

BLACK IDENTITY IN THE 1950s JAZZ COMPOSITIONS
OF CHARLES MINGUS

by

SCOTT MICHAEL STROVAS, B.M.

A THESIS

IN

MUSIC THEORY

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

Approved

Matthew Santa, Ph.D.
Chairperson of the Committee

Michael Berry, Ph.D.

Peter Martens, Ph.D.

Accepted

John Borrelli
Dean of the Graduate School

August 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Matthew Santa, and to my committee members, Dr. Michael Berry and Dr. Peter Martens for their valuable insight and support throughout this process. I also wish to thank Dr. Christopher Smith for helping to shape the course of this project early in its inception, and Alan Shinn, Will Strieder, and Dr. Mary Jeanne van Appledorn for their guidance throughout my years at Texas Tech. Each of these mentors has been a true inspiration for me in their instructional abilities, in their dedication to their students, and in their continuous academic pursuit of music.

I am forever grateful for my parents, Denny and Carolyn Strovas, whose unrelenting support and sincere interest in all of my musical and academic endeavors continue to inspire my ambitions. For the same reasons I am grateful for my brother, Shawn, and to many extended family members. Finally, I owe my health and happiness to my wife, Karen Beth, who completes and inspires me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF MUSIC EXAMPLES	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	1
Introduction	1
Previous Scholarly Contributions	3
Mingus’s Early Life from Childhood to the 1950s	6
Growing up as a Minority Among Minorities	7
The Young Musician	8
Influence of the Gospel Church	12
Influence of Duke Ellington	13
Early Professional Career	14
New York, Debut, and the Jazz Workshop	15
II. MINGUS AND THE THIRD STREAM	18
Introduction	18
“Eclipse” (1953)	21
“All the Things You C#” (1955)	24
“Septemberly” (1955)	32
Conclusion	37

III.	MINGUS AND BLACK NATIONALISM	38
	Introduction	38
	“Pithecanthropus Erectus” (1956)	40
	The Oppositional Design of “Pithecanthropus Erectus”	41
	The Oppositional Design of “Pithecanthropus Erectus”: Mingus’s Conflicting Aesthetics	43
	Experimental Attributes of “Pithecanthropus Erectus”	51
	Conclusion	53
IV.	MINGUS AND THE ROOTS OF JAZZ	55
	Introduction	55
	“Better Git It In Your Soul” (1959)	55
	“Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting”	58
	Conclusion	61
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

ABSTRACT

This thesis profiles three aesthetic approaches of jazz composer and bassist Charles Mingus through an exploration of his most central and illuminating 1950s compositions. More specifically, it unpacks the role of certain musical elements as they relate to each compositional identity, and thus, to the deeper contextual influences behind each work. Mingus's compositional approaches reflect the social, political, and economic environment faced by most all mid-twentieth century African-American jazz musicians; subsequently, his aesthetic transitions are a microcosm of what occurred in the larger body of African-American jazz.

LIST OF MUSIC EXAMPLES

2.1	“Eclipse” Lyrics	22
2.2	Rachmaninoff, Prelude in C# Minor (mm. 1-7)	25
2.3	“All the Things You C#” (Introduction)	26
2.4	Three-Note Motive	27
2.5	“All the Things You C# (Theme and Counterpoint)	28
2.6	Chorus Structure of “All the Things You C#”	30
2.7a	“September in the Rain” (mm. 1-8)	33
2.7b	“Tenderly” (mm. 1-8)	33
2.8	“Septemberly” (Texture 1)	34
2.9	“Tenderly” (mm. 9-16)	35
2.10	“Septemberly” (Texture 3 Juxtaposition)	36
3.1	“Pithecanthropus Erectus” (A Section)	45
3.2	“Pithecanthropus Erectus” (First Occurrence of Section B)	50
4.1	“Better Git It In Your Soul”	57
4.2	38-Bar Chorus Structure of “Better Git It In Your Soul”	60

LIST OF TABLES

2.1	Appearance of the Three-Note Motive in Improvised Choruses	31
3.1	Oppositional Forces in “Pithecanthropus Erectus”	42

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Introduction

The career of Charles Mingus is an excellent lens through which to view the reactions of African-American jazz musicians towards racial injustice in mid-twentieth century American society. He became known as a virtuoso bassist in the late 1940s and early 1950s while working with many notable musicians. Performing alongside Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Red Norvo, Art Tatum, Bud Powell, and Charlie Parker, Mingus was in an ideal position not only to gather a tremendously strong vocabulary and wide stylistic foundation in the language and performance of jazz, but also to observe the lives and hardships of other African-American musicians with whom he worked and shared similar circumstances. By the early 1960s, he was considered one of jazz's most innovative and talented composers; in addition, he had become an outspoken and often militant social commentator.

A music industry in which racial inequality played a significant role shaped the careers of many African-American jazz musicians. Studio work, radio orchestras, and jobs associated with the performance of classical music, for example, were reserved most often for white musicians, who also reaped the financial benefits of wider critical acclaim in the mainstream media. While jazz provided African Americans an avenue in which they could make a living in music, widespread recognition and financial stability was often dependent on their willingness to conform to the role of the "entertainer." The innovators of bebop reacted against this stereotype, and strove to depict themselves as

serious musicians capable of producing an intellectual art far beyond the constraints traditionally reinforced by the predominately white radio and recording industries. Their success in revolutionizing the music sparked in the African-American jazz community a modernist approach to innovation. New forms of African American-led jazz carried explicit sociopolitical associations, and adopted several stylistic identities ultimately manifested in the 1960s formation of free jazz.

Charles Mingus bridged the musical and contextual gap between bebop and free jazz. In what Todd Jenkins describes as “a long period of experimentation and soul searching,” his 1950s compositional approach progressed through distinct stylistic identities.¹ Like the originators of bebop, who transcended the artistic limitations created by previously conceived notions of jazz as entertainment, Mingus first presented himself as a serious musician. Contending that “all music is one,” he fused the elements of Western-European music and jazz in the manner of the ‘third stream’ (though Gunther Schuller did not coin the term until 1957).² Motivated by the burgeoning civil-rights climate of the mid 1950s, Mingus then started composing music with a politically-charged consciousness. He increasingly relied on African-American aesthetics to convey his radical political views in works such as “Pithecanthropus Erectus” (1956), a composition which foreshadowed later developments in avant-garde and free jazz. By the end of the decade, Mingus infused many of his works with the attributes of slave work

¹ Todd Jenkins, *I Know What I Know: The Music of Charles Mingus* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 2.

² Ralph J. Gleason, “Charles Mingus: A Thinking Musician,” in *Down Beat: 60 Years of Jazz* ed. Frank Alkyer, 77-78 (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1995).

songs and spirituals, blues, and gospel in a Black-Nationalistic celebration of the African-American musical tradition.

In this thesis, I profile these stages through an exploration of Mingus's most central and illuminating 1950s compositions. More specifically, I unpack the role of certain musical elements as they relate to each compositional identity, and thus, to the deeper contextual influences behind each work. Mingus's compositional approaches reflect the social, political, and economic environment faced by all African-American jazz musicians; subsequently, his aesthetic transitions are a microcosm of what occurred in the larger body of African-American jazz.

Previous Scholarly Contributions

This project is inspired first and foremost by the work of Eric Porter, who, like other scholars, chronicles the career of Mingus, but more significantly describes his “shifting aesthetic philosophy that was a product of a continual struggle to reconcile his music, his identity, and his position in the society in which he lived.”³ Drawing on a wide range of subject matter – such as Mingus's correspondences with jazz critics published in different issues of *Down Beat* magazine; his musical experiences; his formation of both Debut Records and the Jazz Workshop; the fallout in the African-American musical community following white pianist Dave Brubeck's success, and the role of mass media in sponsoring white musicians with little regard to African-American

³ Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 103.

innovators; his autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*;⁴ and most significantly, the wide range of self expression found in his compositions – Porter analyzes the vast contexts behind Mingus’s ultimate objective, simply to gain respect as an African-American musician, as integral to shaping his transformational artistic visions.⁵ This thesis is an extension of Porter’s assessment, and more clearly defines the shifts in Mingus’s compositional approach through musical analysis.

That Mingus’s compositions were deeply influenced by his social, political, and racial views is widely acknowledged. Analyzing post World War II social contexts, music in the struggle for civil rights, and Mingus’s personal experiences as an African American, Desmond King contends that the racial and political presence in Mingus’s work was unavoidable.⁶ Salim Washington and Charles Hersch focus on Mingus’s career between 1959 and 1964, and rightly so.⁷ During these years, which mark the production of such albums as *Blues and Roots* and *Mingus Ah Um* (both released in 1959), *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (1960), *Money Jungle* (with Duke Ellington, 1962), and *Right Now* (1964), and were capped with a successful European tour, Mingus experienced his greatest critical acclaim and most rewarding commercial

⁴ Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

⁵ Porter, 101-2.

⁶ Desmond King, “‘The World’s Against Me as a Black Man’: Charles Mingus and Segregated America,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, no. 1 (March 2000): 54-77.

⁷ Salim Washington, “All the Things You Could Be by Now: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* ed. by Brent Hayes Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Robert O’Meally, 27-49 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Charles Hersch, “Let Freedom Ring: Free Jazz and African-American Politics,” *Cultural Critique* 32 (Winter 1995-1996): 97-123.

accomplishments. These scholars recognize Mingus's role in shaping the landscape of jazz avant-gardism – a music with explicitly political and symbolic ideals associated with absolute freedom – beginning with his recording of “Pithecanthropus Erectus,” but correlating more directly with the performance practices of the Jazz Workshop between the early and mid 1960s. Their investigations are essential to understanding Mingus's career during this time period and defining his mature compositional identity: the fruition of his 1950s shifting aesthetic.

Of three biographies I found to be particularly useful in completing my study, the most recent by Jenkins boasts an impressive and comprehensive account of Mingus's recording career.⁸ He not only lists the dates, musicians, and record label associated with each track from “Texas Hop” (1945) to *Something Like a Bird* and *Me, Myself an Eye* (both released in 1978), he provides thorough descriptions of many of the performances. While the language of these surveys is directed towards an audience without formal training in music, Jenkins provides valuable insights on the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic texture of each work, on important stylistic, motivic, and quoted materials in the composed and improvised music, and on the larger aesthetic and contextual associations of each performance.

