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Mingus, Mitchell Mixture Makes Miraculous Music

By RICHARD H. ATKINSON

Charles Mingus, the legendary angry bassist and jazz band leader who died in January, was a black man born along the Mexican border and raised in Watts during the 1920s and '30s.

Musically, he cut his teeth on gospel church music, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

Joni Mitchell, legendarily ethereal singer-poet-painter-guitarist, is a white woman whose roots are in the vast prairies of Saskatchewan,

Canada. Growing up, she became immersed in the art-folk music of Bob Dylan and the sweet rock of David Crosby and Neil Young. An archetypal Mingus composition is "Better Git It In Your Soul," for Joni Mitchell, it's "Woodstock."

Their collaboration during 1978 ("Mingus," Elektra-Asylum) was a miraculous project, a monument to their common gift for outreach, for stretching themselves artistically. The resulting album contains six tunes, four by Mingus and two by

Mitchell, framing Joni's poetic lyrics. The songs are surrounded by snatches of conversation between Mingus, his friends and family caught on tape during his last year of life.

The music is performed by Mitchell and a band that is essentially the fusion group Weather Report (saxophonist Wayne Shorter, bassist Jaco Pastorius, drummer Peter Erskine), with Herbie Hancock subbing on keyboards.

Mingus' compositions are surprising because, of the

four, only a jump tune characterizing "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" exhibits the straight ahead smoking spirit of "Saturday Night Prayer Meeting" and similarly swinging Mingus classics.

Mitchell's lyrics are, as always, top flight. She is the most consistently rewarding poet working within the realm of modern American music. In her hands, "Pork Pie Hat" grows beyond being a memorial to Young and becomes a meditation on the entire history of integration. "The Dry Cleaner" is a

wonderfully comic figure set within a riotous, cock-eyed essay on the value of money.

Charlie's calmer compositions are cast by Mitchell as intensely personal reflections of her own romantic situations ("Sweet Sucker Dance") and the debilitated Mingus' touching, tragic plight ("Chair In The Sky").

The two pieces with words and music by Joni Mitchell that complete the recording are "God Must Be a Boogie Man," an appropriate conceptual contribution of question-able musical worth, and


"The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey," a wildly wonderful song which is perhaps inappropriate within the Mitchell-Mingus context.

Still, for the project idea alone, to say nothing of the marvelous music that works so well — like "Pork Pie Hat" and "Sucker Dance" — and for Mitchell's increasingly accomplished jazz singing, this is a major album. To paraphrase Mingus, you better git it in your collection.

Richard H. Atkinson is a critic and writer living in Gadsden, Ala.

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