

Chang, violinist, and Barlow a straw, cello. From July 8 to 14.

RECORD REVIEWS

Joni Mitchell and Charles Mingus match misses

By Rich Tozier
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Duke, Louis, the Count, Dizzy, Miles — even without the surnames you don't have to be a jazz devotee to know who these people are. Though one can only speculate if Charles Mingus would ever have reached their magnitude of popularity, certainly new vistas of recognition were beginning to open up for the bassist-composer when he died last January after a long period of physically debilitating illnesses.

If merely making him more famous in the issue, Joni Mitchell's *MINGUS* (Asylum 5E-505) should help, sheerly by weight of her name. Otherwise, her album, originally a collaboration with Mingus (he scored four of its tracks but died before the recording was completed) which she herself describes as a "difficult and challenging project," comes off as a nervous attempt to adapt her singing and lyrics to his music.

Mitchell, ever since her *HISSING OF SUMMER LAWSNS* album, has been rather self-consciously trying to open up her style to embrace the flexibility of a jazz singer. Though I respect her effort at self-improvement, she still has a way to go before her labors seem natural and mature.

The nucleus here — Mingus — as transmitted through Ms. Mitchell and a backup group which includes Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and the overstressed bass of Jaco Pastorius, almost gets lost in the shuffle. The Mitchell-Mingus match works most evenly in the simple blues, "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat." Except for that and her "God Must Be A Boogie Man," which was derived almost verbatim from his lesson with a psychologist as recorded in his autobiography *BENEATH THE UNDERDOG*, this ambitious, hybrid-intentioned album ("I was trying to please Charlie and be true to myself," she admits in the liner notes) serves neither Mitchell nor Mingus very well. Furthermore, the "raps," taped during various moments with Mingus, supposedly connect the songs but only give the album the clutter of a scrapbook. One track, "The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey," is placed midway through the LP, and, unless I'm missing something, has nothing to do with the Mingus concept at all.

Still, I respect the idea of this album, and hope it will at least bring more attention to Mingus, even though the publicity is too late in coming to do him much good.

Of course, there's nothing better than the real thing, and record companies, quick to cash in on all this posthumous lionization, are issuing and reissuing Mingus product now that a decent interval has passed since his death.

Columbia, for whom Mingus cut the historic *MINGUS AH UM* and *DYNASTY* albums in 1959 (both of which were later packaged together as *BETTER GIT IT IN YOUR SOUL*), has chosen cuts from each album, added portions which had been previously edited, and included four unissued tracks in *NOSTALGIA IN TIMES SQUARE* (JG-35717). The title is somewhat misleading, since the composition actually bearing that name was recorded for another label and is not included here. *NOSTALGIA*, despite two decades, holds up nearly as freshly as when it was recorded. The two album set generously shows off trombonist Jimmy Knepper, pianist Horace Parlan and the hard Texas reed of tenor Booker Ervin, as well as the occasionally wobbly John Handy on alto.

For the Mingus buff who already has *AH UM* and *DYNASTY*, this will be an interesting supplement to those albums. For an introduction to the man, *NOSTALGIA* is a good place to meet him.

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What Mingus actually did contribute to music is still an open question. Although his style of bass playing was definitely his own, it is not a widely-imitated style. Lesser-knowns like Jimmy Blanton, Oscar Pettiford and Scott La Faro are generally cited as having had the greatest influence on modern approaches to the instrument. Nor are Mingus' compositions — unique as they are — part of the general literature. Aside from "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," there aren't many of his writings which have thus far even attempted the passage into the repertoire of other bandleaders.

Rather, Mingus was a teacher, a leader, a force who would rarely settle for less. Stories about his often vitriolic intolerance for mediocrity — a feeling which he had been known to express physically as well as verbally — abound, and may likely take on a degree of legend quality as time goes on. In any case, using whatever means, he was usually able to bring out the best in his musicians; if not, their brief stay with him had to at least have worked some change in their musical perceptions. Mingus bands — he called them "workshops" for a time — were tough schools whose graduates, having found their own measure, would go on to chart their own creative courses, but that's another story. The sound of Charles Mingus was always, and still is, an intense trip.