

Charles Mingus, Jazz and Modernism

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Abstracts

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the diverse discourses of modernism in jazz at mid-century in relation to the work of Charles Mingus. What was meant by modern jazz in Mingus' time? How was his music, as well as his life as a jazz musician and composer, affected by discourses of modernism? Modernism was used in the jazz field as a discourse to elevate jazz from its role as entertainment music into a legitimate art form. In its transfer from European art music to African-American jazz, the concept of aesthetic modernism retained most of its signification: it was associated with the notions of progress, of avant-gardism, and, eventually, of political militancy; and all these notions can be found in multiple forms in Mingus' work. This thesis defines the concept of modern jazz as it was used in the jazz press in the 1950s and 1960s in relation to the critical discourse around Afro-modernism as well as in relation with Mingus' conception of himself as a composer.

L'objectif de ce mémoire est d'explorer les différents discours sur le modernisme et le jazz des années 1950 et 1960 en relation avec l'œuvre de Charles Mingus. Que signifiait le terme modern jazz à l'époque de Mingus? Comment la musique de ce dernier, ainsi que sa carrière comme musicien de jazz et compositeur, furent affectées par les discours sur le modernisme? Ces discours furent utilisés dans le monde du jazz pour légitimer celui-ci en tant que forme artistique. Dans son passage de la musique « sérieuse » européenne au jazz afro-américain, la notion

de modernisme artistique a conservé la majeure partie de sa signification : association avec les idées de progrès, d'avant-gardisme, et aussi de militantisme politique. Toutes ces idées se retrouvent sous différentes formes dans l'œuvre de Mingus. Ce mémoire définit le concept de modern jazz tel qu'il était utilisé dans le discours journalistique des années 1950 et 1960, et y relie le discours académique sur le modernisme afro-américain, afin d'évaluer comment Mingus interagit avec ceux-ci.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The music struggled against the rules to get its freedom. It was violent and spread its beauty into hallucinated screams, terrible noises, monstrous [sic] angers, explosions, unbearable laments and mortal injuries. With this tumultuous declarations, the provoking Mingus drew hatred, organized panic. He shouted “They say I’m mad, and perhaps I really am mad”. Perhaps, but much more enraged, and voluntarily so. He wanted to bite, he wanted to be contagious and spread it around him. With screams, he managed to lead the passion of his men to a climax: large segments of white society would then fall apart among the crash of cymbals and moan of brass. And Mingus triumphant, howling into savage extasy [sic] would then arise, pacified, purified by all this delirium and become tender, purring and almost charming.... He was the first terrorist of Black People music.

-Unknown author, liner notes,
album *Blue Bird*, by Charles Mingus¹

Everything for which Charles Mingus was known and is remembered is in this epigraph. As poetic and non-musicological as this description is, it is still one of the most relevant descriptions of this composer’s artistic vision. It stresses the provocative power Mingus infused his music with, his desire to change things through his art and the political edge of his compositions, as well as their

¹ Liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Blue Bird*, America Record AM 6110, 1971, 33¹/₃ rpm.

contrasted nature. Mingus was far more than just the angry man of jazz, as he was quite often dubbed during his lifetime. He was an uncompromising artist whose entire life had been dedicated to musical composition and who tried to integrate every possible life experience into his music. The result is an extremely personal musical production which defies usual generic divisions, and which has been greatly influenced by the context in which it was composed. Spanning four decades (from the 1940s to the 1970s), his work as a composer has indeed been marked by his acute awareness of the political issues surrounding the social condition of African Americans. The most obvious aspect of the political content of his work is found in titles of his compositions: “Fables of Faubus,” “Meditation on Integration,” “Freedom Suite,” and “Remembering Rockefeller at Attica,” to name only the most obvious of them. This simple way of conveying a particular message through instrumental pieces is enhanced by the fact that Mingus’ music always had an innovative edge.

This political edge present in Mingus’ conception of music is, I will argue, closely related to what Ingrid Monson and others have called jazz modernism.² As will be explained in more detail in the next chapter, modernism, as a discourse, was used in the jazz field to elevate jazz from its role as entertainment music to a legitimate art form. In this transfer of aesthetic modernism from European art music to African-American jazz, the concept retained most of its signification: it was associated with the notions of progress, of avant-gardism, and eventually, of political militancy. But as a tool for legitimacy, modernism was a two-edged

² Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

sword for African American jazz musicians since it implied a dialogue between two different conceptions of music. Specifically, using the notion of modernism to elevate jazz music as high art implied an acceptance of the aesthetic standards of European music, thus proclaiming a certain superiority of European aesthetic values over African-American tradition. This problematic aspect of modernism and jazz was accentuated by the climate of racial tension in the United States after World War II. Yet this thin line separating innovation and tradition presented progressive African American jazz musicians with a familiar black modernist dilemma: to be too traditional could be seen as reactionary vis-à-vis the values of aesthetic modernism, while being too modern could bring charges of neglecting or abandoning one's own musical roots.³

Mingus's musical production is particularly varied in terms of style: it ranges from "straight ahead" bebop pieces, to hard bop, blues and gospel influenced arrangements, to scores for symphonic orchestra, to a jazz tone poem, and to Latin- and Spanish-tinged pieces. This eclecticism reflects his quest to navigate, on the one hand, his identification with African-American musical tradition and, on the other, his expansion of it. Mingus was part of that generation of jazz musicians born in the late 1910s and early 1920s from which came the core of what is often called the bebop revolution.⁴ Two years younger than Charlie Parker (1920), and five years younger than Dizzy Gillespie (1917), the young Mingus could forge his early musical identity *before* coming into contact

³ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 86-7.

⁴ See Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

with the intense force of attraction that bebop was for young musicians in the 1940s.

Charles Mingus Jr. was born from a middle class family in Nogales, Arizona, in 1922, but grew up in Watts, which was then a quite poor Los Angeles black suburb.⁵ Mingus's father insisted that his three children all learn music while they were young. Before picking up the bass, Mingus started learning the trombone, as well as the cello, an instrument which allowed him a brief stint in his high school symphonic orchestra.⁶ Mingus eventually moved on to the bass under the advice of an older musician, friend, and future colleague, saxophonist Buddy Collette.⁷ After a couple of years playing in the clubs and bars of Los Angeles, Mingus got his firsts important gigs with the Red Norvo Trio, Louis Armstrong, and his all time idol Duke Ellington. He moved to New York in 1951 and started to develop a reputation as a bass virtuoso within the jazz scene and took part in the emergent bebop movement. Parallel to his achievements as a bassist were his achievements as a composer and bandleader. He earned a certain degree fame in the jazz scene during the late 1950s and early 1960s, recording no less than 17 albums under his name between 1957 and 1963, which eventually lead to an European tour in 1964. Due principally to health problems, he withdrew almost

⁵ Gene Santoro, *Myself when I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus* (New York: Random House, 1971), 68.

completely from music between 1967 and 1970.⁸ From then on, and until his death from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (Lou Gherig's disease) on January 5, 1979, he returned to music, took up composition again, and started touring the now flourishing jazz festivals across the world. He is principally remembered for his innovative ways of approaching jazz composition, as well as for his expansion of the role of the bass in jazz. His discography includes more than sixty albums under his own name, as well as numerous collaborations on other jazz albums as a sideman.⁹ He is now considered as a major figure in the jazz pantheon.

