



Charlie Mingus recalled on album

A tribute to Mingus

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Charlie Mingus and Joni Mitchell liked each other's music, and each other. Mingus, who was dying, said he would write some pieces for her which she could hang lyrics on and drop into an album.

Mingus set to work. He wrote four pieces, and he fully intended to write a fifth, and maybe a sixth, but he died Jan. 5 at age 56.

Joni had been dog-paddling around in the currents of black classical music, as she puts it, for more than a year. It was a difficult but challenging project, trying to please Mingus and still be true to herself.

Before he cut out (as jazz musicians often speak of death), Mingus was able to hear every song but one — "God Must Be a Boogie Man," with both lyrics and music by Miss Mitchell. That tune didn't actually take form until two days after his death in Mexico.

Recently, the project jelled. Miss Mitchell added "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," a Mingus tribute to saxophonist Lester Young. She wrote most of the arrangements, engaged a top-flight jazz group ("Weather Report," without leader Joe Zawinul), tuned her guitar and got her vocal equipment in shape.

The multi-talented lady subsequently filled four canvases with paintings for use in and on the album.

So here it is now — Joni Mitchell — Mingus (SE-505) — an album on Asylum Records.

Off the Record

It is a great tribute — altogether a nice piece of work. It is not easy to get into; it takes work. What it asks is that you play it four or five times, and if you still don't dig it, forget it.

Don't waste too much time on it. For after all, it is abstract, like so much of Mingus's music, and like most of Miss Mitchell's lyrics, oils and watercolors.

But there are some joys here you may not want to miss. One is Miss Mitchell's jazz singing — she often sounds remarkably like Annie Ross, of the old Lambert, Hendrix and Ross trio. Another is her witty words to "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines" and "Pork Pie Hat" (her final, poetic say about bassist-composer Mingus, who was also something of a mystic).

Also well worth hearing: the fine instrumental work of bass guitarist Jaco Pastorius, electric pianist Herbie Hancock and soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter.

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The Ethel Merman Disco Album, on A&M (SP-4775) holds disco versions of some of the venerable entertainer's classic numbers. No, she doesn't sing disco, overaccenting the beat and repeating key phrases over and over, in the manner of Sister Sledge. She simply

sings as she customarily does — pulling out all the stops, making like a foghorn wooing an amplifier, wailing.

Where the disco comes in is in the exuberance of her accompaniment; the Peter Matz orchestrations are as brassy as Sousa and as kinetic as tom-toms, spurring Ethel to wring a new vivacity out of "There's No Business Like Show Business," "Everything's Coming Up Roses," "I Get a Kick Out of You," "Something for the Boys," "Some People," "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "I Got Rhythm."

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Last May, the late Arthur Fiedler (he never tried to beat them, but simply joined them) went disco, conducting the Boston Pops in a disco suite on TV.

Midsong International's Saturday Night Fiedler (MS1001) preserves the program, which was another instance of the maestro managing to keep up with the forward motion of the young people's tastes. He insisted that the "marvelously, insistently rhythmic dance form" could be adapted from Bach to the Bee-Gees.

So here are not only a "Saturday Night Fever" medley, with the Pops's sound captured vividly, but a side-long "Bachmania," which is based on the composer's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor and Air for the G String.

The Bach blend isn't lively especially (thus not good disco), but adorned with a heavy beat, it is certainly interesting.