

## DARK PASSIONS, BRIGHT MOMENTS: Bob Bernotas



The past few years have seen a renewal of interest in the music of bassist-composer **Charles Mingus**. In 1990, 11 years after his death, Mingus' monumental *Epitaph* was assembled from fragments of unfinished scores and sketches, and performed to great acclaim. The following year brought the formation of the Mingus Big Band, a loosely organized unit of New York all-stars that plays original arrangements of Mingus' repertoire. Then in 1992 producer Hal Wilner released *Weird Nightmare: Meditations on Mingus*, a fittingly bizarre homage in which an eclectic mélange of performers, ranging from jazz artists like pianist Geri Allen and clarinetist Don Byron to Rolling Stone Keith Richards and rapper Chuck D, interpret the music (and prose) of this dark genius. And best of all, a windfall of long-unavailable Mingus recordings is being reissued on compact disc after years in out-of-print vinyl limbo.

Recorded in 1957, just prior to one of Mingus' creative peaks, *East Coasting* (Bethlehem 30022, playing time: 49:34), consists of the Eubie Blake-Andy Razaf standard, "Memories of You," and five Mingus originals, only one of which ("Celia") became a permanent part of Mingus' repertoire. Together these pieces document a crucial point in the evolution of Mingus' music, foreshadowing his notable Columbia, Candid, and Atlantic sessions of 1959-61. Mingus was one of those rare artists (like Ellington, Monk, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk) who belonged to no school, who followed no lead other than his own. Despite its mid 1950's vintage, the music on

this disc reflects neither of the then-dominant trends in jazz. It exudes infinitely more emotion than the chilled out, blood-drained “cool” school and reveals more depth than the frequently overheated and formulaic hard bop.

All the characteristics of classic Mingus are evident in these works: complex structures, intricate lines, unusual keys and surprising modulations, abrupt changes of tempo and mood, abundant space for improvisation, and virtuoso bass solos. Of course, Ellington echoes are present, as they always would be, but Mingus’ work is only superficially “Ellingtonian.” As with Duke, the key element is the composer’s passion, genuine, deep, and personal. But there is really only one word that truly describes this music: “Mingus.”

The personnel on this Bethlehem date is almost as interesting as the music. Trombonist Jimmy Knepper and saxophonist Shafi Hadi were Mingus stalwarts, two of only a small cadre of players who, at that time, had a true affinity for his demanding compositions. Summoned to the date only six hours before it took place, pianist Bill Evans had to sight-read the intricate parts. He did so remarkably, displaying the same combination of sensitivity and boldness that earned him acclaim two years later as a member of Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* sextet. The trumpeter is Clarence “Gene” Shaw, a little remembered, but superb player out of Detroit, whose solos throughout this session take unexpected and ingenious turns. Legend has it that, two months later, Shaw became so upset at one of Mingus’ typically unreasonable beratings – which even included a death threat – that he temporarily gave up playing and destroyed his horn.

One musician who could endure the bassist’s volatility was drummer Dannie Richmond, Mingus’ long-time friend, confidant, and as much of an alter ego as that erratic psyche could have had. When he met Mingus, less than a year before this recording date, Richmond was an erstwhile rhythm-and-blues saxophonist, not yet 21 years old, and had been playing the drums seriously for barely six months. Mingus, who had suffered real and imagined problems with drummers, was excited by the youngster’s potential, as well as his malleability. And so, out of Richmond’s talent and open mind Mingus fashioned a drummer in his own image. Richmond would appear on the huge majority of Mingus’ subsequent recordings, including all of those discussed here.

***Jazz Portraits/Mingus in Wonderland*** (Blue Note CDP 27325, 44:15) was recorded at a January 1959 concert. It is not as adventurous compositionally as either *East Coasting* or the classic sessions that were to come, but the playing is no less inspired and the music is every bit as evocative. Mingus composed two of the four pieces, the catchy blues, “Nostalgia in Times Square,” and a two-part ballad, “Alice’s Wonderland,” for the score of John Cassavetes’ improvisational film, *Shadows*, and they are among his most memorable.

Alto saxophonist John Handy, making his recording debut, is featured on a lovely version of “I Can’t Get Started.” Mingus’ carefully constructed, full-bodied – and

superbly recorded – bass line is more countermelody than accompaniment and evolves into one of his strongest solos on record. In the arresting and witty cadenza, Handy and Mingus complete each other's phrases, including some playfully interpolated quotes from "Stormy Weather" and "Tenderly."

