



Charles Mingus

CREATIVE HIGHLIGHTS FROM 1960-1979

3 Key Points

- ▶ 1). Charles Mingus was a great bassist, composer and bandleader whose works often contained collective improvisation and provided musicians freedom to find their own voice.
- ▶ 2). Mingus' music left an impactful imprint on the development of Third Stream as well as other styles such as Soul Jazz, Cool Jazz, Modal and Rock music.
- ▶ 3). Throughout his career Charles Mingus used his music as a tool for activism in order to shed light on injustice

Who was Charles Mingus?

- ▶ Charles Mingus was a great bassist, composer and activist who used his craft as a powerful tool to bring attention to injustice and illuminating important issues within the civil rights movement. His compositional style introduced a more flexible approach that freed up bands from the rigidity of the swing era (Fordham) and provided soloists with more malleable settings for improvisation, providing breaks, tempo changes, dynamic shifts and colorful backgrounds which often contained collective improvisation by the whole band.
- ▶ Looking at Charles Mingus' recordings from 1960 and later the focus of this project will center on three impactful recordings;
- ▶ **Black Saint Sinner Lady (1963),**
- ▶ **Let My Children Hear Music(1972),**
- ▶ **Changes I and II(1975).**
- ▶ These three recordings contain quintessential examples of collective improvisation, third stream music and songs that bring attention to social justice issues that challenge the status quo. The body of work in the last 20 years of Mingus' life have cemented him as one of the most prolific, and innovative composers in Jazz history along side, Duke Ellington, Wayne Shorter and Thelonious Monk.

Dedication to his Craft

- ▶ “I began playing and didn’t stop for a long time. It was suddenly me; it wasn’t the bass any more. Now I’m not conscious of the instrument as an instrument when I play.”-Charles Mingus



