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MARC ZAKEM ON MUSIC

Joni Mitchell's 'Mingus' doesn't do jazz great justice, but reissue of some of his 1959 work does

When Charles Mingus died on Jan. 5, 1979, the world of jazz, as the cliché goes, lost one of its giants. But, unlike many of the other jazz greats who have passed on, the loss of Charles Mingus is one which will be, or at least should be, felt by all lovers of modern music.

Mingus was one of those musicians who made jazz accessible and even fun for listeners not normally attuned to or appreciative of jazz.

Because of that, just as Mingus was often eschewed for being black and a jazz musician, just as he was often tagged as being violent or crazy or both, so was he, of all things, at times looked down upon for being an entertainer in the otherwise oft-times serious world of jazz music.

Born in Arizona in 1922, the bassist played with "traditionalists" such as Louis Armstrong and Lionel Hampton and later associated himself with modernists such as Charlie "Bird" Parker (saxophone) and Max Roach (drums).

He also led his own bands, teaching his musicians songs on the piano (he would never show his sidemen written sheet music, and he would skim over some parts as he played them, so that his musicians could reinterpret Mingus' music as their own) and exhorting them as they played with shouts and cries that can be heard on the finished recordings.

Two albums have recently appeared that serve as a tribute and memorial to Mingus. Ironically, both were originally meant to serve as tribute only; that is, both were being prepared for production before Mingus' death.

One, "Nostalgia in Times Square," is a rerelease and repackaging of Mingus' two 1959 session albums and the other, Joni Mitchell's "Mingus," combines six Mingus compositions with the popular female singer's vocals and lyrics.

Ms. Mitchell's "Mingus" serves as a bittersweet recollection of Mingus, the man. Unfortunately, "bittersweet" is not the way Mingus should be remembered. Compared to most of Mingus' best work, which is punchy, lighthearted and, above all, passionate, the new album is dirge-like, serious and empty.

Most likely, the whole project was taken too seriously. The numbers are tightly arranged, and were each recorded, by Ms. Mitchell's admission, three or four times. As a result, the music contains no improvisation, and improvisation was the heart of Mingus' best pieces.

Melodies serve as the whole song, rather than as the base from which to launch solos. At the point where Mingus would cut loose and really begin a song — with his musicians' instrumentals — Mitchell is ready to end here.

There are other problems with the arrangements. Mingus' sound was full-bodied, with a constant "walking" bass line (in which the bass usually goes up and down the scale throughout each measure) and horns that would continually play off of each other. The music on "Mingus" is incomprehensibly sparse.

Even with Weather Report's Jaco Pastorius on bass, the bass line is reduced to a few intermittent notes, played without regularity and with a dull, metallic sound. The other instruments follow suit, providing an odd, lunar backdrop to Ms. Mitchell on all numbers except the relatively upbeat "Dry Cleaner from Des Moines."

Ms. Mitchell's penchant for jazz, increasingly evident since "Miles of Isles," seems to mesh well with many of Mingus' own ideas, although, again, much of the music is so bad that it's hard to tell.

Still, the singer's poetry tends to create a tone rather than define a situation, much like Mingus' own instrumentation.

And although some lyrics are embarrassing ("Watching the drycleaner do it/ Like Midas in a polyester suit"), others, such as "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" about saxophonist Lester Young, evoke a nice sort of sentimentality — by far the overriding tone of the album.

However, it's unlikely that Mingus would have cared for such mush. Despite Ms. Mitchell's liner notes and paintings, a plastic inner sleeve and some on-location recordings of Mingus and friends, it's doubtful that the album will win over many listeners.

The album is too "in" with the jazz scene to appeal to her broader-based listeners, and too poor to capture the Mingus fans.

Now the good news. "Nostalgia in Times Square" is a completely different story. Taken from the CBS "Mingus Ah Um" and "Mingus Dynasty," the new two-record set includes four previously unreleased recordings from the original sessions, including the brilliant "Pedal Point Blues," and many solos that were edited out of the original releases.

The album stands as a testament as to why Mingus could not only command the respect of his peers but the attention of "lay" listeners as well.

Mingus' mixture of blues, be-bop and standard tunes does not stray far from standard improvisation in which an opening melody segues into various solos and then returns for the finish.

However, Mingus will often reintroduce the basic melody throughout the middle of the song, sometimes actually having it played behind one of the solos, thus allowing the listener less chance to become lost during a piece.

Similarly, he will let one of his horn players improvise at the very beginning of a number as the other instruments carry the melody, thus striking a balance between Charlie Parker, who would often do away with an opening melody, and more conservative musicians.

Most of the pieces on the album, including "Jelly Roll," "Bird Calls" and "Stop," contain common chord sequences and standard chords, again allowing the untrained ear to follow the flow of the music (there are exceptions to this, including the noless-remarkable tribute to Parker, "Gunslinging Bird").

What keeps the more experienced jazz aficionado from becoming bored are the brilliant solos by saxophonists Brooker Ervin and John Handy. Mingus and the others which are highlighted throughout the album.

Finally, each number reverberates with life. Mingus drives his musicians through the sessions, goading them on while their spontaneous solos crackle with electricity and vitality. The music has lost nothing in 20 years.

If Ms. Mitchell's album serves as a true death knell with its lackluster composition and arrangements, "Nostalgia in Times Square" brings notice that — as was often said of Charlie Parker after his death — Mingus Lives.

"Nostalgia in Times Square" is a new album using 1959 work of the late Charles Mingus, above. Joni Mitchell, right, also has an album recalling Mingus.

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