

AMERICAN JOURNAL

Joni Mitchell meets Mingus

By DAVID ARMSTRONG

It was a surprise, looking up on stage and seeing the familiar angular face, watching the wide mouth open and hearing jazz-scattering come out. But it was indisputably Joni Mitchell up there and it was jazz she was singing.

Mitchell first performed the new songs she had written with Charles Mingus about a year ago, at a big, open-air concert in Berkeley to benefit Bread and Roses, a charitable group. It was night time and the fog swirled above the theatre, floodlights catching the vapors near the stage where Mitchell sang and Herbie Hancock played piano.

As Mitchell went into a dreamy, forties-style lyric about Manhattan, a prop-driven plane droned through the fog. It was such a perfect touch, I suspected the promoters of hiring the plane. I looked around, half-expecting to see the casually dressed audience transformed, the men in evening dress, the women with gardenias in their hair.

Joni Mitchell's newest album, *Mingus* (Asylum 5R-505), is a collection of songs written with the late jazz bassist and composer and inspired by him, Mingus died in Mexico early this year at 56, before the collaboration he initiated could be completed; but the six songs, snippets of taped interviews with Mingus, and the bold, colorful paintings that wrap this package are evidence that the unorthodox pairing worked.

Mingus is the first Joni Mitchell album I've liked since the first one, back in 1968, that introduced her own versions of the songs already made popular by Judy Collins and other performers. As the lank-haired archetype for art students everywhere, the rock groupie whose relentlessly autobiographical songs told more than

I ever wanted to know about life and love among the cocaine and Jack Daniels set and, finally the jaded international *artiste*, Mitchell's subsequent ventures onto vinyl made me cringe. She was, I thought, a female Woody Allen — not in her performing style or appearance, but in her calculating solipsism and her knack for making surface descriptions sound profound.

So when I heard Mitchell was working with Mingus on an album, I expected it to be her *Interiors* — bleak, ponderous and ultimately flat-footed. But it's not, it's

her *Annie Hall* — occasionally self-conscious, but otherwise warm and intelligent, with a wit and elasticity all the more affecting for being unexpected.

In *Mingus*, Mitchell has done a very difficult thing. She's taken the differences in age, race, gender, nationality and class (Mitchell, as her songs on earlier albums remind us, is rich; Mingus never was) between Mingus and herself and used them in counterpoint, to establish herself as both a unique observer and participant in his life.



Charles Mingus

In perhaps the album's finest moment, Mitchell takes "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," one of Mingus' best-known compositions, and turns it into a commentary on the life and times of Mingus, the late saxophonist Lester Young (for whom Mingus wrote the music) and herself. She does this by contrasting the racism that drove Young and Mingus underground as young black musicians and the heady openness with which she and Mingus embrace in a racing New York night.

And she does it in jazz time, her voice

supple and expressive, her specially written lyrics evoking the big city energy that inspired the older men: "We came up from the subway/On the music midnight makes/To Charlie's bass and Lester's saxophone/In taxi horns and brakes."

Mitchell expands the song into a tribute to both Young, the original subject, and Mingus, the original composer, making it her own without doing violence to the generous spirit of the original work. It's a moving performance she can be proud of.

There are other bright moments on *Mingus* — Mitchell's hilarious lyrics to "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines," her chilling rendition of "The Wolf that Lives in Lindsey." Her lyrics are vivid and uncharacteristically unsentimental, most of the time. Her singing is fluid, with an occasional affecting break in her voice reminiscent of Billie Holiday. An all-star band of jazz-fusion players, including Hancock and Weather Report's Wayne Shorter and Jaco Pastorius, provides added texture and nuance.

Mitchell plans to tour the country late this summer with some of these same musicians, giving fans who cherish her folk and rock hits a chance to hear her speak in the rich vocabulary of jazz. It's an adventuresome move, and I hope it succeeds. Joni Mitchell could easily go on playing "Both Sides Now" and "Woodstock" for the rest of her life, never changing a note, and be hugely popular.

Instead, she's chosen to grow. For encouraging that decision, she, and we, can thank an extraordinary musician who left us a vibrant musical legacy. His name, of course, is Mingus.

Shakespeare can be fun

By ANDREW GRIFFIN & TIM DURKIN

Where did these people think they were? Pine Knob? Lawn chairs, picnic jugs and a standing-room-only crowd has been the rule thus far at the MSU Theatre Department's Summer Circle Free Festival.

Crowds like that for Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*? The popularity of *Ah, Wilderness!* could be explained by a first-rate cast in a play ideally suited for it and its audience on a magical summer night. But *The Two Gentlemen*?

It would seem that no one in the overflow crowds had heard that American actors, particularly young ones, are not supposed to be able to do Shakespeare properly. Or that the bard of Avon was a tediously windy bore.

At least one member of the audience had. One woman turned to her daughter and said, "We can sit way back, darling, you won't understand the words anyway."

But she was wrong. We understood everything and it was all worth understanding. To repeat the obvious, Shakespeare certainly has a way with words.

Just thinking about the lovely language and biting wit wrapped around a fool-proof plot makes me wish I had seen all four performances instead of just one. How can anyone go wrong with two pairs of foolish lovers, sword fights, fopish rivals and a trio of servants far brighter than their masters?

Best performances in a high-quality cast were Kerry Shanklin's as a young damsel permanently devoted to a love-struck cad and Jon Lee's quick little servant with little tolerance for the love-struck fools around him.

Ultimate credit must go to director Jon Baisch for a superb production, and a flawless cast. There wasn't one weak performance in the lot.

Yes, Shakespeare can be fun. There

have been proposals to turn the Summer Circle into a Shakespeare Festival. This production proves it could be done.

The previous week's production of *Ah, Wilderness!* provided answer to the above-mentioned proposal. It was every bit as good as the Shakespeare production.

The three principals, Jon Baisch, Jon Lee and Phyllis Baisch were a joy to watch. Lee perfectly captured the contradictions and snottiness inherent in being sixteen and exceptionally intelligent. The Baisches were all-American parents anyone could identify with or want for his very own.

Kerry Shanklin and Sue Chekaway did not shine as they did in *The Two Gentlemen*, but they only appeared in the two weakest scenes (O'Neil's fault). John Hanners' Uncle Sid stole the July 4th dinner scene. The rest of the cast was perfect, as was the rest of the production.

LOWELL GEORGE

It's a curious world when the death of Elizabeth Taylor's ex-husband can make the front page while no one bothers to mention Lowell George's death at all.

George died Friday, June 29, of a heart attack at the age of 34 just before launching a promotional tour for his first solo album, *Thanks, I'll Eat It Here*.

George will be remembered as a key member of the band Little Feat. Little Feat put out a string of critically acclaimed albums in the '70's which were known for their wry commentary on American life and their rich musical style which changed greatly from one album to another.

The group disbanded last year after their most successful album, *Waiting for Columbus*.

George should also be remembered for the artists he befriended and worked with. The list includes Valerie Carter, Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt and Jackson Browne who dedicated *The Pretender* to him.

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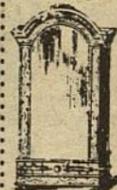


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