Mingus' life and work have been studied from different angles. Most non-biographical essays and research on his work seek to understand his compositional style, his public persona, or the link between his political opinions and his musical compositions. Building on these studies, the central question explored in this thesis is the following: how did a political activist and musician like Mingus, "the first terrorist of Black People music," struggle with the inherent contradictions of jazz modernism?¹⁰ Ensuing from this primary interrogation are different questions that will first need to be answered: what was meant by modern jazz in Mingus' time? how was his music, as well as his life as a jazz musician and composer, affected by discourses of modernism? how can we see him as a challenge to these discourses on modernism in jazz?

⁸ About this somewhat darker period in Mingus's life, see Scott Saul, *Freedom is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 320-9.

⁹ See discography in Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 247.

¹⁰ Liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Blue Bird*, America Record AM 6110, 1971, 33¹/₃ rpm.

The first step toward an understanding of the link between Mingus and jazz modernism consists of identifying the key aspects of this concept and of its implications for the jazz milieu. Chapter 2 will discuss the relationship between European modernism and jazz modernism by first presenting how the press exploited the concept of modernism in an attempt to legitimise jazz music. Subsequently, this journalistic discourse on jazz modernism will be related to the musicians' ideas on this subject, and critically examined in its mid-century context, following a perspective elaborated by Ingrid Monson.¹¹ Other thinkers of Afro-modernism will be presented for their larger views of the exchanges between European modernism and Afro-modernism, notably Houston A. Baker and Paul Gilroy. This chapter will then present how jazz journalists and critics of the 1950s and 1960s discussed Mingus' work at that time in relation to jazz modernism. After this presentation of the more theoretical aspects of jazz modernism and of its uses in the press, chapter 3 will evaluate how it actually connected with Mingus' work in order to show how he struggled with – or against – them. This chapter will be based upon the many comments made by the composer on his conception of music, which principally come from articles in specialized periodicals like *Down Beat*, *Metronome*, *Jazz Hot*, *Jazz*, *Jazz Magazine*, *Musica Jazz*, but also from album liner notes, open letters, and comments by and quotations from other musicians. What comes out of these comments is that it is the broadness of his conception of jazz and music, as well as the way he understood his relationship to the jazz tradition, that enabled him to negotiate the pitfalls of jazz modernism in the post-war period.

¹¹ Monson, *Freedom Sound*.

Literature Review

Any historical research on Charles Mingus has to start with the meticulous biographical work of Brian Priestley.¹² This book presents the most exhaustive chronological account of Mingus' personal as well as professional life. It is also complemented by the most accurate discography of Mingus' recordings as a band leader and as a sideman. Priestley's prose is mostly descriptive, and he gives as many chronological markers as possible. This characteristic makes the book a particularly effective tool for scholarly research, yet as any work of this scale, it leaves aside many important elements. Principally regrettable is the fact that, generally, the personal life takes over the musical one. Very little information is given concerning the musician's compositional process, Mingus' collaborators are left with only little room, and there is almost no discussion of the composer's reception by the public and the jazz milieu. This is all the more deceptive since the book presents itself as a critical biography – which refers probably more to the 10 musical examples transcribed at the end of it, the discography and the tentative formal analysis of some pieces than to a properly critical approach to Mingus' *œuvre*.

A second biography of Mingus was written in 2000 – 18 years after Priestley's book – by jazz and popular music scholar Gene Santoro.¹³ Even though it is more oriented toward a general public, this biography still adds to the first one. Santoro leaves the historical markers and the chronological precision aside to tell a much more personal story of his protagonist. The book's

¹² Priestley, *Mingus: Critical Biography*.

¹³ Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real*.

acknowledged objective is to demystify the tales about the “angry man of jazz.” He relies much more on interviews with Mingus’ friends, family members and collaborators than on archives from record companies, magazines and nightclubs.

The two biographies are thus complementary: one giving precise background elements about particular events in Mingus’ life, and the other attempting to explain the reasons for some of his choices, relying on his impressions and on those of people who knew him well. Both are equally helpful for the scholar looking for a deeper knowledge of Mingus as an artist.

French jazz criticism produced two other books on Mingus presenting different approaches to his work. The first one, simply entitled *Charles Mingus*, is from philosopher and jazz scholar Christian Béthune.¹⁴ The book is not exactly biographical: it is rather constructed around important themes that can be found in Mingus’s music. Each chapter presents a documented interpretation of an aspect of the musician’s life and work. The first and last chapters are more biographical and focus principally on Mingus’ development as a musician, but the other ones address themes like rebellion, the Freudian uncanny, classical composition, his ambiguous relationship with musical writing, as well as his relation to time. Each of these themes is explored in relation to musical compositions in Mingus repertory and is supported by comments from the composer himself as well as some from other musicians who knew him. The result is a kaleidoscopic view of Mingus’ music that provides a good overview of the heterogeneity of his

¹⁴ Christian Béthune, *Charles Mingus* (Montpellier: Éditions du Limon, 1988).

production. Although the themes are explored in rather brief way, the book presents a good entry door for further researches.

The second French book is co-authored by Didier Levallet and Denis-Constant Martin.¹⁵ *L'Amérique de Mingus* takes a somehow opposite path than Béthune's book by focusing on only one of Mingus' compositions and using Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *tripartition* method to analyse it comprehensively. The book is actually nothing less than an attempt to adapt and apply the musical semiotic method developed by Nattiez and Jean Molino to a jazz composition. As the method recommends, the authors describe extensively their methodology in exploring the three analytical poles inherent to it: the *poiétique*, the *esthétique* and the *niveau neutre* (production, reception, and "the music itself").¹⁶ The choice of "Fables of Faubus" – one of Mingus' most famous songs – as the object of analysis is coherent with the authors' objective to find a representation of America at Mingus' time in the piece. "Fables of Faubus" is a politically motivated composition with a lyrical content denouncing the opposition of former Arkansas governor Orval Faubus (1910-1994) to the racial desegregation of the public schools of the town of Little Rock, in 1957.

The political content of the lyrics as well as particularities of the music are analyzed and subsequently related to information about the way it was composed, played, and received by the public and the media. But the authors' attempt to look for America through Mingus' eyes (or voice), ends up being somewhat myopic. Despite all the rigor of Levallet and Martin's musical analysis, their conclusions

¹⁵ Didier Levallet and Denis-Constant Martin, *L'Amérique de Mingus* (Paris: P.O.L., 1991).

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

are limited to a few simple musical elements (Phrygian cadences, blues scale, elasticity of the pulse, extended form) that does not allow them to go much further in linking the music to the context. Even if their conclusions are quite limited in comparison with the depth of their analysis, the authors nevertheless give a good sense of what has to be considered when proceeding to a semiotic analysis of a jazz piece.

