

## THE ARTS

It was Mingus, one of the most influential jazz figures, who singled out Miss Mitchell, known primarily as a folk and rock artist, for what turned out to be his final project.

## An odd couple: Joni Mitchell, Charles Mingus

By Bob Protzman  
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Joni Mitchell said that at first, even she felt that it was an "odd combination," referring her collaboration with the late jazz composer and bassist Charles Mingus that produced an album and led to her first concert tour in three years.

For the album, Mingus, a street person and composer of such strongly gospel and blues-based music as "Better Git It in Your Soul" and of often raucous raging, cacophonous and innovative jazz, a highly trained bassist and one of jazz's most influential figures, met 35-year-old Miss Mitchell, Canadian-born upper-middle class composer of the sweetly folksy "Both Sides Now" and of contemporary songs with often sophisticated, complex imagery and profound thoughts; an untrained guitarist, schooled painter and poet generally considered the equal of Bob Dylan as a pop-music lyricist.

Between munches of a grilled cheese sandwich and coleslaw at the Cleveland airport, Miss Mitchell talked by phone recently about the Mingus-Mitchell collaboration and about the Asylum album "Mingus" that resulted.

Mingus, the black jazz giant who died at the age of 56 last Jan. 5 in Mexico of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, contacted Ms. Mitchell concerning the project about a year before his death.

Why did Mingus single out Joni Mitchell, who is known primarily as a folk and rock artist, although she has, in her own words, "flirted" with jazz in recent years? Why would he turn to her rather than to established or even younger jazz artists to work with him?

"He hadn't given up hope of living at that point," Miss Mitchell said, "so it was not necessarily that I was contacted to write his epitaph. We all shared his opti-

mism that he would beat it, even though it was incurable. He had finished another album, 'Me Myself an Eye' (on Atlantic), and was looking for projects to busy himself with during what was hoped would be a convalescence, not a general decline.

"Initially I felt his invitation was an honor and a challenge. I thought it was an odd combination, yet I was looking for a peculiar project. Deep in the back of my mind I was trying to decide what to do. I knew I wanted to study music (she does not read music), but not in an institution." Mingus' inquiry "came to me as a perfect gift, an opportunity to study jazz with a master in a way that suited my learning process — by muddling through it."

At first, Mingus wanted her to work with him on a complex project involving a full orchestra, jazz voices and the recitation of T. S. Eliot. Ms. Mitchell declined, saying it simply was beyond her musical skills and she wasn't that fond of Eliot's work.

Some time passed before he got in touch with her again. "Then he handed me six melodies and asked me to write lyrics to them



Mitchell: 'I felt his invitation was an honor, a challenge'

to his satisfaction," she said. Chuckling, she added, "And this from a man who punched out band members — on the bandstand — when he was dissatisfied with them. It was a little joke between us that he wouldn't punch me."

Miss Mitchell said that although Mingus was paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, he was mentally alert and subject to the same kind of extreme emotions and moods that he'd always been known for. "His face was either radiant or like a storm cloud," she recalled. "But he had a great sense of humor, a sense of put-on. His spirit was not paralyzed."

What were her objectives on the album? "As I said, initially I didn't have a tribute in mind because he was very much present. I simply wanted to set words

to his melodies that he could relate to, that had to do with him.

"The first one I completed, 'Chair in the Sky,' was written specifically to his point of view and with some of his humor. That was the first song I sent to him on a demo tape that was full of mistakes. When he discovered I was musically illiterate, it created some concern for him. He was excited about it, though."

She said she wanted Mingus to like the album, but also wanted to break down some of his prejudices. "He was prejudiced against electric instruments; he felt the dynamics were lost with them and that it was their nature to take away the humanness of the player. Well, I felt our players (Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius and others) were exceptions to that. And he ended up liking their music. You see, it was an exchange."

Before his death, Mingus heard five of the album's six tracks, four of which are Joni Mitchell's lyrics to Mingus' melodies. The other two songs had words and music by Ms. Mitchell. "God Must Be a Boogie Man" is the only one that he didn't hear.

"He liked everything except 'Chair in the Sky,' where he preferred the crude demo tape, the purity of my first fledgling flight as a jazz singer," Ms. Mitchell said. "He liked the mistakes in it. The final version of 'Chair' was, in his opinion, the only thing I overwrote. He loved 'Pork Pie Hat.'

"When he died, I included some documentary material and the album took on more of a tribute quality."

## Bring back the Joni of old

Any relationship between the Joni Mitchell who played coffee houses and folk festivals in the 1960s and the Joni Mitchell who performed Tuesday at the Mann Music Center (Dell West) is purely coincidental.

A few years ago Miss Mitchell decided, literally, to jazz up her act. Lately she has been touring and recording with jazz sidemen, and one thing was very apparent at the concert — Miss Mitchell can not sing jazz very well and she can not play it at all.

Miss Mitchell's performance

did not lack for energy, projection or sophistication. Indeed, she seems more assured on stage than she has ever been. The jazz musicians in her entourage, when they play without her, are quite stimulating.

The audience was respectful, though hardly enthusiastic. One could not help feeling that most of them would just as soon hear the Joni Mitchell of old, the Joni Mitchell who was one of the premier song-poets of the 1960s.

— Edgar Koshatka