Also debuting on this session is tenor saxophonist Booker Ervin, who blows into the themeless "No Private Income Blues" like a Texas tornado. As the piece progresses, he and Handy lock into a steadily intensifying series of exchanges that climax in some exhilarating, improvised counterpoint. Ervin, like Lucky Thompson and Charlie Rouse, was an original, unmistakable, and sorely underrated voice on the tenor. His death in 1970 at the age of 39 was an incalculable loss to the music.

Ervin and Handy, as well as Jimmy Knepper's plunger-muted trombone, are heard prominently on *Mingus Dynasty* (Columbia CK 52922, 45:44), one of Mingus' best exercises in small-group composition. His love of gospel music is apparent throughout, particularly on "Slop," a reworking of Mingus' own "Better Git It In Your Soul." Richmond drives "Gunslinging Bird" with a compulsive, undulating 6/4 rhythm that will raise most listeners' heart rates. "Alice's Wonderland" from the January concert has been retitled "Diane" and, with the ensemble doubled in size, its atonal underpinnings are exposed more fully. The middle section is a master class in trio interplay. Pianist Roland Hanna applies his light touch, both single-note and block-chorded, to the melancholy theme, while Richmond's brushes gently keep time and Mingus inserts a free-floating bass line.

The compositional highlight of this set is "Far Wells, Mill Valley," a flamenco-inspired piece dedicated to Mingus' friend, painter Farwell Taylor. Mingus, Handy, and trumpeter Richard Williams have brief solos and Jerome Richardson's flute is present throughout, at times heard, through the magic of overdubbing, simultaneously with his baritone saxophone. But the strength of the work lies in its rich ensemble textures and polyphonic passages, two defining elements of Mingus' writing.

Through the 1960s Mingus experienced triumphs and fiascos, celebrity and notoriety, fleeting fame and prolonged obscurity. The path that his genius traveled was never a straight one, but out of the chaos Mingus re-emerged in the early 1970s with a new quintet and a recording deal with Atlantic, a label where, from the mid 1950s to the early 1960s, he had done some of his best work. Rescued by the reissue mavens at Rhino Records from years of neglect, the best of Atlantic's distinguished jazz catalog – including three long unavailable mid 1970s Mingus titles – have appeared, at long last, on CD.

*Mingus Moves* (Rhino R2 71454, 62:36), recorded over the last three days of 1973, was Mingus' first appearance in a recording studio in over two years. (A February 1972 concert at New York's Avery Fisher Hall was recorded and released on Columbia.) Just two days before these sessions began, Richmond returned to his mentor after a brief detour with the jazz-oriented rock band Mark-Almond.

“Dannie’s joined the Beatles,” Mingus had been saying in disgust.

This is, in many ways, a transitional album, noteworthy more for what it promises than what it achieves. The quintet, which was to evolve into one of Mingus’s great bands – sadly, his last – is occasionally ragged on the heads. Saxophonist-flutist George Adams reveals the bud of a personal, engagingly eccentric solo style that would blossom in his subsequent work with Mingus. Only three of the seven originally issued tracks are Mingus compositions: the brooding “Canon,” “Opus 4,” with its long and twisting line reminiscent of his 1950’s classic, “Jump Monk,” and “Opus 3,” whose theme makes obvious reference to another important early work, “Pithecanthropus Erectus.”

The solo star of this session is the brilliant pianist Don Pullen. Shaped in equal parts by gospel music and free jazz, Pullen’s two hands and ten fingers – and knuckles! – attack the keys with a relentless, yet inspired, abandon. As a bonus, one of the previously unissued tracks, the funky “Big Alice,” is a Pullen composition. By the early 1990s, after nearly 30 years on the scene, this unique artist finally began receiving a taste of the recognition he had deserved for so long.

Exactly a year later, Mingus was back in the studio with nearly the same band to record two of the decade’s essential albums, **Changes One** (Rhino R2 71043, 44:45) and **Changes Two** (Rhino R2 71044, 43:06). Pullen is, once more, in magnificent form. Adams has found his saxophone voice and really uses it, and also sings some raunchy blues. And Richmond is as comfortable as ever, anticipating Mingus’ every move. The newcomer to the group is trumpeter Jack Walrath, a risk-taking player with a searing tone, an array of colors, and a conception shaped, but not limited, by bebop. Six of the eight different pieces on these two discs – one tune is played twice – are Mingus originals, and among them are some of his most daring, structurally complex works.

