

## Introduction

### Charles Mingus Changed My Life

It was 1963 and I was fifteen, growing up in Charleston, Illinois, a town with a population of ten thousand located two hundred miles south of Chicago. I may have been especially prone to a transformation at that moment because of my devotion to *Mad* magazine. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, long before it was a child's comic book featuring "Spy vs. Spy," *Mad* approached American culture with irreverent satire, much of which I understood—and with its New York Jewish humor, much of which I did not. Nevertheless, had it not been for *Mad*, I might have grown up believing that tail fins on cars were not stupid.

*Mad* essentially confirmed what I was already learning from my non-conformist parents: that much of what seems healthy and normal must be approached with scrupulous skepticism. Like my slightly bohemian father, a professor of theater arts at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, the writers at *Mad* were much more critical of "The Day People," who carried briefcases and wore generic fedoras with small brims, than of "The Night People," who lived mostly in New York and stayed up all night, without watching television.

In *Mad*, jazz artists were definitely among The Night People, but that did not prevent them from being frequent targets for ridicule. Of course, with their berets, cigarette holders, goatees, and bopspeak, they were asking for it: they relished bourgeois contempt, even going so far as to embrace the claim that they and their music were insane. With the kind of irony I was just beginning to appreciate, they made "crazy" a synonym for excellent.

I had become unironically devoted to jazz as a high school sophomore, largely because of Alan Coutant, a senior who played alto saxophone in the school band and the university jazz ensemble with the liquid, lickety-split facility of Lee Konitz. His ability with the saxophone was especially

astounding in contrast to my clunky cornet, an instrument that did not allow for the speed with which Alan could play his saxophone. Just warming up before high school band practice, Alan would play mysterious but logical patterns, always with startling velocity. He buried his head in his music stand as he played, so I assumed he was playing something written down. I was amazed the first time I walked around behind him and discovered there was nothing but an unopened folder on his stand. He was improvising!

Even though I certainly could not play improvised jazz myself, I knew this was *my* music. Soon I was buying jazz LPs at a record store in nearby Mattoon, Illinois. The jazz aficionado who owned the store sold me LPs by Stan Kenton, Shelley Manne, Stan Getz, and André Previn.<sup>1</sup> I also began listening to a disc jockey named Pete George who played jazz for two hours every Sunday afternoon on a Mattoon radio station. Pete's tastes ran to Dixieland and the white swing bands, but he did introduce me to Duke Ellington. I have maintained a lifelong devotion to Ellington, ever since Pete insisted that I start listening seriously to Duke after I called to tell him I preferred Count Basie. To this day, I feel a bit smug when someone tells me they prefer Basie to Ellington.

I was still fifteen when I acquired a copy of the Schwann Catalog, a monthly periodical that listed every record in print. Although I would never hear many of the jazz musicians listed in that issue of the Schwann, including a group with the intriguing name Firehouse Five Plus Two, I knew all their names from my careful and repeated perusings of the catalog's jazz section. The pages were eventually dog-eared down to the print.

One night I was listening to the little cracker-box AM radio my grandmother had recently given me. It was eleven o'clock, and I was supposed to be asleep. My parents may have been unusual, but they did try to enforce bedtime rules, except on Sunday nights when I was allowed to stay up to watch *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. But listening to the radio after ten was not even in the gray zone, so I had to be careful.

Usually I listened to WLS, a station out of Chicago that played the pop music so essential to the lives of me and my high school friends. One night, while trying to tune in WLS at 890 on the AM dial, I discovered a station out of Dallas/Ft. Worth, probably at 870. They were playing jazz, and it was *modern*. No Dixieland or Tommy Dorsey. I had never heard such enchanting music on the radio. The DJ, I learned, was Dick Harp, and he had a regular Tuesday-Thursday show, beginning at 11:00 P.M. From then on, unless I was totally exhausted, I would tune in. Many years later, at a jazz studies conference in Dallas, I asked some colleagues who were roughly my age

what they knew about Dick Harp. One remembered him and his program and told me that Dick also played polite piano jazz in Dallas night clubs.