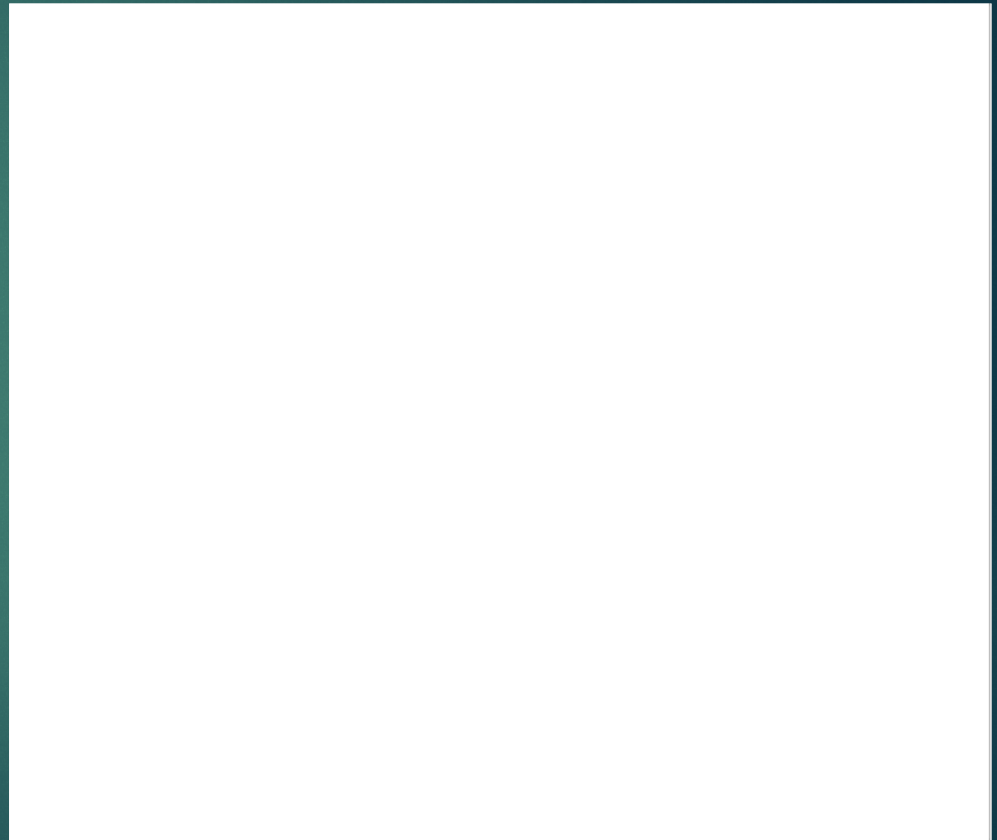
Early Development



- ▶ Driven to join Jazz royalty as Baron Mingus, at one time practicing 17hrs a day.
- ▶ Learned discipline from bassist Rheinschagen, Jazz Bassist Callender, multi reed instrumentalist Buddy Collete, Lloyd Reese, Art Tatum and painter Farwell Taylor.
- ▶ Became heavily interested in Mysticism at a young age.
- ▶ Talked about injustices with Red Callender after lessons
- ▶ Spends time listening to Duke Ellington and following around Jimmie Blanton in LA.

Early Compositions

- ▶ Mingus Fingers with Lionel Hampton was big influence on Wilbur Ware's rhythmic concept.
- ▶ Later Mingus would give lessons to PC.
- ▶ Lloyd Reese gave him a foundation.
- ▶ "Half mast Inhibition" composed at 19.
- ▶ New Yorker calls music ruthlessly honest.



A Cross Pollination of Influences



- ▶ Mingled with painters, actors, poets, dancers, comedians, writers, philosophers and tried to assimilate techniques from other art forms into his own compositional style.
- ▶ Duke Ellington and Jimmie Blanton
- ▶ Igor Stravinsky
- ▶ Orson Welles
- ▶ Lenny Bruce
- ▶ Farwell Taylor
- ▶ Allen Ginsburg
- ▶ Langston Hughes
- ▶ Jackson Pollock
- ▶ Acting workshops - Tried to mold his own jazz workshops using this model.
- ▶ Hindu Mysticism

Inequality

- ▶ Why were there pay discrepancies between white and black led groups?
- ▶ Why was the postwar wave of heroin seem to be washing over black urban neighborhoods almost exclusively?
- ▶ Why were the Japanese Americans and the not the German Americans put solely into internment camps?
- ▶ Why were black Artists treated better in Europe than in the USA?
- ▶ Experiencing Racism on a consist basis increases the chance for problems with both mental and physical health to occur. (Isabel Wilkerson, author of Caste)

Charles Mingus Sextet in Europe



- ▶ Video is 3 different concerts taking place in Belgium, Norway and Sweden.
- ▶ Bass plays the melody alone to start on “So Long Eric”.
- ▶ Beat is flexible and sometimes speeds up or slows down while drums are still locked in.
- ▶ Dannie Richmond changes tempo with Mingus smoothly using eye contact and watching each other for cues.
- ▶ Mingus Taught Dannie the concept of Rotary Perception by imagining a circle around the beat and expanding his playing outward and then back to a single point.
- ▶ Eric Dolphy plays an ostinato sounding like Morse code and plays with an unmistakable sound.

Techniques

- ▶ Dual overlapping melodies.
- ▶ Combining Old style and modern solo styles into one solo on Jelly Roll
- ▶ Rotary perception
- ▶ Organized chaos
- ▶ taping two fingers down to build strength and also squeezing a rubber ball.