Again from Europe, German saxophonist and jazz scholar Ekkehard Jost devoted a chapter of his book *Free Jazz* to Mingus.¹⁷ It is surprising to find this in a book dedicated to the free jazz movement, together with names such as Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra and Don Cherry, but Jost is careful to present Mingus more as a precursor of free jazz than as a representative of this trend of jazz. The chapter includes a discussion of the innovative bass playing style developed by Mingus, as well as some comments about his emancipation from the strict notion of form in jazz composition. Jost also discusses the new role of collective improvisation in Mingus' arranging techniques, which is probably the element of his music that was the most influential to the free jazz musicians. Overall, the chapter can be seen as an introduction to the innovative aspects of Mingus' music in relation to the developments of jazz in the 1950s and 1960s.

Nicole T. Rustin's dissertation entitled *Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture* shares a similar objective to this present study. Her principal goal is to "flesh out how Mingus might be seen as

¹⁷ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981).

offering an alternate narrative of the musician's experience.”¹⁸ Although Rustin's interest is more oriented toward how Mingus challenges gender categories and idealised notions of black masculinity, a great deal of emphasis is put on his conception of jazz as an artistic form and of himself as an artist. The dissertation is divided in two sections: the first one analyses Mingus' autobiography in relation to his stage persona in a gender-oriented perspective. Here, Rustin is interested in the construction of identity present in Mingus' autobiography and sees the book as just another aspect of the jazz musician's persona. The second section is more about the business side of jazz and how it is influenced by issues of race and gender. The opening chapter of this section is dedicated to Mingus' biography from student to teacher and bandleader, with an emphasis on how it affected his conception of himself as an artist, and, more broadly of his vision of jazz as an art form. The second chapter of this section is about Mingus' efforts to become responsible for the production and commercialisation of his art. It relates how he started his independent recording label, and describes how this aspect of his career can inform us of his ideas about his art.

Many articles and book chapters have been written on Mingus and his music. Among all of these, four are particularly pertinent for my own work. First of all, Scott Saul dedicates two chapters to Mingus in his book *Freedom is, Freedom ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*.¹⁹ In these, he explores elements of Mingus' career between 1955 and 1965, notably his political

¹⁸ Nichole T. Rustin, “Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture” (PhD diss., New York University, 1999), 9. ProQuest (304514304).

¹⁹ Saul, Scott. *Freedom Is*.

involvement, his entrepreneurial activities, and the collective approach to composition he developed in the 1950s. Although some of Saul's arguments are a little bit redundant with Rustin's dissertation, his perspective is much more about how Mingus reacted to his environment and how his particular vision of jazz responded to what was happening politically and socially in these years. Saul also refers to modernism and how Mingus related to that aesthetic current, but in a rather superficial way – without attempting to understand how Afro-modernism has to be conceived differently from the high-modernism discourse elaborated by Clement Greenberg and others in the post war era.²⁰ Saul's chapters are particularly enlightening when explaining how Mingus is struggling with avant-gardism while trying to retain a connection with the African-American musical tradition.

In an article published in the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Desmond King explores the racial environment in which Mingus evolved in an attempt to explain the reasons for the political content of the composer's music.²¹ King focuses on three different periods of Mingus' life: his childhood in Watts, Los Angeles, his early career during the height of the bebop movement, and his rise in popularity as an avant-garde jazz composer in the late 1950s and early 1960s (during the civil rights movement). He explains very well how the realm of the political intertwines with the musical world in which Mingus took part, and how it affected his musical production. Despite the fact that King leaves aside much of the means Mingus used to give political meaning to his music, his article presents

²⁰ See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and kitch," *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939, 34-49.

²¹ 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.

a considerable source of information regarding Mingus' ideas about racism in the United States during his lifetime.

Jennifer Griffith takes a different point of view in an article also linking Mingus's musical production with his racial concerns.²² She is looking for elements pulled out from the black minstrelsy tradition in Mingus' music. In so doing, she explains how Mingus is signifyin(g) upon the jazz tradition using mimicry and parody, as an answer to the racial context of the 1950s.²³ Griffith's approach is much closer to the musical text than King's, which emphasises the political context in which Mingus evolved. Her article has the benefit of demonstrating a new angle by which it is possible to understand Mingus as being in continuity with his predecessors in the jazz tradition, and how his conception of the jazz musician challenges easy either/or categorisation of the entertainer versus the artist – which are two issues that will be addressed into more depth in my project.

Finally, saxophonist, composer and jazz educator Salim Washington goes to the very heart of Mingus' relationship with the jazz tradition in his article entitled “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now’: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz.”²⁴ In this article,

²² Jennifer Griffith, “Mingus in the Act: Confronting the Legacies of Vaudeville and Minstrelsy,” *Jazz Perspective* 4 (2010): 337-368.

²³ For a more thorough discussion of the use of irony and parody in jazz, see Ingrid Monson, “Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology,” *Critical Inquiry*, 20, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 283-313; about signifyin(g) see Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁴ 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*

Washington argues that our understanding of what an avant-garde is in the jazz tradition is distorted by the fact that it is impossible to find in it an exact equivalent to the historical avant-garde. Jazz artists have been more concerned by gaining legitimacy than by mockingly undermining an ennobled and potentially oppressive artistic aura. Washington argues that “jazz at its best has always been a perpetual avant-garde movement.”²⁵ This affirmation situates innovation at the heart of the jazz tradition, but does not necessarily mean that innovators most often try to dismiss what has been done by their predecessors. As we will see – and as Washington himself argued – Mingus’ career is representative of this process. Washington limits his article to the study of a single album by Mingus, and does not delve too far into the political signification of that particular relationship between Mingus and his predecessors.

Jazz Studies, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 27-49.

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

Chapter 2

Jazz Modernism

Art seemed to offer the only means of advancement because it was the *only* area in America – from an Afro-American perspective – where the color line had not been rigidly drawn. Excluded from politics and education, from profitable and challenging areas of the professions, and brutalized by all American economic arrangements, Afro-Americans adopted the arts as a domain of hope and an arena of possible progress.

-Houston A. Baker Jr.²⁶

If what Houston A. Baker proclaimed in the epigraph above was true for African American art during the 1920s and 1930s, it was particularly so for African American music, not because music offered more expressive possibilities than other art forms, but because music was part of an industry where money could be made, careers could be built, and fame could be reached. Yet to consider African American musicians from this period as “artists” is something that we do more easily today than at the time. From their status as entertainers to their present day ennobled aura of serious artistry and dedication, jazz musicians benefited from a

²⁶ Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11.

gradual legitimisation process that culminated in the last 30 years with the blooming of subsidised programs for jazz, and of jazz departments in music faculties of colleges and universities across North America and Europe. The progressive change in the conception of the music from entertainment music to art, this legitimisation process, invariably raised issues around the relationship between the jazz tradition and the European musical tradition, as well as between jazz and the other legitimated art forms and, more broadly, the aesthetic currents of modernism.

In fact, modernism – particularly the discourses around modernism – has been used in jazz history as a tool to give more cultural capital to jazz. Up to the present day, the concept of jazz modernism has been used by musicians, journalists, critics, fans and scholars alike to prove that jazz had (and still has) attributes that qualify it to enter the pantheon of the great arts. The term modern jazz itself was used to signify multiple ideas, musical genres and concepts depending on who used it and when. To be effective as a conceptual framework through which to approach jazz, it is necessary to understand the multifaceted aspects of the term and how it relates to jazz music itself. Before going into more details about the way modernism and jazz have been reconsidered by scholars like Baker and others in the last 30 years, it is necessary for this project to understand what was meant by modern jazz in the 1940s and 1950s since this constitutes a base on which the later theories have been built.

