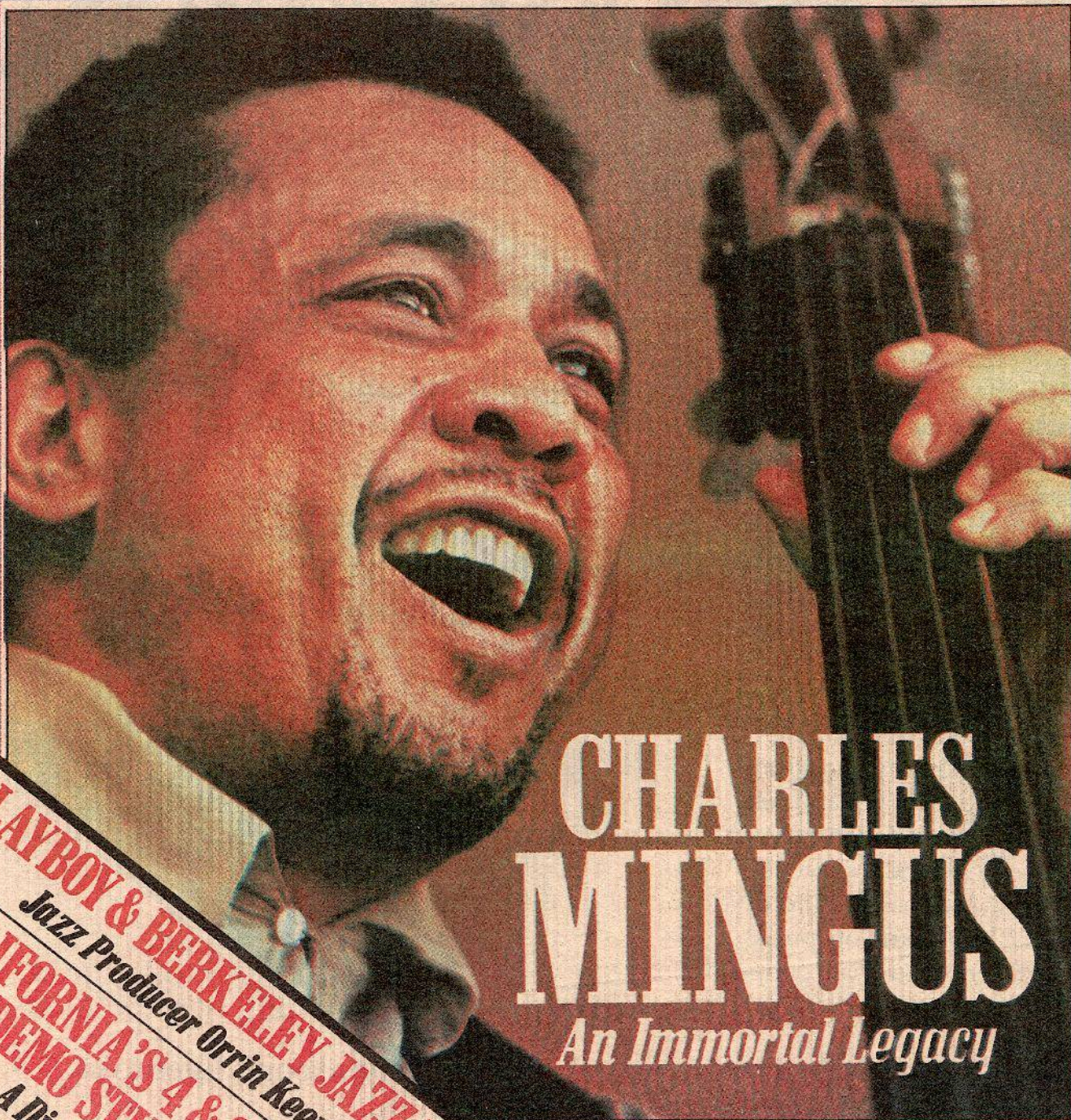


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CHARLES MINGUS

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JAZZ!

