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Joni Mitchell teamed with Mingus before his death

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Staff Writer

Joni Mitchell says that, at first, even she considered her collaboration with the late Charles Mingus an odd combination.

The teaming of Mitchell and Mingus, the jazz composer and bassist, produced a new album and led to her first concert tour in three years.

Consider: The 56-year-old Mingus, a street person and composer of such strongly gospel- and blues-based music as "Better Git It in Your Soul" and of often-raucous, raging, cacophonous and innovative jazz; a highly trained bassist and one of jazz's most influential figures, meets the 35-year-old Mitchell, Canadian-born, upper-middle-class composer of the sweetly folksy "Both Sides Now" and of contemporary songs with often sophisticated, complex imagery and profound thought; an untrained guitarist, schooled painter and poet generally considered the equal of Bob Dylan as a pop music lyricist.

Between munches of a grilled cheese sandwich and cole slaw at the Cleveland airport, Mitchell talked by phone recently about the Mingus-Mitchell collaboration and about the album "Mingus" that resulted on Aylum.

Mingus, the black jazz giant who died at the age of 56 Jan. 5 in Mexico of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, contacted Mitchell concerning the project about a year before his death.

WHY DID MINGUS single out Joni Mitchell, who is known primarily as a folk and rock artist? Why would he turn to her rather than to established or even younger jazz artists to work with him so late in his life?

"He hadn't given up hope of living at that point, so it was not necessarily that I was contacted to write his epitaph," Mitchell said. "We all shared his optimism that he would beat it, even though it was incurable. He had finished another album, 'Me Myself and an Eye' (on Atlantic), and was looking for projects to busy himself with during what was hoped would be a convalescence, not a general decline.

"Initially I felt his invitation was an honor and a challenge. I thought it was an odd combination, yet I was looking for a peculiar project. Deep in the back of my mind I was trying to decide what to do. I knew I wanted to study music (she does not read music), but not in an institution. This (Mingus' inquiry) came to me as a perfect gift, an opportunity to study jazz with a master in a way that suited my learning process — by muddling through it."

At first, Mingus wanted her to work with him on a complex project involving a full orchestra, jazz voices, and the recitation of T.S. Eliot. Mitchell declined, saying it simply was beyond her musical skills, and she wasn't that fond of Eliot's work.

Some time passed before Mingus got in touch with her again.

"Then he handed me six melodies and asked me to write lyrics to them to his satisfaction," she said, laughing. "And this from a man who punched out band members — on the bandstand — when he was dissatisfied with them. It was a little joke between us that he wouldn't punch me."

Mitchell said that although Mingus was paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, he was mentally alert and subject to the same kind of extreme emotions and moods he'd always been known for.

"His face was either radiant or like a storm cloud," she recalled. "But he had a great sense of humor, a sense of put-on. His spirit was not paralyzed."

What were her objectives on the album?

"As I said, initially I didn't have a trite in mind because he was very much present," she said. "I simply wanted to set words to his melodies that he could relate to, that had to do with him."

"THE FIRST ONE I completed, 'Chair in the Sky,' was written specifically to his point of view and with some of his humor. That was the first song I sent to him on a demo tape that was full of mistakes. When he discovered I was musically illiterate, it created some concern for him. He was excited about it, though."

She said she wanted Mingus to like the album, but also wanted to break down some of his prejudices.

"He was prejudiced against electric instruments. He felt the dynamics were lost with them and that it was their nature to take away the humanness of the player. Well, I felt our players (Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Jaco Pastorius and others) were exceptions to that. And he ended up liking their music. You see, it was an exchange."

Eventually Mingus, before his death, heard five of the album's six tracks, four of which were Mitchell's lyrics to Mingus' melodies. The other two songs had words and music by Mitchell. "God Must Be a Boogie Man" is the only one he didn't hear.

"He liked everything except 'Chair in the Sky,' where he preferred the crude demo tape, the purity of my first fledgling flight as a jazz singer," Mitchell said. "He liked the mistakes in it. The final version of 'Chair' was, in his opinion, the only thing I overwrote. He loved 'Pork Pie Hat.'"

"When he died I included some documentary material, and the album took on more of a tribute quality."

Mitchell acknowledged that she consciously avoided producing what would be called a jazz album. In fact, she chose not to use versions of the songs that had been performed by such bebop and straight-ahead jazz players as alto saxophonist Phil Woods, baritoneist Gerry Mulligan, bassist Eddie Gomez and others.

"They were all successful versions in their own way," she said. "That's why I mentioned the musicians on the album. But they played traditional bebop, and I didn't want the album to be a retrospective."

"I wanted to create a record that without sacrificing any musical integrity within the jazz idiom would be accessible to pop audiences, but not by using any of the obvious fusion techniques."

"I WANTED IT to be a purely modern jazz album, but even in my singing I didn't want to try to sound like a singer in the jazz idiom. I wanted to bring some freshness to jazz vocals, where even the greats had come to love their melodies more than the content of what they were singing."

"A lot of them with marvelous instruments could just as well be singing off a tomato soup can, unlike Billie Holiday, who, no matter how banal the lyrics, always sounded profound."

Ms. Mitchell said that she learned a lot about jazz quickly, but that she also learned a lot about the various factions among jazz musicians and listeners.

"It was a great exercise," she said. "It really stretched my range and freed up my phrasing incredibly. I have more freedom, more options on how to phrase. I don't think I'd ever sung a song with quite so much movement (as 'Pork Pie Hat'), yet it's one of the most comfortable songs in my show now. I just love to sing it."



Folk-contemporary singer Joni Mitchell met with jazz artist Charlie Mingus
... they collaborated on an album before Mingus' death

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