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Joni Mitchell musical tribute to Mingus falls short

By JOHN ROCKWELL
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NEW YORK — This century has seen a number of figures from the world of entertainment win deserved reputations as artists. George Gershwin comes immediately to mind, but still he worked in a traditional orchestral idiom. More recently such unabashedly popular musicians as the Beatles and Bob Dylan have been taken seriously — sometimes so seriously that they themselves become embarrassed.

What's new is that the pop people have by now created their own artistic traditions and that their traditions have begun to merge, in some still vague and elusive sense, with the mainstream of high art.

TODAY, THERE are a number of supposedly "pop" performers who are in no reasonable way distinguishable from "artists." They may make money, but they're not enslaved by it. They may lack a traditionally crafted technique, but they work out their own means to their own artistic ends.

They may move in a glamorous world far removed from a starving, Bohemian stereotype, but they still make art rather than fluffy entertainment. Joni Mitchell, who will be at the Forest Hills Tennis Stadium Saturday night, is such an artist — as serious and experimental as they come.

MISS MITCHELL is also in the news these days because of her unusual, touch-

ing collaboration with another popular artist seemingly far different from her in background and achievement — Charles Mingus, the great jazz bass player and bandleader who died early this year of the muscular disease that killed Lou Gehrig. The result, a record called "Mingus," is not a total success.

But the very route by which a 35-year-old, one-time folksinger and folk-rock princess from Canada by way of Los Angeles came first to jazz itself and then to a leading jazz experimentalist of the 1960's — and a black cultural poet, to boot — is an unusual tale. And it helps give some hints as to the evolution of Miss Mitchell's own artistry.

"WHEN CHARLES became ill, it felt to his wife and his friends to try to find some projects to stimulate him, to keep him active and interested," she explained a few weeks ago in Los Angeles in her slightly stilted, almost Biblical manner of speaking. "Charles had called a friend one night and said, 'Come over here, I want to talk to you about God.'"

"The friend felt ill equipped to talk about God, so he stopped in a bookstore and purchased a copy of T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets.' From that came an idea to Charles that he wanted to do a piece of music with a very formal, educated voice reading the Quartets, or parts of them. My job was to translate what he conceived as the formality of Eliot's language into



Charles Mingus left musical legacy

the vernacular. His analogy was the Baptist Church, where you have somebody reading a Biblical text and someone else translating that down into the jargon.

"So, I bought the book, and then I called back and said I couldn't do it — there was no way I could take it and distill it down. It seemed like a sacrifice. I thought I'd rather do it with the Bible. So, we scrapped the project."

"LATER I heard again he wanted to see me. He had written six melodies for me to set words to. By then Charles was paralyzed. He sang them into a tape recorder, and a piano-player friend of his fleshed them



Joni Mitchell stars in unusual musical tale

out into a voiced piece of music. The tape presented to me was a piano with a metronome. It nearly drove me crazy, this tape. I took it out to the beach at Malibu and the second day I woke up in bed with my foot ticking back and forth under the covers, to the rhythm of this metronome."

Miss Mitchell had several meetings with Mingus in which he suggested specific themes for songs, many of them drawn from incidents

in his own past. At times, she felt she "got bogged down in history, and I felt I wouldn't be able to write them because I wasn't there." But the lyrics as they finally emerged seem a quite remarkable attempt by a person from one background to bridge the gap into another's world.

LAST SUMMER, Miss Mitchell began to think she should go into the recording studio right away if Mingus

were to have any creative say in the record. The recording sessions, hastily conceived and prepared, went poorly. Mingus resisted electronic instruments and preferred a more traditional jazz arranger with whom Miss Mitchell felt distinctly uncomfortable. "At that point, I realized that in order to continue with the project, I couldn't just be a cog in someone else's scheme. I had to continue the way I always had, in an intuitive exploration."

The final result, to this taste, isn't always success-

ful, clouding the energetic directness of jazz with a certain self-consciousness. But her music to come may well blossom into something extraordinary as she pursues this style.

"This record is a logical extension of what I've been doing, in that my direction obviously magnetized Charles to me and me to Charles. I would never have written melodies that moved like that myself. But having been disciplined now to learn those intricacies, that will definitely influence my future music."

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