Journalistic discourse

In his book *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, Bernard Gendron explores the relationship between popular music and high art in the jazz idiom around World War II.²⁷ Gendron argues that it is around that time that jazz started to gain cultural capital and began to be considered as a more serious form of art. The first step toward this legitimisation of jazz occurred during what is called the Dixieland war, a conflict between advocates of swing and the New Orleans jazz revivalists (often called the “Moldy Figs”), which happened roughly at the eve of World War II. From the start of this conflict, the term “modernist” as applied to jazz implied an opposition against the reactionary forces of traditionalism, which created a definition of the genre established by the negative: modern jazz could be anything except New Orleans jazz.²⁸ Through the years, this type of open definition allowed every new genre, trend, or innovation to be *de facto* included under its umbrella. Modern jazz rapidly became synonymous with the new, the avant-garde, and the progressive. With European modernism, it shared more the association with aspects of modernity like mass entertainment, industrialisation and reproducibility – in opposition to the folkloristic vision of New Orleans jazz – than a critical and political edge.

Following this trend of opposition to traditionalism, when the critical reaction to bebop combos started to appear in the press a few years later, these new ensembles were considered modern *along with* the big bands who played in the swing tradition instead of being viewed as a *rupture* with them, or as the new

²⁷ Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²⁸ Ibid., 128.

wave of an avant-garde.²⁹ In the pages of *Down Beat*, bebop musicians were considered new, refreshing, pioneering, but in continuity with the swing idiom. It is only when the controversy around the New Orleans jazz revival (the Dixieland war) faded out that the sense of continuity between swing and bebop vanished. Around 1948-1950, the beboppers were finally presented as *the* modernists of the time, eclipsing swing as mere entertainment, and pushing it against New Orleans jazz as being outmoded. This dichotomy between bebop and the previous jazz tradition is well exemplified in an article from the February 11th 1948 edition of *Down Beat*:

Much discussion, pro and con, anent be-bop has consistently overlooked the outstanding feature of its essential difference from other jazz – New Orleans, swing, etc. As the picture must be understood through a knowledge of the painter and his time, so must the approach toward modern jazz.³⁰

This quotation also represents an important paradigmatic change: with the advent of bebop, *knowledge* became a necessity to understand the music. It was no longer addressed as entertainment music, and certainly not as dance music. This first switch in the use of the generic term “modern” anticipated how it would come to include other innovations in the jazz idiom.

Put another way, the jazz press at this time used a discourse associated with an art form possessing a higher cultural capital in order to lift bebop far from the

²⁹ Ibid., 139.

³⁰ Dave Banks, “Be-bop Called Merely The Beginning of a New Creative Music Form,” *Down Beat*, February 5, 1948, 16.

folk aspects of Dixieland and the more popular sides of swing. The reasons for this attempt are multiple. One can imagine that the editors of *Down Beat* were trying to fight for their own cause and surround their publication with an aura of seriousness and importance – the more respected jazz would be, the more respected *Down Beat* would be. By making itself a defender of the new and “hip,” the magazine was undoubtedly attempting to attract a larger and younger audience to achieve greater sales. But by presenting this hipness as something necessitating a knowledge that only a connoisseur could have, the magazine created an elitism that was not part of their previous discourse. Presenting jazz as hip *and* serious could also have been a marketing strategy in response to the rapidly increasing market gains of rhythm ‘n’ blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

This reaction to the popularity of other musical genres was also part of the discourse used by the musicians themselves, particularly at the height of the bebop movement, where the opposition to previous genres of jazz was accentuated.³¹ The words of Charlie Parker in particular are representative of a tendency among certain bebop musicians concerning how they conceived of their relation to the roots of jazz. In an article published in September 1949, Parker is quoted saying that “bop is something entirely separate and apart” from the older tradition. We can then read that Parker is a fan of Paul Hindemith, and that he thinks bebop could borrow from atonality, but that it is “not moving in the same direction as modern classical.”³² His discourse clearly aims at distinguishing

³¹ About the two possible narratives of bebop (evolution or revolution), see DeVeaux, *Birth of Bebop*.

³² Michael Levin and John S. Wilson, “No Bop Roots in Jazz: Parker,” *Down Beat*, September 9, 1949, 1.

bebop as something original and new in jazz and, in some respect, as a break with the jazz tradition. Parker's position is clear: as an art form, his music deserves the same recognition as European classical music, yet it is unique and follows its own ways. Though frequently more nuanced, the bebop musicians interviewed in *Down Beat* around this time usually share this tendency to claim their affiliation with a similar elite, yet preserving their particularity from the European classical music tradition.

If modern jazz first included swing, then incorporated bebop, and dropped swing as old fashioned, there is no reason why it could not then, in turn, incorporate the subgenres of cool jazz, West Coast jazz, and third stream – which it soon did. In fact, it is as if modern jazz, as a label, was not based on musical characteristics, but rather only on the need by its users to promote jazz as something other than entertainment music. Yet this is true only up to a certain point. Some musical elements seemed to be common to most of the music labelled as modern after bebop. Most of the references to modernism in *Down Beat* discuss music that shared the bebop combo format (a band of usually less than eight musicians including a rhythm section comprising a drummer, a bassist, a pianist or a guitarist, plus a varying selection of wind instruments), and refers to melodies and solos that used a bebop phrasing and angular melodies. Modern jazz was also used to describe music arranged for bigger ensembles, often borrowing compositional and arranging techniques from the European modern music tradition, and incorporating orchestral instruments like oboe or French horn. Whether played by a combo or by a larger band, it seemed to involve principally the playing of new compositions over the reinterpretation of standards from the

past and popular songs. Although the form usually stayed close to the “theme-solos-theme” format, the use of larger and less repetitive forms also began to appear. But the modern jazz genre was also full of contradictions: Mingus’ blues- and gospel-inflected compositions shared the genre with the quasi-atonal music of Lennie Tristano, with Gil Evans arrangements for *Birth of the Cool*, and with Thelonious Monk’s compositions. As a label, modern jazz ended up being as diverse as modern painting could be.

The broadness of the music embraced under the modern jazz label is certainly one of the reasons why it eventually was substituted by the more precise generic terms now used to describe the different trends of the period – cool jazz, hard bop, West Coast jazz, third stream, latin jazz, or soul jazz. Of course, it is normal that without any historical hindsight, the critics and journalists found it difficult to delineate different subgenres in the music of their time. Yet even in recent books on the history of jazz, the term “modern jazz” is still used to describe, without any distinction, every trend of jazz appearing after bebop.³³ The common denominator to all of these trends seems only to reside in the new and generalised conception of their practitioners as artists, and no longer only as entertainers.³⁴

³³ For example, see Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁴ “With jazz, the writing of history has largely been driven by the efforts of a shifting (an often uneasy) coalition of musicians and critics to make jazz a ‘concert music’ or ‘a form of art,’ to push it to the far side of the ‘Great Divide’ separating art in the modernist mold from ‘an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.’” DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 443.