Despite its deceptively carefree 51-bar theme, “Remember Rockefeller at Attica,” echoes Mingus’s anti-racist ode from late 1950s, “Fables of Faubus.” “Sue’s Changes” gradually unfolds through a series of tempo shifts and rubato passages. One of Mingus’ loveliest ballads, “Duke Ellington’s Sound of Love,” is performed once as a rich instrumental and again in a weak-voiced, out-of-tune vocal by Jackie Paris. In “Free Cell Block F, ‘Tis Nazi U.S.A.” Mingus deftly strings together angular five-, seven-, and nine-bar phrases, including occasional 5/4 measures, into a seamless melody line. And originally composed in 1964, the stunning “Orange Was the Color of Her Dress, Then Blue Silk” contains hints of an 11-bar blues form as it weaves in and out of its many tempos. Pullen’s colossal solo dominates the first half of this track and is indescribably marvelous. Overall, the two **Changes** discs represent a milestone in small group composition and stand among the highest points of Mingus’ career.

But Mingus had so little time left. During 1976 his usually robust physique began to show telltale signs of fatigue. In November 1977 he was diagnosed with

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Mingus' body was wasting away, while his fertile imagination remained strong. Once paralysis overtook his limbs, Mingus composed his final works by singing into a tape recorder. Then, on January 5, 1979, the chill of death enveloped Charles Mingus at the age of 56, a tortured genius who transformed his darkest passions into beautiful music.

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**Rahsaan Roland Kirk** lived in a wide world of sound. He heard music everywhere and in everything, in the songs of birds and the sounds of whales, in the rumble of trains and the roar of jet engines. On his gigs, he was as likely to play a Stevie Wonder tune or a Villa-Lobos composition as he was an Ellington standard. He could sit in with anyone, from old-time New Orleans clarinetist George Lewis to the avant garde Art Ensemble of Chicago. In the words of Charles Mingus, with whom Kirk recorded in the early 1960s, "This man is what jazz is all about."

Born Ronald Kirk in Columbus, Ohio, in 1936, he was, according to alternative versions of his legend, either blind from birth or left sightless as an infant after a botched medical treatment. As a child, he took up clarinet and saxophone. Then one night, when he was 16, Kirk dreamed that he was playing three instruments at the same time. The next day he went to a music store in search of that sound. He tried all the reed instruments until finally, in the basement, among the scrap pile, he found the *manzello*, a modified soprano saxophone with a slightly curved neck, enlarged bore, and bass clarinet-like bell. A year later the store's owner showed him the *stritch*, a straightened alto saxophone. By hanging his tenor saxophone, manzello, and stritch around his neck all at once, Kirk was able to switch deftly among them. But more importantly, he developed the ability to blow all three horns simultaneously, producing harmonies unlike anything ever created by any one musician, or for that matter, any *three* musicians. Now he could play the music that he heard in his dreams.

Kirk recorded for numerous companies, but he enjoyed his longest and most productive association with the Atlantic label during the 1960s and '70s. Like much of Atlantic's wonderful jazz catalogue, these essential recordings fell into disregard in recent years. But now, three of Kirk's best albums are available once more, thanks to the iconoclastic Rhino Records.

Originally released in 1969, ***Volunteered Slavery*** (Rhino R2 71407, playing time: 42:54) is an eclectic and spirited presentation. The first half of the disc features a choir on two cuts and also introduces Kirk's penchant for reinterpreting pop tunes. The Beatles' "Hey, Jude," for instance, suddenly appears in the midst of the title track. Stevie Wonder's mega-hit, "My Cherie Amour," becomes a charming vehicle for Kirk's distinctive flute.

Kirk takes "I Say A Little Prayer" through changes that Burt Bacharach, Hal David, and Dionne Warwick never imagined. A brief vocal incantation for the recently

assassinated Martin Luther King (“*They shot him down to the ground*”) launches the theme and it never stops cooking. Kirk’s breathtaking solo, in which his tenor is the most prominent, but not the only, horn, interpolates such unlikely material as Chopin’s “Polonaise,” Gillespie’s “Manteca,” and Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme.” Throughout the date, and on this track particularly, Dick Griffin’s trombone lines are especially well served by the remixing, and his trademark multiphonics ring stronger than on the original vinyl.