Like most jazz DJs in those days, Dick Harp played the LPs the record companies sent to his radio station. These included the conscientiously marketed, strikingly designed LPs on the impulse! label. In the 1960s, impulse! released some of the best jazz records ever, among them Benny Carter's *Further Definitions*, Oliver Nelson's *Blues and the Abstract Truth*, Max Roach's *Percussion, Bitter Sweet*, Gil Evans's *Out of the Cool*, and several LPs by John Coltrane that represent his most distinguished work at the end of his life. The producers Creed Taylor and Bob Thiele made sure that most of the music they released was recorded at the state-of-the-art studio of Rudy van Gelder, without question the most important recording engineer since the 1950s.

And impulse! LPs were visually beautiful. The exclamation mark at the end of the label's name was a perfect inversion of the letter *i* at the beginning. The LPs always opened in a gatefold, unlike the envelope-like covers of other labels. Most strikingly, the spines of impulse! LPs were orange on top and black on the bottom, one notable exception being Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, among the best-selling albums in jazz history. The cover of that one was black and white, as specifically requested by Coltrane. As Tony Whyton has pointed out, thus did Coltrane try and succeed in making *A Love Supreme* unique.<sup>2</sup>

Because of their design, impulse! LPs were perfect fetish objects for collectors, to whom their physical presence was at least as important as the music they contained. Many collectors—including me—are more devoted to that physicality than they would care to admit. A friend from my graduate school days did not file his impulse! LPs with his other records alphabetically by artist as I did; instead he put them all together, filed by catalogue number, right there on the desk where he wrote his term papers. With those thick spines, the albums constituted a solid block of orange on black. It was an impressive sight.

To add to their cachet, impulse! LPs cost a dollar more than the records released on other jazz labels such as Prestige, Blue Note, and Verve.

Charles Mingus made some of his best LPs with impulse!, *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus* and *Mingus Plays Piano* among them. But first came his ballet suite, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, released in the fall of 1963. Dick Harp played it on his radio show late one Tuesday night. Although he surely knew that anything on impulse! was worth hearing, I wonder if he really knew what to expect when he opened that record. His taste, after all, ran to more sedate music.

Not mine, apparently.

This was my road to Damascus moment. When I heard Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* that autumn night in 1963, I could not believe my ears. I had no idea that such textures and harmonies were even possible. As Mingus magisterially drove the band with his bass, saxophones howled in the upper register while rumbling brass instruments growled at the lower end. No sooner had I decided that the music was full of menace than peaceful, lyrical harmonies seamlessly emerged from the mix. The tempo would speed up, then slow down, giving the music an exhilarating, nervous edge, as if it were searching for a direction. Scott Saul would later write that Mingus was "a pioneer of inner expression in jazz, a composer who developed a nuanced musical language for emotions that ran the gamut from extremes of tenderness to extremes of rage."<sup>3</sup>

I was hardly literate in Mingus's "language for emotions," but that did not stop me from deciding then and there that I did not belong in Charleston, Illinois. There was another world out there, and I wanted to be in it. No one else in my little town knew about this music, I told myself, let alone possessed the same capacity to find it as exhilarating as I did. Although I was surely wrong about a town that included a university with an active music school and jazz ensemble, this did not prevent me from deciding that I wanted to be in New York. I did not even know that Mingus was then living in New York or that he associated with Allen Ginsberg and other Beat artists, but I did know that my sympathies were for the New York Night People and not the repressed, bourgeois Day People that *Mad* magazine so appealingly skewered.