The discourse of jazz modernism in the 1950s and 1960s also had a strong racial underpinning. Implied in the use of the term “modern” is a whole set of aesthetic criteria used to evaluate the music which were exterior to the jazz tradition. These created an opposition between a “black” and a “white” jazz aesthetic that unfolded during the 1950s and 1960s, which assumed that a white aesthetic would propose a conception of jazz emphasising a stronger influence from European modernism, while a black aesthetic would stick closer to the African-American music tradition.³⁵ Without retrenching themselves into staunch traditionalism, advocates of a “black” aesthetic would also try to develop a new sound for jazz, but one which would stress the fact that jazz had to keep its distinctiveness from the European musical tradition. As previously mentioned, modern jazz, as a label, encompassed many different subgenres of jazz, each stressing a different vision about what was jazz, and about where resided its future as an art form. Oppositions arose as to what was the most modern, the most progressive jazz style, since winning this argument meant gaining more cultural capital and more visibility in the press – which was something leading directly into receiving better gigs and better contracts with record companies. Considering the fact that white musicians generally benefitted from better employment conditions, African American musicians were particularly concerned with these issues, and all the more so as the 1950s progressed, with the increasing awareness

³⁵ For a deeper discussion of what of ‘black’ and ‘white’ aesthetics that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism, see Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 74-78. Monson builds on the critical discourse on jazz at this time to evaluate how these then instinctive categories were defined. Broadly speaking, a white sound was more associated with criteria pulled from European classical music tradition – purity of sound, emphasis on structure and form – while a black sound was more associated with elements like the blues and call and response.

of the problematic aspects of white musicians' appropriation of African-American music. As Ingrid Monson explains:

On the one hand, a cosmopolitan display of knowledge enabled artists such as Duke Ellington to resist white stereotypes of the folk musicians – that untutored, instinctual “noble savage” to which Moldy Fig critics were so attached. On the other hand, musicians who embraced classical music ideals and incorporated references to the European tradition faced at least two types of critical response. First, interest in classical music by jazz musicians was often taken as an admission that jazz innovations were *derived* from European sources.

...Second, within African American communities, an overemphasis on classical continuities in the music was considered by some constituencies as pretentious or indicative of insufficient pride in African American roots.³⁶

Of course this polarisation between the different positions on appropriation of musical elements from the European musical tradition is somehow artificial considering how permeable artistic forms are. Borrowing certain elements from another culture does not mean embracing it completely, and jazz musicians of this period all had their particular ways of negotiating these issues. Monson gives many examples of musicians who were appropriating or rejecting elements from the European musical tradition (including the Modern Jazz Quartet, Dave Brubeck, Art Blakey and Miles Davis), and with them she proves beyond doubt that this framework is quite useful when trying to understand the racial dynamics

³⁶ Ibid., 86-7.

associated with aesthetical choices made by jazz musicians. We will see in the next chapter that Mingus' case is particularly interesting regarding these issues.

Another important matter related to race and jazz modernism resides in the overly-direct use of European modern music criteria to evaluate the “modern-ness” of jazz without any sort of adaptation, thus dismissing all the particularities and originality of jazz. This problematic is well exemplified in this quotation by Duke Ellington about his relationship with the canon of composers from the European musical tradition:

If I seem a little shy about being displayed on a critical platform with the classical big shots, let me also dispel the notion that I hesitate to place the jazz medium in a top musical category. Jazz, swing, jive and every other musical phenomenon of American musical life are as much an art medium as are the most profound works of the famous classical composers. To attempt to elevate the status of the jazz musician by forcing the level of his best work into comparisons with classical music is to deny him his rightful share of originality. Let us remember that many ‘long-hair’ composers (still current) freely admit that they have been influenced by the jazz idiom....Music, like any other art form, reflects the mood, temperament and environment of its creators.³⁷

What Ellington is addressing here is a particular discourse that developed alongside jazz modernism called “colorblindness.” Colorblindness describes how

³⁷ Duke Ellington, in *Ibid.*, 87.

white critics and journalists tended to “exaggerate the permeability of racial boundaries during the postwar era,” stress the universality of jazz, and thus disconnect it from its African-American origins.³⁸ In so doing, critics and journalists seemed to completely ignore the important links between jazz music and the historical background of African-American people. Moreover, making jazz colorblind was, according to Monson, a way of dismissing African-American perspective on the music by implying that this perspective does not actually exist.³⁹ This line of thought permitted proponents of this particular discourse to impose standards of excellence coming from European modern music to evaluate jazz without any considerations of its cultural background.

The debate as to which criteria should be used to evaluate jazz in its relationship with modernism was not limited to the 1950s and 1960s. More recent studies on Afro-modernism bring a fresh perspective on African-American art, music and modernism. Afro-modernism is a rich and extremely broad topic of study and it would be impossible to try to give a comprehensive overview of it here. Nevertheless, some scholars from this field have been extremely influential for jazz studies and their ideas are of great use when discussing the work of jazz musicians from the 1950s and 1960s in relation to modernism.

Critical discourse

Generally speaking, there are two possible stances when it comes to evaluating the “modern-ness” of jazz and African-American art: one can either try

³⁸ Jon Panish, in *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

to prove that the habitual definition of modernism applies perfectly to African-American art, or one can be critical about the standard definition, and try to modify it to make it more inclusive of art forms stemming from other cultures.

Before Houston A. Baker Jr. and other literary scholars took a second look at African-American writers from the first half of twentieth century, scholars tended to broadly define Afro-modernism as the poor cousin of European modernism, or as a feeble attempt by African American artists to create something similar to the work of the great European artists already consecrated. Baker, in his seminal book entitled *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989), proposed to broaden the quite restrictive definition of aesthetic modernism to make it more inclusive to artistic productions created in other socio-cultural environments, but which shared the same time period, as well as a similarly “modern” framework. Baker starts with an assessment of how usual definitions of literary modernism are bourgeois, West-centered, elitist, and male-dominated. Baker describes the different means by which writers from the Harlem Renaissance created a modern literary corpus, thereby refuting the idea that they failed to do so.

If Baker restricts his study to the field of literature, his work nevertheless had a huge impact on scholars interested in other art forms, including music. Many musicologists have sought to reconsider the previously taken for granted definition of musical modernism, and tried to make it more inclusive. Those whose perspectives are the most relevant for this particular project on Mingus are Guthrie P. Ramsey, Paul Gilroy and Ronald M. Radano. Each in a slightly different way, these authors have urged us to take a second look at the conventional delimitation of what is modern and what is not, and to reconsider the

inherent ethnocentrism of these boundaries. Particularly influential for these musicologists and sociologists interested in African-American music was Baker's discussion of the inherently political nature of Afro-modernism, and its ties with oppression. It is in this sense that for these scholars, Afro-modernism is considered a *response* to European modernism.

