Mingus Ah Um (1959) and An Ethics of Care in Jazz

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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, Identity, Jazz



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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–featuring myself (**Earl Brooks**), **Brittnay Proctor**, **Jessica Teague**, and **Nichole Rustin-Paschal**— 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 second installment of

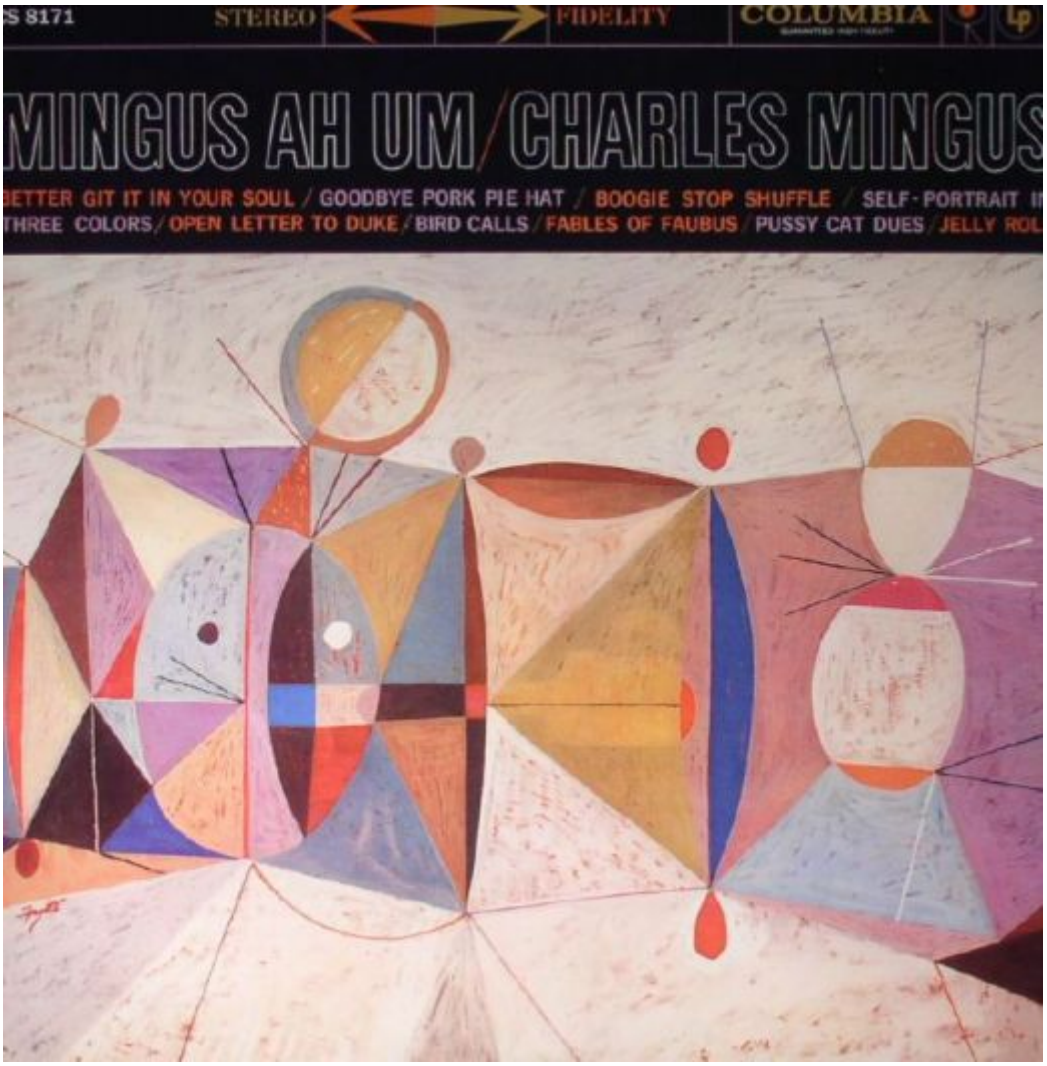
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this series, **Brittnay Proctor** challenges us to view Mingus through the discourse of ethical care. She argues that we have often "confused Mingus's care for the future of jazz music and black jazz artists for an ornery and grouchy disposition." You can catch up with the full series by clicking **here.–Guest Editor Earl Brooks**

> *One thing I'd like to clear up a little more in case I haven't is the fact that all those eras in the history of jazz, like Dixieland, Chicago, Moten swing, all those styles, man, are the same and as important as classical music styles are. —Charles Mingus, "Avant-Garde and Tradition" in Mingus Speaks (2013)*
>
> *My present working methods use very little written material. I 'write' compositions on mental score paper, then I lay out the composition part by part to the musicians. I play them the 'framework' on piano so that they are all familiar with my interpretation and feeling and with the scale and chord progressions to be used...I can keep my own compositional flavor in the pieces and yet allow the musicians more individual freedom in the creation of their group lines and solos. –Charles Mingus quoted by Diane Dorr-Dorynek, Original Liner Notes, Mingus Ah Um (1959)*

