

Mingus at Monterey: Meditations on integration

Ed offers us a portrait of musical genius Charles Mingus, a fascinating study of diversity, integration, paradox and high art.

By [Ed Mendelowitz, PhD](#)



In the liner notes for one of [my albums] a critic had written that I had never pinned myself down so that anyone could say, “*This is Mingus!*” He just doesn’t understand that I don’t want to be caught in any one groove. *Everything* I do is Mingus.

Charles Mingus
In Nat Hentoff’s *Jazz Is*

I remember when interviewers used to ask him despite the breadth of his legacy how he fit into traditional categories that included European classical forms, bebop, Dixieland, gospel, Latin rhythms, and the blues--all genres of music he drew upon in his compositions and then transcended. He would look up and sigh: “Can’t you just call it Mingus music?” More than two decades later I think he’d be pleased—if not at all surprised—to know that we can.

Sue Mingus
Tonight at Noon

A Sort of Introduction

Charles Mingus, virtuoso bassist and composer of extended jazz masterworks second only to the immortal Duke Ellington, once wrote an astonishing book about himself entirely in the third person as narrated by a kind of dissociated observer and friend. The first chapter begins with a pronouncement to his Jewish psychologist (yes, Mingus actually consulted a psychotherapist) on matters of

dissociation and what we may call inner diversity:

“In other words, I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two. The second man is like a frightened animal that attacks for fear of being attacked. Then there's an over-loving gentle person who lets people into the uttermost sacred temple of his being and he'll take insults and be trusting and sign contracts without reading them and get talked down to working cheap or for nothing, and when he realizes what's been done to him he feels like killing and destroying everything around him including himself for being so stupid. But he can't—he goes back inside himself.”

Charles Mingus
Beneath the Underdog

“Where he finds more than three,” Jazz critic, activist and *Village Voice* journalist Nat Hentoff observed at the time; “many more than three.” There are, in effect, in each one of us too. “Which one is real?” the less pluralistically inclined psychologist inquires in Mingus's book. “They're *all* real,” rejoins the momentarily circumspect musical genius.

Given our division's focus this year on diversity and multiculturalism, I have been thinking about this briefest reverie on this gargantuan figure (one who himself was, technically, an admixture of many races and who immersed himself in all the tumult of the tumultuous times into which he had been cast) of staggering talents and contradictions, forging out of the chaos a personality larger than life and a body of work that continues to haunt and mesmerize knowing ears . Speaking for the other jazz luminaries of his time no less than himself, he once put it this way: “*They know we know where it's at.*” It is high time, I think, that more psychologists were in on the secret as well.

Charles Mingus and the Inscrutable Self

Hentoff once called Mingus a “mythological creature.” And perhaps he was, his body size and weight changing in protean manner as dramatically as his music as he swung, suffered and often blustered his way through life. “*I don't like to get caught in any one groove,*” he had said; “*Everything I do is Mingus.*” Mingus's father had hoped that his son might find a stable career with the post office (something at several points in his tortuous career Mingus was, sadly, required to do), but the wayward son was never short on ideas of his own and not one to be told by others what to do. “His life,” recalls his wife Sue, “loomed large and unpredictable.” A tempest of conflicting proclivities and passions, he could be explosive and even reckless—sometimes frankly violent—yet regularly eloquently effusive in a profound and, let us say, Felliniesque way. In conversation with Hentoff, he put it this way:

“It's not just a question of color anymore. It's getting deeper than that . . . People are getting so fragmented . . . Fewer and fewer people are making a real effort anymore to find exactly who they are and to build on that knowledge. Most people are forced to do things they don't want to most of the time, and so they get to the point where they feel they no longer have any choice about anything important, including who they are. We create our own slavery. But I'm going to keep on getting through and finding out the kind of man I am through my music. That's the one place I can be free.”

These spontaneous remarks about self and becoming, freedom and destiny, struggle and release disclose a surpassingly thoughtful man and psychological acuity that is of a piece with many of our most cherished third force utterances and ideals. “ *‘Play yourself!’* he used to holler to his musicians and the world,” recalls Sue. Humanistic psychology from Nietzsche to Maslow exhorts very nearly the same thing.