⁸ Jenkins, 2006; Gene Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Brian Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (London: Quartet Books, 1982).

Mingus's Early Life from Childhood to the 1950s

To understand the vast complexity of his compositional output – Mingus's works span from classical to jazz, latin, and pop/rock, and some resist categorization – one must recognize that, to Mingus, music was the “the individual's means of expressing his deepest and innermost feelings and emotions.”⁹ He used it to project his passions, to vent his frustrations, and to reflect on events in both his personal life and in the wider social contexts of an America struggling with race relations. Many of his most well-known works, such as the reminiscent “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” the politically-charged “Fables of Faubus,” and the swinging, gospel-influenced “Better Git It in Your Soul” (each released on *Mingus Ah Um* in 1959) demonstrate sorrow, outrage, and joy, or venerate his predecessors – just a small sample of the vast sentiments that pervade his entire musical canon. John Handy, a saxophonist and former sideman of Mingus, acknowledges “the spirit in which he did things...and the willingness to expose [his] raw self, soul, emotions...like he'd open up his chest and say, ‘this is what's happening.’”¹⁰ Wynton Marsalis reiterates: “The most important thing is, a lot of times in his music, he's trying to relate it to something human.”¹¹ That Mingus was tormented emotionally, as shown by his two separate psychiatric confinements, very well may have contributed to the uniqueness of his work; his restless aesthetic philosophies were likely a result of his unrelenting internal struggle with his own place in the world around him.

⁹ Gleason, 77.

¹⁰ *Triumph of the Underdog*. Dir. Don McGlynn. Shanachie Entertainment, 1997.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Growing Up as a Minority Among Minorities

Charles Mingus Jr. was born on April 22, 1922 in Nogales, Arizona. Both of his parents were biracial – his father was half-white, half-black, and his mother, who died before Mingus turned one, was half-black, half-Chinese. Consequently, Mingus had exceptionally light skin, which, for the young boy growing up in the racially mixed Watts area of Los Angeles, became an early source of dissociation.¹² The target of prejudice by darker-skinned African Americans, and lighter-skinned Latino-Americans and Caucasians, Mingus spent his youth as a pariah, and often associated with other outcasts from different ethnic backgrounds. Racial conflict in his home proved even more confusing for the young boy struggling with race. Half-black, half-Native American, his stepmother was dark-skinned. But his father had fair skin and blue eyes, and often disowned his black heritage. Prejudiced and abusive, Charles Mingus Sr. taught his children that they were better than other African Americans because their skin was lighter. Mingus recalls the first time he was called “nigger” (narrative in third person): “My boy was shocked. Daddy’d warned him about playing with ‘them little black nigger yaps’ down the street, so how could he be one too?”¹³ Mingus contemplated on these early racial conflicts his entire life, making race the center of focus in a number of compositions. Former tenor saxophone sideman Jerome Richardson remarks, “He was knowledgeable about what was going on in the country with regard to race relations, and

¹² Jenkins, 5.

¹³ Mingus, 26.

he never would back down from it.”¹⁴ Mingus originally titled his autobiography *Memoirs of a Half-Schitt-Colored Nigger*, derisively addressing his multiracial ethnicity; he also declared, “I am Charles Mingus: half-black man, yellow man, half-yellow, not even yellow, not even white enough to pass for nothin’ but black, not light enough to be called white. I claim that I am a Negro.”¹⁵

Mingus’s experiences with prejudice were not limited to the small scope of his neighborhood. In many ways, race relations in Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s were comparable to that of the Deep South: white homeowners associations, reinforced by the Ku Klux Klan’s intimidations of African-American families attempting to move into their neighborhoods, sought residential segregation; public offices and facilities were segregated; the majority of African Americans were employed as unskilled workers; and a Jim Crow mentality pervaded public transportation, restaurants, cinemas, clothing stores, and hotels, as African Americans were limited to denigrating service if served at all.¹⁶ This was the racial climate in which Mingus spent his youth. His struggles with race are ultimately projected in his vast musical output, which when taken as a whole, like Mingus’s ethnicity, is unclassifiable.

The Young Musician

Race was also present in Mingus’s musical journey from its inception. In his efforts to maintain a “respectable” lighter-skinned household, Charles Mingus Sr. started

¹⁴ *Triumph of the Underdog*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ King, 62-4.

each of his three children in the study of European-classical music. Knowledge of the music signified education and status, and was another way for Mingus Sr. to project his family's superiority over darker-skinned African-Americans. Santoro notes, "Grace wanted to sing, but her father insisted on the violin. Vivian wanted to paint and draw, but Mingus Sr. made her study piano."¹⁷ He purchased his son's first instrument from the Sears catalogue when he was eight. Charles Jr. chose the trombone "because that was the only interesting-looking musical instrument he'd seen up to that time."¹⁸ But poor musical instruction led to early frustrations, and within a few months the trombone was exchanged for a cello.

Mingus was a talented young musician with excellent ears, and though his reading skills were poor, he earned a position in the Los Angeles Jr. Philharmonic. He had aspirations to perform with the Los Angeles Symphony and to write symphonies, ballets, and operas.¹⁹ Nevertheless, his natural musicianship could not overcome the reality that orchestral opportunities for African-American musicians in the 1930s were almost non-existent.²⁰ Experienced musicians who recognized Mingus's abilities tried to inform him about the racial inequalities within the music industry. Mingus recalls a remark made to his father by an African-American violinist: "Why don't you get him a bass? Because at

¹⁷ Santoro, 22.

¹⁸ Mingus, 24.

¹⁹ King, 64.

²⁰ Jenkins, 6.

least a black man can get employment with a bass, because he can play *our* music.”²¹ In high school, this sentiment was reiterated by Buddy Collette and Britt Woodman, older bandmates whom he respected and with whom he would become life-long friends. Collette insisted that classical music was closed to nonwhites, and advised Mingus to “slap that bass and you’ll always be able to get work.”²²

Mingus did switch to the bass and started practicing jazz, but his interest in classical music endured. Years of playing European concert music drew him to the sounds of Strauss’s *Death and Transfiguration*, to the cello works of Debussy and Ravel, and to J.S. Bach, who outlined harmonies that were equivalent to those used in more modern styles and who wrote down his improvisations.²³ Mingus studied primarily with jazz bassist Red Callender, but also with Herman Reinshagen, a former bassist with the New York Philharmonic. He also learned music theory and composition from a well-respected Los Angeles African-American music instructor, Lloyd Reese, who introduced Mingus to the compositions of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and to the advanced harmonic structures used by pianist Art Tatum. Reese later arranged for Mingus to study orchestration with Dimitri Tiomkin, a film-score composer. He composed his first work, “What Love?” in 1939, and recorded his original music for the first time in 1945.

²¹ Quoted in Priestly, 10.

²² Quoted in Santoro, 30.

²³ Santoro, 33.

In his early experiments (which I will examine in Chapter 2) Mingus was “a composer interested above all in incorporating classical elements into jazz.”²⁴ As late as the early 1950s, he revered other jazz musicians who drew upon the European tradition.

Mingus recalls the first time he heard Thad Jones:

I just heard the greatest trumpet player that I’ve heard in this life. He uses all the classical [compositional] techniques, and is the first man to make them swing...He does...the things Diz heard Bird do, and Fats made us think were possible.²⁵

His knowledge of European music also became a source of arrogance for the young jazz bassist, who considered himself more serious than other musicians and often challenged them to prove their musicianship:

I was real snobbish about anybody who didn’t study with Lloyd Reese or go to a conservatory... We had a gig at Jefferson High School to play with [jazz trumpeter] Roy Eldridge and a couple of older guys. And I remember I used to think Roy Eldridge had a cocky attitude. Well, I walked in to him and said, ‘What’s the relative minor of B flat?’ He looked me over. ‘I’m gonna tell you something, nigger. You young punks out here. I’m running into you every time I turn around. You don’t know nothing about me. You don’t know about your own people’s music. I bet you never heard of Coleman Hawkins. I bet you never listened to him. I bet you can’t sing one of his solos.’ (Mingus)²⁶

The encounter left a lasting impression on the young bassist and charged him to take the work of other African-Americans musicians more seriously. At this early point in his career, he was already influenced by the music of Duke Ellington and had experienced gospel music in his stepmother’s church, but he learned to reconceptualize jazz, and to intellectually embrace gospel and the blues. These forms of the music, unlike the

²⁴ Priestly, 65.

²⁵ Quoted in Priestly, 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

European tradition, were rooted in African-American aesthetics, and they would become important components of his compositional approach beginning in the mid to late 1950s.

Influence of the Gospel Church

Before Mingus started playing the bass, his experiences with more traditional African-American musical genres were secondhand. When he was young, his father and stepmother attended separate churches. Mingus most often attended his father's more conservative African Methodist Episcopal Chapel. The church was an African-American extension of the Anglo-Saxon institution, and musically it practiced traditional four-part hymnody. In contrast, Mingus's stepmother occasionally took young Charles to the Holiness Church, which, according to Mingus, was much different than his father's church: "People went into trances and the congregation's response was wilder and more uninhibited than in the Methodist church. The blues was in the Holiness churches – moaning and riffs and that sort of thing between the audience and the preacher."²⁷ The church also exposed the boy to new instruments, where he first took notice of the trombone; but more importantly, it introduced him to the earthy mixture of slave spirituals, blues, and underlying rhythmic structures more closely identified with the African-American musical aesthetic.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

Influence of Duke Ellington

Mingus's first significant jazz influence was the composer and band leader, Duke Ellington. By 1930, Ellington was broadcasting live five nights a week – at least one night nationally – from Harlem's Cotton Club, a gangster-run nightclub which specialized in showcasing the “primitive” African culture for white audiences. The entire club was decorated in southern and African motifs, and the shows were designed to transport the audience “to some far-off, exotic place for an hour of fast entertainment, energetic dancing, skimpy costumes, and unusual music.”²⁸ Ellington's band backed the all-black productions with a blend of original compositions billed as “jungle music,” a commercially attractive, yet extremely critical label. John Hasse notes, “Under the veil of exotica, a songwriter or performer could do all sorts of raucous, bold, unconventional things.”²⁹ Put mildly, the circumstances surrounding Ellington's compositional period at the Cotton Club allowed him to freely experiment with musical texture, form, and orchestration; he had a “workshop” in which to develop a distinct compositional voice.

