

MINGUS PLAYS PIANO

spontaneous compositions and improvisations





IMPULSE! IMPD-217

MINGUS PLAYS PIANO
CHARLES
MINGUS



THE
NEW WAVE
OF JAZZ
IS ON
IMPULSE!

- 1> **Myself When I Am Real** 7:35
- 2> **I Can't Get Started** 3:40
- 3> **Body and Soul** 4:31
- 4> **Roland Kirk's Message** 2:40
- 5> **Memories of You** 4:35
- 6> **She's Just Miss Popular Hybrid** 3:08
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- 11> **Compositional Theme Story: Medleys, Anthems and Folklore** 8:35

Charles Mingus, solo piano

Original sessions produced by Bob Thiele

Reissue produced by Michael Cuscuna

Recording engineer: Bob Simpson

Recorded on July 30, 1963 at RCA Studios,
New York City



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MINGUS PLAYS PIANO |
CHARLES MINGUS

Mingus Plays Piano

CHARLES MINGUS

This first album on which Charles Mingus plays only piano was inevitable. While it is as a virtuoso bassist, composer and volcanic leader that Mingus is best known to the jazz audience, those who are frequently with Mingus off the stand tend to identify him almost as closely with the piano as with the bass. I've never been in a Mingus home in which a piano wasn't present, and I've often heard a new Mingus composition for the first time as it sounded when he performed it on the piano. Gradually, within the past few years, Mingus has been increasingly heard at the instrument in public, and this album demonstrates the degree to which he is continuing to focus more and more of his concentration on the piano. He is not by any means abandoning the bass, but I expect that this set marks the beginning of a further dimension in Mingus' career as a performer.

Although the trombone and the cello were Mingus' primary instruments before he switched to bass, he was also drawn to the piano from as far back as he can remember. (Since an older sister was a piano student while he was growing up, the



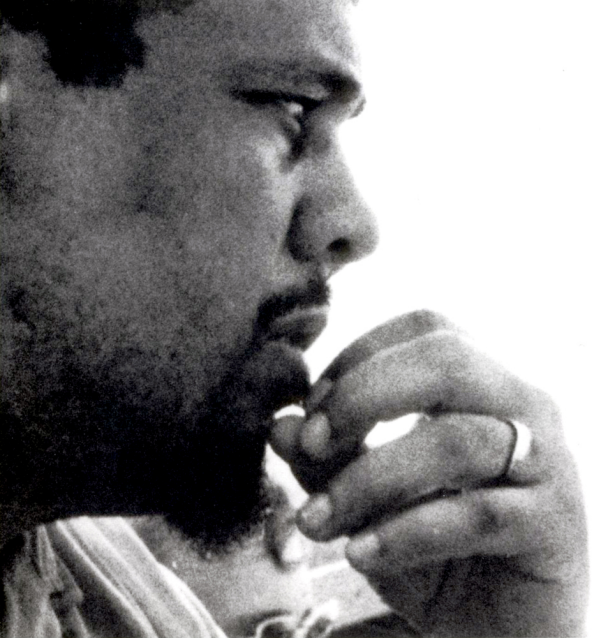
easy availability of the instrument led to familiarity.) A particular stimulus to Mingus' interest in the piano was the period during which he played with Art Tatum before Mingus settled in New York. Tatum encouraged his bassist's absorption in the piano, and Mingus remembers Tatum standing over him, teaching him chord changes.

4 When Mingus became leader of his own groups, he found the piano not only a valuable aid in composition but also one of the key means by which he was able to communicate the basic frameworks of his originals and arrangements to his sidemen. As he once said in an interview in the British magazine, *Jazz News*: "I don't arrange music in the accepted term of that word. Most of the time I play the melody on the piano and then sing the interpretations to the musicians, bending the notes the way I want them played." Eventually, as I've noted, he began to play the piano more often with his bands, and the time arrived when he wanted to record a whole program on piano.

Characteristically, Mingus makes his full-scale debut as a piano soloist without rhythm section. He has always had most respect for those pianists — notably Tatum — who could function alone because they were accustomed to play-

ing fully with both hands. "A lot of the younger pianists," Mingus emphasizes, "don't appreciate what Tatum revealed about the resources of the piano. It's when you have the left hand going that the right hand makes more sense. Otherwise, the chords sound empty." Among other solo pianists whom Mingus admires for their two-handed scope are Hank Jones and Jimmy Jones. Although he is very serious about the piano, Mingus realizes that some listeners may first approach this album with skepticism about hearing what a man whom they consider primarily a bassist can do on another instrument. "All I can say," Mingus observes, "is that if a bass player can attempt what I've done here, by myself, some of the other musicians who are full-time pianists ought to at least consider practicing more." This is not egotism on Mingus' part. Chronically self-critical, he does not maintain he is a piano virtuoso, but he does feel that a musician who does play piano should be able to record all alone.

If Mingus is not a Tatum, he is certainly uniquely himself as a pianist, and as this album demonstrates, he plays the instrument with an impressive range of expressive power. The first number, **Myself When I Am Real**, is, like **Meditations for Moses** and **Compositional Theme Story**,



a largely spontaneous performance. “Depending on the mood I’m in,” Mingus explains, “this sort of thing comes out differently every time I play it. I go into a kind of trance when I’m playing this kind of number. I remember that when we were recording this one, I noticed suddenly I didn’t seem to be breathing.” The title means that it is on these spontaneous, trance-like occasions that Mingus feels his real, his most inner musical personality emerges. I would agree. Here are the qualities of romanticism, rhapsodic lyricism, and song-like ardor that are at the base of Mingus’ character. The allegedly “angry” Mingus is only one part of his personality, and it is a part that is activated in reaction to what he considers hostile stimuli. When Mingus is not besieged by various pressures, this is indeed **Myself When I Am Real**. Clearly, all is not restful in this number, but the occasional turbulence is the expression of a yearning for deeper and fuller experience. It is not bellicose.

