

Mitchell, Mingus duo a fascinating idea, a gem of a record

"Mingus." Joni Mitchell. Asylum SE-585.

Charles Mingus, the great jazz composer and bass player, died Jan. 5 in Cuernavaca, Mexico, of what is known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Mingus was 56. That day, according to Mingus's widow, Sue, 56 whites beached themselves on a coast of Mexico. Not knowing what to do with them, the people there burned them. So 56 whites were cremated the same day as Mingus.

Sue Mingus, some time later, told the story to Joni Mitchell. Had Mitchell's much-awaited collaboration with Mingus not already been completed — more or less — by the time of his death, that story might have been elaborated into a song and put on the album. It is the kind of story that would have resonated with Mitchell's poetic sensibility — dare one say, in the canyons of her mind?

The album is a fascinating one — intriguing just in the notion of a major pop figure collaborating with one of the giants of the jazz world. Mitchell putting lyrics to Mingus's music: in some instances; in others, adding music to a Mingus text. The result is jazz in the sense that jazz rhythms are heard frequently throughout the album and that some of the best jazz musicians available can be heard here: Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock among them.

But the form is much freer than at least our traditional notions of jazz. The rhythms are irregular, for one thing. If anything, these are little art songs or song-poems.

The music functions to enhance the meaning or mood of the text, even though, in most instances, the music was written first; or, in the case of the setting of one of Mingus's most famous compositions, the wistful "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," a tribute to the great saxophonist Lester Young, the words provide images that take us more deeply into the lyricism of the music.

Running occasionally between the songs are brief tape excerpts from the studio sessions, which Mingus — then confined to a wheelchair — attended. One is a conversation between Mingus and someone identified only as "Swede," in which Mingus claims he is going to live longer than Duke Ellington did. "I'm going to cut Duke," says Mingus.

Obvious care and love went into this album, and much of it is impressive, especially Mitchell's evocative text for "Pork Pie Hat" and the rollicking opus "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines." Lest anybody doubt Mitchell's achievement, consider that every



The care and love Joni Mitchell put into "Mingus" is evident in its sound.

songwriting team that has been asked about the matter, has said that setting a lyric to a piece of music is a much harder way to work than the other way around: Setting music to lyrics. Mitchell does brilliantly on these, and vocally, she has never sounded better, richer, more confident.

Inspiration fails her, however, in a number of instances, most notably in two of her own songs, "God Must Be a Boogie Man" and "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey," the latter being a piece that she was writing before she met Mingus.

Musically, they are simply uninteresting. Or it is that the music here is too supportive of the text and has no energy of its own? One hates to invoke here the old where-are-the-melodies argument that has been used against much of Mitchell's recent work, especially in a project so far-reaching, almost noble, as this one. Nonetheless, the musical content is indeed slim in at least some of the work on "Mingus," despite the sensitive backing of the instrumentalists. It sounds at times like vocal improvisation rather than actual note-for-note composition.

Let's call "Mingus" a flawed gem, and let's let Mitchell try out the material onstage. Maybe the flaws will disappear. She will perform a concert Sunday night at the Minneapolis Auditorium.

"Candy-O." The Cars. Elektra SE-947.

The Cars, too, will be here this weekend: Tonight at Midway Stadium with the Doobie Brothers.

For purposes of discussion, the Cars are to New Wave rock what Glenn Miller (and perhaps Benny Goodman) was to swing. The popularizers of an idiom. In the case of swing, the idiom needed popularizing because the great black bands of the '30s who created the style — Chick Webb, Basie, Fletcher Henderson, et al — didn't have as much access to the large white audience as did Miller, Goodman or the Dorsey brothers.

In the case of New Wave, it is not so much racism as the fact that the mass rock-oriented public hates New Wave and, in fact, will demonstrate that hatred on occasion, as evidenced when those Punk Fabs, the Ramones, were pelted with vegetables, paper cups and whatnot last fall at the St. Paul Civic Center. The Cars, however, have devised a form of music that owes a great deal to New Wave — the machine-like ostinato, the hollow-sounding, frenzied but distant lead vocals — but is much more palatable, less threatening, less quirky, all of which spells success.

The band's debut album, "The Cars," released last year, was a smash. Arrangements were detailed and clever, the tunes were good, the lyrics were interesting. The new one isn't quite as striking in content, though the overall production (again by Roy Thomas Baker) is superb.

Much has been made of the Cars' debt to Roxy Music, and, in fact, Greg Hawkes tends to create the kind of interesting counter-melodies on synthesizer that one hears on the most recent Roxy album, "Manifesto." But the Cars' vocal work, shared by bassist Ben Orr and rhythm guitarist and idea man

Ric Ocasek, is not nearly as eccentric as that of Roxy's Bryan Ferry, nor is the lyric material as introverted. Ocasek, who writes the songs, favors distant, idealized images of females, seen from the point of view of a helpless, albeit neurotic, often emotionally wounded person. He pants away for her, but, come morning, he can take her or leave her, one imagines. The ensemble vocals are wonderful, especially the velvet-like harmonies of "It's All I Can Do."



The Cars may popularize the New Wave.

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"Back to the Egg." Paul McCartney.
Columbia FC 36857.

Paul McCartney's problem is that the fans keep expecting something positively staggering — some kind of musical epiphany — from him and his former Beatles colleagues. And it might as well be McCartney because he is the most prolific of the four.

But, of course, the staggering and the epiphany-producing is not what McCartney is good at, working on his own. What he does do is write sweet, sentimental, sometimes witty tunes. His real love, one suspects, is the standard AABA pop ballad, such as the lovely "Baby's Request" that closes side two of "Back to the Egg" with its jazzy trombone backing — a lazy, loping-along kind of tune that Hoagy Carmichael might have written.

Artfully — who's kidding whom? — McCartney has no problems. Columbia's new contract with him, of which "Back to the Egg" is the initial result, is said to involve \$20 million. Believe me, there ought to be only laughter in the McCartney household. "Back to the Egg" isn't as taut or as striking as "London Town," McCartney's last album, but it is pleasant.

In any event, Beatles fans will have to settle for this or take nothing at all. George Harrison keeps trying to write actual songs, but apparently can't anymore. McCartney can, and he is all that is left, folks. Ringo is getting a deep tan in Mexico, John and Yoko are buying up apartments, getting ready for the long winter. Paul is the only one left.