

# Memories of Mingus from Joni Mitchell

Mingus has a song, "If Charlie Parker Was a Gunslinger, There'd Be a Whole Lot of Dead Copycats." Sometimes I find myself sharing this point of view. He figured you don't settle for anything else but uniqueness.

— Joni Mitchell, from the July 26, 1979 issue of Rolling Stone

By MARKE ANDREWS

**I**N TERMS of background, no two individuals could have been more different than Joni Mitchell and the late Charles Mingus: Mitchell, the blond, blue-eyed folksinger from the tailored wheatlands of Saskatchewan; Mingus, the streetwise black kid from Watts, who occasionally waded through gang rumbles with his double bass in order to get to a jam session.

Mitchell spent her adolescence writing poetry, painting, dancing, writing songs. Mingus sneaked into jazz clubs, chased after women, got high with the boys in the band. But as their careers progressed, both artists showed similar traits — an impulsive creative spirit, rebelliousness toward society, confusion over self-identity, and a stubborn refusal to dwell on past glories. More important, both considered themselves composers first, musicians second.

About two years ago, Charles Mingus realized he was dying, suffering from a degenerative muscular condition commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease. In early 1978, Mingus contacted Joni Mitchell and told the singer-songwriter he wished to record with her. A few months later, he presented her with several melodies he had written, asking her to set lyrics to them for a new album. Mitchell worked and reworked the songs, showing the bassist her progress, racing against the crippling disease that now confined the once-robust Mingus to a wheelchair.

She lost the race. On January 5, 1979, at the age of 58, Charles Mingus died. Two days later, Mitchell penned the final song for the album, which has been released under the title, *Mingus* (Asylum, XSE 505).

The project is Mitchell's most adventurous to date. Ever since her 1974 *Court and Spark* release, she

has been moving away from pop music, gravitating more and more towards jazz. Her last album, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, represented a personal Declaration of Independence which startled critics and fans alike. Their reaction was, by and large, negative.

*Mingus* contains six tunes. Four of the compositions were Mingus-Mitchell collaborations, the other two were written solely by Mitchell. Between tracks are segues of Mingus's voice.

The album opens with a birthday celebration for the bassist, followed by Mitchell's composition, *Good Must Be A Boogie Man*. The song captures Mingus's enigmatic personality with the lines, "Blind faith to care/ Blind rage to kill." *A Chair in the Sky* deals with death (it follows a recorded conversation in which Mingus talks, almost enthusiastically, about his impending funeral), with Mitchell seeing Charlie's "soul on fire, burning up the bandstand." The side closes with Mitchell's *The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey*, a chilling piece of music that overtracks a pack of howling wolves behind the stabbing bass of Jaco Pastorius.

The highlight of *Side Two* is Mitchell's vocal on the classic Mingus ballad, *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, written in memory of saxophonist Lester Young. Except for a horn section on *The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines*, the album's instrumentation consists of Mitchell's acoustic guitar, Pastorius's bass, Wayne Shorter's soprano sax, Herbie Hancock's electric keyboards, and percussion from Peter Erskine, Don Alias and Ernie Richards. The Mingus writing style has been well-preserved, with melodies creeping out from the instrumental foliage to strike the listener.

One intriguing riddle left unexplained in the liner notes is why Mingus sought out Mitchell for this final recording. Did he sense the same restlessness in her art which characterized his career? Was it because Mitchell shows no fear in laying bare her feelings at any given point in time (something which Mingus did only in short, confused bursts in his autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*)? Or was it merely a hunch, the Mingus intuition gambling on a longshot chemistry that two loners, one from Saskatoon and one from Watts, could come together to make a memorable record?

Whatever the motivation, the gamble has paid off artistically. Mingus is not likely to produce any hit singles, but it is a remarkable record.



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