It's not easy for a fifteen-year-old to act on his dreams, however, and various circumstances kept me in the Midwest for several more years. And so it was in 1975 that I heard and finally *saw* Mingus with his last great quintet, not in New York, but in Bloomington, Indiana. You can hear this band on two CDs, *Changes One* and *Changes Two*: George Adams (tenor saxophone), Jack Walrath (trumpet), Don Pullen (piano), Dannie Richmond (drums), and Mingus on bass.<sup>4</sup> Again, I simply could not believe what I was hearing. A deeply lush ballad would suddenly give way to cacophonous free-blowing and then just as suddenly become tender and delicate. Mingus kept the tempo solid as a rock until he would glance at Dannie Richmond and then, as one, the ensemble would speed up or slow down in perfect synchrony. To this day, I have never heard a jazz ensemble do this so consistently and so effortlessly. Don Pullen used every square inch of his hands to create startling effects on the piano, whether he was in a deep romantic groove or pounding out "energy music" à la Cecil Taylor. When George

Adams put down his sax to sing “Devil Blues,” avant-garde jazz invaded the blues.

Mingus only played two nights in Bloomington, a brief stop between a gig in Chicago and a return to New York, but I was there both nights. On the second night, he invited to the bandstand a young alto saxophone player who had been recommended by local aficionados as an up-and-comer. When the young man made the mistake of playing too long, Mingus unceremoniously stopped the band and ordered him to stop doing what way too many other alto saxophonists do—try to play like Charlie Parker. As he was leaving the bandstand, the young man forgot to pick up his saxophone stand. More than a little terrified of Mingus, he never went back for it.

Indeed, Mingus could have that effect on people. By 1975 he weighed at least three hundred pounds and wore a no-nonsense expression that told fools he was in no mood to suffer them. Jack Walrath later told me that the pressure Mingus put on members of the band did not necessarily make them play better. “How well are you going to play when you know that at any minute you’re about to be hit over the head with a string bass?”<sup>5</sup> But when I saw Mingus on stage in 1975, I regarded him as a force of nature, a law unto himself.

I finally got to New York for more than a few days in 1979. Within weeks I had heard Art Blakey, Jackie McLean, Johnny Griffin, Annie Ross, Barry Harris, Betty Carter, Frank Foster, and Chico Hamilton. But I never saw Mingus in New York. He died on January 5, 1979, just a few months before I moved into an apartment in Morningside Heights.

*Better Git It in Your Soul* grows out of those first experiences of what many now call “Mingus Music” and the several decades of listening that came later. This book begins with a chronological biography of Mingus (part I)—though I frequently pause to focus more deeply on aspects of Mingus’s career that deserve special attention, such as his childhood proximity to the Watts Towers of Sam Rodia and his brief encounter with novelist and critic Ralph Ellison.

The rest of the book (parts II, III, and IV) explores aspects of Mingus’s career that I believe are essential to understanding his achievements as an artist. I have deliberately begun this second half of the book with a section on Mingus the writer of prose and poetry (part II) in order to establish the breadth of his accomplishments in this arena. He was a world-class bassist and one of the most distinctive composers in the history of American music, but he was also the author of some beautiful poetry and a vivid and candid autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog: His World According to Mingus*.<sup>6</sup>

Part III is a musical biography. Avoiding repetition unless absolutely necessary, I retell Mingus's story in terms of the musicians with whom he performed and the stylistic movements in which he played a role. This segment of the book culminates with an account of his participation in the Third Stream music of the 1950s. Third Stream attempted to fuse jazz with classical music, evoking an ambivalent but fascinating response from Mingus.

In part IV I explore Mingus's interactions with Dannie Richmond, Eric Dolphy, and Jimmy Knepper, three key musicians with whom he worked closely. In each case, the collaborations yielded extraordinary music; indeed, what the sidemen created with Mingus was like nothing else they ever did. That said, each dealt with Mingus at his most difficult. The interactions with Knepper were, in a word, tragic.