Released in 1959 in the same orbit as Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* (August 1959) and Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (October 1959), Charles Mingus's *Mingus Ah Um* (September 1959) showcased Mingus's range both as a composer and bassist. Intimate both in its sound and session composition (only seven sessions players worked on the album), the album provides a purview into Mingus's commitment to the idiomatic ("interconnected") and collaborative nature of the black jazz tradition and the stakes of/for black art and artists. His investment in jazz's black idiomatic structure stood at odds with the increasing importance of the singular jazz man to the marketing of jazz music.

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Works like *Mingus Ah Um* prompt listeners to listen attentively to collaboration and collaborative efforts, both in the setting of a jazz ensemble/collective and in the historicity of black (jazz) men caring for one another. While the imposition of white gender prerogatives sometimes foreclosed intimate, homosocial (same-gender, social) relationships between black jazz men that revolved around what Christina Sharpe terms in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as an "ethics of care," *Mingus Ah Um* is not only an ode to black jazz ancestors and elders, but performative of Mingus's deep *care* about the black jazz tradition and its futurity. (131)

In histories of jazz, Charles Mingus is often characterized as volatile and dismissive of young black jazz artists. His purported critique of neo-jazz movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s, like the free jazz ("The New Thing")/avant-garde jazz movement, narratively put him at odds with emerging jazz artists like Ornette Coleman and Miles Davis. But as demonstrated by *Mingus Ah Um*, Mingus profoundly cared about black jazz men and the future of black jazz music. Given these histories, what would it mean for listeners to not dismiss Mingus altogether, but hold in tension his anxieties, deemed dogmatic and peremptory, with his often *careful* and honorific sonic confabulation with black jazz men? How does re-listening to *Mingus Ah Um* make us empathetic to Mingus's pursuit in preserving a waning black jazz tradition that was ever increasingly ridiculed and mocked (by way of anti-blackness) for its presumed anti-intellectualism and placation to

whiteness? The undercurrent of Mingus's care is not always expressed in histories or interviews, which begs the question: what is rooted in, yet exceeds the autobiographical, when we *listen*?



https://youtu.be/aII3528wwyw

When listening to *Mingus Ah Um* the album's ethics of care might be heard most explicitly on tracks like "Fables of Faubus," a protest song in the most righteous sense, aimed at Orval Faubus, the former Arkansas governor who deployed the state's national guard to barricade Central High School in Little Rock from the threat of integration (which is also to say the threat of miscegenation). A tune steeped in dissent and once with lyrics that made Columbia ask Mingus to re-record the tune: "Boo! Nazi Fascist supremists!/Boo! Ku Klux Klan (With your Jim Crow plan)." ("Original Faubus Fables," *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, 1960)



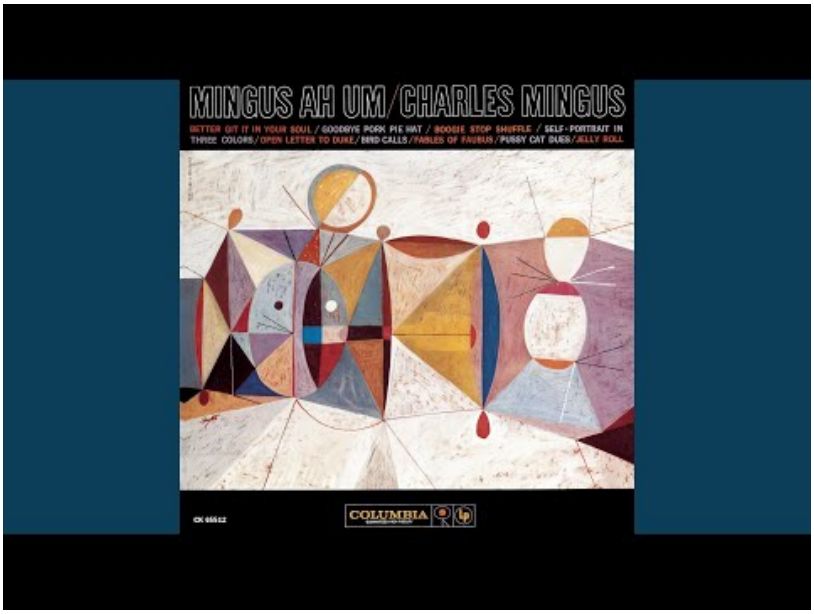
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Listening to the cluster of "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," "Open Letter to Duke," and "Jelly Roll" (it has been written that "Bird Calls" was composed in honor of Charlie Parker, but Mingus composed the

