“KASPLASH! SLURPLOP... KPLUNK!” Charles Mingus’s Sound Effects and the Politics of Humor

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Abstract

In his autobiography, Beneath the Underdog, jazz musician Charles Mingus recounts his hatred of being ignored during his bass solos. When it was finally his turn to enter the foreground, suddenly musicians and audience members alike found drinks, food, conversations, and everything else more important.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Comics, Gender



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In his autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, jazz musician Charles Mingus recounts his hatred of being ignored during his bass solos. When it was finally his turn to enter the foreground, suddenly musicians and audience members alike found drinks, food, conversations, and everything else more important. However, this small, and somewhat ironic, anecdote of Mingus's relationship with the jazz community has now become a foreshadowing of his current status in sound studies–but no longer! This series re/hears, re/sounds and re/mixes the contributions of Mingus for his ingenious approach to jazz performance and composition as well as his far-reaching theorizations of sound in relation to liberation and social equality, all in honor of the 60th anniversary of Mingus's sublimely idiosyncratic album *Mingus Ah Um* this month. In the third piece of this series, Jessica Teague grapples with Mingus's 1957 Atlantic recording of "The Clown." Her analysis reveals one of Mingus's most critical questions: Is the only way to escape exploitation to exploit another, or worse yet, yourself? You can catch up with the full series by clicking **here. –Guest Editor Earl Brooks**

When jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus first set out to write his memoirs in the mid-1950s he told his wife Judy that he "wanted a chance to write about the true jazz scene that has made our *masters* millions and taken the most famed to their penniless graves as the only escape from the invisible chains on black jazz as an art" (Santoro 175). By the time *Beneath the Underdog* saw publication nearly two decades later in 1971, it was considerably slimmed down from the 800+ page manuscript Mingus had produced. Financially strained and evicted from his downtown loft, Mingus hoped that the book would be a best seller and offer economic freedom from the music industry.

But as many have noted, *Beneath the Underdog* is not your typical jazz autobiography (see Krin Gabbard, Nichole Rustin-Paschal, Gene Santoro, and Daniel Stein). Here, Mingus rejects standard notions of the self declaring in the first sentence of his book: "In other words, I am three." By writing in a mode that wavers between the lurid world of popular pulp-heroes and psychological high-modernism, Mingus's autobiography (like his music) treads a slender line between clowning and critique.

In one of the most infamous scenes from *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus hyperbolically describes having intercourse with twenty-three prostitutes over the course of one night in Tijuana, Mexico. The incident follows the breakup of his marriage with his first wife Barbara and his affair with Nesa Morgan, the wife of a club owner. Recounting his superhuman exploits in the language of the comic book, Mingus turns what might have been a display of his sexual prowess into a clowning circus act, complete with zany sound effects and an off-kilter sense of rhythm. It's a scene that simultaneously reinforces the stereotype of the African American male's hypersexuality and deflates it with comedy:

> *KASPLASH! SLURPLOP!*
>
> *"Me, señor!"*
>
> *KPLUNK!*
>
> *"No! Me, sir!"*
>
> *SPLATT*
>
> *"You like fooke?"*
>
> *"Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty!"*
>
> *SPASHOOSH!*
>
> *"Two dollars, sir!"*
>
> *(Beneath the Underdog 176-177)*

There is a certain ambiguity to the poolside scene. Mingus the narrator is notably absent and the action proceeds without any visual clues—he gives the reader only fragments of dialogue that alternate between the prostitutes selling their wares and the side conversation between Mingus and his friend Hickey, who comments upon his sexual performance. What is more, the onomatopoetic sound effects employed are demonstrably silly and absurd. There are no moans or sighs of ecstasy here—each act is punctuated by a "BLAM! BLAM!" (178). Sex is transactional and performative for Mingus, but not pleasurable.

The pulpy, comic book quality of the Tijuana scene makes Mingus a superhuman like a character from *The Fantastic Four*, but it also makes him into a two-dimensional cartoon. This undercutting of the self and the performative body characterizes Mingus's concept of the fractured self of the black jazz musician—a theme he takes up in his music as well as his writing (e.g. "Self-Portrait in Three Colors" from *Mingus Ah Um*). Interestingly, Mingus's affinity for comics would surface again and in 1966 he collaborated with African American illustrator Gene Bilbrew to create a comic strip-style advertisement for the Charles Mingus Record Club that appeared in the *Village Voice*.



Cropped image from Dangerous Minds via Stupefaction. Click there for full strip.

Biographers have argued that Mingus included these likely fictionalized sex scenes as a way to sell more books and evade the exploitative economics of the music industry. However, the comic book sound effects that render Mingus's sexuality humorously exaggerated comes at the expense of Latinx women. Despite having grown up in a multi-ethnic community in Los Angeles, his representation of the voices of the Mexican prostitutes flattens their identities and plays upon ethnic stereotypes. With each "Sí señor," the women are presented as both sexually promiscuous and submissive. Mingus's relationships with women were fraught, and his anxieties about his own sexuality were inevitably tied up with race. His tendency to treat women as sex-objects is similarly on display in the comic strip above, in which a suggestively-attired white female hipster acts as a narc, exposing a bootleg record dealer. "Uh, you got anything by Charlie Mingus? Uh-h, y'know, like uh... under the counter?" she asks, dripping innuendo.

