other musicians give up. One man who struggled and faught 'til the end was Charles Mingus, who passed away earlier this year.

Ask anyone who is into jazz about influential bass players, the name of Mingus will be right on top. He wrote and played with more feeling than any of his peers could muster, and remembering that feeling has been made much easier by two new releases, one an anthology of Mingus recordings, the other a tribute from a contemporary pop performer.

The brilliant anthology, "Charles Mingus: Passions of a Man, an Anthology of His Atlantic Recordings" (Atlantic Records) covers both early and late Mingus. This three-record set becomes an immediate must for any serious jazz collector. Included are the ground-breaking "Pithecanthropus Erectus," the marvelous "Haitian Fight Song," and "Goodbye, Porkie Hat" (you may remember the rock version on Jeff Beck's album "Blow by Blow")

Mingus' subtle solo on "Haitian Fight Song" is incredible; his lilting melodies, on numbers like "Duke

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Ellington's Sound of Love" and "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" are memorable. Listening to all six sides, you become overwhelmed by this man's genius. You can't help but despair that he lived with so much pain. The disease that took him was the same one that robbed the world of Lou Gehrig; that fact makes one of his last efforts just that much more incredible.

That project was to pen some tunes for use by Joni Mitchell, a singer-songwriter hardly out of the jazz vein. Joni has dabbled in jazz before, as on last year's "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter." Her new LP, "Mingus" (Asylum Records), takes her head-first into the mainstream of jazz, and she holds her own quite well. Her voice is well suited to the format; hearing her sing jazz will show you why so many people compared Rickie Lee Jones to Joni when she first appeared.

Four of the melodies were written by Mingus; he never lived to hear the completed project, missing Joni's "God Must Be A Boogie Man." Her lyrics are street-wise and self-assured; in other words, they fit the personality and style of Mingus perfectly. My emotions are mixed on her lyrics for "Goodbye Porkpie Hat," though I guess that my

prejudice for the original is showing. My favorite is "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines," a mover that's funny too.

The best jazz musicians around contributed to Joni's work, and the players on the album include Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Peter Erskine, Don Alias, and Emil Richards. I'll be really surprised if "Mingus" sells well; it's too far removed from what Joni Mitchell fans are used to. It, along with the Atlantic records anthology, will stand as loving tributes to a man who deserves them.

QUICK LOOKS: "Dynasty," Kiss (Casablanca Records)—This is a Kiss album you can dance to. "I Was Made For Lovin' You," where Paul Stanley works with Vini Poncia and Desmond Child, features a thumping bass Donna Summer would be proud of. Actually, in terms of listenability, this may be their best disc. Stanley emerges most impressively, with "Sure Know Something," while Gene Simmons' "X-Ray Eyes" is silly. The vocals are spread out more than ever before, and the result is true improvement.

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