-Double Stops

-Arco

-pedal Points

-changing the angle on how his finger strikes the string to get more fat part of the finger

-taping

-string rakes

-Blanton style phrasing

Charles Mingus Sextet in Europe

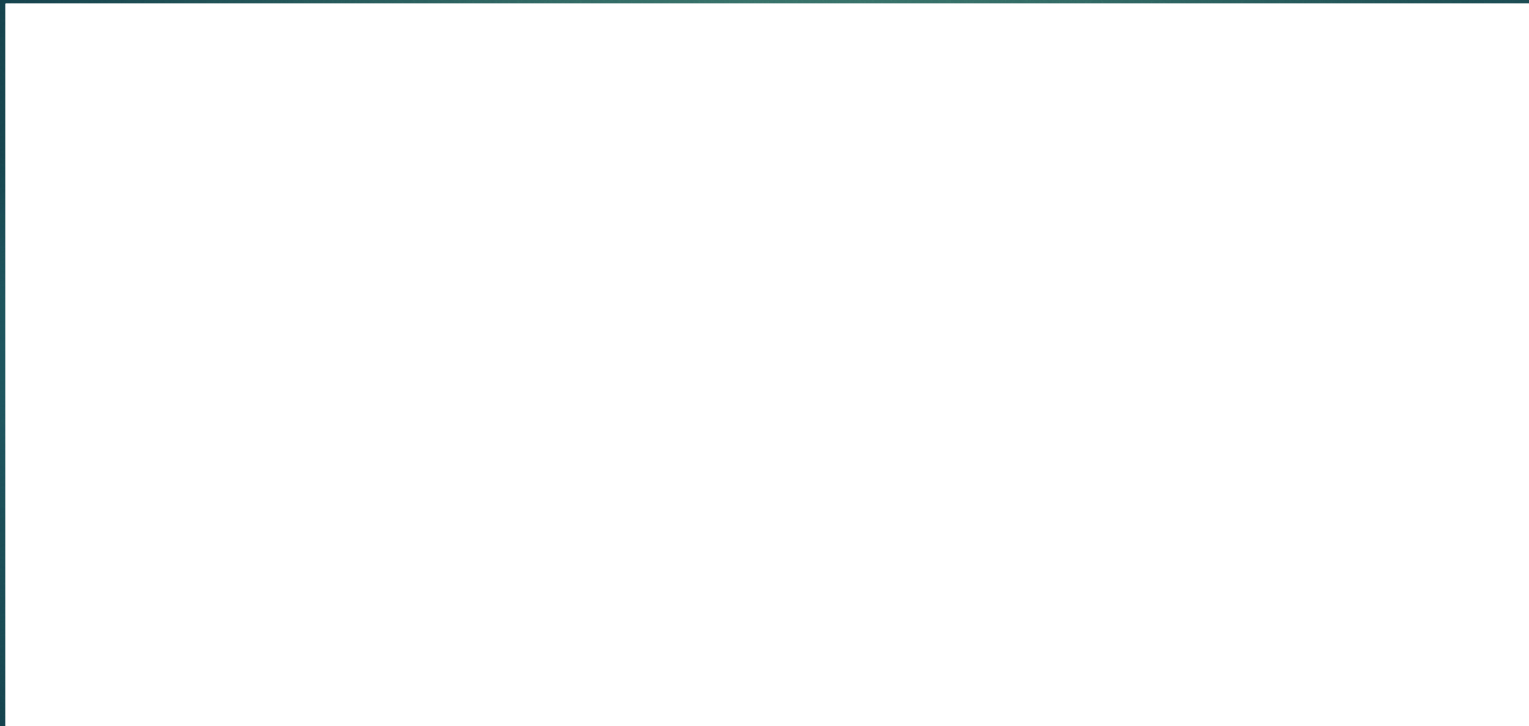
- ▶ (1964) Eric Dolphy's last concert



Black Saint and the Sinner Lady (1963)

- ▶ Originally written for Dancers
- ▶ Use V mic technique with Bari and Alto closest to mic and Tenor in the back.
- ▶ Some of the Liner notes writing by his psychologist give the listener a glimpse into Mingus' Psyche.
- ▶ The first Jazz album recorded using overdubbing.
- ▶ A tortured glimpse into his own soul and constant struggle
- ▶ This Mingus Album sounds the most like Ellington
- ▶ Use motif and thematic writing similar to Bach to expand his compositions.