Ramsey, for example, uses Marshall Berman's definition of modernism as a starting point. For Berman, modernism represents "any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it."⁴⁰ Implied in this definition is the time frame of the modern period (a period of modernisation), but also the idea that the modern subject has to come to terms with its era, and realise its own inclusion in it. The subject – the artist – is thus at the centre of the definition; he or she is the sole criterion for determining the modernity of its creation. Therefore, it is essential to understand modernism in relation to the subject – or a multitude of subjects – and not only as a predefined concept that can or cannot be applied to certain artistic forms. This focus on the subject is at the heart of Ramsey's perspective on black musical culture. His book *Race Music: Black Culture from Bebop to Hip-hop*, is permeated with the idea that the significance of a given artistic tradition is to be found in the point of view of its practitioners, in how they lived, and in how they conceived of their art in relation to their socio-cultural environment.⁴¹ In the case of black musical culture, Ramsey emphasises the idea of migration and urbanisation as extremely important

⁴⁰ Marshall Berman, quoted in Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Culture from Bebop to Hip-hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 97.

⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

defining elements of Afro-modernism in the first half of the twentieth century. It is through this process of migration from a rural environment to urban centers (usually coupled with a south to north exodus) that African Americans started embracing modernism as an “aesthetic principle.”⁴² This “migratory” principle also transforms how these artists relate to their tradition. Ramsey is careful not to present a clear cut distinction between a rural past and an urban present. The new modernity of African Americans before World War II is not in reaction to an idealised notion of a folk African-American identity associated with the South, but instead implied “processes that employ cultural ‘mixing’ and imaginative and quite selective uses of the past for present and future needs.”⁴³ Following Baker, Ramsey’s conception of Afro-modernism thus implies a new and particular relationship with the past which is consistent with the idea of artistic avant-gardism, further tying Afro-modernism with a political purpose.

This political aspect of Afro-modernism might be tied to an actual rejection of one of the fundamental premises of modernity finding its roots in the Enlightenment project: the faith in human reason. According to Paul Gilroy, it is not only the experience of racial oppression that forged a radically more engaged artistic tradition, it is the awareness of the link between reason and racial terror:

The critiques of modernity articulated by successive generations of black intellectuals had their rhizomorphic systems of propagation anchored in a continued proximity to the

⁴² Ibid., 28.

⁴³ Ibid., 37.

unspeakable terrors of the slave experience. [It] was nurtured by a deep sense of the complicity of racial terror with reason. The resulting ambivalence towards modernity has constituted some of the most distinctive forces shaping black Atlantic political culture.⁴⁴

Gilroy not only speaks of the distinction between Afro-modernism and European modernism, he speaks of the *rejection* of the latter by the former. This is why he employs the expression “counterculture of modernity” to describe this tradition. With this term, he implicitly rejects the idea that artistic and intellectual traditions of the black Atlantic diaspora is only a variation on the theme of European modernism: it is an appropriation and a subversive transformation of it, a transfiguration of its basic elements into something much more political: “[the counterculture of modernity] refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics.”⁴⁵

The counterculture of modernity is an extremely interesting concept to keep in mind when discussing the African-American musical tradition, and particularly jazz music from the 1950s and 1960s. At this time more than ever before, “the power of music in developing black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency, whether individual or

⁴⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7. Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” comes from his reconsideration of the notion of nationality: The black Atlantic diaspora is the concept he uses to avoid the merging of nationality with ethnicity.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 38.

collective, demands attention to both the formal attributes of this expressive culture and its distinctive *moral* basis.”⁴⁶ Far removed from the “art for art’s sake” stance of high modernism, the counterculture of modernity has to be understood as a function of this power struggle between the culturally, socially, and economically oppressed and its oppressor. It has to be comprehended as a rejection of the dominating culture and its separation between art and life: “In contradistinction to the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life, these expressive forms reiterate the continuity of art and life. They celebrate the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life.”⁴⁷

The importance of this “grounding” is exactly what made it so hard for jazz musicians of the 1950s and 1960s to embrace completely the notion of progress so primordial to European modernism. What we have seen earlier concerning the need for jazz musicians from the 1950s and 1960s to keep one foot in tradition even when embracing their most avant-gardist stance is a consequence of this mistrust of progress and reason. This created a dialectic between innovation and tradition which is reflected in the critical discourse about Afro-modernism where the evolution of jazz is seen in a constant pulling between a revolutionary stance and an evolutionary one. As Ronald Radano has shown, failing to understand the particularities of Afro-modernism – whether one sees it as merely different from European modernism, or as squarely opposed to it –

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

leads at just one step from the “assimilationist tale,” in which black music is only a recuperation of elements from European art music.⁴⁸

But in the study of the relationship between European modernism and Afro-modernism, some scholars are actually defending the opposite. Those defending the inclusive stance – who are willing to incorporate jazz and African-American art into the canon of the modern arts without adapting the admission requirements – base their arguments on the simple premise that since both artistic traditions come from the same time period, the same geographic space (the West), and have quite often influenced one another, they should be evaluated using the same criteria.⁴⁹ As we will see later, the question remains open as to why the European criteria should dominate over others! Moreover, proponents of this line of thought would argue that doing the opposite – using adapted criteria to evaluate African-American art – would come to suggest that Afro-modernism was not as “good” as European modernism; as if it could not stand the direct comparison and needed parameters to be adjusted. This reasoning does not come from bad intention, but the result usually ends up eliminating completely the particularities of African-American art and culture. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter clearly demonstrates in which ways such an approach can easily avoid fundamental elements of African-American art such as discrimination and

⁴⁸ Ronald M. Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), xii.

⁴⁹ About the mutual influences between jazz and the European modern avant-garde currents, see Jed Rasula, “Jazz as a Decal for the European Avant-Garde,” in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13-34; Mona Hadler, “Jazz and the New York School,” in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 247-259.

oppression. As we have seen, to be relevant as an interpretive framework, as a way to comprehend the artists and their production, a definition of Afro-modernism needs to reflect what these artists lived and felt. The conditions under which an art form has been created and the perception of the artists who forged it are elements that should not be hidden by larger considerations like time period or geographic context. A good example of the dangers of failing to do this can be found in Alfred Appel's book entitled *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce*, in which the author, to give only one example, treats a Brancusi sculpture and the stage persona of jazz pianist Fats Waller as if there was no difference of perspective in their use of primitivism!⁵⁰

This particularly provocative example represents one end of a whole spectrum of the different ways of conceiving of the relationship between European modernism and Afro-modernism. A little less rigid approach may be found in Ronald Schleifer's book *Modernism and Popular Music*, in which he suggests that usual definitions of modernism should not exclude so easily the notion of pleasure.⁵¹ Attacking particularly the Adornian definition of high modernism, Schleifer's point is that modernism should be understood in relation to consumption as well as to production. This shift of focus allows him to look for elements of modernity (urbanisation, mass culture, reproducibility, alienation, etc.) in the realm of popular culture. Without renouncing the aesthetic criteria of modernism, Schleifer tries to enlarge their scope. He does not exactly challenge

⁵⁰ Alfred Appel, *Jazz Modernism: from Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 37.

