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Joni Mitchell's Latest Jazz Venture Misses Mark

By Arthur S. Brisbane
A Member of the Staff

"MINGUS"—Joni Mitchell (Asylum Records)—Joni Mitchell travels a lonesome road these days.

Her peers are busily feeding the star-making machinery—adding a dash of punk here, some jazz there to their mainstream pop efforts—while Joni has struck out into the land of pure jazz. She's taken her knocks for it.

Her last album, "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," elicited a chorus of boos from the critics and cockeyed looks from her fans. But rather than retreat to the folk music for which she's best known or the rock she made on her "Court and Spark" album, Miss Mitchell has plunged ahead, this time into the world of the late, lamented Charles Mingus.

The album, "Mingus," shows Joni has matured considerably in her new medium. The project began when Mingus, who died early this year, let it be known he liked her work and wanted to meet her.

The meeting was arranged and a joint project conceived. The end result is an album comprised primarily of Mingus' melodies and Joni's lyrics, although she contributed two songs she composed. Interspersed between the cuts are short snippets of conversation



'MINGUS'
... memorial to jazz great

that capture Mingus in his natural habitat: Mingus the jazz artist; Mingus the jazzman; Mingus the world-beater. A sample:
"I never had it too, too hard, uh, you know. All my life, uh you know, just everything I touched, turned to gold. I'm not, I'm not rich but, you know,

soundtracks

I've always had a few, some dollars in my pockets."

This record, dedicated to Mingus and his legend, evokes little of the dark side of this creative genius, a black man who knew the meaning of blue funk and who frequently made it known he believed he hadn't received the financial rewards commensurate with his talent.

The music on the album revolves entirely around Miss Mitchell's voice. The jazz instrumentalists—including Jaco Pastorius, bass; Wayne Shorter, soprano sax; and Herbie Hancock, electric piano—merely punctuate the melodies Mingus conceived and Miss Mitchell executes.

Because there rarely is a substantive backup on these songs, the music is hard to get a handle on. Sometimes it seems the artist is just meandering. The feel is extemporaneous, with the musical lines sometimes aimless.

In addition, this Mitchell-Mingus collaboration rarely calls on a strong rhythm. All but one of the six cuts are played in a slow tempo with an ill-defined beat. The result is a street corner style that finds Joni dishing out lyrics while the band grooves behind, a collection of individual sounds adding

their disparate voices to the words.

But the effect of all this grows on you. For one thing, the lyrics are exceptionally good—although nearly indecipherable without looking at the album sleeve. "A Chair in the Sky" is about Mingus, as he resides in limbo with the sounds of Charlie Parker playing in his ear and the spirit of Manhattan damning him to a long wait in purgatory.

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