

Pop and jazz record reviews

# Tortured bassist found his peace before last note

About 13 years ago Charlie Mingus, the great jazz bassist and composer, who died last week, retired. No one knew why, exactly, although it was understood he was finishing up the book he'd been working on for years, the fictionalized autobiography called *Beneath The Underdog*.

It was an intense and anguished time for Mingus. He'd stopped recording and at one point was treated in New York's Bellevue Hospital for depression. He was haunted by his thoughts, couldn't sleep, and apparently tried to seal himself off from the rest of the world, going so far as to board up the windows of his apartment. He was, as he told friends, just looking in his mirror "and wishing he would die."

When he started recording again in 1970 something had changed in his music. He was with Atlantic Records now, and his '70s releases included *The Changes I and II* series, *Live At Carnegie Hall*, the marvellous *Mingus Moves* album, and, not finally, the *Three Or Four Shades Of Blues* album released in July 1970 and possibly the best-seller of his career. A fusion album, it utilized the likes of John Scofield, Phillippe Catherine and Larry Coryell, and was given great reviews. He did not like it, believing it was a bit too commercial, which of course it is.

Around the time of the session for *Three Or Four Shades Of Blues*, he worked on some film-score music, which resulted in the most current Mingus album now available — *Cumbia & Jazz Fusion*.

Another Mingus product is due out, an extended work called *Me, Myself And Eve*, recorded last spring with many of the *Three Or Four Shades* personnel, and also, unlikely as it sounds, a collection of songs with *Joni Mitchell*.

Undoubtedly there'll be various complications as well. Columbia might well re-release his *Dynasty* album and Atlantic might do something with the *Pithecanthropus Erectus* album, or *The Clown*, or even the two anthologies already out — *Best Of* and *Art Of*.

The music he recorded last is of a piece. Although his moods and irritations vacillated wildly during his life, the most recent albums show a remarkable uniformity of mood — good-willed, slightly meditative, more strictly musical than his previous work. That is, there are few literary, political or biographical themes (along the lines of his eulogy to Lester Young in *Goodbye Porkpie Hat*) in this current music. It's pictorial more than anything else, sprawling, colorful and richly textured.

*Cumbia & Jazz Fusion*, recorded with the *Jazz Workshop*, came about when film director Daniele Senatore gave Mingus several recordings of Colombian music.



The late Charlie Mingus

His affection for Spanish and Spanish-based music went back a long way, so one can imagine that these particular records rekindled his interest.

The music that resulted has the shape and spirit of a travelogue. It begins atmospherically, with wild, jungle-like sounds (more than a touch of Ellington here), and grows in intensity and complexity into a considerably richer, more profound experience. It has neither the laser-like focus of earlier Mingus work nor the bite. It is sanguine music by a composer seemingly at peace with himself.

*Cumbia & Jazz Fusion*. Charles Mingus. (Atlantic SD 8801).

The true brutality of disco is not its loudness (it's not that loud, really) or its lack of musical content (much disco in the past few years has been infinitely superior to much rock). It's what happens to the artists. They use disco — they think — to get their break, but more often than not, it buries them.

Thelma Houston, whose *Don't Leave Me This Way*, was one of the bigger hits of 1977, might have been lost in the shuffle along with hundreds of other disco singers. But her new single, *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, should prove to be her escape hatch. It's a disco record in that the bass is pumped up and you can dance to it. But there's much more to it: Houston's voice, for instance. She's an inspired singer, taking risks with the song that few others would try.

*Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*. Thelma Houston. Tamla T54297F.

— Peter Goddard