

South Piedmont Community College

Charles Mingus, ‘The Angry Man of Jazz’

Tera Waddell

MUS 112 – Introduction to Jazz

Richard Hall

October 25, 2024

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There are many creative ways to release the strong emotions of life and pouring out one's heart and soul by playing music is one such way. Charles Mingus used his talent as a musician to do just that. He was a gifted musician who was able to put the emotions of life into musical notes. There is much to say about Charles Mingus and his life and accomplishments. By taking a small glimpse into his life, his struggles with his emotions, and looking at the history behind a piece of music he wrote called “Fables of Faubus” we will get to know more about Charles Mingus who was given the nickname, “The Angry Man of Jazz” (Vitale).

First, let us look at Charles Mingus’ life. He was a talented bass player, pianist, composer, and band leader (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). He was born in 1922 on a military base in Nogales, Arizona (“Charles Mingus: Biography”) to mixed race parents. His mother died when he was just 4 months old (Vitale) and he said, “his father was an army sergeant who never loved him” (Vitale).

He grew up in Watts, California (“Charles Mingus: Biography”) and did not have a role model or anyone to tell him “what he was supposed to be like” (Vitale). He was drawn to music at the age of 8 years old hearing the church choir sing and listening to Duke Ellington on the radio (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). Being of mixed race, he felt like he didn’t fit in anywhere. He said that “he didn’t fit in with the blacks, whites or Mexicans at school” (Vitale). These struggles that Mingus went through were the foundation of his success in the music world.

Charles Mingus formally studied the double bass for five years under some legendary teachers. “H. Rheinshagen, principal bassist of the New York Philharmonic, and compositional techniques with the legendary Lloyd Reese”. In his professional career, he toured with bands that included top jazz performers such as Louis Armstrong in the 1940’s (“Charles Mingus: Biography”).

In the 1950's, Mingus made New York his home and continued to make a name for himself. He played and recorded with the leading musicians of that time. Musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and someone who was a true inspiration to Charles Mingus from the very beginning, the great Duke Ellington himself ("Charles Mingus: Biography").

Charles Mingus went on to form his own publishing company and recording companies and founded the "Jazz Workshop". The "Jazz Workshop" helped young composers with marketing their new works. It was a group that enabled them to get their works recorded and played on the radio, plus helped them book performances ("Charles Mingus: Biography").

Charles Mingus "recorded over 100 albums and wrote over 300 scores ("Charles Mingus: Biography"). The first piece he ever wrote was when he was seventeen years old called "Half-Mast Inhibition" it would not be recorded until 22 years later ("Charles Mingus: Biography"). Some of his works include "Goodbye Porkpie Hat", "Pithecanthropus Erectus", "Fables of Faubus", and "Let My Children Hear Music" ("Charles Mingus: Biography"). He has worked with nearly every leading jazz artist of his time ("Charles Mingus: A Guide "). He helped bridge the gap between bebop and the avant-garde and was known for his skill in collective improvisation ("Charles Mingus: A Guide"). "He distilled blues, gospel music, New Orleans-style jazz, and classical music to arrive at a sound that was like no other in jazz" says Charles Waring in his online article called Best Charles Mingus Pieces: 20 Essential Pieces by Jazz's Fiery Iconoclast (Waring).

Now that we have taken a glimpse into Charles Mingus' life, let us try to understand his struggle with his emotions. Mingus was known as fiery and for expecting perfection from his band. He was called "The Angry Man of Jazz" (Vitale). What did Charles Mingus do to earn his nickname? If something upset him, he would yell and break things. He also fired one of his band members right in the middle of a show. He took his anger too far sometimes. Mingus punched

trumpet player Jimmy Knepper in the mouth “and ruined his embouchure.” In his anger, he also threw his very expensive bass off the stage shattering it to pieces (Vitale). When he could control his emotions and put his passionate feelings into musical notes, it was miraculous. His music was always changing, and it was hard for some to play. He said his music was always changing because he was always changing (Vitale). Charles Mingus said about his music that, “It's all kinds of emotions to play in music but what I'm trying to play is very difficult because I'm trying to play the truth of what I am” (“Vitale”)

What better way to understand the mind of Charles Mingus and his struggles with his emotions than to hear it from the man himself. A quote from the Charles Mingus’ website on the page called “In His Own Words” it not only describes how he felt but we can all relate to this struggle. Mingus is very talented at putting his feelings into words (“In His Own Words”).

