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Mingus' music lives

New Joni Mitchell album blends his passion, her sensitivity

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NEW YORK — Charles Mingus was a large man with large appetites — a black artist who expressed his passions in a music so exuberant and personal that it broke through the conventions of jazz.

In contrast, Joni Mitchell comes close to being a personification of 1960s flower power. Lithe and blonde, she sings in a fragile soprano with acoustic guitar, painting word images in intimate songs of mellow joy and muted sorrow.

One would assume Mitchell's exquisite sensibilities and rarified music would be incompatible with the raucous, smouldering fire of Mingus' passions.

Yet one of the last projects Charles Mingus participated in, as he waged a battle with a debilitating disease that killed him in January, was a collaboration with Joni Mitchell. The results of the collaboration are now available on "Mingus," Joni Mitchell (Asylum Records).

At the heart of the album are four songs with music by Mingus and words by Mitchell, although it is obvious that Mingus inspired some of the ideas expressed in the lyrics.

Of the two other songs, both written solely by Mitchell, one was inspired by the beginning of Mingus' autobiography, "Beneath the Underdog." The song, "God Must Be a Boogie Man," displays a skepticism and caustic wit that Mingus could easily have embraced. The title line chorus, delivered as a



Mingus



Mitchell

party sing-a-long, would have delighted his sense of the absurd.

"A Chair in the Sky" deals straightforwardly with impending death. Over a haunting Mingus melody, Mitchell's words put you in the mind of Mingus, confined to a wheelchair in a Manhattan high rise apartment window. Her words capture his ardor for life, memories and regrets. It is a tribute to a life that did not know the meaning of surrender.

"Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," one of Mingus' most lovely melodies, written as a eulogy to the tenor saxophonist Lester Young, becomes, with Mitchell's words, an homage to Young and Mingus. It's a eulogy that celebrates the survival of the spirit of those two jazz giants.

For more of Mingus, a representative compilation of his work as bassist, bandleader, composer, arranger, pianist and singer can be found on "Passions and a Man," Charles Mingus (Atlantic Records).

The three-record set includes some of his best, most influential and important work. It is a perfect place to begin appreciating that work.