

# **Charles Mingus: Top 25 icons in Jazz history**

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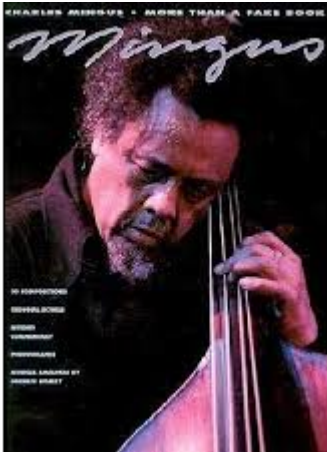
### **Charles Mingus: Biography**

One of the most important figures in twentieth century American music, Charles Mingus was a virtuoso bass player, accomplished pianist, bandleader and composer. Born on a military base in Nogales, Arizona in 1922 and raised in Watts, California, his earliest musical influences came from the church— choir and group singing— and from “hearing Duke Ellington over the radio when [he] was eight years old.”

He studied double bass and composition in a formal way (five years with H. Rheinshagen, principal bassist of the New York Philharmonic, and compositional techniques with the legendary Lloyd Reese) while absorbing vernacular music from the great jazz masters, first-hand. His early professional experience, in the 40's, found him touring with bands like Louis Armstrong, Kid Ory and Lionel Hampton.

Eventually he settled in New York where he played and recorded with the leading musicians of the 1950's— Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Bud Powell, Art Tatum and Duke Ellington himself. One of the few bassists to do so, Mingus quickly developed as a leader of musicians. He was also an accomplished pianist who could have made a career playing that instrument. By the mid-50's he had formed his own publishing and recording companies to protect and document his growing repertoire of original music. He also founded the “Jazz Workshop,” a group which enabled young composers to have their new works

performed in concert and on recordings.



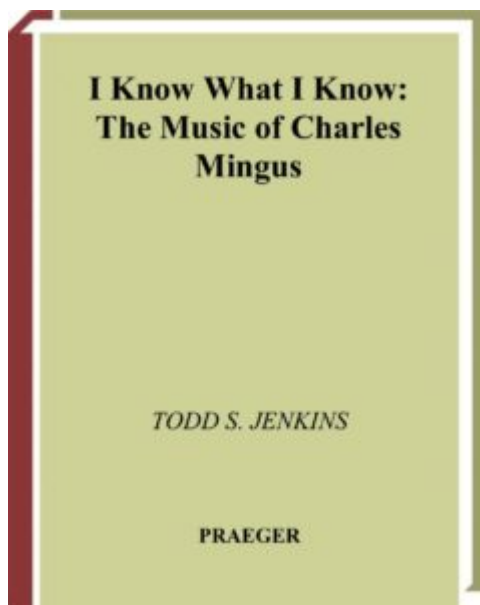
An iconoclastic visionary, jazz bassist, composer, and pianist Charles Mingus established a movement within modern jazz that marked a departure from bebop and helped chart the course of avant-garde jazz. Inspired by the music of Duke Ellington, Mingus created jazz scores and compositions of textual color while retaining the dominant element of improvisation.

He sought to create "spontaneous compositions," that offered musicians individual freedom and collective improvisation often through un-notated sections. Mingus's aggressive bass attack and harmonic sensibility-rooted in the earlier styles of such bassists as Jimmy Blanton-marked an effort to move away from the steady walking bass and to explore octave leaps and rhythmic subdivisions based upon various passing tones. Apart from his compositional and instrumental contributions, Mingus co-founded his own record label during the 1950s, and organized jazz workshops to further the study of jazz as a serious art form.

Mingus soon found himself at the forefront of the avant-garde. His recordings bear witness to the extraordinarily creative body of work that followed. They include: Pithecanthropus Erectus, The Clown, Tijuana Moods, Mingus Dynasty, Mingus Ah Um, The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady, Cumbia and Jazz Fusion, Let My Children Hear Music. He recorded over a hundred albums and wrote over three hundred scores.

Although he wrote his first concert piece, "Half-Mast Inhibition," when he was seventeen years old, it was not recorded until twenty years later by a 22-piece orchestra with Gunther Schuller conducting. It was the presentation of "Revelations" which combined jazz and classical idioms, at the 1955 Brandeis Festival of the Creative Arts, that established him as one of the foremost jazz composers of his day.

In 1971 Mingus was awarded the Slee Chair of Music and spent a semester teaching composition at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In the same year his autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, was published by Knopf. In 1972 it appeared in a Bantam paperback and was reissued after his death, in 1980, by Viking/Penguin and again by Pantheon Books, in 1991. In 1972 he also re-signed with Columbia Records. His music was performed frequently by ballet companies, and Alvin Ailey choreographed an hour program called "The Mingus Dances" during a 1972 collaboration with the Robert Joffrey Ballet Company.