Music, for Mingus, was the vehicle nonpareil for self-exploration (though he did, as we have noted, retain a psychologist on the side), pathway to the ineluctable self. “Music,” he said, “is a language of the emotions. If someone has been escaping reality, I don't expect him to dig my music.” Mingus could discuss the fine points of craft with a sophistication that was on a level easily commensurate with the most abstruse postmodern or psychoanalytic rhetorician but got closer to the essence of things through a down-to-earth and uniquely colloquial expression and the godhead of music (conceivably, according to some, a better talisman for our psycho-spiritual quandaries and quests) and the relegation of the word to ancillary status:

“My music is as varied as my feelings are, or the world is, and one composition or one kind of composition expresses only part of the total world of my music. At a concert or nightclub, I call tunes in an order that I feel is right for the particular situation and what I'm trying to say in that situation. Each composition builds from the previous one, and the succession of compositions creates the statement I'm trying to make at that moment. The greatness of jazz is that it is an art of the moment. It is so particularly through improvisation, but also, in my music, through the successive relation of one composition to another.”

Do you see? Music as template and metaphor as rendered by a master of extended soliloquies and works. *Let my children hear music!* implored Mingus. (“ *Shall we then as children enter the kingdom?*” urges Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* .) We do not live by *logos* and theoretical abstraction alone.

Yet Mingus clearly wrestled with his daemons, which often got the upper hand. His oftentimes unmanageable temper is an integral part of the myth, indeed, leading to the dubious distinction of being the only musician ever asked to leave

the Ellington band. (*Asked* because Ellington never fired anyone!) Mingus himself tells the story, which bears repeating if only because it pertains to the most perfect of musical geniuses and shepherds of vagabond musicians all rolled into one. Also insofar as it reveals Mingus's uncanny ability to capture the essence of a fellow creator of new sounds with just a few words. Ellington speaks here to the capricious band member who has just managed to split Juan Tizol's (Ellington's trombonist) chair in two with a fire axe, the incident notwithstanding by no means unprovoked. After the show, Ellington summons Mingus to his dressing room where this courteous reprimand ensues:

“Really, Charles, that's destructive. Everybody knows Juan has a knife but nobody ever took it seriously—he likes to pull it out and show it to people, you understand. So I'm afraid, Charles—I've never fired anybody—you'll have to quit my band. I don't need any new problems. Juan's an old problem, I can cope with that, but you seem to have a whole bag of new tricks. I must ask you to be kind enough to give me your notice, Charles.”

The charming way he says it, it's like he's paying you a compliment. Feeling honored, you shake hands and resign.

Charles Mingus
Beneath the Underdog

Listen to Mingus's *Pithecanthropus Erectus* and see if you cannot hear echoes of our common human predicament, the mystery of becoming and the travesty of conceit—musical reflections, in effect, of the sheer joy and terror of trying to emerge from the crowd and stand upright. It is all there in spades and code. Listen to *Ecclusiastics* or *Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting* and see if you don't gain an insight or two that many of our theologians haven't yet gleaned. Mingus was a man of implacable investigations into, and clashes with, both self and the world. What he has to say to us, as a consequence, is insistently fascinating and instructive.

Mingus could be fanatical in these inward and outward explorations, grasping intuitively the need to get beneath the cleavage of the infamous subject-object split in order to truly live: *Being-in-the world Mingus style*, we might say. He considered his deeply introspective musical reveries (*Self-Portrait*, *Portrait in Three Colors*, and *Myself When I Am Real* to name just a few) paintings or snapshots, suggesting, knowingly, that it was impossible to precisely pin himself down insofar as his existential wheel was constantly in spin. (“*All kinds of me*,” the early Dylan had also implored in response to the critics.) A 1949 composition entitled *God's Portrait* was later renamed *Self Portrait* and then, in 1952, simply *Portrait*, finally settling into its final designation as *Old Portrait* before the creator was content at last to let things be . We are unsurprised to learn that this is a man who entitles one of his albums *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus* (known among enthusiasts, in shorthand, simply as *Mingus x5*). Decidedly, this was a man set upon development of human potential, both his own and that of

those with whom he played. “*Be all that you can be,*” he told anyone who ventured into his sizeable orbit. This restless quest led Mingus regularly to the Jamesian “margins of consciousness,” points of departure for both travail and transcendence—realms with which Mingus was thoroughly experienced and in which he was atypically at home. *Precognition, Extra-Sensory Perception,* and *Mind-Readers Convention in Milano* were among the transpersonal imaginings engendered by his countless journeys there.

Praying with Eric

Any musician will tell you that Mingus music requires multiple skills. A drummer once described it as a three-ring circus; he should have said four. You need to read like a classical player, improvise like a jazz musician, play well in the ensemble, and, on top of everything else, have a personality. I have seen how behavior that causes trouble in one context may, in another, provoke the explosive magic and exultation that bring a concert to magnificent life and the audience to its feet. The music grows and expands with such contradictions.

Sue Mingus

Sometimes I call it *Meditations on Integration* and sometimes *Meditations on Inner Peace*.

