

## RECORDS: ROCK

Our reviewers disagree more or less politely on the new Joni Mitchell album, *Mingus*, a tribute to the late jazz great, Charles Mingus.

By JEFF SIMON  
News Recordings Editor

The album is Joni Mitchell's *Mingus* (Asylum SE-505), as long awaited an artifact as The Maltese Falcon. And like The Maltese Falcon it's pure lead. (My estimable colleague, Dale Anderson, and I don't quite see typewriter-to-typewriter on this. Disagreement is what makes horse-races — and criticism too.)

The main question is whom one loves more: a supremely gifted pop singer-songwriter who's white, beautiful and in the prime of life; or a volcanic, black jazz bassist-composer who's dead.

Therefore, there is no question. Mingus deserves our love more. The dead are defenseless. Joni Mitchell's album is the kind of travesty only dogged devotion can produce.

No formal condescension is involved here despite the fact that music feeds on condescension. Classical musicians condescend to jazz and pop people; jazz musicians condescend to swingless classicists and pop barbarians, and pop musicians condescend to the effete intellectual snobs who support jazz and the classics. (That is, when they're all on the same up-from-poverty level. Rich musicians are different. They love everybody.)

The Joni Mitchell of *Court and Spark* and *For the Roses* is an artist to be taken seriously under any and all circumstances. Besides, it was Mingus himself — dying, and wheelchair-ridden and unable to propell fellow jazz musicians with his annunciatory bass lines — who summoned Joni Mitchell to put words to some of his most achingly chromatic Ellingtonian tunes.

There are three of them here. Mitchell also put words to Mingus' keening classic Lester Young lament "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat". Her closing "Pork Pie" lyrical fantasy is pure M—G—M musical: "To two little dancers/Dancing outside a black bar/There's a sign on the awning/It says 'Pork Pie Hat Bar'/And there's black babies dancing ... Tonight." And that is no fate for a pure elegaic melody from the heart.

The best of *Mingus* are the recorded snatches of Mingus' conversation and Mitchell's own songs ("The Wolf That Lives in Lindsey" is all hers, from her vein of suburban desperation, and all the better for it).



By DALE ANDERSON  
News Critic

When Carly Simon uses jazz on her latest album, it's as if she's tying on a designer scarf. It's chic. It's worn for effect. For Joni Mitchell, jazz is a whole different set of clothes. She wraps herself in it in *Mingus* as if it were the robes of a holy man. Perhaps it is. *Mingus* worships long and lovingly at the altar of jazz.

*Mingus* (All right, so she wanted a jazz-rock bassist. What's the matter? Was Stanley Clarke busy?)

Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter are around but only for daubings of impressionistic color, no solos.

The hard truth is that Joni Mitchell, beautiful, willing collaborator, made a dying man happy in his final hopelessly degenerating months. From such things eternal blessings must flow if there are such things. But not necessarily good music. Mingus and Mitchell don't mix. Avoid temptation and try them both pure if you haven't already: Mingus' *Better Get It In Your Soul* (Columbia) and Mitchell's *Court and Sparks* and *For the Roses* are the places to start.

The result is a four-dimensional memorial to the towering personality of the late be-bop bassist Charles Mingus — paintings on the album jackets, tributes in the liner notes, impressions of jazz life set to Mingus' music and snatches of conversation tape recorded while he was still alive. It adds up to a special sort of a concept album about life and death and luck.

This is the culmination of what Mitchell has been driving for ever since she revived Lambert, Hendricks and Ross' "Twisted" on *Court and Spark* in 1974. Five years have turned her from a dilettante into a credible jazz singer. What illuminates *Mingus* most, aside from Jaco Pastorius' acrobatic bass playing, is her elastic voice.

*Mingus* is an incredibly ambitious album, far more complex and impressionistic than the stuff that usually occupies popular singer-songwriters. It's quite likely that it's over the heads of half of Mitchell's folksong fans. And jazz buffs, of course, will make the mistake of assessing it against the be-bop masters. Nevertheless, it has integrity. Considered on its own terms, as a white acolyte's tribute to a black jazz deity, it succeeds. It succeeds powerfully well.

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