⁵¹ Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xiii.

the restrictive definition of modern art, instead he tries to prove that *some* popular music fits this definition.⁵² What is interesting with his position is that despite his rather thin account of the differences between Afro-modernism and European modernism, he still concedes that the former purposely rejected the separation of art and other aspects of life. This is how his idea of an “everyday modernism” should be understood in opposition to high modernism.⁵³

Of all these debates about the ontological nature of Afro-modernism, and about its relevance as a conceptual framework to understand African-American culture, this rejection of the elitism inherent to European modern art is probably the element most subject to consensus by specialists. It is a direct consequence of the different historical perspectives created by the experience of oppression, as well as one of the reasons why African-American culture can always be perceived as being politically driven. But as Radano advises us of the dangers of emphasising too much the role played by this experience of oppression, it is essential to keep in mind that African-American culture was not built in isolation, and that it did interact with other cultural productions. A culture should never be looked upon as something closed on itself, just as it should not be considered only using comparisons with another culture, particularly if the latter can be described as hegemonic.

⁵² As a matter of fact, one of the problems with Schleifer’s attempt to criticise the elitist vision of modern art is that he ends up reproducing a similar pattern of exclusion into his discussion of popular music. Only some carefully chosen composers and musicians are allowed access to his pantheon of modern artists.

⁵³ Schleifer, *Modernism and Popular Music*, 35.

The case of jazz music from the 1950s and 1960s is particularly interesting in this regard, as the musicians embraced voluntarily elements from the hegemonic culture for political as well as economic reasons. As we have seen, the dynamics of this appropriation are complex: musicians had to fight the double critiques of either being dismissed as too disconnected from the tradition, or as being reactionary. The postwar era has been a critical period in this regard, as musicians – and Mingus more than any other – were extremely aware of the politics creating inequalities around them and tried to respond to it through their music. As they appropriated discourses and artistic practices from European modernism, while at the same time rejecting some of the ideology embedded in it and trying to retain a cultural identity, jazz musicians of this era were caught up in a dynamic which created tensions, but also an effervescent climate of creativity and dialogue which was a defining moment for jazz and African-American music generally.

Mingus' Reception

Throughout his career, and particularly in the 1950s and 1960s when he had not yet reached the respected status of a truly original American composer, Mingus' reception in the press had quite often reflected some of the ideas about jazz modernism explored in the previous chapter. Mingus had been a catalyst of much of the advancements of new ideas in jazz in the effervescent context of this period by his constant will to innovate musically and to search for his own musical personality. This was amplified by his strong character and his constant will to express his ideas about jazz, music, art in general, society, life, and any

other related subjects. Consequently, he provoked many reactions from journalists and critics who commented at length on his work as well as his declarations, usually building upon the innovative aspects of his music to present him as an – almost – modern composer.

From the beginning of his reception in the press, Mingus was perceived as a thinker, as someone with strong ideas about music. In the very first article about him in *Down Beat* – dating from June 1951 – we can read the author Ralph J. Gleason claiming that “Charlie Mingus is not only one of the most impressive of the contemporary musicians, but one of the most impressive thinkers about music that jazz has produced.”⁵⁴ In the next paragraph, he adds that “[Mingus] may well become one of the most important musicians that jazz has produced because he has proven that there should be no segregation in music between classical and jazz.”⁵⁵ Following these two comments and a brief biography of Mingus, the remainder of the article is a montage of quotations from the composer about his conception of music. It is extremely interesting to read Mingus’ ideas so early in his career. In 1951, he was already acknowledged as a virtuoso bass player, but was still far from being recognized as a composer, although he had already written a few pieces including “Half-Mast Inhibition,” “Chill of Death,” “Weird Nightmare” and “Mingus Fingus.” The introductory passage that included the previous quotations can tell us quite a bit about the way Gleason understood Mingus’ ideas. If we read between the lines, the author’s point is clear: Mingus

⁵⁴ Ralph J. Gleason, “Charlie Mingus: A Thinking Musician,” *Down Beat*, June 1, 1951, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 7.

will become an important musician if he continues to develop his fusion of jazz with classical music. In doing so Gleason implies that this is the best thing for Mingus to do, and thus gives us a good example of the previously mentioned discourse of colorblindness by dismissing the qualities more associated with African American musical tradition inherent to Mingus' work. The way Gleason emphasises Mingus' ability to think about music, as if this capacity was not something shared by all musicians, is also fascinating. The title of the article itself, *Charlie Mingus: A Thinking Musician*, seems to imply that a thinking jazz musician is something unusual, surprising, as if Mingus was exceptional in thinking about the music he was playing instead of just instinctively producing it. Reinforced here are all kinds of racist assumptions about African and African-American music as being mostly instinctive and associated more closely to the body than to the brain. Gleason's backhanded compliment is also exacerbated by his proposition that it is by fusing jazz with classical music that Mingus "might well become one of the most important musicians that jazz has produced."

It would be hard to find a clearer example of the pitfalls of jazz modernism when attempting to associate jazz and European classical music, where the latter sets the norm for the former's supposed lack of sophistication. Despite all the subtlety of Mingus' conception of jazz as an art form presented in his statements quoted in the second half of Gleason's article, what has been understood and what is presented in the title and the introduction of the piece reproduces banal assumptions of Western cultural superiority.

If Gleason is attempting to predict what the future of jazz should be, other journalists and critics were less speculative in their approach. One of the means often used to reduce the gap between the high art position of European classical music and the lower position of jazz in terms of cultural capital is to stress the innovative aspects of contemporaneous jazz. In doing so, they implied that jazz was progressively bridging the gap with the more advanced ‘serious’ music of the time. Consequently, reviews of Mingus’ albums often included comments like: “Before noting this present album as an early example of what will undoubtedly be the jazz of the future,”⁵⁶ or “Mingus has some quite musically valid ideas aimed at further extending the jazz horizon and in this set, he has proved that several of them work when fleshed by a unit of intelligent musicians who aren’t afraid to push back the usual.”⁵⁷ In a quite similar way to what Gleason implied in the article discussed above, the last quotation is ambiguous as to whether the intelligent musicians also happen not to be “afraid to push back the usual,” or if this is actually the only intelligent thing for musicians to do .

In 1956, well known critic Barry Ulanov also emphasized the way Mingus made new with the old during a concert at the Café Bohemia, in New York: “If you were at the Bohemia last week, ...you would have heard an attempt to lift the blues from its rhythmic morass and to promote some melodic vitality in the form.”⁵⁸ A year later, jazz critic Dom Cerulli made a similar statement when he wrote that “Mingus and his musicians are seeking to broaden the scope of jazz,

⁵⁶ Chris Whent, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, John LaPorta, Ted Macero, and Kenny Clarke, *Jazz Composer Workshop*, Savoy RM 211, 1955, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁵⁷ Unsigned review of *Charlie Mingus* (33¹/₃ rpm), by Charles Mingus, *Down Beat*, June 15, 1955, 18.