He toured extensively throughout Europe, Japan, Canada, South America and the United States until the end of 1977 when he was diagnosed as having a rare nerve disease, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. He was confined to a wheelchair, and although he was no longer able to write music on paper or compose at the piano, his last works were sung into a tape

recorder.

From the 1960's until his death in 1979 at age 56, Mingus remained in the forefront of American music. When asked to comment on his accomplishments, Mingus said that his abilities as a bassist were the result of hard work but that his talent for composition came from God.

Mingus received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Smithsonian Institute, and the Guggenheim Foundation (two grants). He also received an honorary degree from Brandeis and an award from Yale University.

At a memorial following Mingus' death, Steve Schlesinger of the Guggenheim Foundation commented that Mingus was one of the few artists who received two grants and added: "I look forward to the day when we can transcend labels like jazz and acknowledge Charles Mingus as the major American composer that he is." The New Yorker wrote: "For sheer melodic and rhythmic and structural originality, his compositions may equal anything written in western music in the twentieth century."

He died in Mexico on January 5, 1979, and his wife, Sue Graham Mingus, scattered his ashes in the Ganges River in India. Both New York City and Washington, D.C. honored him posthumously with a "Charles Mingus Day."

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. The microfilms of these works were then given to the Music Division of the New York Public Library where they are currently available for study and scholarship – a first for jazz.

Sue Mingus has founded three working repertory bands called the Mingus Dynasty, Mingus Orchestra, and the Mingus Big Band, which continue to perform his music. Biographies of Charles Mingus include *Mingus* by Brian Priestley, *Mingus/Mingus* by

Janet Coleman and Al Young, *Myself When I Am Real* by Gene Santoro, and *Tonight at Noon*, a memoir by Sue Mingus.

Mingus' masterwork, "Epitaph," a composition which is more than 4000 measures long and which requires two hours to perform, was discovered during the cataloguing process. With the help of a grant from the Ford Foundation, the score and instrumental parts were copied, and the piece itself was premiered by a 30-piece orchestra, conducted by Gunther Schuller, in a concert produced by Sue Mingus at Alice Tully Hall on June 3, 1989, ten years after Mingus' death.

The New Yorker wrote that "Epitaph" represents the first advance in jazz composition since Duke Ellington's "Black, Brown, and Beige," which was written in 1943. The New York Times said it ranked with the "most memorable jazz events of the decade." Convinced that it would never be performed in his lifetime, Mingus called his work "Epitaph," declaring that he wrote it "for my tombstone."

"The Library of Congress purchased the Charles Mingus Collection, a major acquisition, in 1993; this included autographed manuscripts, photographs, literary manuscripts, correspondence, and tape recordings of interviews, broadcasts, recording sessions, and Mingus composing at the piano.

Sue Mingus has published a number of educational books through [Hal Leonard Publishing](#), including [Charles Mingus: More Than a Fake Book](#), [Charles Mingus: More Than a Play-Along](#), [Charles Mingus: Easy Piano Solos](#), many [big band charts](#)— including the [Simply Mingus](#) set of big band music charts— and a Mingus guitar book.

Strauss and the impressionist compositions of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, he soon fell under the influence of jazz. After hearing Duke Ellington during a late night radio broadcast, Mingus found a mentor and lifelong idol. "When I first heard Ellington in person," stated Mingus in *Jazz Is*, "I

almost jumped out of the balcony. One piece excited me so much that I almost screamed.”

During high school Mingus studied music under Lloyd Reese, a former trumpeter with Les Hite. “Reese taught a system in which chord progressions were represented by a series of roman numerals,” explained Ted Gioia in *West Coast Jazz*. “This not only facilitated understanding transposition but also the understanding of general harmonic rules underlying any set of chords.

“To pursue his study of harmony, Mingus made extensive use of the piano. “I never really understood the bass until I started working out harmonies and other things on the piano,” explained Mingus as quoted in *Mingus: A Critical Biography*. “Then I came to regard the fingerboard of the bass like a piano fingerboard.” Performing in Lloyd Reese’s rehearsal band and a unit led by Al Adams, Mingus performed with other young aspiring jazz musicians such as saxophonist Dexter Gordon, trumpeter Ernie Royal, and drummer Chico Hamilton.

In 1942 Mingus joined the band of New Orleans clarinetist Barney Bigard, and a year later went on the road with the band of jazz legend Louis Armstrong. After his stint with Armstrong, he began a period of study under Herman Rheinshagen, a former member of the New York Philharmonic. Mingus eventually set out to compose his own works, much as Duke Ellington had done.

Though he displayed an admirable attempt to master the school of Ellingtonian composition, Mingus’s early music had yet to exhibit the individual genius of his later work. As Brian Priestley pointed out in his work, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, “It must be safely assumed that he was starting to copy the simpler sounding charts from popular records to add to the stock arrangements [Buddy] Collette acquired, and was studying them to see how they worked and how they could be

successfully amended.”