Accounts vary on exactly when Mingus heard an Ellington broadcast for the first time, but both Jenkins and Priestly claim that it was Ellington's theme, “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo” that sparked Mingus's lifelong admiration of him.³⁰ The work's gut-bucket trumpet growls, haunting reed textures, and arranged instrumental choruses undoubtedly presented a new sound to the impressionable young Mingus who, like Ellington, would

²⁸ John Edward Hasse, *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 106.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Priestly states that Mingus was eight or nine when he heard Duke (Priestly, 6); Jenkins asserts that he was twelve (Jenkins, 6).

continually position himself in circumstances favorable for music experimentation throughout his career. Mingus had few opportunities to perform with his idol. In 1953, he squandered a chance to serve as Ellington's permanent bassist after a notorious racial conflict with another band member, Latino trombonist, Juan Tizol. Ellington and Mingus united again in 1962 to produce *Money Jungle*, a trio album with drummer Max Roach designed to showcase Duke's aptitude as a composer and performer of the avant-garde.

Early Professional Career

In many of his early professional experiences on the west coast, Mingus gained a strong foundation in traditional jazz. He developed his skills alongside Collette and Woodman, and also saxophonist Dexter Gordon and future bandmate Eric Dolphy. In 1942, at the age of twenty, Mingus landed his first big gig in an ensemble led by Barney Bigard, a former Ellington clarinetist, and Kid Ory, one of the first important trombonists of jazz. Soon after, he toured and recorded with Louis Armstrong, but left the group before a series of southern engagements that he refused to play. Mingus continued to perform on the west coast through the 1940s, and even briefly led groups of his own. He gained a reputation as a virtuoso bassist with Lionel Hampton and Red Norvo, but like many other African-American musicians, his career suffered from segregationist practices. Porter notes:

African-American musicians in California had to contend with segregated unions in Los Angeles and San Francisco, which often limited their employment options to small clubs and after-hours joints and effectively kept them out of symphonies, radio orchestras, Hollywood studio work, and better-paying nightclub gigs.³¹

³¹ Porter, 106.

A member in the desegregated branch of Los Angeles's American Federation of Musicians, Mingus fought to integrate the union's other Los Angeles office which denied membership to African Americans. Collette credits his efforts in the late 1940s for the merger of the two branches in 1953, the first of a nationwide integration of the union.³²

New York, Debut, and the Jazz Workshop

Mingus arrived in New York at the end of 1951. Released from Red Norvo's group because he was unable to obtain a local union card (likely because of his race), he struggled to find work and even took a position at the post office. Bebop revolutionary Charlie Parker encouraged him to return to music and employed him intermittently for three years. His first encounters with bebop in the mid 1940s had not impressed the disciple of Ellington, who preferred Johnny Hodges, Duke's altoist, to what he first perceived in Charlie Parker's playing as disorganized.³³ But while on the road with Hampton, Mingus gained a deeper understanding of the radical ideals associated with bebop from trumpeter Fats Navarro, and he identified with its anti-white establishment sentiment. Furthermore, performing with Parker changed his view of the saxophonist, whom he began to revere as an original:

He put something else in there that had another kind of expression...more than just, say, the blues or the pain that the black people have been through. And in fact he brought hope in.... I knew I had an uplift to life from hearing his playing. In fact, I immediately gave up what I believed in, which came from classical and

³² King, 64.

³³ Jenkins, 9; and Priestly, 28.

Duke, and I felt a whole change in my *soul* when I joined up and accepted that I liked Charlie Parker.³⁴

In 1953, Mingus joined Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Max Roach in what was advertised as an all-star concert performance at Toronto's Massey Hall. The occasion not only crystallized Mingus's place among the bebop greats, it marked the last recorded meeting of Parker and Gillespie, and the only recorded gathering of all five musicians.

Mingus issued three volumes of the concert on his independent label, Debut, which he had recently established with Max Roach.³⁵ Their conception of the business was consistent with a current trend among African-American musicians, most notably Dizzy Gillespie, to found small record companies in an effort to have greater control over their own careers, artistic products, and sales royalties. De Jong remarks, “[Black musicians] faced the stark reality that if they were ever going to gain creative authority over their own music, they would need to devise their own organizations – separate from the white-controlled industry.”³⁶ Ironically, Mingus, having sued the local musician's union for his wrongful release from Red Norvo's ensemble, used the money he received in settlement to start the business. Santoro describes the small company's workings: “Debut would combine art music and pop music. It would give offbeat ideas and newcomers a shot. [Mingus] used his apartment or out-of-the-way studios for cheap

³⁴ Quoted in Priestly, 47-8.

³⁵ The collection was just the second release by Debut. The first, *Strings and Keys*, was issued from a duet session Mingus recorded with pianist Spaulding Givens before he moved to New York.

³⁶ Nanette de Jong, “‘You Can't Kill an Organization': Musicians' Collectives and the Black Power Paradigm,” *Jazz Research* 37 (2005): 136.

rehearsals.”³⁷ By owning his own record company, he eliminated certain practical issues – namely financing a studio session – which provided him an increased number of opportunities to experiment in his own composition. More importantly to Mingus as a group leader, and equally profound for him as an African-American musician, he eliminated the influence of white-owned record companies, achieving both an actual and symbolic freedom in his compositional and musical decisions.

Intent on presenting jazz as a serious form of art music, Mingus also joined the Jazz Composers Workshop, a group of New York musicians interested in expanding the boundaries of jazz mostly by incorporating classical elements. Mingus performed with the group between late 1953 and 1955, and worked with musicians such as Thelonious Monk and Gunther Schuller. But the workshop offered little if any monetary reward and soon folded. Selecting a handful of musicians from the ensemble, Mingus quickly formed a new workshop, dropped ‘Composers’ from the title, and began to move away from his previous Western-European musical conceptions. The Jazz Workshop began a three-month stint at New York’s Café Bohemia in the fall of 1955. On December 23, Mingus recorded the performance and issued it on two LPs. One month later, Mingus produced *Pithecanthropus Erectus*; his career as a bandleader and composer had begun.

³⁷ Santoro, 97.

CHAPTER II

MINGUS AND THE THIRD STREAM

Introduction

For our central discussion, it is most relevant to start with Mingus's compositional output from the first half of the 1950s. He did compose before this time period, but it is in the formation of Debut Records in 1952 that we hear Mingus's work significantly influenced by the racial circumstances black musicians faced.

Owning his own recording studio not only provided Mingus a forum in which to freely experiment with music composition, but also, it also was a declaration against the white-controlled music industry. The period of the late 1940s and early 1950s was an era in which mainstream media, whose dominant influence over American culture saturated the post-war society with white-over-black politics, established a social hierarchy in which the white, suburban culture became the standard to which minorities were to assimilate.³⁸ For African-American musicians, financial stability most often depended on their willingness to conform to the expectations of white media. Commenting on his experiences with Lionel Hampton, Mingus once said that he "hoped for a time when it will no longer be necessary for a musician to jump up and down on a drum or to dance on a bandstand to receive recognition of his talent."³⁹ In contrast, innovators such as Charlie Parker were devoted entirely to their artistry; sadly, many struggled economically

³⁸ Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1997), 7.

³⁹ Quoted in Priestly, 37.

and even psychologically because of indifference in the music industry towards their accomplishments, and because of an embellished association in mass media of blackness with the dark and decadent side of jazz.⁴⁰

The highest accomplishment for an African-American musician was for his music to be compared to that of a white composer or artist, or for it to be recognized as having European characteristics or influence.⁴¹ These associations legitimized the artistry and sophistication of the black musician, and more importantly, warranted respect for the artist. The innovators of bebop, for instance, drew upon the harmonic language of the classical idiom and became the first jazz musicians to extensively incorporate extended harmonies up to the chordal ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth.⁴² As a composer, Mingus also understood the significance of Western-European associations, and he adopted a compositional identity in which he intentionally incorporated elements of the classical tradition into his jazz compositions.

Debut was the vehicle for his fusion of classical and jazz, and his workshop for presenting musical realizations of his personal beliefs. Mingus viewed jazz not as a form of popular dance music, but as an art music equivalent to the classical tradition. In a letter to *Downbeat* correspondent Ralph Gleason, Mingus compares Charlie Parker to Brahms, Chopin, and Tchaikovsky; he argues that classically trained musicians could “swing for the first time in history!” if only the music was written properly; and he endorses the

⁴⁰ Porter, 120.

⁴¹ Panish, 9.

⁴² Paul Tanner and Maurice Gerow, *A Study of Jazz* ed. Frederick W. Westphal (Dubuque: WM. C. Brown, 1964), 56.

elimination of the music industry's color barriers which prevented African Americans from performing in symphonies and from gaining proper recognition for their talent:

“Can we send a potential Ravel, Debussy, or Stravinsky to his grave without affording him the chance to prove that music has advanced many steps and that many composers as great as any of the old are being forced to write background music for the slipping of Mabel's girdle, rather than the true emotions of his inner self?”⁴³

Mingus's contention, “all music is one,” symbolically equalized African Americans and white musicians by removing the boundaries of categorization. Once asked about the ‘jazz’ label, Mingus responded, “It's like saying nigger; you know, saying a substitute name for music. Why name it at all?”⁴⁴

Between 1952 and 1955, Mingus's music strongly reflects his universalistic ideals. One dominant feature throughout his compositions is the presence of multi-textured melodies and contrapuntal exercises. These techniques are more characteristic of “cool jazz,” in which the practitioners sought to incorporate a variety of European aesthetics.⁴⁵ Unequivocally influenced by his early musical experiences on the west coast, Mingus not only interweaves composed jazz melodies, but also integrates actual material from the classical repertoire into his performances. He meticulously writes out parts to convey each minute, interpretive detail, and even replaces improvised choruses with composed solos or orchestrated melodies. Furthermore, by using instruments such as the cello and flute, which are less characteristic of the jazz style, he creates textures that sound remarkably European. In this chapter, I investigate Mingus's use of Western-

⁴³ Gleason, 77-8.

⁴⁴ *Triumph of the Underdog*.