Group Dancers (Soul Fusion) Freewoman And
Oh This Freedom's Slave Cries



Innovations in Emerging Genres

- ▶ Cool Jazz - Stars of Swing, 4 part voicings , pedal points, poly tonality, weaving two songs together, ballads warm sound
- ▶ Free Jazz- Pithecanthropus Erectus (collective improvisation)
- ▶ Soul Jazz- Wednesday Night Prayer meeting
- ▶ Solo Bass- Great American Music Hall in SF
- ▶ Wrote out solo for Lee Konitz on “Extra Sensory Perception” and was influenced by Stravinsky Firebird Suite.
- ▶ Rockers began smashing guitars like Mingus had done on occasion with his bass. (The Animals witnessed it and told the story to Hendrix)

Meditation (For A Pair of Wire cutters)



-Recorded Live at Monterey Jazz Festival in 1964 (1966).


-Mingus takes on racism and the Prison Industrial Complex.

-Written for blacks in the south who endured conditions similar to concentration camps.

-Clifford Jordan plays Tenor sax who is also featured in live performances of We Insist Freedom Now with Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln.

-Mingus plays melody arco while Clifford Jordan plays the ostinato bass part and it sounds like a cross rhythm.

-Plays pedal points, speeds up tempo on purpose to create tension before settling back into swing groove.



Notes from an Interview with Alicia Schooler Hugg, Niece of Charles Mingus

- ▶ Author of the book titled “The Art and Soul of Jazz”.
- ▶ -Mingus was isolated growing up and sometimes had trouble fitting due to his mixed race.
- ▶ Mingus was like a sponge and took in lots of new ideas including Hindu Mysticism.
- ▶ Mingus had a soft spot for troubled souls. This may be why he chose to bring attention to America’s treatment of disproportionately black prison populations.
- ▶ His Great Grandfather was Euro-asian (British and Chinese).
- ▶ Sue Mingus had the greatest impact on his life.
- ▶ struggled to pay debts most of his life, sometimes working at the post office and even got evicted once.

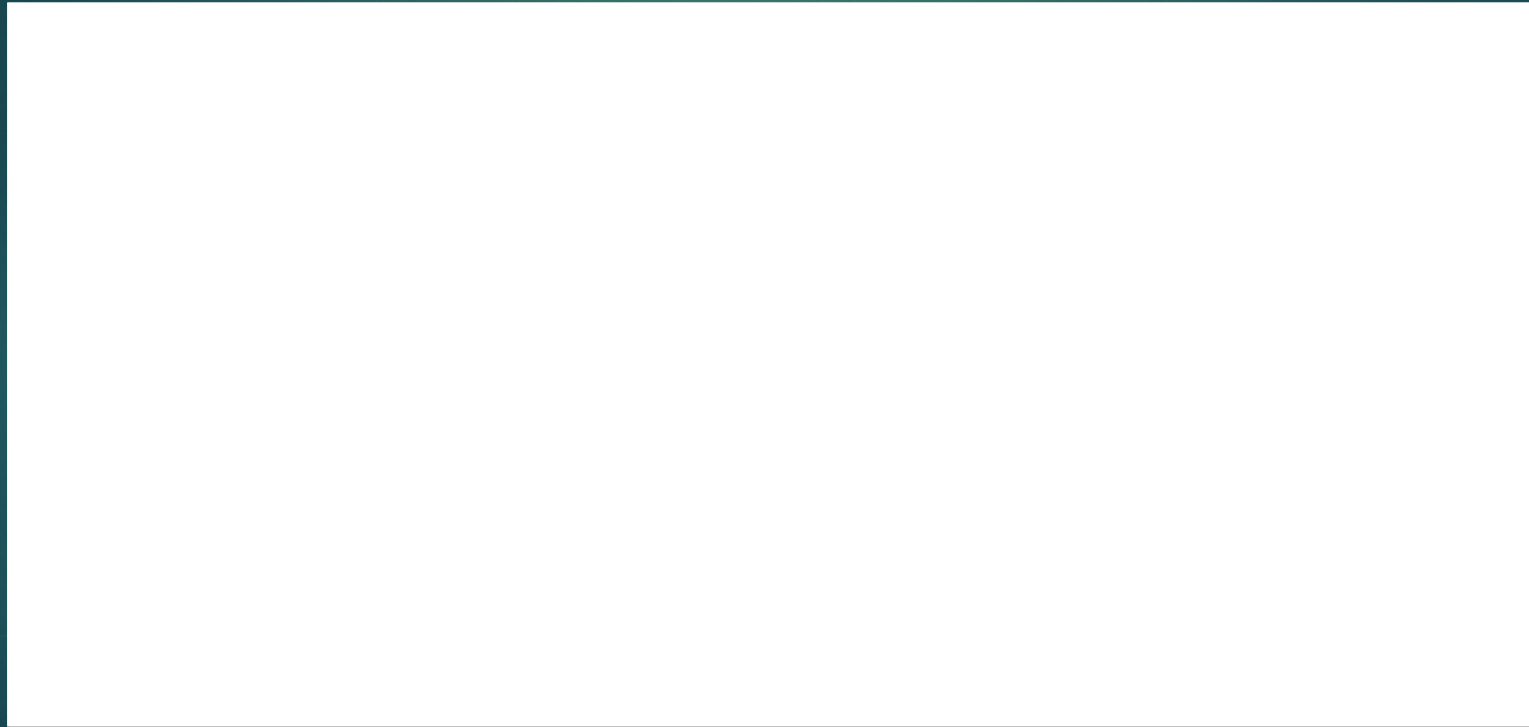
Let My Children Hear music (1972)

