

White Wishes, Darlings

Two views of Joni Mitchell's *Mingus*

Mingus
Joni Mitchell
Asylum SE-505



Joni Mitchell's new album—her 11th—began as a collaboration with Charles Mingus, who wrote the music for four of the tunes, and was completed as Joni's personal tribute to Mingus, who died on January 5, 1979, at the age of 56. She has chosen, wisely, to evoke the spirit of Mingus within the limits of her own style, rather than trying to mimic the sound of Mingus' music. Joni acknowledges in the liner notes that: "This was a difficult but challenging project. I was trying to please Charlie and still be true to myself." She has largely succeeded, but the album presents a challenge to the listener as well—it requires focused concentration, and will appeal most strongly to those who are familiar with Mingus' music.

After recording test sessions with a number of fine musicians, Joni settled on a consistent group for the album: Jaco Pastorius on bass, Wayne Shorter on soprano sax, Herbie Hancock on electric piano, Peter Erskine on drums, Don Alias on congas and Emil Richards on percussion. Their playing is in accord with Joni's post-*Hejira* style: stark, spacious, jazz-inflected textures, with much of the emphasis on the counterpoint of Joni's voice and Pastorius' horn-like bass lines. While this music has frustrated many of Joni's old fans, who yearn for her folksy days, it clearly represents a more sophisticated artistic maturity. If she has narrowed her audience by remaining true to her evolving artistic ideals, we cannot fault her for being stale and repetitive.

This sort of defiant dedication characterized the entire career of Charles Mingus, and it is delightful that he recognized an affinity with Joni and chose to write some music especially for her. Although—or perhaps because—he was struggling against a debilitating disease, Mingus wrote some of his strongest music in the last year of his life. Of the music written especially for Joni, three tunes are on the album: "A Chair in the Sky," "Sweet Sucker Dance" and "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines." A fourth Mingus tune, the classic "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," was adapted by Joni to close the album.

The album begins with a tape recording done at one of Mingus' last birthday celebrations. (Either his 53rd or 54th; there is a dispute about the matter.) Other taped segments form brief interludes throughout the album. Fortunately, they are well chosen and brief, serving as windows into the life of Mingus without intruding excessively into the listening experience.

The first tune is "God Must Be a Boogie Man," and it is Joni's introductory portrait of Mingus' personality—the trinity of his character: Mingus "the one attacking/so afraid," Mingus "so sweet/so overly loving and gentle," and Mingus "in the middle unmoved/walking to show what he sees/to the other two." The religious metaphor (One in Three; Three in One) is particularly apt, since Mingus often characterized himself as a medium—an Eye of God—through which music flowed. (Thus the title of his last album: *Me, Myself, An Eye*.) The call-and-response format suggests the gospel-like

Mingus of "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting." Joni reinforces the metaphor melodically, with the repeated three notes of "God must be" and the triad outlined by the notes of "be a boogie." Instrumentally, the tune is spare and percussive, with Joni slashing at her guitar and Erskine dropping bombs.

The Spirit of Mingus

"A Chair in the Sky" evokes not only the spirit of Mingus, but also those of two of his idols, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. The tune is wistful, with its images of Birdland and the young Mingus "burning up on the bandstand," but never sentimental. Joni delivers the purest jazz vocal of her career, blending graceful scat lines with Shorter's sax at the end. The title is particularly fitting, suggesting both the wheelchair of Mingus' last days (which could not contain his soaring talent), and *A Chair in the Sky*, a 1943 MGM musical that featured the Ellington band. In the movie, the young black hero lies unconscious and dreams of good and evil struggling for his soul.

Side one closes with "The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey," a tune that seems out of place—a displaced cousin of "Coyote." If it fits in at all, it is as a dark portrait of the evil within a man—the evil that Mingus grappled with, as expressed in his autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, and in tunes like "Hellview from Bellview." If it takes a little intellectual shoe-horning to fit the lyrics of the song into context, it takes none for the music: again brooding and percussive, with Joni hammering on the open strings of her guitar and making it sound most unguitar-like. Rich in dissonant overtones and punctuated by eerie wolf-howls, the tune closes side one in a mood of funeral despair.

That mood is instantly lifted—literally laughed away—by the seven-second tape duet of Joni and Charles singing Fats Waller's "I's A-Muggin'" that opens side two. Joni's giggle kicks right into "Sweet Sucker Dance," a strong Mingus tune with a characteristic Joni Mitchell lyric about the paradoxes of love: "We can't live without it/Why do we go out and get it/Just to turn around and doubt it." True to the ironic themes of many of Joni's songs, the song celebrates the joy of being a happy sucker in love—which, of course, you can't be if you see yourself as a sucker.

If "Sweet Sucker Dance" is a celebration, despite its ironies, then "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines" is a Mardi Gras parade run amok. Essentially a crazed blues, "Dry Cleaner" roars along on a frenetic bass line punctuated by slam-bang horn fills. Joni's lyrics are sharp and funny, the incredulous observations of an out-of-luck gambler watching as a "Midas in a polyester suit" cleans up in Vegas: "But the cleaner from Des Moines/Could put a coin/in the door of a John/And get twenty for one/It's just luck!" (Who said there's no such thing as easy money?)

After a last, dead-center perfect quote from Mingus—"I was lucky," man! God blessed me, you know! I was blessed by God!"—the album closes with a beautiful rendition of Mingus' ballad "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat." Joni's lyrics take off from Mingus' original intent—a tribute to Lester Young—and evolve into a tribute to Mingus, ending up as a joyous dance, like the dance of a New Orleans funeral party returning from the cemetery.

The album succeeds as a series of "audio paintings" (Joni's term), and as a unique statement about Mingus' life and music. If it is uneven, and sometimes more brilliant in concept than in execution, it is because Joni has aimed very high. That, in itself, is an accurate reflection of the spirit of Mingus.

Jim Roberts

"Sweet Sucker Dance" and "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines." © 1978 by Crazy Crow Music and Jazz Workshop, Inc. (BMG)