⁴⁵ Tanner and Gerow, 63.

classical aesthetics in a survey of three recordings: “Eclipse,” “All the Things You C#,” and “Septemberly.”

“Eclipse” (1953)

The first two years of Mingus’s compositional experimentation with Debut are marked by works such as “Precognition” (1952) and “Miss Bliss” (1953), which include the layering of multiple composed melodies. In another work, “Extrasensory Perception” (1952), Mingus takes greater compositional authority by writing out the solo for alto saxophonist Lee Konitz and removing the element of improvisation, a signature component of jazz. But Mingus’s European aesthetic in these early years is best defined by the use of orchestral timbres. An examination of Priestly’s discography, which lists the label, works, personnel, and instrumentation of each studio session throughout Mingus’s career, confirms the presence of a flute or cello in four of seven Mingus-led recording sessions between 1952 and the recording of *Mingus at the Bohemia* in 1955.⁴⁶ He incorporates remarkably orchestral settings into works such as “Portrait” (1952), which is a clear representation of his Western-European approach. Jenkins notes, “[Portrait] takes a step even further into the classical jazz confluence, with a slowly building, ever tenser introduction worthy of Scriabin.”⁴⁷ However, his art song, “Eclipse” (1953), is the most revealing of Mingus’s universalistic ideals both in its lyrics and orchestration.

⁴⁶ Priestly, 257-65.

⁴⁷ Jenkins, 14.

Originally intended for Billie Holiday (though she never performed it), whose protest song “Strange Fruit” (1939) brought the brutality and malice of lynching into the national spotlight, “Eclipse” is a celestial allegory of the most finite humanistic blending of races: miscegenation. The lyrics, written by Mingus and given in Example 2.1, depict the union of an interracial couple – characterized by the sun and the moon – and the reactions of society members upon witnessing their interaction.

Example 2.1 – “Eclipse” Lyrics

Eclipse, when the moon meets the sun,
Eclipse, these bodies become as one.

People go around,
Eyes look up and frown,
For it’s a sight they seldom see.

Some look through smoked glasses
Hiding their eyes,
Other think it’s tragic,
Sneering as dark meets light.

But the sun doesn’t care
And the moon has no fear
For destiny’s making her choice.

Eclipse, the moon has met the sun.
Eclipse, these bodies have become one.⁴⁸

While Holiday’s work attacks the Jim Crow mentality of the Deep South, Mingus’s story of interracial love confronts a wider scope of American discomfort. Scott Saul interprets the poem: “[The lovers] seem to be victims not of racial prejudice (an issue that might demand a race-sensitive solution) but of narrow-minded conformism, a kind of suburban

⁴⁸ Sue Mingus, ed., *More than a Fake Book* (Milwaukee: Jazz Workshop, 1991) 40-1.

groupthink: the disdainful public sneers and curses the tragedy simply because ‘it’s a sight they seldom see.’”⁴⁹

The work’s 21-bar song form is accompanied by an instrumental introduction, and another orchestrated passage between the penultimate and final stanzas. The setting of these instrumental textures is in the fashion of a twentieth-century chamber ensemble. A slower work, the tempo is set at around sixty beats per minute, but exact measures are difficult to perceive. The work begins with a single bowed bass on D \flat 2, doubled an octave lower by the piano shortly after. Tenor and baritone saxophones then join the texture, sounding long tones in the lower tessitura of the instruments to create consonant and dissonant intervals with the bass. The drums enter liberally and in the role of color production, not keeping time, but sounding short bursts of snare drum rolls offset with a quintuplet snare and cymbal figure at 11” into the performance, and another three-note figure in the snare coming out of a roll at 15”. After its initial entrance, the piano remains sparse throughout the rest of the introduction, only sounding chords at landing points or places of harmonic dissonance. The cello at the beginning is featured melodically in free, but flowing phrases until 14” into the performance, when it presents a drastically contrasting tritone double-stop between G and D \flat . Below it the orchestration becomes increasingly agitated. The trombone enters loudly in its lower range at 19” and begins a harmonic interplay with the saxophones. The entire instrumental texture crescendos before finally releasing the tension for the vocal entrance and the start of the song form.

⁴⁹ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 185.

The second instrumental passage occurs at 1:34 into the performance. It begins with a faster swing section in which the drums keep time. The cello and bass, joined by the alto saxophone in the fifth measure, bow the mostly eighth-note melody in octaves. The other two saxophones and the trombone combine to produce chords on beat one of each measure. This passage is symmetrical, consisting of two four-bar phrases, but leads into another free, orchestrated texture before the return of the vocalist.

The art song is possibly Mingus's first composition as a social commentator. The work's blending of classical and jazz elements is a metaphor not only for its lyrics, but also for Mingus's greater efforts to eliminate boundaries between race in music and in the greater society. It also demonstrates how he related aspects of his personal life with his music, as he was married at the time to a white woman, Celia Mingus.

"All the Things You C#" (1955)

While Mingus's early experiments with Debut provide an interesting view of his compositional aesthetic at the time, they did not achieve wide critical acclaim or economic success. On December 23, 1955, at the end of a three-month stint at New York's Café Bohemia, he recorded the live performance. The tracks reveal that Mingus still incorporated elements of the classical tradition, but his aesthetics were slightly changing. He no longer used the flute or cello, and was more interested in blending melodies together to create interesting contrapuntal works.

Mingus's integration of European elements into his compositions is unequivocally demonstrated by his quotation of actual music from the Western tradition. An ideal example of this approach is the work, "All the Things You C#," in which he uses the introductory material from Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C# Minor.⁵⁰

Example 2.2 – Rachmaninoff, Prelude in C# Minor (mm. 1-7)



Mingus does not quote the material precisely; rather, he organizes it as so that in m. 9, the rest of the ensemble can cohesively enter in tempo while adding the dimension of swing.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Charles Mingus, *Mingus at the Bohemia* (1955), Debut 123.

⁵¹ The eighth notes in the melody are swung, and the drums add a swing feel in the hi-hat which is not notated in example.

Example 2.3 - "All the Things You C#" (Introduction)⁵²

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each with a saxophone section and a piano section. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 155. The saxophone parts are for Tenor Sax, Trombone, and Bass. The piano parts are for Piano (Pno.).

- System 1:** Measures 1-4. The saxophone parts are mostly rests. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed sixteenth notes.
- System 2:** Measures 5-8. The saxophone parts have some notes starting in measure 8. The piano part continues with similar rhythmic patterns.
- System 3:** Measures 9-12. The saxophone parts have a melodic line starting in measure 9. The piano part provides harmonic support.
- System 4:** Measures 13-16. The saxophone parts continue their melodic line. The piano part continues with harmonic accompaniment.

⁵² Transcribed by the author (the tenor sax and trombone sound one octave lower than notated; the bass sounds two octaves lower).

In the first eight measures, the piano forcefully sounds Mingus's interpretation of the Prelude, which varies slightly from the original in rhythm and note placement, but is clearly the same music. As the rest of the ensemble enters, Mingus's intent behind the incorporation of the Prelude becomes clear. The tenor sax, trombone, and bass sound an introduction to the jazz standard, "All the Things You Are," which was routinely performed by ensembles led by Charlie Parker.⁵³ Within the settings of both Rachmaninoff's Prelude and the jazz artists' introduction exists a striking, three-note motive (boxed in the example) which Mingus uses as a symbolic link between the two genres of classical and jazz, and as a musical building block to transform the identity of "All the Things You Are," into "All the Things You C#."

The melodic and intervallic contour of the three-note motive is such that it first descends by semitone, and then by a perfect fifth.

Example 2.4 – Three-Note Motive



Mingus's use of the structure is reminiscent of one of the earliest forms of medieval counterpoint in which a composed tenor was taken from a pre-existing work, most likely liturgical in origin, and stated as a lower voice against which new melodic material was

⁵³ This introduction can be heard on Charlie Parker, *Jumping at the Roost* (1948-1949) and *Jazz at Massey Hall* (1953). Mingus performs on the latter of these recordings, a live concert in which he later infamously overdubbed his own part to make the bass sound louder.

Example 2.5 – “All the Things You C# (Theme and Counterpoint)⁵⁴

Tenor Sax
Theme, "All
the Things
You Are"

Trombone
Three-note
motif

5

T. Sax

Tbn.

9

T. Sax

Tbn.

13

T. Sax

Tbn.

17

T. Sax

Tbn.

⁵⁴ The tenor saxophone sounds one octave lower than notated.

21

T. Sax

Tbn.

25

T. Sax

Tbn.

29

T. Sax

Tbn.

33

Solo Break

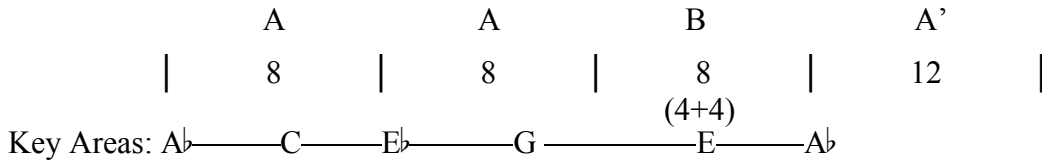
T. Sax

Tbn.

constructed. In the thematic chorus of “All the Things You C \sharp ,” given in Example 2.5, the trombone continuously repeats the motive (the first occurrence is boxed), providing the underlying counterpoint for the theme of “All the Things You Are,” played by the tenor saxophone.

After the introduction and statement of the theme, Mingus continues to saturate the performance with the three-note motive. Each member of the group improvises on one chorus of the work's form.⁵⁵

Example 2.6 – Chorus Structure of “All the Things You C#”



Passing through five different key centers, the chorus is a 32-bar AABA song form with the final A expanded by four measures. It begins in A^b major, but before the first A section closes, the work has already modulated to C major. The second A section is almost a literal transposition of the first, only it begins in E^b and modulates to G major. The B section begins with a four-bar phrase in G major which then repeats itself in the key of E major. The A section returns with some added material and closes the chorus in A^b major, the key in which it opened.

Behind the improvised solos, the piano often states the motive on the dominant chord of each section's closing key area. For instance, the first A section closes in the key of C major. The first two notes of the motive sound as half notes on beats 1 and 3 of the dominant G7 chord in m. 6, and the final note of the motive sounds as a whole note with the arrival of the tonic chord in m. 7. Tonic is prolonged through m. 8, and a modulation occurs at m. 9, the beginning of the second A section. This pattern repeats itself in the closing key of each section: on D7 of G in m. 14, on B7 in m. 24, and on E^b7 in m. 34.