- ▶ Charles Mcpherson- "Mingus hired the best engineers and this was a very serious project with charts sprawled out everywhere. During this session I got the best alto sound I ever got on a recording."
- ▶ Mcpherson talks about "Godforce"/Focus pushing Mingus
- ▶ Mingus Steals ideas from prior versions of himself
- ▶ "Don't be Afraid, the Clown is Afraid too"
- ▶ "The Chill of Death"
- ▶ Mingus thought this was his best album

“Don't be Afraid, the Clown is Afraid too”

- ▶ Who is the Clown?
- ▶ Composition starts with the sound of the circus in the background.
- ▶ An Allegory for mistreatment of Black Americans?
- ▶ sound effect background noise mixed into composition
- ▶ Double consciousness
- ▶ Clown has parallels to minstrel tradition?
- ▶ Mingus solos playing swinging 8th note lines
- ▶ Horns quote hot house
- ▶ Returns to crowd noise sounds of the circus at end of piece

“Don't be Afraid, the Clown is
Afraid too”



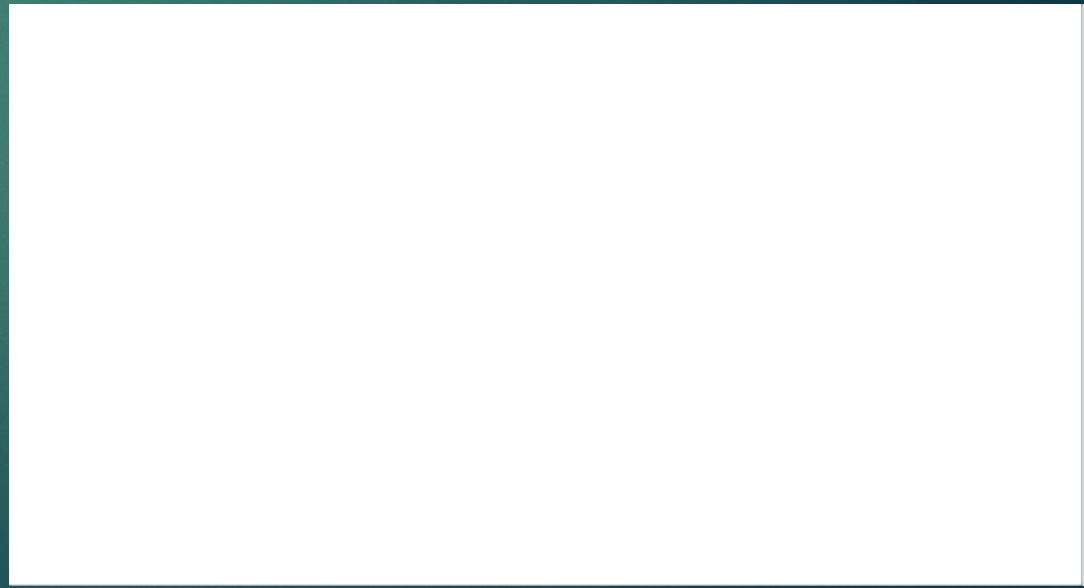
Music as Biography

- ▶ “Mingus had learned the hard earned value of biography from jazz. The best jazz musicians dedicate themselves to finding their individual musical voices-Who they are on their instruments-and to pushing the envelope of technique and conception, rewriting the rules. That was the road to growth and maturity , part of what Charlie Parker’s maxim meant. Art was a dialog, and it’s topic was change”. (Santoro, from *Myself When I am Real*. p.79)

Changes I and II (1975)

▶ “Remember Rockefeller at Attica”

- ▶ Severe Overcrowding: There were 2,200 people locked up in substandard and dehumanizing conditions in a facility meant for 1,600
- ▶ Have the prisoners were black and all of the prison guards were white and racism was prevalent
- ▶ From Sept. 9 to 13, 1971, prisoners took control of the Attica Correctional Facility in the most well-known prison uprising of the 20th century in which 39 people were killed after Governor Rockefeller ordered the police to take back the prison.