The epilogue looks at several films that feature Mingus or his music. I close with a few words about the film *Stations of the Elevated*, directed by Manfred Kirchheimer. This forty-minute poem in moving images, shot in 1977, uses bits and pieces of Mingus Music as it explores the work of young renegade artists who painted subway trains in New York City, often creating images of beauty and power. Released in 1981, shortly after Mingus's death, the film is an especially appropriate elegy.

Even though I have relied on the two preexisting, well-researched biographies by Brian Priestley (1982) and Gene Santoro (2000), this book is a new biography of Mingus.<sup>7</sup> Priestley and Santoro consulted all the resources available at the time, and Santoro in particular seems to have interviewed just about everyone who ever knew Mingus. I have also benefited from the double memoir *Mingus/Mingus* by Janet Coleman and Al Young (1989).<sup>8</sup> But a great deal of new material has appeared since the publication of these books, most notably Sue Graham Mingus's account of her life with Charles after the two met in 1965.<sup>9</sup> She became his fourth wife when they married in 1975 and his widow when he died four years later. Several other memoirs have been published in the meantime, most helpfully those of Buddy Collette, George Wein, and Clark Terry, as well as John F. Goodman's *Mingus Speaks*.<sup>10</sup> I have also been fortunate to have at my fingertips the recent work of some excellent jazz scholars who have taken a special interest in Mingus—Eric Porter, Scott Saul, John Gennari, Nichole Rustin, and Jennifer Griffith.<sup>11</sup>

I spent several days with an early, unedited draft of Mingus's autobiography in the Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Also at the Library of Congress I listened to the many reel-to-reel tapes that Mingus left behind and that Sue Mingus had recently

donated to the collection. I know I was the first to listen to many of these tapes because they were being digitized on a daily basis as I worked my way through them. I may also be the first scholar to have examined the Mingus correspondence in the Alfred A. Knopf Archive at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. There I found numerous letters and memos documenting the complex process by which Mingus's draft autobiography became *Beneath the Underdog: His World According to Mingus*.

An important addition to Mingus studies is a series of interviews with his two older sisters, Vivian and Grace. In 2001, when both were in their eighties, Shelby Johnson spoke with them extensively, ultimately compiling more than four hours' worth of conversation about their lives collected on four CDs under the title *The Mingus Sisters Speak*.<sup>12</sup> The sisters provided an intimate account of their childhood years, and since a great deal of what Charles wrote in *Beneath the Underdog* may seem exaggerated or even fabricated, I was surprised that the sisters validated much of what Mingus wrote. I was also surprised by their response when Johnson asked if they ever saw Charles in one of his legendary fits of anger. They both matter-of-factly said no. There was no defensiveness; they simply denied ever seeing that side of their brother. Vivian did, however, recall a scene late in his life when she and her daughter visited Charles in New York: when Vivian's daughter lit up a joint, Charles was furious and told her to get rid of it. Grace also remarked that Charles's friend Buddy Collette once told her that if one of Mingus's musicians "hit a wrong note," he would get "yelled at." Otherwise, though, they remembered their younger brother as cheerful, funny, and loving. Grace's fondest memories were of the times when her brother visited her house at Christmas: "He brought a lot of joy to the house." At the end of the long interview, both sisters expressed complete and uncritical love for Charles.

The Mingus sisters' memories of their brother as benevolent and joyful contrast sharply with the many stories of Mingus abusing people who displeased him in some way or another. Two of his musicians—one black, one white—have said that he struck their faces with enough force to knock out a tooth. Had he not been so difficult to work with, he might have had a very different career, perhaps one like the composer/musician/leader he most admired, Duke Ellington. But Mingus could be tender and thoughtful, just as he could be angry and destructive. He could also be a faithful friend. When the white saxophonist Pepper Adams, who regularly played in Mingus's groups, told Charles that he had to go into the hospital, Mingus offered to pay his medical expenses.