⁵⁵ The solo order is tenor saxophone, piano, trombone, and bass.

Table 2.1 illustrates the frequency of the motive’s appearance behind each improvised chorus. The motive sounds in each of the saxophone choruses, the opening two A sections of the piano chorus, the first and second A sections and the B section of the trombone chorus, and the second A section and B section of the bass chorus.⁵⁶

Table 2.1 – Appearance of the Three-Note Motive in Improvised Choruses

	A	A	B	A ¹
Tenor Sax	√	√	√	√
Piano	√	√		
Trombone	√	√	√	
Bass		√	√	

After all of the improvisations, the introductory material is stated again and in its entirety. The head, or composed music of “All the Things You C#” – the melody of “All the Things You Are” and its three-note motivic counterpoint – is then played again, and the performance concludes with the complete introductory material stated one final time. Charting Mingus’s use of the three-note motive is significant in understanding his motivation to create a work that reflects his desire to unify music into one entity. He extracted the motive from both jazz and classical sources, used it as a counterpoint in a

⁵⁶ The three-note motive is not heard at all during a chorus of “trading fours” – a common practice in jazz performance – in which the tenor saxophone improvises for four measures, followed likewise by the drums, the trombone, and the drums again. This cycle repeats itself through the entire form of the chorus. The rhythm section “comps” for the horns at this time, but during the drum solos, the other members of the ensemble rest.

similar manner with early Western counterpoint, and infused it into almost every aspect of the performance.

“Septemberly” (1955)

Mingus’s fascination with counterpoint in the early part of the decade is not limited to “All the Things You C#.” Jenkins notes, “Mingus toyed with layered medleys, having the ensemble play two or three separate themes woven together instead of in sequence,” and he cites Mingus’s integration of “Prisoner of Love” and “Perdido” in his renditions of “Tea for Two” and “Body and Soul” (1954).⁵⁷ Mingus also employs this technique in his original compositions, “Extrasensory Perception” and “Precognition,” made at the onset of Debut.

In “Septemberly,” Mingus juxtaposes the melody of “September in the Rain” with the theme to “Tenderly” in a particularly interesting fashion. Both are 32-bar forms, AABA and AA’ respectively, and the melodies of the two jazz standards are strikingly similar, especially in their first eight measures given in Examples 2.7a and 2.7b. While the melodies differ in rhythm, they share the exact same pitches through the sixth note of each melody: both begin on B \flat , ascend by step to C and by minor third to E \flat , then descend by minor second to D and by major third to B \flat . They ascend by step to C once more before the contour finally separates, and are linked again on the note, F, which is the last note in each melody’s first phrase (these final notes are even sustained for the same length of time).

⁵⁷ Jenkins, 31.

Example 2.7a – “September in the Rain” (mm. 1-8)



Example 2.7b – “Tenderly” (mm. 1-8)



Mingus interweaves the two jazz melodies through three separate instrumental textures to generate the composed music of “Septemberly,” a work which utilizes both orchestral and jazz settings. In the first setting, given in Example 2.8, the compositional elements take on a European avant-garde quality, free of time and rhythm, and harmonically controlled by the counterpoint between the two themes.

Example 2.8 – “Septemberly” (Texture 1) ⁵⁸

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: Tenor Sax, Trombone, and Bass. The score is organized into two systems. The first system begins at the 8'' mark. The Tenor Sax part is written in treble clef, the Trombone in bass clef, and the Bass in bass clef. The Bass part features a prominent bowed tremolo double stop at the interval of a perfect fourth between B \flat and E \flat . The second system begins at the 52'' mark. The Tenor Sax part is written in treble clef, the Trombone in bass clef, and the Bass in bass clef. The Bass part continues with the tremolo double stop, with some changes in the final measures.

Mingus opens the work with a bowed tremolo double stop at the interval of a perfect fourth between B \flat and E \flat . He continues to hold the tremolo in the manner of drone through the first two melodic statements. During these phrases the drums, rather than asserting the time, take a role of color production, and sporadically and softly strike the cymbals and snare drum. At 8'' into the performance, and above the colorful drums and bass texture, the trombone enters very expressively. Slowly and in free tempo, it sounds the opening phrase of “September in the Rain.” At 52'', it begins to repeat the same material – the second A section of the original melody – but is now joined by the

⁵⁸ Transcribed by the author (again, the tenor saxophone sounds one octave lower than written).

saxophone which plays the theme to “Tenderly.” Just as freely as before, both horns now sound the first six notes of the parallel melodies in unison. When the tenor saxophone and trombone gain melodic autonomy, they produce often dissonant harmonies over the bass and drums but eventually close the texture with an open-fifths quality.

The second texture is a duet between the piano, which is heard for the first time, and the tenor saxophone. Beginning at 1:38 into the work, the saxophone now plays mm. 9-16 of “Tenderly” in the same liberal fashion as the opening texture.

Example 2.9 – “Tenderly” (mm. 9-16)



To create a free sound in the music, the piano uses rapid arpeggios, mixtures of short and long chords, planed ascending and descending chord structures, and pedal tones to accompany the melody with its standard harmonization, the first chord structures from either jazz standard to be heard.

Of the three textures, the third setting, which begins at 2:10, is the most characteristic of jazz. For the first time the entire ensemble is playing together. The rhythm section sets up a rhythmic feel typical of common time medium-swing charts: the piano comps over the harmonic changes, the bass walks, meaning it usually sounds four quarter notes in each measure, and the drums keeps the pulse with a series of quarter

notes interfused with an occasional swung eighth-note pattern, the high-hat on beats two and four, and infrequent off-beat kicks on the snare drum. Because it is played in time, the length of the third texture can be spoken of in terms of measure numbers. Mingus uses the harmonies to the A' section of "Tenderly," the last sixteen measures of the standard, and again layers the two jazz melodies in the tenor saxophone and trombone.

Example 2.10 – "Septemberly" (Texture 3 Juxtaposition)

The musical score for "Septemberly" is presented in four systems, each with a Tenor Saxophone (T. Sax) and Trombone (Tbn.) part. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is common time (C). The score is divided into four systems, each starting with a measure number (4, 8, 12) in the Tenor Sax staff.

- System 1:** Tenor Saxophone part features triplet eighth notes and quarter notes. Trombone part features a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes.
- System 2:** Tenor Saxophone part continues with eighth notes and quarter notes. Trombone part features a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes.
- System 3:** Tenor Saxophone part continues with eighth notes and quarter notes. Trombone part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- System 4:** Tenor Saxophone part continues with eighth notes and quarter notes. Trombone part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, labeled "Solo Break".

For the first eight measures of the example, the two horns again sound their interpretations of the melodies in Examples 2.7a and 2.7b. In the final eight measures, the tenor saxophone plays the last phrase of “Tenderly” (similar to the melody in Example 2.8), but the trombone breaks away from its assignment and begins to improvise.

A two-bar solo break takes the performance into the solo section, which is based on the harmonic structure of “September in the Rain.” Each member of the group, excluding the drums, improvises on one chorus. At the conclusion of the bass chorus, the opening texture returns. Mingus sets up his tremolo effect, the drums are used as a color, and the trombone and saxophone freely play their assigned melodies in counterpoint one last time.

Conclusion

For Mingus, the blurring of the lines between classical and jazz was both a specific reaction to the circumstances he faced as a black musician, and a declaration of equality. Attaining critical recognition for his talent was difficult because of his race, and because of the place of jazz in society. By incorporating European elements into his compositions, he attempted to depict himself as a serious musician and to earn respect as an artist, and he argued for the inclusion of all music as one universal language. Because of his race and the place of jazz in society, Mingus understood the difficulty in having his art taken seriously. His attempt at earning credibility as a capable and serious musician is reflected by the specific compositional choices made in his original works from the early 1950s.

CHAPTER III

MINGUS AND BLACK NATIONALISM

Introduction

On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white bus rider, inciting the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. Less than two months later, Charles Mingus recorded the album *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (Atlantic, 1956). His first for a major label as a band leader, the album is viewed by many as Mingus's most significant record – even his “manifesto.”⁵⁹ He uses the title track to comment on the current state of U.S. race relations, describing it as a “jazz tone poem” which 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 animals still in a prone position. Overcome with self-esteem, he goes out to rule the world, if not the universe; but both his own failure to realize the inevitable emancipation of those he sought 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.⁶⁰

A figurative overthrow of the repressive and racist society in which he lived, the programmatic work represents a drastic shift in Mingus's compositional aesthetic; consequently, many consider it to be “a watershed work...in his development as a composer.”⁶¹ While no direct connection exists between the bus boycott in Alabama and *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, it is unlikely a coincidence that the timing of this crucial event

⁵⁹ Jenkins, 42.

⁶⁰ Charles Mingus in liner notes to *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (1956), Atlantic 1237.

⁶¹ Sue Mingus, *More Than a Fake Book*, 109.

in the 1950s civil rights struggle correlates with Mingus's production of what some regard as his most important album, and one in which he firmly establishes music as a medium through which to express his social, political, and racial views.

Indeed, *Pithecanthropus Erectus* is representative a larger aesthetic and political shift occurring among African-American jazz musicians who began contributing in their own way to the activist climate of the Civil Rights Movement. Ingrid Monson notes that:

The jazz community reacted in various ways to civil rights events including the performance of benefit concerts, the recording of albums with political themes, attributing political meaning to particular jazz aesthetics, the exploration of African and other non-Western musical and religious ideas, and engaging in highly charged dialogues about race and racism in the jazz industry.⁶²

This description of the jazz community's political consciousness in the latter half of the 1950s corresponds with what Robert McMichael describes as a "mainstream distillation of a distinctly political and intellectual component to blackness": a movement among African Americans to transcend "primitive" conceptions with non-violent civil rights demonstrations and powerful oratories, such as those embodied by the efforts of Martin Luther King.⁶³ Many jazz musicians abandoned their European-influenced objectives and embraced the blues and the spiritual – African-American folk traditions deeply associated with the humanistic expressions of suffering, determination, and hope.