Charles Mingus

In its formative stages he sometimes called it *Meditations for a Pair of Wire Cutters*, and after the sudden death of his good friend Eric Dolphy (a short-lived Buddha of uniqueness and gentleness in jazz), he took to calling this remarkable work *Praying with Eric*. First performed at a now storied Town Hall concert in New York in 1964, it ranks with the very best of Mingus's compositions. Mingus seems oftentimes to have been obsessed with the matter of prejudice, his ruminations about how failures of inward and outward integration could erupt into cold-blooded violence expressed in such titles as *Don't Let It Happen Here*, *Remember Rockefeller at Attica* and *Oh Lord Don't Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb On Me* (these provocative titles, intriguingly, often bearing little apparent relation to the beautiful tunes to which they were affixed), Mingus made no secret of reading the circumstances and history of his own people (a quite local example of prejudice and pain and Oedipal fiasco) into his ruminations in such transfixing works as *Prayer for Passive Resistance* and *Fables of Faunus*, passionate works by, patently, a politically and socially conscious man. *Meditations on Integrations*, an especial gem, had perhaps its most famous rendition in a stunning performance at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1964. In the liner notes to the album subsequently released, Mingus disclosed the instructions he had given on that occasion to his sidemen:

“You see,” I said, “it's like a prayer and you're the preacher, the main speaker, the voice. You're like when disorganization comes in and you've got to straighten it out; like the minister in church or like a Jewish rabbi.

Everybody's shouting to you. You got to chant to them and put them back into condition.”

Mingus's rootedness, among myriad other things, in the music and rituals of the church are ever-present in his richly textured and often spellbinding performances and work. And, as we have gleaned, Mingus was capable of seeing matters from multiple (“*more than, three, many more than three*”) points of view. Recalling the performance at Monterey, he opined:

“Anyone could play *Meditations* on that day in this time of ours when everyone is fighting everyone else all over the world. Man, woman, religious sects, people in general, colors. I felt like I was playing for God. Well, it's time that people get together and try to fight their way through to love with something that warms them and brings them together. Look what you're doing! Look how sad you make me feel! I do have a freedom in this society, even though it's limited. It's taken me a long time to get where I want musically . . . I give you the Monterey music as a token of love, as a memory.”

Mingus on love. Well, this would be an entire bookshelf in itself. “He'd talk about technique and about music,” Sue reminisces, “and then, in the middle of everything he'd talk about love. He always got around to love.” Particularly moving are the songs he wrote for his fellow musicians, often as wordless eulogies after they had passed away: *My Jelly Roll Soul* for Jelly Roll Morton; *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* for Lester Young; *Jump Monk* for Thelonious Monk; *Reincarnation of a Lovebird* for Charlie “Bird” Parker; *Ode to Bird and Dizzy* for Parker and Gillespie; *So Long Eric* for Dolphy; *Duke Ellington's Sound of Love* for the man on the planet he probably admired most. And, for Sue, Mingus's fourth and final wife, the gorgeous and devotionally intricate *Sue's Changes*. Always the attendance to transience and metamorphosis. One wishes at times that Mingus's psychologist—who actually wrote the liner notes to one of his albums—might have expressed himself even fractionally as well in words as Mingus could do, repeatedly, with his music. (Surely there resides some sort of coded message for the rest of us here.) Integration, Passion, Awareness and Love: hallmarks, as the variously riotous and riveting musician understood, of personal and planetary evolution, vitality and hope.

Live at the Jazz Workshop

The Jazz Workshop is the name of a now defunct club in Boston's Kenmore Square. It was also the name Mingus affixed to a mid-sized ensemble of eight to ten rotating musicians with whom he played and experimented at a small club in the West Village during the 1950's. Mingus's exhortation to the members of what came to be known as a “university” of jazz was one of constant exploration. *Talk about it !*” he would shout to his fellow musicians, demanding that their transient musical ideas be embraced and developed, fearlessly, on the spot. (Jazz artists,

we should note, make no use of PowerPoint displays or lecture notes: it is—imperative that the more tone-deaf among us truly take this in—an improvisational art of the moment.) Mingus could be harshly exacting in his expectations. Fellow musicians that made up the consortium (Jackie Byard, Booker Ervin, John Handy, Jimmy Knepper, Charles McPherson and Horace Parlan among them) at times referred to the *Workshop* as a “sweatshop” to which they nonetheless kept returning: a testament to how demanding the bandleader could be but, also, the admiration they accorded him in eliciting their very best. Listen to Mingus's *Jazz Composers Workshop* for a glimpse of a set of musical improvisations at once atmospheric and abstract, noting the delicate layers of interweaving voices, rhythms, and forms. Note, too, irrepressibly, those trademark resolutions of piercing discord into heartrending and tenderness. Only a surpassingly complex and disciplined mind, heart and soul and could harbor within itself the requisite extremes of tension and emotion to achieve out of such seeming cacophony (like Beethoven, like Mahler, like Coltrane) passages of preternatural calm. In these early sketches one perceives the seeds of the fuller artist and man.

