



CHARLES MINGUS DIES AT 56: A leading bass player and composer for 25 years, the jazz musician suffered a heart attack in Mexico. Page B6.

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Charles Mingus, 56, Bass Player, Bandleader and Composer, Dead

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Charles Mingus, one of the leading jazz bass players, bandleaders and composers of the last 25 years, died Friday of a heart attack in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He had been ill for a year with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Mr. Mingus was 56 years old.

The musician reached the peak of his fame in the mid-1960's, when his blend of European-influenced technical sophistication and fervent, blues-based intensity proved enormously popular and influential. In addition, he became a leading spokesman for black consciousness, even though he maintained a distance between himself and the more organized militants.

Always a stylistic eclectic, he avoided the depersonalized quality that afflicts many artists with varied roots. The force of his personality — indeed, his sheer, massive physical presence — was always strong, and his music continually reflected the venturesomeness of his musical mind.

'An Important Link'

Perhaps his principal contribution was his role in the elevation of the bass from the more demure half of the rhythm section into the status of a solo and melodic instrument. Some critics have suggested that Mr. Mingus's tendency to play just ahead of the beat lent his music a "frenetic rhythmic tension."

In more general musical terms, Mr. Mingus's very eclecticism helped define his influence, and led to a broad reevaluation of black musical traditions by younger jazz musicians. His work has been described by Leonard Feather in his "Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties" as "an important link between older, half-forgotten styles and the free improvisation of the '60's."

Mr. Mingus was born on April 22, 1922, in Nogales, Ariz., and was raised in the Watts district of Los Angeles. A precocious child (his father once ascertained his I.Q. results and told him, "Even by a white man's standards, you're supposed to be a genius"), Mr. Mingus took a while to find his proper instrument. He moved through the trombone and the cello before settling on the bass, which he studied with Red Callender and H. Rheinscha-

gen, who had been a member of the New York Philharmonic for five years.

After playing with several notable bands in California in the 1940's (Louis Armstrong, Kid Ory, Lionel Hampton and others), Mr. Mingus moved to New York in 1951, working with such musicians as Red Norvo, Billy Taylor, Charlie Parker, Stan Getz and Duke Ellington.

He began to emerge as a composer and leader in the mid-1950's, and his "Jazz Workshop" bands late in that decade appeared frequently in the New York area. In 1960, he led a quartet that included Eric Dolphy and Ted Curson, and during the 60's he appeared regularly in New York clubs and at the leading national and international jazz festivals. He also recorded extensively.

Became Increasingly Militant

During this time, Mr. Mingus's frequent altercations with audiences, clubowners and concert promoters became more and more abrasive. He would sometimes stop playing and lecture audiences on their behavior, or storm offstage in a rage. His increasing militancy about how musicians in general and black musicians in particular were treated led him to form his own record label, but distribution problems proved crippling.

He became known as "jazz's angry man," and went so far as to denounce the very term "jazz" as a racist stigma: "Don't call me a jazz musician," he said in 1964. "The word jazz means nigger, discrimination, second-class citizenship, the back-of-the-bus bit." But, at the same time, he almost invariably included white musicians in his groups. Referring to Don Butterfield, a white collaborator, Mr. Mingus said, "He's colorless, like all the good ones."

In the late 1960's, Mr. Mingus fell into a decline, brought about by what one friend called a "deep depression." He moved to the East Village and lived in a state of destitution. "For about three years," he said in 1972, "I thought I was finished."

His re-emergence began in 1971, when Knopf published his autobiography, "Beneath the Underdog," on which he had worked for some 25 years. A flamboyant, semifictionalized account of his career that dealt extensively with his love life, the book was described by his wife, Susan Graham Ungaro Mingus, as "the superficial Mingus, the flashy one, not the real one."

Began to Record Again

He began to record again in February 1972, and as the decade progressed, his appearances became more and more frequent and ambitious. Mr. Mingus toured Europe, where he had always felt appreciated, in 1972 and 1975, and appeared regularly at the Newport Festival. When his illness finally prevented him from performing in public, his last quintet, led by his longtime drummer, Dannie Richmond, played at the Village Vanguard in July 1978, with Eddie Gomez on bass.

The last year of Mr. Mingus's life was described by Sy Johnson, a longtime collaborator and friend, as "Mingus's finest hour as a human being." He composed steadily even when he was no longer able to play or even sing, and his projects included a collaboration with Joni Mitchell, the popular folk-rock singer and composer who has been turning increasingly to jazz in recent years.

Mr. Mingus had gone to Mexico to seek treatment for his disease. After his death he was cremated and, following a private Hindu ceremony, his ashes were scattered over the Ganges River by his wife. Mr. Mingus, who was married several times, is survived also by five children and two stepchildren.

Memorial services are being planned for New York and Los Angeles.

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