For Mingus, this shift towards Black-Nationalism is first realized in an exceptionally militant fashion. Believing that "his duty as a jazz musician was to address injustice through art as well as through public comment," he begins to compose works

⁶² Ingrid Monson, "Jazz: Chronological Overview," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portian K. Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 159.

⁶³ Robert K. McMichael, "'We Insist—Freedom Now!': Black Moral Authority, Jazz, and the Changeable Shape of Whiteness," *American Music* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 382.

with explicitly political titles and programs of which “Pithecanthropus Erectus” is one of, but not the first.⁶⁴ Only a month before “Pithecanthropus” was produced, Mingus recorded two original compositions with intentionally racial connotations. The first of these, “Work Song” (not to be confused with jazz trumpeter Nat Adderly’s 1960 composition, “Work Song,” which is the more widely known of the two), depicts the striking of sledgehammers by slave laborers. The second, “Haitian Fight Song,” references the 1791 Haitian black slave revolt and eventual revolution over their French colonial masters. Both firmly rooted in African-American aesthetics, the compositions are the most uninhibited sociopolitical jazz works to be performed or recorded since Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.” Along with “Pithecanthropus Erectus,” “Work Song” and “Haitian Fight Song” also foreshadow an array of Mingus’s activist music, such as “Fables of Faubus,” “Meditations on Integration,” “Prayer for Passive Resistance,” “Remember Rockefeller at Attica,” “Free Cellblock F, ‘Tis Nazi USA,” and “Don’t Let Them Drop the Atomic Bomb on Me.” For these reasons, the two works are extremely important; and while they further confirm Mingus’s arrival as an outspoken and militant critic of the status quo, “Pithecanthropus Erectus” represents an even clearer and more fully-realized version of Mingus’s political aesthetic and shift in compositional identity.

“Pithecanthropus Erectus” (1956)

Mingus designed “Pithecanthropus” to be an arena for social and musical confrontation. As affirmed in his summarization of the work’s program quoted above, his

⁶⁴ Porter, 126.

intent was to use it as a metaphorical portrayal of the African-American struggle for equality. That Mingus engages the issue of 1950s race relations with suggestions of black *revolution* intensifies the composition's charged political agenda – a controversial message firmly articulated in the work's program and oppositional structure. This dualistic framework denotes Mingus's shifting compositional aesthetic. The musical confrontations manufactured in "Pithecanthropus Erectus" not only embody the oppositional forces of its program, through which Mingus communicates his fierce sociopolitical statement; they also reflect the composer's internal conflict between his universalistic and Black-Nationalistic compositional objectives.

The Oppositional Design of "Pithecanthropus Erectus"

In what Saul describes as "a contest between a jazz imbued by German chromaticism and a jazz devoted to feverish bursts of collective improvisation," "Pithecanthropus Erectus" alternates between phrases of controlled, composed material, and unrestrained, improvised settings.⁶⁵ Phrase A, harmonically structured and finite in duration, contrasts Phrases B and C. As Table 3.1 demonstrates, Phrases B and C share a number of characteristics, most importantly, their improvised nature; it is the intensity of the C section which warrants the conception of the two phrases as disparate.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Scott Saul, "Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (September 2001): 413.

⁶⁶ Both Priestly and Porter interpret the improvised textures as two separate B and C sections. Saul reiterates their assessment, citing their dissimilar underlying rhythms. This rhythmic instability plays a strong role in amplifying the intensity of the music, but it is the greater *chaotic* nature of the C section that validates the conception of separate B and C labels.

Table 3.1 – Oppositional Forces in “Pithecanthropus Erectus”

Chorus Structure:

A	B	A	C
16	indefinite	16	indefinite

	A	B	C
Organizational Method	Composed	Collectively Improvised ⁶⁷	Collectively Improvised
Melody	Unison	Polyphonic	Polyphonic
Harmony	European chromaticism	Modal	Modal
Rhythm	Melodic long tones; quarter notes in bass, but it is not walking; swing feel in drums	Faster melodic lines; triplet figures in piano; bass walks; swing feel in drums	Faster melodic lines; piano plays second note of triplet figure; bass plays first and third note of triplet figure; drums plays each note of triplet figure
Sound	Slow ascending chromatic line; quick crescendos and decrescendos, sudden rests	Blues scale dominates; blues inflections	Chaotic; animalistic wails and screeches in alto; rhythmic instability; blues scale

Mingus constructs this dualistic framework to establish the programmatic associations of the music. The figurative oppressor, who holds himself above all other creatures, is suggested in the unison melody of the A section. Elements of controlled compositional design are used to musically convey the tyrant’s attempts to suppress those whom he wishes to enslave. The sixteen-measure phrase structure represents the boundary of his control, in which the pre-composed music and specific harmonic progression regulate the direction of a performance. That the musicians are confined to

⁶⁷ During the solo choruses, the B section is not collectively improvised. In contrast, the C section is collectively improvised throughout the entire performance.

the execution of arranged musical material and limited to the set harmonic progression during solos reflects the apparent submission of the subjugated populace.

While jazz musicians regularly improvise on preexisting formal and harmonic structures in the performance of standards, it is the conflict between the controlled compositional features of the A section and the freer improvisatory characteristics of the B and C sections which clarify the allegorical associations of “Pithecanthropus Erectus.”

The formerly enslaved masses are embodied in the polyphonic textures of the latter sections. Mingus uses elements of improvisatory compositional design to convey their liberation from tyrannical constraints by empowering the musicians to determine collectively the phrase durations within a performance. Likewise, the use of modal harmonic textures carries associations of free will and individual expression, as they allow a soloist, or even an ensemble, to transcend the otherwise somewhat limited improvisatory options associated with a preset form and harmonic progression.

Ultimately, the extreme chaotic nature of a C section supplemented with animalistic wails and screeches signifies the destruction of the oppressor at the hands of the enraged, unshackled masses.

The Oppositional Design of “Pithecanthropus Erectus”:

Mingus’s Conflicting Aesthetics

For Mingus as a composer, the dualist construction of “Pithecanthropus Erectus” is a musical staging of his aesthetic transformation. As discussed above in Chapter 2, many of his early compositions were an attempt by the composer to blend the elements of

jazz and classical music. After “*Pithecanthropus Erectus*,” he is less interested in this compositional approach; instead, Mingus increasingly relies on musical components of African-American folk traditions.

The music of the A section, given in Example 3.1, is precisely composed. Each voice is carefully positioned to create a colorful, even orchestral sound. In this regard, the section reflects Mingus’s earlier classically inspired efforts to notate meticulously the stylistic qualities of jazz: his attempt to unite jazz and classical music as one universal language.

Indeed, Mingus fuses compositional elements from both genres to construct the music of the A section. Harmonically it is rooted in bebop, and therefore includes many of the tonal characteristics found in the music of Common Practice: tertian harmonies constructed over the scale degrees of a major or minor key which progress functionally – meaning their root motion suggests intermediate-dominant-tonic relationships, and is most fundamental when descending by fifth – and a number of chromatic alterations and extended chord structures designed to produce a variety of harmonic color. Each of these attributes is found throughout the A section, and are especially clear in the section’s first five measures. Set in F minor, the music opens chromatically with an F major triad which can be viewed as mixture – or in its motion to the $D^{\flat}maj7$ chord in m. 2, as a neo-Riemannian PR transformation.⁶⁸ Though an F major chord opens the music, it is still a tonic-class harmony.

⁶⁸ Mingus does not present the F major triad in its entirety during the theme, leaving out the third of the chord until the solo choruses; consequently, the true quality of the chord is masked until this time.

Example 3.1 – “Pithecanthropus Erectus” (A Section)⁶⁹

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with four staves: Alto Sax, Tenor Sax, Piano, and Double Bass. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the tempo is marked as quarter note = 160. The first system (measures 1-4) features chords F, Dbmaj7, Gm7b5, and C7b9. The second system (measures 5-8) features chords Fmb6, Dmaj7, Eb7b9, and Ab7b5. The third system (measures 9-12) features chords Gmb6, C7b9, F, and Dbmaj7. Dynamics include piano (*p*), crescendo (*cresc.*), and forte (*f*). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and triplets.

⁶⁹ Transcribed by Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*.

The musical score consists of four staves: A. Sax., T. Sax., Pno., and D.B. The key signature has two flats (Bb, Eb) and the time signature is 4/4. Measure 13 is marked with a first ending bracket. The harmonic progression is indicated above the saxophone staves: Abm7 (m. 13), Db7 (m. 14), Gb (m. 15), Gm7b5 (m. 16), and C7 (m. 17). Dynamics are marked as *f* in measures 13 and 17, and *mp* in measures 14, 15, and 16. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a dynamic shift from *f* to *mp* between measures 14 and 15. The double bass part plays a steady eighth-note line, also shifting from *f* to *mp* between measures 14 and 15.

Tonic is prolonged through m. 2 to the intermediate-class Gm7^b5 ($G^{\theta 7}$) structure of m. 3. The C7^b9 chord in m. 4, which briefly demonstrates the inclusion harmonic tones above the chordal seventh, is a dominant-class harmony which returns the music to the tonic-class F minor harmony of m. 5. Each of the harmonies in mm. 2-5 is diatonic, and together they form a circle-of-fifths progression. This type of chordal motion embodies the fundamental tendency of harmonies in a tonal setting to descend by fifth towards tonic.

Besides its harmonic attributes, the A section of “Pithecanthropus” balances additional qualities from classical and jazz. The alto and tenor saxophones are a blend of melodic color, slowly and chromatically ascending over the harmonic progressions. This characteristic is more European in nature, as opposed to the more angular melodic lines normally found in jazz works. Also more likely to occur in classical compositions are the fast crescendos and decrescendos, and sudden rests found in mm. 7-9 and mm. 12-16. In contrast, rhythmically the section adopts jazz’s signature common-time swing feel with the drums sounding a customary repeating pattern of a quarter note followed by two

swung eighth notes on the ride cymbal. The bass completes the rhythmic feel, sounding a stream of quarter notes on the fundamental of each harmony which imitate the pulse, but not the pitches, of a walking bass line. The instrumentation of “Pithecanthropus” (alto and tenor saxophones, piano, bass, and drums) is also more characteristic of jazz, and replaces former Mingus-led groups that included the cello and flute – instruments more closely associated with classical music.