The second half of the disc is drawn from Kirk’s set at the 1968 Newport Jazz Festival. “One Ton” features a conversation between conventional flute – as if anything Kirk did was “conventional” – and nose flute. On his “medley of tunes that John Coltrane left here for us *to learn*” (“Lush Life,” “Afro-Blue,” “Bessie’s Blues”) Kirk’s tenor saxophone and manzello, although inspired by Trane, remain wholly original, which is the highest kind of tribute. Tenor, manzello, and stritch, in three-part harmony, introduce the astounding “Three for the Festival,” before Kirk switches to flute for an awe-inspiring exhibition of multiple tonguing, key percussion, and multiphonics.

A true egalitarian, Kirk felt that no music was beneath him. ***Blacknuss*** (Rhino R2 71408, 43:10), recorded in 1971, is Kirk’s definitive statement on popular music, proof that it is possible to make jazz out of good popular songs, providing you are willing to meet them half way. Like Sonny Rollins and Lester Bowie, he found the secret to playing pop tunes in the jazz idiom: take them seriously, handle them with care and respect, recognize their merits, and have fun doing it. About half of the album consists of short takes on soul hits of the period, like “Ain’t No Sunshine,” “My Girl,” “Never Can Say Goodbye,” and two of Marvin Gaye’s biggies, “What’s Goin’ On?” and “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology).” Kirk also reaches back to 1947 for the old Bull Moose Jackson ballad “I Love You, Yes I Do,” delivered soulfully on manzello, with authentic support from brass, Hammond organ, electric guitar, and backbeat.

Other tracks delve even deeper into the past. Introduced by Kirk’s righteously pissed-off sermon, the traditional hymn “Old Rugged Cross” is rendered, on tenor saxophone, with an appropriately sanctified timbre. And “One Nation” takes black popular music all the way back to its source, capturing the festive spirit of the West African highlife well before the commercial mainstream discovered, and exploited, so-called “world music.” In short, this disc recounts the story of African-American music, spiritual and secular, sacred and profane, as only Kirk could tell it.

Recorded at the San Francisco’s Keystone Korner in 1973, ***Bright Moments*** (Rhino R2 71409, 2 CDs, 1:22:17) documents a “typical” Rahsaan Roland Kirk nightclub set. (By that time, Kirk had adopted the name “Rahsaan,” which he heard himself being called in a dream.) “We’d like you to sit back and get on the train with us,” he tells the audience, “and go to all the places we’re gonna go to. When you want to get off, just tell somebody and we’ll stop the train and throw you off.”

And it's quite a journey, winding through the lands of Ellington (a Ben Webster-inspired "Prelude to a Kiss"), Waller ("Jitterbug Waltz"), Bacharach ("You'll Never Get to Heaven"), and even Rodgers and Hammerstein (Kirk's impassioned tenor reading of "If I Loved You"). There are recitations, preachy (and funny) monologues, and side trips into both funk and traditional jazz, the latter of which features Kirk's woody, vibrato-driven clarinet. And of course there is the title track, the now famous "Bright Moments Song," Kirk's signature tune, salutation, and creed.

In 1975 Kirk suffered a severely debilitating stroke. His left side was paralyzed, but even before he was stricken, Kirk had modified his horns so that he could play their entire ranges one-handed. His mouth was contorted, so he developed a new embouchure. He had to undergo dialysis treatments three times a week, yet he continued to perform and tour almost as before. "Courageous" is not an adequate enough word to describe the final two years of Rahsaan Roland Kirk's life. "Miraculous" gets a little closer. During that span, few who heard him play, without being aware of his condition, could detect any reduction of his remarkable skills. But on the night of December 5, 1977, as he was leaving Bloomington after having played two concerts at the University of Indiana, Kirk's astounding life force gave out suddenly and finally. He was just 41 years old.

Early in his career, some short-sighted critics, failing to see the connection between ingenuity and genius, charged Kirk with gimmickry. "I do everything for a reason," he responded. "Nothing is a gimmick. I have to do what I feel." This exceptional musician traveled his own road, yet, through his spellbinding live performances and invaluable recordings like these, he brought bright moments to legions of listeners along the way.

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