The quote from Mingus says, “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. Which one is real? They’re all real (“Charles Mingus: Biography”).” This is quote was taken from his autobiography called “Beneath the Underdog.” As you can see, Mingus was a passionate man and a deep thinker. He had a gift not only for putting his feelings into musical notes but also writing in such a way that we understand his feelings and we appreciate him for saying what needs to be said.

Mingus also used his music and his words as a way to advocate for civil rights. We will now look at a powerful song that he wrote during a time when just being able to go to a certain high school if you were black caused an outrage. Charles Mingus wrote “Fables of Faubus” in 1959 over just such an outrage (Vitale). The song is named after the then Governor of Arkansas Orval E. Faubus. “In 1957 he sent out the National Guard to prevent the integration of Little Rock Central High School by nine African American teenagers (“Fables of Faubus”).”

When Mingus was asked about “Fables of Faubus” he said that “normally he would just write tunes and put political titles on them “Fables of Faubus ” was different, though--I wrote that because I wanted to. (Myers). The words in the first verse of the song help one understand what those young high school students must have been feeling as they entered the school that day with the National Guard and protesters standing by. The words also show that Mingus had a gift of empathy and was able to simply describe the struggles of racism and point out the absurdity of the situation.

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em shoot us!

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em stab us!

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em tar and feather us!

Oh, Lord, no more swastikas!

Oh, Lord, no more Ku Klux Klan!

The song “Fables of Faubus” creates “evocative images in the listener’s mind” says an article on the Masterclass website called “Charles Mingus: A Guide to His Life and Music” (“Charles Mingus: A Guide”).

Lastly, let us look at some other accomplishments of Charles Mingus’ career and his later years. In the 1970’s, Mingus taught composition at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His music was also performed by ballet companies. An hour-long show called “The Mingus

Dances” was choreographed by Alvin Ailey and performed by the Robert Joffrey Ballet Company (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). Mingus also shared his music with the world and toured throughout “Japan, Europe, South America, Canada, and the United States” (“Charles Mingus: Biography”).

In 1977, Mingus was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), a rare nerve disease. It left him confined to a wheelchair but that did not stop him. He was dedicated to his music and when he was no longer able to play the piano and write music, he sung his last works onto a tape recorder. Charles Mingus remained committed to his music until the very end (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). He died in Mexico in 1979 at the age of 56. “His wife, Sue Graham Mingus scattered his ashes in the Ganges River in India (“Charles Mingus: Biography”).”

“After his death, the National Endowment for the Arts provided grants for a Mingus foundation created by Sue Mingus called "Let My Children Hear Music" which catalogued all of Mingus' works. (“Charles Mingus”).” After the works were catalogued, they were given to the New York Public Library’s Music Division so that they could be studied. This is something that had never happened before in the jazz world (“Charles Mingus: Biography”).

In conclusion, we have learned about Charles Mingus, “The Angry Man of Jazz” and can now understand from his upbringing why he was fiery and emotional. He was a very talented bass player, composer, music teacher, and piano player and played with almost all the other great jazz musicians of his day (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). We looked at a very moving quote from Mingus’ autobiography that explained his struggles as being three people, each with their own distinct passions, whether they be good or bad. We also learned the history behind a powerful song Charles Mingus wrote called “Fables of Faubus.” By reading the lyrics, we can feel the fear that the nine young black high school students must have felt as they entered their

Arkansas high school for the very first time surrounded by the National Guard and protesters (“Fables of Faubus”).

Charles Mingus was an accomplished musician who poured himself into his music. Every piece he wrote was a part of himself and his feelings. He was very passionate, and his music was always changing just and he was. Even until the very end, Mingus, although battling a rare nerve disease and unable to write, left us his last musical contributions on a tape recorder (“Charles Mingus: Biography”). “Charles Mingus was one of the greatest jazz artists of the 20th century (“Vitale”).

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