In contrast, the B and C sections are experimental, chaotic, and most importantly, collectively improvised: three aesthetics which, in jazz, critics have argued as distinctly African-American, and within Mingus’s compositional output, suggest a step towards Black Nationalism. In “Pithecanthropus,” these elements signify, in particular, the function of jazz as an expression of freedom. Charles Hersch states that “jazz improvisation has from the beginning had political overtones for African Americans.”⁷⁰

In a discussion of avant-garde experimentation, Salim Washington suggests:

Jazz musicians have conducted a continuous search for the expansion of formal parameters available for artistic expression and have often related these breakthroughs...to a simultaneous yearning for progress in the concomitant social arrangements of its society.⁷¹

Porter adds, “black music ‘insanity’ has functioned as a signifier for the daunting oppression musicians faced, while forming...a type of ‘radical creative space’ from which black musicians could voice their ideas and critique the status quo.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Hersch, 98.

⁷¹ Washington, 28.

⁷² Porter, 133.

The B and C sections are collectively and freely improvised around the work's programmatic themes. That Mingus gave each of his sidemen a mode or scale from which to expand their improvisatory ideas reflects a pronounced step away from pre-composed or scored compositional directions through which Mingus attempted to collapse the boundaries between jazz and classical music ("violins will swing for the first time in history!"), and points toward his changing approach to jazz composition:

First, a jazz composition as I hear it in my mind's ear – although set down in so many notes on score paper and precisely notated – cannot be played by a group of either jazz or classical musicians. A classical musician might read all the notes correctly but play them without the correct jazz feeling or interpretation, and a jazz musician, although he might read all the notes and play them with jazz feeling, inevitably introduces his own individual expression rather than the dynamics the composer intended. Secondly, jazz, by its very definition, cannot be held down to written parts to be played with a feeling that goes only with blowing free.⁷³

The use of collective improvisation "allowed him to convey his own musical vision while providing other members of the ensemble sufficient improvisational freedom to participate in the spontaneous creation of each performance."⁷⁴ At this point Mingus begins to orally dictate his works to his sidemen in effort to both achieve a higher individualistic sound, and as a celebration of the black oral tradition present in New Orleans' jazz and brass bands.

During the calmer B episodes, such as in Example 3.2, the collective improvisations occur only during the thematic material, providing each individual soloist space for their own expressive interpretations. Still, the musicians utilize African-

⁷³ Charles Mingus in liner notes to *Mingus Ah Um* (1959), Columbia 1370.

⁷⁴ Porter, 126.

American thumbprints, such as bent notes and minor-pentatonic and blues scales, to create their individual melodies; the piano echoes these same scalar devices while sounding a textural undercurrent of triplets; the bass begins to walk now, outlining the two-chord harmony by pulsating four quarter notes in each measure; the drums merely keep the same rhythmic pattern.

During the more tumultuous C section, which Brian Priestly compares to Ellington's "jungle sound," and which in the 1920s carried explicitly "primitive" and "African" associations, the intensity of the composition is heightened melodically and rhythmically.⁷⁵ Rather than playing scale-based melodic riffs, the alto saxophone mimics human and animalistic wails and screeches. The piano pounds the middle note of the underlying triplet figures, adding a syncopated dimension to the composition. Meanwhile, the bass and drums state their own variations of the triplet motif. The bass liberally sounds the first and third notes of each triplet group while the drums forcefully pound all three notes of the triplet equally. The result of the piano, bass, and drums' individual interpretations of the triplet figure is a hysterical disarray of the rhythm that intensifies the mayhem of the C section, and helps to depict the programmatic overthrow of the antagonist.

⁷⁵ Priestly, 71.

Example 3.2 – “Pithecanthropus Erectus” (First Occurrence of Section B)⁷⁶

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each containing four staves: Alto Saxophone (A. Sx.), Tenor Saxophone (T. Sx.), Piano (Pno.), and Double Bass (D.B.). The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D-flat minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 25-28) features a melodic line in the A. Sx. with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 27. The Pno. part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment with triplet markings. The second system (measures 29-32) continues the melodic and accompaniment patterns. The third system (measures 33-36) shows the melodic line moving to a higher register and the Pno. part featuring more complex chordal textures with triplet markings. The fourth system (measures 37-40) concludes the section with a final melodic phrase and accompaniment.

⁷⁶ Transcribed by Priestly, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Pithecanthropus Erectus" by Charles Mingus. It consists of four staves: A. Sax., T. Sax., Pno., and D.B. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The score begins at measure 37. Above the A. Sax. staff, the following chords are indicated: Fm7, Bb7, Gm7b5, and C7. The A. Sax. part features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The T. Sax. part also features a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The Pno. part is marked with a "cue" box in the third measure and contains rhythmic slash marks throughout. The D.B. part provides a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure.

Experimental Attributes of “Pithecanthropus Erectus”

While the construction of “Pithecanthropus” denotes Mingus’s shifting racial and political aesthetic approach, it remains a signature example of his experimental compositional objectives. The devices used in the construction of the work foreshadow many of the late 1950s and 1960s developments in jazz. Foremost among these compositional features are the use and expansion of free form, what Saul remarks as “Mingus’s first plunge into the idiom that later coalesced under the name of ‘free jazz.’”⁷⁷ By 1956, most jazz musicians were still confined to playing the original standards or contrafacts based on the 32-bar (AABA) popular song form. The structured form allowed musicians to perform as an ensemble with little or no time put into rehearsal, as the focus of the performance was individual interpretation manifested through improvised solos. Contrarily, Mingus adamantly rehearsed his Jazz Workshop ensembles simply because they performed his original compositions and arrangements and without using sheet

⁷⁷ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*, 191.

music. The time spent in rehearsal of his Workshop provided Mingus these opportunities for experimentation, resulting in “Pithecanthropus Erectus”: likely one of the first jazz compositions in which the musicians freely interpret formal boundaries within a performance (the B and C sections are indefinite, their endings determined by a harmonic cue sounded in the piano).

Mingus’s use of harmony in “Pithecanthropus Erectus” is also experimental. Harmony is often linked to form in the performance of jazz compositions. Take, for instance, what jazz musicians refer to as rhythm changes, an established harmonic progression over which the 32-bar (AABA) popular song form commonly sounds; or consider the Blues form and its structured harmonic interpretations. Just as Mingus erased the formal boundaries of the B and C sections in “Pithecanthropus,” he devised a harmonic setting free of implied formal associations. The B and C sections are modal, that is, not based on conventional major/minor scales and their suggestions of tonality. Consisting of just two chords, Fm7 and B \flat 7, which share the tones F and A \flat in their construction, the harmony of the B and C sections is receptive to the F Dorian mode (F, G, A \flat , B \flat , C, D, E \flat) and F minor-pentatonic scale (F, A \flat , B \flat , C, E \flat). As Example 3.2 demonstrates, only tones from these pitch sets, aside from the alto saxophone screeches and the B \natural blues note of the B and C sections, are sounded during the performance.

Mingus’s use of harmony precedes other musicians’ later experiments with modal forms, such as Miles Davis’s landmark album, *Kind of Blue* (1959); yet, his exploits into collective improvisation reach backwards to early New Orleans jazz. In that musical

practice, the front line of the ensemble (trumpet, clarinet or soprano saxophone, trombone, and possibly tenor saxophone) often improvises collectively, especially in the concluding choruses of a work. These improvisations, however, are controlled by the formal boundaries discussed above, and each musician is often limited to the expected role of his particular instrument within the ensemble: the trumpet is the loudest higher-pitched instrument on the front line, and therefore most often limited to stating or embellishing the melody in collectively improvised settings; in contrast, the clarinet and saxophones are usually free to improvise in the role of a secondary, obbligato melody; and the lower-pitched trombone outlines the harmonic progression, often adding distinctive slide techniques to embellish its arpeggiated line. Mingus creates new parameters of control in the collectively improvised sections of “Pithecanthropus Erectus.” Because the musicians are not limited by formal boundaries or their instrumentation, the composer seems to restrict his musicians to the F Dorian mode and minor-pentatonic scale discussed above. Almost ten years later, John Coltrane would give his sidemen four preset scales to guide their improvisations on his highly influential album, *Ascension* (1965), further illuminating the significance of Mingus’s compositional direction in “Pithecanthropus Erectus.”

Conclusion

It is in Mingus’s experimentations in form, harmony, and collective improvisation that his peers and critics begin to view him as an important and talented composer. The advancements made by Mingus in “Pithecanthropus Erectus” not only predate modal and free jazz, they signal a defined step away from the composer’s European compositional

objectives and one towards an approach that was more celebratory of the African-American experience, increasingly experimental, and fortunately for Mingus, more economically profitable.

CHAPTER IV

MINGUS AND THE ROOTS OF JAZZ

Introduction

Following the landmark album *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, Mingus continued his experimental trends. He produced *The Clown* for Atlantic in 1957, which included a newer adaptation of “Haitian Fight Song” and the album’s title track – a dark story of a clown whose ultimate desire was to make people laugh, but tragically, only did so at the expense of his own health. Mingus chose, rather innovatively, to include an improvised vocal narrative over circus melodies and sounds generated by the ensemble. In the same year, Mingus was invited by Gunther Schuller to take part in a festival of third-stream music held at Brandeis University. He contributed to the festival one movement of a work entitled “Revelations,” which included alongside normal jazz instrumentation flute, bassoon, French horn, bowed bass (in addition to pizzicato bass), and harp. Following a trip to Mexico he produced *Tijuana Moods* (1957), Mingus’s first attempt at the sounds of Latino music. But it is in his move towards hard bop, a more popular Black-Nationalistic style of jazz, that Mingus becomes more economically successful and attains his widest critical acceptance.