- ▶ Ironic happy playful melancholy
- ▶ 5note triplet phrasing
- ▶ quotes the rhythm from Fable of Faubus.
- ▶ Recorded as “Just for Saps, Laughs”
with Lionel Hampton because Lionel was a Rockefeller supporter.
- ▶ How does a society treat its least well off?



“Free Cell Block F, Tis Nazi USA”

- ▶ Falling 8th not triplet lines that gets repeated over swing feel
- ▶ The upbeat accents and beat displacement of the end of the phrase sounds a lot like Monk.
- ▶ Bridge goes into a Bossa Nova feel
- ▶ Two measure of waltz time in the last part of A section going into solos and near the end of the tune

References a prison block in the south which had conditions similar to Nazi Germany.

“The Chill of Death”

- ▶ Mingus suffered from ALS, (Lou Gehrig's disease) a fatal neurological disorder which attacks the pathways from the brain to the spine.
- ▶ Mingus became trapped in his own body
- ▶ Wrote a Poem about facing death.
- ▶ Orson Welles was a big influence
- ▶ Mingus Died in 1979 in Mexico
- ▶ His ashes were dropped into the Ganges River, India
- ▶ Charles Mingus lives on Through his music.



Bibliography

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- ▶ Charles Mingus: More Than a Fake Book
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- ▶ Interview with Wilbur Ware. (6hrs)
- ▶ Interview with the Niece of Charles Mingus, Alicia Schooler Hugg
- ▶ Question to Charles Mcpherson about recording on Let My Children Hear Music.
- ▶ Myself When I am Real. Mingus (Gene Santoro)
- ▶ Caste. The Origins of our Discontents. (Isabel Wilkerson)
- ▶ Video: Mingus In Europe 1964 with Eric Dolphy
- ▶ Photo from Title Slide: <https://www.charlesmingus.com/mingus/mingus-explains-song-titles>
- ▶ Photo of younger Mingus <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1971/05/29/mingus-at-peace>
- ▶ Lesson with Curtis Lundy. 2020. Rotary Perception