I am thinking also about that other *Jazz Workshop*, the one on Commonwealth Avenue. Once, many years ago during my final year of college, I found myself at that club with two friends. Performing that evening was Mingus, a man who was at that time little more than a name to me. The band, I seem to recall, was composed entirely of black musicians; the audience, mostly collegiate, was almost entirely white. The three of us sat at a small table not far from the bandstand. Mingus stood imposingly in the front of the stage, the band members to either side of him and behind. His countenance was strong and inward, almost impassive. He said nothing at all, he and his fellow musicians simply played. I found myself transfixed, transported by sounds (much like my daughter, not yet two months of age, is transported by Mozart) I had no way of comprehending or discussing, not having ever encountered anything remotely like them before. (One of my friends remarked later on this, and both must have thought my ecstatic trance slightly mad.) At the end of the set (quite short in those days, as the club owners were intent upon quick turnovers of patrons and maximization of profits), Mingus abruptly put down his bass, walked to the bar and ordered a drink. The performance had ended (like music itself, as Dolphy once observed) as suddenly and mysteriously unbidden as it had arrived. For me, it had been a thrilling experience—my initial baptism in the fires of jazz. Decades later, I can still recall being gripped by the stoic dignity of the man, something much greater than his sheer corporeal presence. Mingus was playing music of extraordinary power and reach, an obeisant act in itself—playing for multiple and ineffable gods. He wasn't about to cater to upscale collegiate youth, the vast majority of whom, he must have clearly intuited, had little idea about what they had witnessed and heard. A subdued Mingus, comportment-wise, musically gave everything he had.

Over subsequent years, I searched occasionally for the odd Mingus record,

usually in the discount bins where I never found anything resembling what I had heard that evening at the *Jazz Workshop*. I was well into my thirties when, now returned to Boston and with a gathering of Harvard Square literati, jazz aficionados and dropouts as guides, I fell at last more completely under the spell. I became obsessed with a succession of jazz luminaries: Ellington, Strayhorn, Coltrane, Dolphy, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Ahmad Jamal, Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Sonny Rollins and Clifford Brown. Falling for Mingus was all but inevitable given the stunning range, vigor, intelligence and sheer visceral energy of his extended polyrhythmic works. Twenty or more Mingus CDs and a few LPs later (yes, the analog warmth of vacuum tubes and diamond styli surpasses anything we can hope to hear on our iPads), the greater trajectory of Mingus's oeuvre has been virtually hardwired into my mind, heart, and soul. I can easily extrapolate what I heard that night very nearly forty years ago in Kenmore Square. Listen to *Changes One* and *Changes Two* and you will know too. If you are within hearing distance, it is possible that you, also, will be transported to the margins of consciousness and even a little beyond. These sublime Atlantic recordings are late great works created out of a period of considerable despond (despond that years before had led Mingus to several ill-fated psychiatric admissions to Bellevue and Mt. Sinai Hospitals) just a few years before Mingus's death to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. If the story of Mingus's breakdowns (far from rare among the great jazz artists of that time) intrigues you, check out *Hellview of Bellevue* and also his re-working of Hammerstein and Kern's *All The Things You Are* (a tune, by the way, right up his alley) into *All the Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother*. Mingus, like more than a few others I have met on the wards, had a glorious sense of humor.

The Afterlife According to Mingus

Making the simple complicated is commonplace. Making the complicated simple—awesomely simple—that's creativity,

Charles Mingus

I liked him immediately. I liked his aloneness in the tumultuous room . . . an unselfconscious, perspiring, focused man, exposed and unimpressed, a man too concentrated within himself for fear . . . My own life had been one of order and balance, founded on grammar and taste and impeccable manners, and yet something about the man across the room seemed oddly familiar. I suppose now it was just some soothsayer wraith blowing down my neck, some fanciful wind from the future revealing for an instant, like a photo developed too soon and out of sequence, the far-off snapshot ahead.

