

Albums



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JONI MITCHELL: "Mingus" (Asylum K53091).

THE concept of Joni Mitchell singing Charles Mingus, the late and very great jazzman, is eccentric but not illogical. For her it is the culmination of the work she has done in recent years.

Since "The Hissing Of Summer Lawns" in 1975, her music has increasingly turned aside from pop melody and been expressed in textures, rhythms and nuances that are more usually the concern of jazz, or jazz-aligned forms. She has worked almost exclusively with musicians from commercially successful "cross-over" bands, principally Tom Scott's L.A. Express, the Crusaders and Weather Report; and, on her last album, "Don Juan's Reckless Daughter," it was Mike Gibbs who arranged and conducted the orchestral suite, "Paprika Plains," that occupied a whole side. There's also the fact that many of her songs, notably on "Hejira," have relied upon the sonorous interplay between her acoustic guitar and Jaco Pastorius' bass.

With Charles Mingus, Joni Mitchell is not only in the company of a giant bass-player, but also a legend of post-war jazz whose life had been a struggle for acceptance. In making this album she has acknowledged her dues.

It's more difficult to see what Mingus — who wrote four of the tunes, for which she composed the lyrics — envisaged in the partnership, which began last year after the sessions for his final album, "Me, Myself An Eye." Like Mitchell, however, his writing had a literary quality and, in his later years, he rejected the term "jazz" because of its too-specific connotations. Originally, he wished to make an album with her of T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets, read in counterpoint to two kinds of musicians: one a "formal" symphony, and the other a "colloquial" small group limited probably to a bass and an acoustic guitar (Mitchell). She found herself unable to contemplate Eliot, but Mingus, who always had a talent for coaxing fellow-musicians, promptly came up with six melodies and a new project for her.

"Mingus" is, of course, a musical obituary, a tribute from one artist to another; for on January 5 this year the bassist died in Cuernavaca, Mexico, at the age of 56. In her liner-notes, Mitchell writes with moving eloquence of his wife carrying his ashes to India: "And

finding a place at the source of the Ganges River, where it ran turquoise and glinting with large, gold carp, released him, with flowers and prayers, at the break of a new day."

Paralysed, barely able to speak, Mingus found his voice through a white woman, and one at that with hardly any jazz background to speak of. It's certainly ironical. All his life he was bitterly critical of whites; he could never forgive nor forget the racism he had encountered. But then he had always loved women — well, if not wisely. By all accounts (and they include his own), Mingus was a bearish but intensely vulnerable man, and Mitchell seems to have been touched by him as an individual as much as a musician.

In his great chaotic autobiography, "Beneath The Underdog," he writes of himself as three people: as a "frightened animal" that attacks in self-defence, as an "over-loving gentle person" who is too trusting of the world, and as a third person who watches and waits. "God Must Be A Boogie Man," one of only two songs for which Mitchell composed the music and lyrics, catches the comedy and pathos of this schizophrenia. It was a song that Mingus never heard; it was written two days after his death. He was dying even as the album was being recorded.

Few records can have been made with as much underlying affection, nor received with so much goodwill; but music cannot only be judged by its intentions. "Mingus," unfortunately, doesn't enhance his legend, and it diminishes hers.

Although it begins with a raucous singalong, a tape of Mingus on his 53rd birthday (other such snatches of music and conversation are scattered around the album), Mitchell strives unsuccessfully to establish a kind of jazz elegy as its real tone, relying upon a spare sound of acoustic guitar, bass, soprano, electric piano and percussion.

She suggests in her notes that it was hard to please Mingus and be true to herself. Mingus could be tender, but also hot and horny, as his book indicates; he was often full of bombast, greatly admiring of his own sexual prowess. He was a man who liked to holler. This exuberance, however, is felt only on "The Dry Cleaner From Des Moines" which has Peter Erskine bebop-swinging on drums and Mitchell trying to talk jive-tough. "The cat was clanking with coin," she sings of the eponymous dry-cleaner. (The song is about gambling joints.) "I'm down to a roll of dimes/I'm stalking the slot that's hot." As pastiche this is okay, but a trifle forced; she doesn't sound entirely comfortable.

The most familiar mood of her records has been a sophisticated melancholy. In a more obviously jazz setting, however, the romanticism seems dreary. This is not entirely her fault. Mingus' tunes are highly elliptical, and she does not resolve the problem of the lack of hooks, which are the basis of pop melodies. But her own two tunes, "Boogie Man" and "The Wolf That Lives In Lindsey," follow the same model and also suffer, notably the latter.

"The Wolf" has a good, dark lyric about a Hollywood pimp, a wolf "that raids and runs through the hills of Hollywood and the downtown slums" (Mingus was a pimp at various times). There's a drifting sadness about it, which she adroitly emphasises with a recurrent image of falling snow ("the heavy, heavy snow") that could be taken either literally or as a drug reference. On the printed page the lyric holds up, but it's buried within a lacklustre performance; she even uses the slightly risible device of having her musicians imitate wolf-howsls as the track fades out.

The other principal problem is that her voice, although a sweet and flexible instrument, is not really that of a jazz singer. Ever since her version of Wardell Gray's "Twisted" on "Court And Spark" she has tried to swing, without real success. "Mingus" cries out for a jazz inflection. Her singing, however, for all its liquid qualities, never has sufficient weight to pull it off. She stymies herself at each turn, dogged by artificialities of style. Thus "Good-bye Pork Pie Hat," possibly Mingus' greatest tune, which she treats as a homage to him and Lester Young, is afflicted with painful self-consciousness in an attempt to be jazz.

There are some very good musicians involved in this record. They include Erskine, Pastorius, Wayne Shorter on soprano, Herbie Hancock on electric piano, Don Alias on congas, and Emil Richards on percussion. Then, on early experimental dates, there were Eddie Gomez and Stanley Clarke on bass, Tony Williams and John Guerin, drums, Phil Woods on alto, Gerry Mulligan on baritone, John McLaughlin on guitar, and Jan Hammer on synthesiser. Dannie Richmond, a drummer who went back a long way with Mingus, also assisted.

No doubt they all believed they were involved in a labour of love, but I'd swap Mingus gruffly singing "Devil Woman" on "Mingus Oh Yeah" for anything here. This album really sees Joni Mitchell leaving her mass popularity in search of a more personal style, and finding only idiosyncrasy. — MICHAEL WATTS.

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