“Better Git It In Your Soul” (1959)

If *Pithecanthropus Erectus* represents Mingus’s transition towards a style identifying him as a Black Nationalist, *Mingus Ah Um* (1959) proclaims the arrival of his most popular and economically rewarding compositional identity – one in which he came

to trust and build from the deepest African-American style traits. Perhaps then, his success following the release of the album is best summarized by Mellonee Burnim's comment, "Negro spirituals and gospel music are the religious music genres actually created *by* and *for* Blacks themselves and which therefore reflect African American musical genius."⁷⁸ The opening track, "Better Git It In Your Soul," is an exciting trip to church, saturated not only with these African-American aesthetics, but also with elements from the blues and bebop. In what David Evans describes as "clear extensions of African musical practice," blues and pentatonic scales, bent notes, polyrhythm, and a loose 6/4 rhythmic feel inundate the composition.⁷⁹ Mingus's use of call-and-response and enthusiastic vocals further reveals the influence of the gospel church, and footstomps and handclaps depict the earliest performance of slave spirituals in which drums were banned.⁸⁰

Mingus develops "Better Git It" around these African-American style traits. The theme, presented in Example 4.1, is based on the F major pentatonic scale (F, G, A, C, D). The melody is limited to these pitches in the A sections, and includes only one additional note in the bridge: scale-degree 4, or B \flat of the F major scale. The harmonies of the work – in particular the B \flat Mm7 chord of mm. 2, 4, and 6 which is independent of a tonicized resultant – suggest the influence of the Blues. This African American-originated music centers on the use of non-functional major-minor qualities for harmonic

⁷⁸ Mellonee V. Burnim, "Religious Music," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, 51.

⁷⁹ David Evans, "Blues Chronological Overview," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, 87.

⁸⁰ Burnim, 55.

Example 4.1 – “Better Git It In Your Soul”⁸¹

The musical score is written in 6/4 time and consists of seven staves of music. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The chord progressions are as follows:

- Staff 1: F, Bb7, F, Bb7
- Staff 2: F, Bb7, Gm7, C7
- Staff 3: 1 F, 2 F
- Staff 4: Bb7, F, Bb7, F
- Staff 5: Bb7, F, G7, C7
- Staff 6: F, Bb7, F, Bb7
- Staff 7: F, Bb7, Gm7, C7, F

⁸¹ Lead sheet found in Sue Mingus, *More Than a Fakebook*, 9.

color and formal structure. Though the call-and-response device is not demonstrated in Ex. 4.1, Mingus employs it in at least two recordings. In the first, *Mingus Ah Um*, a saxophone (likely the alto) answers the composed melodic line played and harmonized by two other saxophones and a trombone. It too performs only the pitches of the F pentatonic scale while improvising between the phrases of the melody. In the second recording, *Mingus at Antibes*, the alto saxophone plays the first measure of the composed melody beginning in m. 2, one measure behind where the other instruments, a trumpet and sax, are playing the melody as written. Throughout both performances, pitches are altered with bent notes and falls. Soloists approach their improvisations with the complex rhythmic and angular melodic traits of bebop melodies, and they are supported sometimes by only the footstomps and handclaps of the other musicians.

Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting

“Better Git It In Your Soul” is strikingly similar to “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting,” a work recorded by Mingus only a few months earlier for an album entitled *Blues and Roots* (1959). Mingus describes his motivation for the project:

A year ago, Nesuhi Ertegun suggested that I record an entire blues album in the style of “Haitian Fight Song”...because some people, particularly critics, were saying I didn’t swing enough. He wanted to give them a barrage of soul music: churchy, blues, swinging, earthy. I thought it over. I was born swinging and clapped my hands in church as a little boy, but I’ve grown up and I like to do things other than just swing. But blues can do more than just swing. So I agreed.⁸²

⁸² Qtd. in Jenkins, 59.

While *Blues and Roots* marks Mingus's clear return to his Black-Nationalistic objectives, it is understandable that the album is overshadowed by *Mingus Ah Um*. The latter record includes what are likely three of Mingus's most famous compositions: "Better Git It In Your Soul," immediately followed by Mingus's tribute to tenor saxophonist Lester Young, "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," and the politically charged "Fables of Faubus," in which Mingus infamously mocks racist Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, who in 1957 called up the National Guard to prevent the integration of Little Rock High School.⁸³ *Mingus Ah Um* was also produced by Columbia, a larger label with the resources to distribute the album more widely than Atlantic could for *Blues and Roots*.

Except for their composed thematic material, "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting" and "Better Git It In Your Soul" are almost identical. In fact, it is arguable that Mingus wanted to record "Wednesday Night" for his debut on the larger Columbia label, but was restricted from doing so because of his contract with Atlantic. To circumvent the constraints imposed by copyright laws, jazz musicians of the 1940s and 1950s who wanted to improvise over the harmonic progressions of a pre-existing composition often recorded the work with a different, original melody; such compositions, like Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" which employs the chord changes to "Back Home Again in Indiana" or any work which includes the rhythm changes of Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm," are known as contrafacts. In all probability, Mingus created, for his Columbia

⁸³ Columbia Records would not allow Mingus to include his inflammatory lyrics with the track. They finally appeared on *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (1960), an album produced on the more independent Candid label.

debut, “Better Git It In Your Soul” to take advantage of the exciting improvisational backdrop he created for “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting.”

Mingus retains the aesthetic of “Wednesday Night” in the newer work. Not only do the two compositions share the same time signature and key area (6/4 and F), but they also employ African American-originated musical elements: blues and pentatonic scales, bent notes, the footstomps, handclaps, and enthusiastic vocals of the gospel church, and the blues harmonic progression over which the soloists improvise. In this regard, “Better Git It” is used in a manner consistent with conceptions of the contrafact in conventional jazz scholarship. But while the formal and harmonic structure of “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting” is a 12-bar blues throughout, the thematic material of the newer work is another Mingus experiment in form. The tune itself is given above as Example 4.1, while a diagram of its form is given as Example 4.2.

Example 4.2 – 38-Bar Chorus Structure of “Better Git It In Your Soul”



Mingus builds the theme on an AABA 32-bar popular song form, but it relies more heavily on blues-based major-minor seventh harmonies than songs that use that form typically do; furthermore, each A section is expanded from 8 to 10 measures by a 2-measure cadential extension, so that the 32-bar form is actually extended to become a 38-bar form. These formal and harmonic deviations would serve to dismiss the notion of “Better Git It In Your Soul” as Mingus’s contrafact of his own work, “Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting,” but the theme’s structure is ignored once the solos begin, and the

performers move into the same 12-bar blues progression and rhythmic texture of the first composition.

Conclusion

Mingus's move towards hard bop is an important event in his transitions as a composer. By incorporating a variety of African-American style traits and musical genres into his work, he produced compositions that were celebratory of the African American experience. *Mingus Ah Um* plays a critical role in reflecting the success of this compositional identity and propels Mingus into the 1960s, where he continues to earn a name as a confrontational and experimental composer.

The transitional compositional identities of Charles Mingus reflect the pursuits of many African-American jazz musicians in the 1950s. His attempts to gain financial stability and critical recognition for his artistic products led him through separate compositional stages. In the first, Mingus presented himself as a serious musician by blending classical and jazz elements in an attempt to blur the racial boundaries of music and create one universal and symbolic language. His second identity is confrontational, as he begins to use African-American aesthetics to express his sociopolitical views. "Pithecanthropus Erectus" is the signature composition of this period which, for Mingus, not only serves as a statement against the status quo, but also illustrates his greater influence on the language of jazz and his significant contributions to its advancement in terms of form, harmony, and collective improvisation. In his third identity, Mingus composes works reflective of the hard bop genre, and attains his greatest popular and

economic success by accepting and including in his compositions the musical possibilities found in African-American folk music. At the same time, he remains experimental, and again stretches the limits of traditional jazz form with his work, “Better Git It In Your Soul.”

This thesis profiled the maturation of Mingus’s compositional approach through three aesthetic objectives in a survey of the critical works related to each artistic identity; in addition, it examined the historical contexts behind each identity while associating Mingus’s compositional decisions to the greater social, political, and economic conditions faced by the African-American jazz community in much of the twentieth century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burnim, Mellonee V. "Religious Music." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, 51-78. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- de Jong, Nanette. "'You Can't Kill an Organization': Musicians' Collectives and the Black Power Paradigm." *Jazz Research* 37 (2005): 136-44.
- Evans, David. "Blues Chronological Overview." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, 79-95. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Gleason, Ralph J. "Charles Mingus: A Thinking Musician." In *Down Beat: 60 Years of Jazz*, edited by Frank Alkyer, 77-78. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1995.
- Hasse, John Edward. *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*. New York: De Capo Press, 1993.
- Hersch, Charles. "Let Freedom Ring: Free Jazz and African-American Politics." *Cultural Critique* 32 (Winter 1995-1996): 97-123.
- Jenkins, Todd. *I Know What I Know: The Music of Charles Mingus*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006.
- King, Desmond. "The World's Against Me as a Black Man: Charles Mingus and Segregated America." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, no. 1 (March 2000): 54-77.
- McMichael, Robert K. "'We Insist—Freedom Now!': Black Moral Authority, Jazz, and the Changeable Shape of Whiteness." *American Music* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 375-416.
- Mingus, Charles. *Beneath the Underdog*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Mingus, Charles. *Mingus Ah Um*. Columbia 1370, 1959.
- Mingus, Charles. *Mingus at the Bohemia*. Debut 123, 1955.
- Mingus, Charles. *Pithecanthropus Erectus*. Atlantic 1237, 1956.
- Mingus, Sue, ed. *More than a Fake Book*. Milwaukee: Jazz Workshop, 1991.

- Monson, Ingrid. "Jazz: Chronological Overview." In *African American Music: An Introduction*, edited by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, 145-166. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Panish, Jon. *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*. Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1997.
- Porter, Eric. *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.
- Priestly, Brian. *Mingus: A Critical Biography*. London: Quartet Books, 1982.
- Saul, Scott. *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Saul, Scott. "Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop." *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (September 2001): 387-419.
- Santoro, Gene. *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Tanner, Paul and Maurice Gerow. *A Study of Jazz*. Edited by Frederick W. Westphal. Dubuque: WM. C. Brown, 1964.
- Triumph of the Underdog*. Dir. Don McGlynn. Shanachie Entertainment, 1997.
- Washington, Salim. "All the Things You Could Be by Now: Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz." In *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Brent Hayes Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Robert O'Meally, 27-49. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

PERMISSION TO COPY

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Texas Tech University or Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, I agree that the Library and my major department shall make it freely available for research purposes. Permission to copy this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Director of the Library or my major professor. It is understood that any copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my further written permission and that any user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Agree (Permission is granted.)

SCOTT STROVAS

JULY 6, 2007

Student Signature

Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

Student Signature

Date