Sue Mingus
Tonight at Noon

Sue Mingus, a once-upon-a-time debutante and graduate of Smith College as

well as Mingus's fourth and final wife, is, like several others, Caucasian. In her exquisitely crafted memoir of an unfathomably rich and unanticipated relationship, *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story*, she opens her book with a telling frontispiece followed by a description of scattering Mingus's ashes shortly after his death at the age of 56 in the Ganges River:

“Of course he knows that he will be regarded as a madman from beginning to end, precisely because he is the exact opposite of a madman.”

Thomas Bernhard
The Lime Works

On a cold January morning before dawn, in the holy village of Rishikesh in northern India, I scattered Charles Mingus's ashes in the Ganges as he had asked me to do, immersing myself with them in the freezing river according to Hindu custom, certain that the raw air beneath the dark range of the Himalayas was made for the life of the spirit and for reincarnation, as he believed. I walked to my one-room house on the Ganges, shivering and dripping water along the sand, and imagined that one day I would nail a small sign above the entrance with his name and dates and the title of one of his tunes, “Tonight at Noon.” That was musician talk for time displacements on the gig, the topsy-turvy hours of work, an acknowledgment of a reversal in the order of things. Perhaps, I thought, it was the new life he had already imagined.

As I continued along the beach I remembered something he'd said about Charlie Parker: “You know, I was thinking about Bird's death . . .” We were sitting together in the patio outside our last home in Mexico, warming ourselves in the sun. “When Bird died there was that clap of thunder. It was a happy death. I felt good about it. As if everything was all right, as if Bird had died in order to look out for a whole lotta guys . . .” He laughed. “Probably the beboppers!”

“You know, Bird's music was very intuitive,” he continued. “There was something sacred about it. I don't know if it was from the devil or from the angels, but the music itself was almost superhuman. I remember I was talking to him once about Buddhism—he knew all about it—and he was telling me about yoga and Buddha and then all of a sudden we saw the club owner raise his hand, and Bird said: ‘Well, it's time to go. Let's finish the discussion on the bandstand.’”

Charles was silent, remembering.

“So that's what he said,” he repeated. “He said: ‘Let's finish the discussion on the bandstand.’ . . . You see, I always knew he was as superstitious about the music as I was.”

Gods that dance for those within hearing distance, those that can fathom otherworldly and often celestial sounds.

Mingus, like Parker and Coltrane and Rollins and Wayne Shorter, was a questing and ultimately spiritual man. Here, too, he was interested in pluralism and something of a pantheist. Contemplating Swami Vivekananda and the Hindu parables, Mingus expounded to his wife in his own unique language on religions more and less sublime: “Those cats had more to say. They're the only ones who got through to me. Their religion is open and democratic, they worship *all the prophets. There's no prejudice at all!*” On the theme of, let us say, metaphysical diversity, how much more shall we say?

Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

A man has to know how to die.

Charles Mingus

We have already considered the obeisance with which Sue Mingus spread her husband's ashes in the cold waters of the Ganges, the telling of which begins her wise and beautifully crafted memoir. A few months earlier, Hentoff saw Mingus for the very last time at the White House of all places, a story he also relates with poignancy and care:

The last time I saw Mingus was at a jazz concert that president Jimmy Carter hosted on the south lawn of the White House. Carter clearly knew a lot about jazz, having visited jazz clubs when he was in the Navy and afterwards. And he said as he introduced the first set, “It's long past time that a real tribute was paid to jazz musicians here at the White House. Jazz has never received the full recognition it deserves in America—because of the racism in this country.” Mingus was seated in a wheel chair in the front row, next to his wife, Sue, who has continued his legacy by forming the Mingus Big Band which plays with his exultant spirit. That afternoon at the White House, the president came over to Mingus and hugged him. Mingus couldn't move, but you could see the appreciation in his eyes—and his desire to keep on living.

And this is how Mingus ends that session with his Jewish psychologist with which his own fantastic (and, often, fantastical) book begins:

“We're making progress, Charles, but perhaps we've done enough for today.”

“I wanted to tell you about Fats—I dreamed about him again last night.”

“Fine. Keep it on ice till next time. Good-bye, Chazz.”

“So long, doctor.”

It's the late, great Fats Navarro (“*He was a trumpet player,*” muses Mingus

matter-of-factly in his book, “*one of the best in the world*”) who Mingus is about to talk about. But that is another story to be taken up in another session—at another moment, perhaps, unfolding within the mystery and majesty of what the poet Beckett had once called “accursed time.” Or, in the language of jazz, *tonight at noon*. You will all want to be onboard for that one, won't you?

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In memory of Eugene Taylor (1946-2013), who often listened to jazz playing softly in the background as he set off on his innumerable nocturnal forays into the margins of consciousness and who, patently, divined the uncanny and ethereal sounds.