song to sound like birds) you realize these tracks are his oeuvre to the "eras in the history of jazz, like Dixieland, Chicago, Moten swing." (See first epigraph) The tracks are less about mimicry and reproducing the exact sound of Lester Young, Jelly Roll Morton, or Duke Ellington, but are rooted in Mingus's ethics of care. With these works, he demonstrates how black jazz men enabled him to invent and play his own idiom of jazz. But most importantly, Mingus uses these compositions to argue that Young, Morton, and Ellington should not be treated as disposable or as an obstruction to "harder" or more radical avant-garde jazz sounds and forms. For Mingus, without Duke, Jelly Roll, or Lester, there is no Mingus, or jazz for that matter.

https://youtu.be/Jyyut4XJj3M

"Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," a tribute to tenor saxophonist Lester Young, the oft cited creator of "cool jazz," is somber in tone, but masterfully weds mournful playing by way of saxophonists Booker Ervin, Shafi Hadi, and John Handy with Young's confident, melodic, and smooth style of play. A buoyant, bouncy encomium is forgone for a tranquil, cool, serenade. The song does not reference Young in name but is deeply personal; Young was slated to play on *Mingus Ah Um* but died shortly before recording sessions started. The song narrates the kinship between Mingus and Young, as well as, the devastating loss to Mingus and black jazz communitas. Sensually euphonious, listeners feel spatially close, nearly inside of the track. The physically intimate resonances of the song make it undoubtedly, a Lester Young track on a Mingus album.



https://youtu.be/JnEQm8mVVZA

"Jelly Roll" pays homage to Jelly Roll Morton, the founder of New Orleans Dixeland jazz. Embodying a slow drag emblematic of Jelly Roll Morton's play and compositions, the song revolves around the bounce of the trombone and ragtime play of the piano. His version of "boogie-woogie" ("Boogie" = black rent parties of the twentieth century) is characterized by a lower register bassline (a left-hand bass figure) and leisurely tempo (appositional to hard bop). The dedication to Jelly Roll Morton is also honorific of jazz's history as an "unacceptable" form of popular music; "Jelly Roll" both in name and sound alludes to the black sexual subcultures and vernacular that were once an integral part of jazz music.



https://youtu.be/lf2yT0XqaUA

"Open Letter to Duke" is a salute to Mingus's greatest musical influence, Duke Ellington. The bounce and accelerated trot of the track reminds listeners that jazz music was once dance music. A piano solo that leads into woodwinds, marks flight and movement, while Mingus's bass play resembles Ellington's use of Afro-Latinx rhythm's later in his career; an "ethnic" turn ("Spanish tinge") in Ellington's big band sound and an allusion to the diasporic connection between black music in the U.S. and the Caribbean. Similar to Duke Ellington's body of work and composition, the sum of the track is greater than its parts.

We have often confused Mingus's care for the future of jazz music and black jazz artists for an ornery and grouchy disposition. He was quite cognizant of the fraught relationship black jazz artists had with the financialization of black performance, writing in his autobiography *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus* that the music industry was a "system those that own us use. They make us famous and give us names—the King of this, the Count of that, the Duke of *what*! We die broke anyhow—and sometimes I think I dig death more than I dig facing this white world." (9)



still from Mingus Sextet live in Europe 1964, Eric Dolphy on alto sax, bass clarinet and flute, Johnny Coles on trumpet, Clifford Jordan on tenor sax, Jaki Byard on piano and Dannie Richmond on drums.

Likewise, Mingus's "working methods" for the album were deeply embedded in an ethics of care. As a bandleader, his compositions were structural, but tailored to each players style of play. What does it mean for the bandleader to care about the ensemble as much as, if not more, than himself? For example, John Handy "met Mingus in December [1958] at a jam session at the Five Spot…the musicians on the stand thought he looked too square. Mingus asked them to give him a chance to play, and they did. A day later Mingus asked him to join his group." (Original Liner Notes, *Mingus Ah Um*) How does *care* and assistance change how we understand Mingus and his relationship to young, black jazz men?

What Charles Mingus (maybe) understood most or at least more than his contemporaries, is that you cannot "think" or intellectualize away the conditions of black life, as Christina Sharpe reminds us, "all we have [is care]" (131). For each other, in the most intramural (situated or done within community.) Mingus's compositions, especially on *Mingus Ah Um*, reflects this ethics. He composed pieces in a way that allowed young, passed over, and unacknowledged black jazz men to shine.

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Featured Image: Still from Mingus 1959 by the BBC, colorized by *SO!*

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