

CALENDAR

JONI MITCHELL HAS HER MOJO WORKING

BY LEONARD FEATHER



PHOTO BY NORMAN SEEFF

Joni Mitchell has turned over yet another leaf with her new album, "Mingus."

We have looked at Joni Mitchell from many sides now. She stands, slim and pale, slender and fragile, as a vital monument to the musical and lyrical communication of concepts and emotions.

New aspects of her image are gradually revealed. Because other artists—Judy Collins, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Dave van Ronk—had brought us her songs perhaps a little before her own first album was released, she reached us as a composer earlier than she became known as a performer. Over the past decade, different sides of Joni Mitchell have been shown through her own records, most of which, through some freak of the unnatural, have enjoyed a measure of commercial success on a level with their surpassing artistry.

Now comes the latest layer to unfold: Mitchell the appreciator of jazz, Mitchell involved and participating, as co-writer with the late Charles Mingus, as collaborator with such musicians as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius and Don Alias in an album called "Mingus" (Asylum S-505) that is quite unlike anything she has previously committed to tape.

Charles Mingus (born Nogales, Ariz., 4/22/22; died Cuernavaca, Mex., 1/5/79, of Lou Gehrig's disease) was a dominant jazz figure as composer, bass virtuoso and overall catalyst in Los Angeles during the 1940s and in New York from the early '50s. Joni Mitchell will be appearing Friday in the Mingus tribute during the Playboy Jazz Festival at the Hollywood Bowl. Starting Aug. 3 she'll be on the road, singing some of the Mingus material, with a jazz-oriented group that will include three musicians well known for their work with Weather Report.

Sitting in the small, cluttered office of her manager in West Hollywood, she talked freely and articulately on a subject about which she is far more knowledgeable than has been generally realized: "My jazz background began with one of the early Lambert, Hendricks & Ross albums, the one called 'The Hottest New Sound in Jazz.' It was hard to find in Canada, so I saved up and bought it at a bootleg price. I considered that album to be my Beatles. I learned every song off of it, and I don't think there's another album anywhere—including my own—on which I know every note and word of every song.

"I couldn't do 'Cloudburst,' because of some of the very fast scat singing, but I did record two numbers out of that set: 'Twisted,' which was in the 'Court and Spark' album, and 'Centerpiece,' which was incorporated with 'Harry's House' in the 'Hissing of Summer Lawns' album."

The jazz vocal trio impressed her at a time, Mitchell says, when rock 'n' roll seemed to be winding down, just before the Beatles came along to revitalize it. It was during that ebb, she recalled, that folk music was able to come into its full power.

"I was also impressed by some of the Miles Davis albums; first 'Sketches of Spain,' with Gil Evans and the large orchestra; but later, Miles' smaller combo things like 'Nefertiti' and 'In a Silent Way' became just about my all-time favorites in any field of music. They were my private music, the albums I loved to listen to on my

own. I never thought of making that my kind of music."

The association with Mingus came about at the instigation of the bassist-composer. "Mingus was a legend, of course; I'd heard of him as far back as my high school days. Then years later, John Guerin, the drummer, played me a record of Mingus' 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,' the elegy for Lester Young, but it wasn't until many years later, when I began to learn the piece for this album, that I really saw the beauty of it."

Mingus' interest in Mitchell, she found out later, was triggered by "Paprika Plains," from her "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter" album. "In the middle of it I had this passage of about seven minutes of improvisational playing. Charles apparently heard in it some kind of strength, and an adventuresome spirit, because I had been trying for years to extend the limits of what constitutes a song."

Word reached her a couple of years ago that Mingus had something in mind for her to do. When she called him, Mingus told her that he had an idea for a piece of music based on an excerpt from T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," with a full orchestra, and overlaid on it a bass and guitar, with a reader quoting Eliot. "He wanted me to distill Eliot down into street language, and sing it mixed in with this reader."

Though Mitchell was fascinated by the idea, and spent time reading the Eliot book, she decided that it was not feasible—"I called Charles back and told him I couldn't do it; it seemed like a kind of sacrilege."

In April, 1977, Mingus called with the news that he had written six songs with her in mind, and wanted her to write words for them and sing them. "I went to visit him and liked him immediately. He was already sick and in a wheelchair, but still very vital and concerned.

"We started searching through his material, and he said, 'Now this one has five different melodies.' I said, 'You mean you want me to write five different sets of lyrics?' He said yes, then put one on and it was the fastest, boogieing-est thing I'd ever heard, and it was impossible! So this was like a joke on me; he was testing and teasing me, but in good fun."

Mitchell made several visits to the Mingus home in New York, listening to some of his older themes on records as well as discussing the newer works and his lyrical ideas for them.

"Then, because he had become very seriously ill, he and his wife Sue went to Mexico, to a faith healer, and during that time I spent 10 days with them. At that point his speech had deteriorated severely. Every night he would say to me, 'I want to talk to you about the music,' and every day it would be too difficult. So some of what he had to tell me remained a mystery.

"Sue gave me a lot of tapes and interviews, and they were thrilling to me, because so much of what he felt and described was kindred to my own feelings. He articulated lessons that were laid on him by Fats Navarro, the trumpeter, and others."

Not all of the music Mingus had in mind for Mitchell to work on turned out to be

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