



Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus

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Charles Mingus was one of the most innovative jazz musicians of the 20th Century, and ranks with Ives and Ellington as one of America's greatest composers. By temperament, he was a high-strung and sensitive romantic, a towering figure whose tempestuous personal life found powerfully coherent expression in the ever-shifting textures of his music. Now, acclaimed music critic Gene Santoro strips away the myths shrouding "Jazz's Angry Man," revealing Mingus as more complex than even his lovers and close friends knew.

A pioneering bassist and composer, Mingus redefined jazz's terrain. He penned over 300 works spanning gutbucket gospel, Colombian cumbias, orchestral tone poems, multimedia performance, and chamber jazz. By the time he was 35, his growing body of music won increasing attention as it unfolded into one pioneering musical venture after another, from classical-meets-jazz extended pieces to spoken-word and dramatic performances and television and movie soundtracks. Though critics and musicians debated his musical merits and his personality, by the late 1950s he was widely recognized as a major jazz star, a bellwether whose combined grasp of tradition and feel for change poured his inventive creativity into new musical outlets.

But Mingus got headlines less for his art than for his volatile and often provocative behavior, which drew fans who wanted to watch his temper suddenly flare onstage. Impromptu outbursts and speeches formed an integral part of his long-running jazz workshop, modeled partly on dramatic models like Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre. Keeping up with the organized chaos of Mingus's art demanded gymnastic improvisational skills and openness from his musicians—which is why some of them called it "the Sweatshop." He hired and fired musicians on the bandstand, attacked a few musicians physically and many more verbally, twice threw Lionel Hampton's drummer off the stage, and routinely harangued chattering audiences, once chasing a table of inattentive patrons out of the FIVE SPOT with a meat cleaver. But the musical and mental challenges this volcanic man set his bands also nurtured deep loyalties. Key sidemen stayed with him for years and even decades.

In this biography, Santoro probes the sore spots in Mingus's easily wounded nature that helped make him so explosive: his bullying father, his interracial background, his vulnerability to women and distrust of men, his views of political and social issues, his overwhelming need for love and acceptance. Of black, white, and Asian descent, Mingus made race a central issue in his life as well as a crucial aspect of his music, becoming an outspoken (and often misunderstood) critic of racial injustice.

Santoro gives us a vivid portrait of Mingus's development, from the racially mixed Watts where he mingled with artists and writers as well as mobsters, union toughs, and pimps to the artistic ferment of postwar Greenwich Village, where he absorbed and extended the radical improvisation flowing through the work of Allen Ginsberg, Jackson Pollock, and Charlie Parker. Indeed, unlike most jazz biographers, Santoro examines Mingus's extra-musical influences—from Orson Welles to Langston Hughes, Farwell Taylor, and Timothy Leary—and illuminates his achievement in the broader cultural context it demands.

Written in a lively, novelistic style, *Myself When I Am Real* draws on dozens of new interviews and previously untapped letters and archival materials to explore the intricate connections between this extraordinary man and the extraordinary music he made.

Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus Details

Date : Published July 20th 2000 by Oxford University Press, Inc. (first published July 2000)

ISBN : 9780195097337

Author : Gene Santoro

Format : Hardcover 480 pages

Genre : Music, Jazz, Biography, Nonfiction, Cultural, African American, History

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From Reader Review *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* for online ebook

Peter Sims says

A biography on one of my heroes that didn't blow me away yet completely disappoint me. Most likely the best biography written on him, but doesn't hold a candle to Lewis Porter's *Coltrane*, the best jazz biography I've seen.

Will says

Sought this out because I had heard several crazy stories about Mingus (e.g., rehearsing his band during performances, punching out his trombone player) and have always gotten a kick out of his quirky music. Fairly well written biography about a very eccentric guy.

Grant says

very disappointing. writing is horrible. that it was extensively researched is its one winning quality. and that i am a fan of the mingus.

Qa'id says

A slowish read at times, but it's always enlightening to learn about the details of the lives of folks who transcend the boundaries of "ordinary" creative capabilities.

Blair says

This is a very fun biography. Mingus was a very volatile talent, both in his musical style and his personal life. He had a bad temper, didn't take shit from anyone. Santoro writes with almost a prose-like style to basically fit that fury into the lines, and it works well. It's a bit too long, but worth the read. It's almost like Mingus was a character in a Scorsese movie, chasing at people with knives, his anger a character bigger than his self at times. As a result there are some very memorable anecdotes.

Al Maki says

I should start by saying that Mingus composed and organized the bands that played some of my favourite music. The book gave me insight into where he came from and the environment he worked in. I found his struggles to keep creating jazz as the economics of the music industry shifted were particularly interesting. It seems to me that Santoro also proposes that the beat movement of the post war era drew a lot of its style by

appropriating the African American styles of the time. I find this an interesting idea.
