

so Mingus, even as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis worked its way, kept on writing, with ideas a-borning for many lifetimes.

In Cuernavaca, toward the end of 1978, when it was taking ten minutes for Mingus to say a single word, his spirit, says his wife, Susan Graham, was unbroken. "He had," she notes, "that marvelous music in his head. All of it, and all of it his. That must have helped."

From his teens, music so multiplied in Mingus's head that he had to keep making room for more. And much of what he wrote in the 1940's and 1950's greatly anticipated what later "avant-garde" musicians were to do. He went outside the chords, for example, long before Miles Davis—using modes and scale fragments on which his sidemen would improvise. And as early as 1945, Mingus was rebelling against the rule that the beat had to be steady and explicitly swinging all the way through a piece. He preferred time that was truly natural in that it accelerated and slowed down according to the feelings he wanted to convey. And often, the pulse was only implicit. ("As long as you can feel the beat," he would say, "you don't have to keep emphasizing it.")

But most wondrous of all was the range of Mingus's interests and imagination. *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, for in-

stance. As Mingus described it: "This composition is actually a jazz tone poem because it depicts musically my conception of the modern counterpart of the first man to stand erect—how proud he was, considering himself the 'first' to ascend from all fours, pounding his chest and preaching his superiority over the mammals still in a prone position. Overcome with self-esteem, he goes out to rule the world, if not the universe; but both his failure to realize the inevitable emancipation of those he thought to enslave, and his greed in attempting to stand on a false security, deny him not only the right of ever being a man, but finally destroy him completely. Basically the composition can be divided into four movements: (1) evolution, (2) superiority complex, (3) decline, and (4) destruction."

And it works *musically*, remaining one of Mingus's most evocative distillations of the passions of man—as well as a warning.

Also worth citing is Mingus's prologue to *Haitian Fight Song* which, he said, when it was first composed, could just as accurately be called *Afro-American Fight Song*. Here too, he pointed out, there are memories of the "wild, moaning" Holiness church music of his childhood. "I'd say," Mingus added, "this song has a contemporary folk feeling. My solo in it is a deeply concen-

trated one. I can't play it right unless I'm thinking about prejudice and hate and persecution, and how unfair it is. There's sadness and cries in it, but also determination. And it usually ends with my feeling: 'I told them! I hope somebody heard me!'"

Another track that requires particular background is *Free Cell Block F, 'Tis Nazi U.S.A.* The title comes from Mingus having read in *Ebony* of a Southern prison preparing for executions. It was affixed after the piece was composed because, although Mingus was never didactic in his *music*—his imagination was too free for that—he felt that sometimes "I ought to give titles to my music that may make people think."

For the rest, there are, as always, those unmistakable *Mingus* lines—boldly stated and developed, vibrant with lyricism (even when aggressive), sometimes of exceptionally tender intimacy, and pulsing with more real life than the vast majority of the so-called "serious" music of this century.

There is also that Mingus groove, especially the electric moment when the entire ensemble, kneaded together by this bassist of oversize spirit, creates a momentum that is among the most exhilaratingly irresistible in all of jazz history. Another mark of Mingus is his own enveloping presence on bass, not

only up front but rumbling hugely through every moment of a performance, like some mythical figure with a thunderbolt ready to fly.

Mingus, however, was very much of this world. A man of large appetites, which he satisfied, he also thought a great deal about roots. He was proud of having been with Kid Ory and Louis Armstrong, and he felt his own music to be part of a continuum that would go on and on. That's why he was especially pleased one day in the late 1960's when he and his group went uptown to play in Harlem on the Jazzmobile.

"Charles," one of his sidemen said when they had arrived, "you can't play what you usually do for these kids here. They don't dig it."

Mingus called the same tunes he would have called anywhere else, and then he went farther—as far as he could make the music go. The kids dug it all; it got right into their souls.

"All those kids," Mingus was smiling, remembering, "following the truck, wanting more. Of course, they want to hear it. It's *their* music, man. It's *their* lives."

By being so freely, honestly, unpredictably himself, Mingus goes on through so many lives, everywhere.

—Nat Hentoff