Willie Ruff, who played jazz on both the French horn and the string bass, tells how Mingus could forge a profound human connection. Mingus was



one of several jazz artists honored at a 1972 event at Yale University to honor Duke Ellington. The event was organized by Ruff, then a Yale faculty member. After the concerts and ceremonies, Mingus embraced Ruff, pulling him into his three hundred pounds of girth. He said, "You gave me the greatest gift of my life just by making it possible for me to see Duke and all these great artists get the honor they deserve." These words and the warmth with which Mingus uttered them brought Ruff to the verge of tears. When Mingus saw the beginning of a tear, he spoke with sudden forcefulness: "Oh, no. Naw, man. Hold that tear! Call it back. Don't let that one fall. Call that one back. I mean it. Call it *back!*." Although he had heard stories about Mingus's violent nature, Ruff said that he heard no menace in Mingus's voice. Charles continued, "Keep that tear. Save it for another time on down the road. You need to keep that one—it's special. Hold it in reserve!" Although Ruff did not think it physiologically possible, he did indeed call back the tear. Years later, Ruff made this encounter the culminating event in his own autobiography.<sup>13</sup>

But Mingus was not always so focused and forceful. He would be hospitalized for depression more than once. Before he met Susan Graham at age forty-two, Mingus had intense romantic involvements with at least seven women, but he never sustained a relationship for more than a few years, sometimes not even a few months.<sup>14</sup> Mingus was fascinated by religion and read widely about meditation, spirituality, and reincarnation. But Nat Hentoff, one of his closest friends, told me that he saw no evidence that Mingus was particularly religious.<sup>15</sup>

Anyone hoping to read the biography of a man with a single, unified identity should read no further. Mingus himself, after all, opened his autobiography with the phrase, "In other words, I am three."<sup>16</sup> There is no question, however, that Mingus's paradoxical, tempestuous, loving, angry, spiritual, defiant, and questing self was always nurturing his extraordinary music. And when it came to music, he was entirely consistent. He always insisted that "all music is one" and that the only way to play it well is to know as much of it as possible. Throughout his career, Mingus had no patience with musicians who seized on an advanced style without being able to play what had come before.

Can a biography have a thesis? If it can, then this book argues that Mingus was exceptional. No other jazz artist has written an autobiography as complex and compelling as *Beneath the Underdog*. With the possible exception of Ellington, no other jazz composer was as bold, as diverse, and as innovative as Mingus. No one else wrote jazz tunes so profoundly beautiful and



emotionally rich. And no one played jazz bass as brilliantly. Like very few of his peers, Mingus took an active role in recording and distributing his own music as well as the music of artists he admired. For these distinctions alone, Mingus stands out.

But Mingus is also exceptional for his association with practically every stylistic movement in jazz history. Other jazz artists whose achievements we most often celebrate are associated primarily with a single moment. Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Art Tatum, Thelonious Monk, and a handful of others who rank with Mingus basically played the same music—however brilliantly—throughout their entire careers.

A useful point of comparison is Miles Davis. He definitely changed music several times, but Mingus was as innovative, if not as influential. Mingus was playing bebop, cool, hard bop, modal jazz, soul jazz, and combinations of these all at the same time as Davis, and sometimes even earlier. Miles, however, was better at promoting himself and creating his own myth, while Mingus was more interested in making music and insisting that people listen to it. If he did engage in self-mythology, Mingus did not do so as purposefully or as successfully as Davis. Whereas Miles carefully established himself as the epitome of cool, Mingus, largely in spite of himself, was “jazz’s angry man.” He was never able to project an image that placed him in a coherent category like the one Davis so comfortably occupied.

And Davis could be accessible in ways that Mingus was not. Mingus wrote music of breathtaking beauty and depth, and even though his music always rewards those who commit to it, not everyone has been prepared to make that commitment. While I was writing this book, many people who do not know jazz asked me what I was working on. They typically knew the name Mingus but little else. Even when I mentioned Joni Mitchell’s 1979 LP *Mingus*, only her most committed fans knew what I was talking about.

I present this book in hopes that it will bring Mingus more of the esteem he deserves.