On May 15, 1953 Mingus and Roach, along with Charlie Parker and pianist Bud Powell, appeared at Massey Hall in Toronto, Canada. Mingus recorded the performance from the bandstand and, after re-dubbing many of his bass parts, released it as the Debut album *Jazz at Massey Hall*. During the same year, Mingus and Roach organized a “Jazz Workshop” concert series at the Putman Central Club in Brooklyn, and two years later formed a quintet, the Charles Mingus Workshop.

In an era when most jazz musicians sought to perform music rooted in the Parker-Gillespie bebop school, Mingus’s interest in African American folk and religious music inspired unique musical concepts. As a modernist who respected earlier jazz and blues traditions, Mingus drew upon traditional music as a rich repository of inspiration, rather than a source to recreate in strict imitation. “When I was with [Mingus],” recounted Jazz Workshop pianist Mal Waldron in *Hard Bop*, “all the guys were playing very ‘hip’ blues, with all kinds of chords and passing tones. Mingus got rid of that, and made us play like the old, original blues, with only two or three chords, and got a basic feeling.”

The 1955 recording for Debut, *Charles Mingus*, captured his creative aspirations for the Jazz Workshop on a set of adventurous music that included the acclaimed duo with Max Roach “Percussion Discussion. “Though Mingus’s temperament and lack of steady work for his ensembles resulted in a constant shift of personnel, by 1956 he did find a vital and long-time sideman in drummer Dannie Richmond, a former saxophonist whose skills on the drum kit created a brilliant balance with Mingus’s bass.

## **Selected discography**

*Minor Intrusions*, Bethlehem, 1954.

*Charles Mingus*, Prestige, 1955.

*Pithecanthropus Erectus*, Atlantic, 1956.

*Passions of a Man*, Atlantic, 1956.

*East Coasting*, Bethlehem, 1957.

*The Clown*, Atlantic, 1957.

*Tijuana Moods*, RCA, 1957.

*Dynasty*, Columbia, 1959.

*Ah Um*, Columbia, 1959.

*Blues and Roots*, Atlantic, 1960.

*Mingus Revisited*, Polygram, 1960.

*Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus*, MCA/Impulse!, 1963.

*The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, MCA/Impulse!, 1963.

*Mingus Plays Piano*, MCA/Impulse!, 1963.

*Reincarnation of a Lovebird*, Prestige.

*Let My Children Hear Music*, Columbia, 1972.

*Changes One*, Atlantic, 1974.

*Changes Two*, Atlantic, 1975.

*Cumbia and Jazz Fusion*, Atlantic, 1976.

*Three or Four Shades of Blue*, Atlantic, 1977.

## **With others**

*Red Norvo Trio*, Savoy.

*Lionel Hampton and His Orchestra (1946-1947)*, Decca.



*Charlie Parker, Jazz Perennial, Verve.*

*The Quintet: Jazz At Massey Hall, Debut, (with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Max Roach).*

*Duke Ellington Money Jungle, Blue Note.*

*Thad Jones, Debut.*

Subject of the 1966 documentary film *Mingus*, by Tom Reichman.

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## The best of Charles Mingus

### Track List

Charles Mingus – The Best Of Double Bass (History of Jazz) [Jazz Legend Masterpieces] [00:00](#) Charles Mingus – Bass-ically Speaking (1953) [03:53](#) Charles Mingus – Bass-ically Speaking (Alternate Take 1) (1953) [07:48](#) Charles Mingus – All The Things You Are In C Sharp (Alternate) (1955) [17:34](#) Charles Mingus – A Foggy Day (Rare Live Take) (1955) [22:57](#) Charles Mingus – Jump Monk (1955) [29:39](#)

Charles Mingus – Bass-ically Speaking (Alternate Take 3) (1953) [33:12](#) Charles Mingus – Septemberly (1955) [40:03](#) Charles Mingus – Haitian Fight Song (1955) [45:06](#) Charles Mingus – Perdido (1953) [52:44](#) Charles Mingus – Work Song (1955) [58:56](#) Charles Mingus – I'll Remember April (1955) [01:11:56](#) Charles Mingus – Salt Peanuts (1953) [01:19:18](#)

Charles Mingus – All The Things You Are In C Sharp (1955) [01:26:01](#)

Charles Mingus – Jump Monk (Alternate) (1955) [01:37:41](#)  
Charles Mingus – Bass-ically Speaking (Alternate Take 2) (1953) [01:41:30](#) Charles Mingus – Love Chant (1955) [01:48:53](#)  
Charles Mingus – Lady Bird (1955) [01:54:45](#) Charles Mingus – Untitled Blues (1953) [01:57:19](#) Charles Mingus – Percussion Discussion (1955) [02:05:48](#) Charles Mingus – Hot House (1953) [02:14:51](#) Charles Mingus – Drums (1955) [02:20:17](#) Charles Mingus – Serenade In Blue (1955)