JONI MITCHELL'S 'MINGUS' BOLD BUT ERRATIC

By Blair Jackson

More than just the "new Joni Mitchell album," *Mingus* is a far-reaching tribute to the late Charles Mingus which uses a combination of stunning artwork, song lyrics which are as

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effective as written poetry as they are set to music, Mingus-Mitchell song collaborations, and snippets of Mingus in conversation to create a bold, stimulating work which, though erratic, succeeds for the most part. Mitchell has gone out on a limb with this record; it will be interesting to see if long-time fans will embrace or reject her head-first dive into the world of complex, often musically abstract jazz. She has been pushing in this direction for quite a while now, but even her last LP, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, did not prepare the Joni Mitchell fans of the world for *Mingus*.

Interestingly enough, the album project was initiated by the then-ailing Mingus, who had been astounded by Mitchell's side-long folk-symphonic epic, "Paprika Plains," on *Don Juan*, and wrote some music with Mitchell's voice in mind. Of the six compositions on *Mingus*, four feature songs with music by Mingus and lyrics by Mitchell. One is a Mitchell composition about Mingus ("God Must Be a Boogie Man," inspired by the first few pages of Mingus' autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*), and one, "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey," has no thematic place on the album as far as I can tell.

Mitchell is backed up on the album by a formidable line-up of jazz greats: Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter, and Peter Erskine of Weather Report (Jaco has been on Mitchell's LPs since *Hejira*; Shorter appeared on a couple of tracks on *Don Juan*); Herbie Hancock on electric piano; Don Alias on congas; and Emil Richards on percussion. Unfortunately, the musicianship rarely rises above the mundane on most of the album; except for a few exciting flashes by Pastorius, Mitchell's own guitar playing strikes me as the most exceptional work on the album. Shorter's contribution consists of little more than weak toots and squeaks on soprano sax—he never really *blows*—and Hancock's electric doodling sounds limp compared to the jagged but majestic lines he played on acoustic grand on this same music at Mitchell's appearances at last year's Bread & Roses Festival. Alas, I confess that I am beginning to tire of Jaco's bass style, particularly since elements of it are being adopted by so many other players in both jazz and rock. I suppose there is a certain irony at work here—Pastorius is perhaps the most important electric bassist to emerge in the past decade, and Mingus was certainly among the greatest and most innovative men to ever pick up an acoustic bass. I don't mean to imply that Jaco is in any way out of place playing Mingus' music (he even plays fairly straight-ahead on one or two cuts), but I have to wonder what someone like Charlie Haden, who toured recently with the Mingus Dynasty group, might have brought to these sessions. And considering the fact that Mingus' groups usually boasted a strong voice on reeds, it seems peculiar that Shorter provides little more than background atmosphere.

I imagine, though, that we are to consider Mitchell's vocals the lead "instrument" on the album. And on most songs, that instrument is trapped, even subverted, by listless, meandering melodies. The tunes will probably strike some as being extremely difficult to sing, but actually, they seem rather pedestrian and



Photo: Ed Perlstein

tuneless to me. There are two exceptions: "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" swings at a bright clip, stretches Mitchell's vocals considerably, and features an almost Big Band arrangement (by Pastorius) with a glistening wall of horns that punctuates Mingus' most interesting writing on the album. (The very full arrangement came as a real surprise to me—at Bread & Roses she sang the song *a capella*.) And "God Must Be a Boogie Man" manages to be both cool and delightful at the same time, and even contains a genuine hook.

