An odd couple: Joni Mitchell, Charles Mingus

By Bob Proctor

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Joni Mitchell said that at first, even she felt that it was an "odd combination," referring to 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 in Your Soul" and "If I Had a Hammer," provided some of the most influential figures, not his, but his companion-in-law, bassist and composer of the scathing folkish "Both Sides Now," and of contemporary songs with often sophisticated, complex and imaginative instrumentation.

Mingus wanted her to work with him on a complex project involving a full orchestra, jazz voices and the creation of T.S. Eliot. Mitchell declined, saying simply was beyond her musical skills and that she was not 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 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 small joke between us that he wouldn't punch me."

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 had 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. But I discovered he 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 not possible to take away the humaneness 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 lyrical Mingus' melodies. The other two songs had words and music by 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 his first flodding 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 ever wrote. He loved 'For You and You'"

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