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| **Mingus, Charles** |
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| Charles Mingus (1929-1979) was an American jazz bassist, composer, and bandleader. He held strong social and political views and composed songs on Civil Rights, such as “Fables of Faubus,” from his modern jazz album *Mingus Ah Um* (1959), and “Meditations on Integration” (1964). Other compositions of Mingus’s musical modernism include the cool jazz inspired anthem “Haitian Fight Song” (1957). The bassist first gained a reputation for performing on the “cool jazz” scene of Los Angeles, California in the post-war 1940s. Mingus would later relocate to New York City in the early 1950s, gaining a reputation as a bandleader who composed, performed, and recorded modern jazz that was distinctly “hard-bop” in some settings, “post-bop” in other contexts, and contained characteristics of the avant-garde, blues influences, and the music of black church gospels that he was exposed to at an early age.  Born Charles Mingus, Jr., April 22, 1922 in Nogales, Arizona, he moved with his family to an area of Los Angeles known as Watts, where there were large populations of blacks and Mexican Americans. Mingus was brought up in a family that attended services at an African Methodist Episcopal Church, where he was first exposed to black gospel music and which later proved to be a significant influence in his original jazz compositions. Mingus’s compositions “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting” and “Moanin’” from his album *Blues & Roots*, and “Better Git It in Your Soul” from his album *Mingus Ah Um*, all recorded in 1959, are examples of early church experiences’ influence on his modern jazz.  Mingus started studying bass in high school, and had already prior played piano, trombone, and cello. His first experiences performing on bass were in local dance bands. Mingus established himself as a professional musician on the cool jazz scene of Los Angeles, and performed there with bebop progenitors Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie when the two instrumentalists made their first West Coast tour in the mid 1940s, after gaining initial popularity in New York City. Mingus would later relocate to New York City in the early 1950s to perform more frequently with Parker and Gillespie, and to gain a reputation as a bandleader and composer. In 1953, Mingus began composing music in a new music cooperative known as the Jazz Composers’ Workshop, which he formed the one year prior. Mingus released an album of his compositions from that experience under the same title in 1955. That year he recorded a live album at Greenwich Village’s Café Bohemia, a venue frequented by beats, writers, poets, and visual artists.  Elements of Mingus’s musical composition and artistic beliefs took a political turn after 1957. By 1959, the bassist had recorded and released the composition “Fables of Faubus,” written in protest of Arkansas’ segregationist Governor Orval Faubus, who had attempted to prevent the court-ordered desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Another example of Mingus’s social activism via modern jazz is his 1964 composition “Meditations on Integration.” Mingus had lived for years in a loft apartment with his family at 5 Great Jones Street in Greenwich Village, which they were evicted from in 1966. The eviction was featured in a documentary film on Mingus that was released in 1968, *Mingus: Charles Mingus 1968*, which also featured the musician’s social and political thoughts in an era of Civil Rights activism.  The bassist had signed with Atlantic Records in 1956, and had already moved to Columbia Records by 1959. He moved again in the 1960s to the new jazz label Impulse! Records, a recording company that had recently started releasing albums from John Coltrane and other bandleaders of the newly established avant-garde, as well as his early jazz hero Duke Ellington. Mingus published his memoir *Beneath the Underdog* in 1971. He wrote approximately 300 compositions in the course of his artistic career, many of which were much more intricate than standard jazz compositions, reflecting his early formal training by classical musicians. An example of these intricacies in his modern jazz composition is the title track to his 1960 album *Reincarnation of a Lovebird*.  Mingus also recorded his poetry, as can be found in *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry* (1957). He released a solo album of his jazz piano playing in 1963. Mingus had used the piano to compose music and to explain his intricate, large band arrangements to its member musicians in the 1960s. Duke Ellington was his largest inspiration as a jazz composer. Mingus recorded the album *Money Jungle* with him in 1962. Mingus’s 1959 composition “Open Letter to Duke” was written for Ellington. His composition “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat (Theme for Lester Young),” also written that year, is a jazz ballad dedicated to the memory of the Ellington Orchestra’s lead tenor saxophonist. Mingus died in Cuernavaca, Mexico on January 5, 1979. The Mingus Big Band continues to perform the bassist’s compositions today, tours internationally, and is led by his widow Sue Mingus. |
| Further reading:  Coleman, J. and A. Young (2004). *Mingus/Mingus: Two Memoirs*, New York: Limelight Editions.  Giddins, G. and S. DeVeaux (2009). *Jazz*, New York and London: W.W. Norton.  Goodman, J.F. (2013). *Mingus Speaks*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP.  Jenkins, T.S. (2006). *I Know What I Know: The Music of Charles Mingus*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger.  Mingus, S.G. (2002). *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story*, New York: Pantheon Books.  Porter, E. (2002). *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP.  Priestly, B. (1983). *Mingus: A Critical Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press.  Santoro, G. (2000). *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*. New York: Oxford UP.  Whitehead, K. (2011). *Why Jazz?: A Concise Guide*. New York: Oxford UP.  *Memoirs:*  Mingus, C. (1991). *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*. New York: Vintage.  *Documentary Films about Charlie Mingus:*  *Mingus: Charles Mingus 1968*, 1968.  *Triumph of the Underdog*, 1998 (This is the first comprehensive documentary of Mingus’s life and work, and features him in performance in the 1960s and 1970s.) |