And yet, these cringe-inducing scenes are often complicated by Mingus's use of pimping and prostitution as metaphors for exploitation throughout his *Beneath the Underdog*. At various points he portrays himself as both prostitute and pimp, both masculine and feminine. When his friend Hickey seems to question Mingus's extreme behavior, he responds: "In this white man's society what else have I got" (178). Even in moments that indulge in humor, such as the Tijuana scene, *Beneath the Underdog* darkly implies a pimp or be pimped world.

Mingus would become known for writing music with a political edge—one might think of "Fables of Faubus" from *Mingus Ah Um* (1959)—but perhaps the closest musical relative to the satirical Tijuana scene is Mingus's 1957 Atlantic recording of "The Clown." In the liner notes for the album, penned by Nat Hentoff, Mingus describes that as he wrote the tune, he realized that it had two parts, and started to imagine it as the story of the clown. He then told the story to radio celebrity Jean Shepherd and allowed Shepherd to improvise the telling of the story during the recording. As Mingus described it to Hentoff, the story was

> *...about a clown, who tried to please people like most jazz musicians do, but whom nobody liked until he was dead. My version of the story ended with his blowing his brains out with the people laughing and finally being pleased because they thought it was part of the act. I liked the way Jean changed the ending; leaves more up to the listener.*

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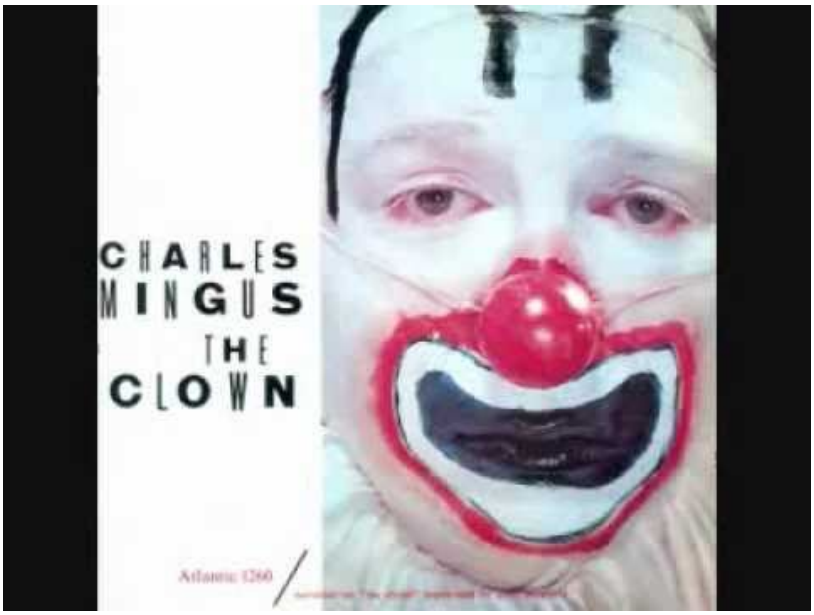

https://youtu.be/frf6E8kVQY8

Like the Tijuana story, "The Clown" also incorporates sound effects, and it opens with the hollow laughter of men and women in a nightclub. As auditory phenomena, sound effects are especially interesting because of their artificiality—they are performances *of* sound. In a cinematic or radio context, sound effects typically amplify an action. Even when sounded, rather than written, they seem to act onomatopoetically. Thus, the addition of the laugh track on "The Clown" is both performance and commentary.

But part of the genius of Mingus's composition is the way he incorporates the logic of the sound effect into the music itself. The vocal quality of his bass, the wah-wahs of the horns, and the rim shots on the drums are but one piece of this totalizing sonic landscape. "The Clown" borrows stylistic elements from other recognizable genres (like, circus music) to evoke the playfully comedic and absurd, but a second, more serious and ironic story of exploitation runs concurrently and undercuts the first narrative's simplicity. On the one hand, we hear the more jaunty, carnivalesque melody of the trombone (Jimmy Knepper) and the tenor saxophone (Shafi Hadi) that lilts in 6/8, but that melody is punctuated by moments of dissonance and *free* playing under the narration—stretching the space between comedy and tragedy. The question he seems to ask in both the Tijuana story from *Beneath the Underdog* and in "The Clown" is essentially the same: Is the only way to escape exploitation to exploit another, or worse yet, yourself?



Close up from the cover of Charles Mingus – The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady (1963)

Black musicians who pushed back were often called "angry," even as music didn't always sound that way. One might think of the contrast between seemingly jaunty, upbeat rhythm of Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" and its devastating lyrics. It is the sound of political and existential crisis. Both "The Clown," and the Tijuana scene indicate Mingus's heightened awareness that, as much as he was known for his music, he was also known for his explosive behavior at performances—the "angry man of jazz." As Eric Porter has pointed out, Mingus's "irrational behavior appealed to audiences at a moment when many members of American society (of whom Beat writers were emblematic) were looking to the oppositional aspects of black culture for solutions to their dissatisfaction with consumerism, conservative politics, repressed sexuality, constrictive gender roles, and other social ills" (130-131). 1957, the year Mingus recorded *The Clown,* was the same year that Norman Mailer published his infamous essay "The White Negro" and Jack Kerouac published *On the Road*. It was also the year that Governor Faubus of Arkansas attempted to halt the integration of Central High School in Little Rock.

Subtle they may be, but the use of comic sound effects in works like *Beneath the Underdog* and "The Clown" highlight the absurdity of the roles black jazz musicians had come to play within American culture. In worrying the line between the comic and the tragic, the explosive and the reflective, Charles Mingus refused to concede to the identity that had been shaped by the music industry, by the press, and by institutionalized racism.

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Featured Image: Charles Mingus 1976, Courtesy of the Wikimedia Commons, Colorized by SO!

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