I Can’t Get Started has long appealed to Mingus because of its harmonic interest as well as because of its title and lyrics. This piano interpretation of the song is meditatively introspective. **Body and Soul** is also indicative of Mingus’ essential lyricism. So far as he can recall, the changes on the bridge are those he learned from Tatum’s performance

of the tune. "On standards," Mingus notes, "the arrangements — with the exception of those chords in the bridge of **Body and Soul** — are almost always entirely mine. I don't buy sheet music. If I feel like arranging a standard, it's because the song struck me for some reason, and then it gets soaked into me completely and comes out the way I hear and feel it."

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Roland Kirk's Message started out as having nothing to do with that remarkable multiple instrumentalist. Mingus was trying to remember a song he had written three or four years ago. Finally, he called Kirk, who had been in his band at the time, to see if Kirk recalled it. Despite the passage of time, Kirk did, and the incident led Mingus to reflect on Kirk and his "message." Mingus has much respect for Kirk's musicianship and disagrees strongly with those who maintain Kirk is basically a showman. "Their problem," he says of Kirk's critics, "is that they don't listen to him with their eyes closed. He can play any kind of music and he's a great composer. Some put him down when he spins a bass on the top of his head, but man, when he plays that bass, it's in tune." Some of his admiration for Kirk's musical integrity and emotional directness seeped into this tune, and Mingus decided to title it after Kirk.

Memories of You is another popular standard which has "soaked into" Mingus. Like Duke Ellington, a musician whom Mingus greatly respects, Mingus is often given to composing vignettes of people he knows. **She's Just Miss Popular Hybrid** is one of them. "Although this chick can be nasty," says Mingus, "she's very popular, but very few like her just for herself, for what she is at her core. I'm one of those who do." As Mingus began to think about the young lady, he became wholly immersed in the music, and this too is spontaneous, almost trance-like performance.

The genesis of **Orange Was The Color of Her Dress; Then Silk Blues** was an S. Lee Pogostin play, *A Song with Orange In It*, for which Mingus wrote the music when it was produced a few years ago as part of a Robert Herridge television series. This is an expanded, more cohesively developed version of part of that score. The emotions in the music come from Mingus' brooding about the two main characters in the play — a musician and a hollow society girl who almost destroys him. At one point in the play, she asked the musician to write her a song with orange in it (try finding a rhyme for orange). "That's how deeply she felt about music," says Mingus

scornfully. "It's like asking someone to write a song for your new gloves or a new hairdo."

Old Portrait has been through several title changes. Originally called "God's Portrait" and later "Self-Portrait," it was recorded in the 1950's by Thad Jones as "Portrait" for the Debut label which Mingus then owned. Mingus wrote the song shortly after the end of his first marriage. He was depressed at the loss of his family, and while on a train, he was led by the passing landscape to think about the kind of man who loves all aspects of nature but cannot love people. At the time, Mingus felt he fitted that description, and accordingly, that there was something missing in him. The song is now called **Old Portrait** because it was written some time ago, and also because Mingus doesn't "look like" that portrait any more.

I'm Getting Sentimental Over You is another highly personal Mingus reanimation of a standard. The final **Compositional Theme Story: Medleys, Anthems and Folklore** is a work that Mingus has performed for many years, but each time its shape and inner balance change. "This," he says, "is a mixture of all the things I've heard, known and felt about this country." **Wisps of What Am I**

Here For? and Goin' Home accent Mingus' convictions as a Negro that there is a deep chasm between this country's promise and what living in it has actually meant for Negroes for more than three centuries. "The Bill of Rights," Mingus observes, "is fine. All those civil rights that are being struggled for are already in there, but it hasn't been applied and it isn't in people's hearts. We're still talking in terms of Negroes and whites, but we're either all Americans, or forget it! As long as those two words exist, with all the divisions they imply and with all the oppression of the Negro they imply, there is no real place for me in this society." Again, in this spontaneous performance, the basic mood is not anger but sorrow and yearning and pain.

And this in sum is Charles Mingus' first solo piano album. Mingus has pointed out that "my bass technique developed from my study of piano. I never really understood the bass until I started working out harmonies and other things on the piano. Then I came to regard the fingerboard of the bass like a piano keyboard." In the process, moreover, Mingus has also developed his own piano style; and judging from these performances, it is

through the piano that Mingus is best able to express the more gentle, the more reflective and — I use the word with care — the more innocent elements of his personality.

— NAT HENTOFF

(Original liner notes from Mingus Plays Piano, AS-60)

To the Listener:

In our continuing attempt to remain true to the original recordings (in both sound quality and design), we at Impulse! Records have made no changes in content, spelling or grammar to the original text.



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 - 2. I Can't Get Started 3:40**
(I. Gershwin-V. Duke)
 - 3. Body and Soul 4:31**
(Green-Sour-Heyman-Eyton)
 - 4. Roland Kirk's Message 2:40**
 - 5. Memories of You 4:35**
(E. Blake-A. Razaf)
 - 6. She's Just Miss Popular Hybrid 3:08**
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(N. Washington-G. Bassman)
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