But "Chair in the Sky," "Sweet Sucker Dance," and "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" seem to be bogged down in their wordiness; you can almost hear Mitchell searching for the elusive melodies. No disrespect toward Mingus intended, but it just may be possible that the songs he wrote "for" Mitchell do *not* lend themselves to vocal interpretation. "Pork Pie" is a particular disappointment because Mingus' absolutely gorgeous melody has been subterfuged, and because it has been *successfully* covered as a vocal tune before (by Rahsaan Roland Kirk). Somehow, Mitchell has buried the melody in a plodding arrangement and sucked

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much of the original tune's charm by writing all-too-literal lyrics about Lester Young (for whom the song was written by Mingus years ago). I would point to Mingus' own early versions of the song or even the bluesy John Renbourn-Bert Jansch reading on Pentangle's *Sweet Dreams* LP as examples of what a beautiful song "Pork Pie" really can be.

While I am less than enthralled by much of the music on *Mingus*, I feel the album is something of a masterpiece on a purely lyrical level. Again, though, I am disturbed by the first two verses of "Pork Pie," with their almost embarrassing empathizing with the plight of jazzmen of days gone by. Of Young she writes, "A bright star/in a dark age/When the bandstands had a thousand ways/Of refusing a black man admission/Black musician/In those days they put him in an underdog position." Is this sort of get-out-your-hankies history really necessary?

Mitchell is much more effective when her writing is more obscure...perhaps "veiled" is a better word. I find "A Chair in the Sky," which Mitchell wrote from Mingus' standpoint as an obviously dying man, very moving. I can almost picture Mingus, alone in his New York apartment, looking down at the river below him, dreaming of his past glories, contemplating his present blessings, resigned, but not bitter, about his fate. "Sweet Sucker Dance" is one of the more poignant and literate love songs I can recall; its bittersweet tale is both profound and universal. And the second half of "Pork Pie," where we move from Lester Young's problems to a colorful contemporary cityscape, contains some of Mitchell's best imagery ever: "Children are up and dancing in the streets/In the sticky middle of the night/Summer serenade/Of taxi horns and fun arcades/Where right or wrong/Under neon/Every feeling goes on!" "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" is one of those classic songs that could *only* have been written by Mitchell. Piercing, perceptive, and definitely *bent*, it speaks of a John Doe-type who cleans up in Las Vegas: "He got three oranges/Three lemons/Three cherries/Three plums/I'm losing my taste for fruit!/Watching the drycleaner do it /Like Midas in a polyester suit..."

Perhaps a few of the songs on *Mingus* seem so tuneless because so much care and craft went into the lyrics apparently without regard to their presentation with music. This is one of the few albums in recent memory which *reads* as well as it sounds. Even the bits of Mingus dialogue between songs translate well into print. It is just unfortunate that the music is not more realized than it is.

Last, but definitely not least, are Mitchell's four Mingus-inspired paintings which grace the album's covers and insides. The art really does stand as an effective complement to the music and lyrics on the album. The cover painting, "Sweet Sucker Dance," is bright, busy, quasi-abstract, somewhere between Kokoschka and DeKooning that captures the ever-shifting unpredictability of much of Mingus' music. Her interpretation of "Chair in the Sky," with its use of thick, rough outline recalling the work of Georges Roualt and an almost fauvist use of color, depicts Mingus as a massive, almost super-human form. In contrast, "I's A Muggin'" puts Mingus firmly back on earth, giving him a sly, school-boy-in-trouble glint in his eye as the vague form of an amused figure (presumably Mitchell) looks on. And the LP's back cover painting, "Charlie Down in Mexico," is positively tranquil. Using a style that seems to mix evenly the influence of Georgia O'Keeffe (one of Mitchell's favorites) and Cezanne, it shows Mingus, from the rear, sitting in a wheelchair in a lovely outdoor setting. It is a sad but beautiful depiction of a genius nearing his end.

Taken as whole—paintings, lyrics, music, and spoken raps—*Mingus* is a lot to digest. After well over a dozen listenings, I find that I'm still picking up new things on each hearing—and familiarity does make what few melodies there are leap out. If I seem disappointed with *Mingus*, it is because there are so many flashes of greatness that I yearn for those flashes to coalesce into a brilliant whole. Unfortunately, they never do. □