⁵⁸ Barry Ulanov, untitled article, *Down Beat*, October 3, 1956, 16.

and break the bind of the often static forms into which so many groups fall.”⁵⁹ One last example is to be found in a review of the album *East Coasting*, from 1957: “Mingus, a remarkable bassist, utilizes his compositional prowess here on five of the six tunes included in attempting to expand the perimeter of jazz in structural terms. While not fully successful, he does indicate the great strength he possesses, essential for the kind of pioneer effort he has undertaken.”⁶⁰ These three examples express the satisfaction of the critics regarding the ways in which Mingus aimed to develop a new sound. Mingus “lift[s] the blues,” “broaden[s] the scope of jazz,” “break[s] the bind” and “expand[s] the perimeter of jazz” in a “pioneer effort.” All these comments reinforce the idea that innovation and originality were key criteria for jazz criticism – particularly regarding form and structure, which are primary components of an aesthetic coming from a European modern music perspective.

Journalist Bill Mathieu went a step further into merging Mingus with a more modern conception of art in a 1963 review of Mingus’s album *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*.⁶¹

If there is to be a new music, then there is to be a new music
criticism. The music must dictate the rules to the critic. Mingus
has painstakingly created a situation wherein the personal taste

⁵⁹ Dom Cerulli, review of *The Clown* (33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm), by the Charles Mingus Jazz Workshop, *Down Beat*, November 28, 1957, 31.

⁶⁰ Don Gold, review of *East Coasting* (33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm), by Charles Mingus, *Down Beat*, April 3, 1958, 28.

⁶¹ Charles Mingus, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, Impulse A35, 1963, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rpm.

or distaste of the listener is the only possible critical criterion.

We'll not discuss whether it is good or bad. By placing himself alone in a corner Mingus has put his critics out of business.⁶²

What Mathieu suggests is that Mingus has reached a point where he is the only one who can possibly dictate the ways of appreciating his music. As a jazz composer – an artist – Mingus no longer has to satisfy demanding critics and listeners; he is setting the aesthetic criteria with which to evaluate his work. Needless to say this shift in the conception of the artist is precisely one of the key elements art historians have identified as separating the aesthetic current of modernism from older currents.⁶³ According to Mathieu, Mingus would have achieved with this album a paradigmatic shift similar to the one made by Claude Debussy at the turn of the twentieth century.

Many journalists and critics took a more direct path into linking Mingus with composers from the European classical music tradition. Even if not always referring to 'modern' composers, the effect of these connections was still to elevate the African-American musician. We can find an example of such a transfer of cultural capital in the previously mentioned review of the Café Bohemia concert from Barry Ulanov: "If you were at the Bohemia last week, [...] you would have heard a bass-solo interpretation of *Memories of You* by Charlie (literally solo – no accompaniment) that had all the rugged individuality of a suite

⁶² Bill Mathieu, review of *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* (33¹/₃ rpm), by Charles Mingus, *Down Beat*, November 7, 1963, 32.

⁶³ See Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael H. Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 15.

for unaccompanied cello by Bach and some of its contrapuntal style as well, although in no way derived from the Baroque master.”⁶⁴ This particular comment is quite effective as it merges the qualities of Mingus as an instrumentist with the compositional genius of J.S. Bach.

Commenting on the piece “Half-Mast Inhibition” on the album *Pre-Bird*, critic Frank Kofsky wrote:⁶⁵

Written when Mingus was only 18, *Half-Mast* is surely the piece [sic] de résistance. Of that period, Mingus recalls: “Jazz to me was Duke and church, but I thought all music was one... jazz, symphony. That’s the bag I was working out of then.”

Full of somber brass and cello, pensive woodwinds, disconnected rhythmic patterns, one can hear in it Sibelius, Copland, Ellington – in short, everything Mingus himself was hearing. Were it extended to symphony length, such a work probably could provide its composer with a fellowship and the first step on a ‘legitimate’ career.⁶⁶

Here again, the connection between Mingus’ music with composers as diverse as Jean Sibelius, Aaron Copland and Duke Ellington serves to reinforce Mingus’ comments on the diversity of his influences, and attests the success of the

⁶⁴ Barry Ulanov, untitled article, *Down Beat*, October 3, 1956, 16.

⁶⁵ Charles Mingus, *Pre-Bird*, EmArcy/Mercury 60727, 1961, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁶⁶ Frank Kofsky, review of *Pre-Bird* (33¹/₃ rpm), by Charles Mingus, *Down Beat*, December 7, 1961, 34.

composition. The last sentence is extremely clear about the financial aspect of this demarcation between jazz and European classical music, and implies that Mingus' music could be considered on an equal level with the latter.⁶⁷ Of course, it is an easy move for critics to recuperate Mingus' own words and quote him expressing his admiration for a European composer, as did Ira Gitler in an article from 1960: "Then, in high school, he heard classical music on records and loved it. His favorites became Debussy and Ravel. 'I don't know why but they did. I also dug Richard Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*'."⁶⁸ As Monson has rightfully pointed out: "...In the late forties and early fifties ...improvisers freely advertised their interest in modern classical music, which functioned as a symbolic marker of urban cosmopolitanism and musical sophistication."⁶⁹ This was still true in the early sixties.

Other means were taken by journalists and critics to associate Mingus with European modernism. In a long article published in *Down Beat* in 1960, Gitler made a comparison between Mingus' music and one of the principal movements of the historical avant-garde in visual art:

About 20 years before the Surrealists in art history came
the Expressionists (Roualt [sic], Kokoschka, Soutine), who have

⁶⁷ Mingus himself was well aware of the financial consequences of such generic division between jazz and high art music, as testified in this article from 1964: "When you classify me in the 'jazzmen' category, you are automatically limiting my work opportunities. I don't want my music to be called jazz." In Jean Clouzet and Guy Kopelowicz, "Un Inconfortable Après Midi," *Jazz Magazine*, June 1964, 26-32. My translation.

⁶⁸ Ira Gitler, "Mingus Speaks – and Bluntly," *Down Beat*, July 21, 1960, 30.

⁶⁹ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 85.

been described as having a ‘passionate, instinctive feeling of the object. Whether a landscape, a still-life, or a portrait, the picture for them was a mirror which reflected their emotions and psychic institutions.’

If a parallel is to be drawn from one art to another, this second area is where Charlie Mingus fits. *Goodbye Porkpie Hat*, for Lester Young, or *Fables of Faubus*, about Gov. Orval E., are not rooted in dream sequences but in real people and events which have affected Mingus. Among other things, Charlie is a man of strong emotions and, if we examine his beginnings in music, one with intuitive powers.⁷⁰

Besides the fact that a debate over whether a jazz composer’s music should be labeled Surrealist or Expressionist is not a particularly decisive one, the criteria on which the comparison depends are quite restrictive: the fact that the two pieces Gitler mentions refer to actual individuals does not exactly qualify them as Expressionist; it might only suggest that they can be understood as figurative. As for the characterization of Mingus as a “man of strong emotions,” and “one with intuitive powers,” these traits are far from being the prerogative of Expressionism, and can in fact be applied to any artist at any time in art history.

This feeble attempt to categorize Mingus as an Expressionist has another objective. By drawing a direct line between Mingus and legitimated artists (Rouault, Kokoschka and Soutine), Gitler reinforces the idea that the subject of

⁷⁰ Gitler, “Mingus Speaks,” 29.

his article was a modern artist. Whether this objective was acknowledged or not, was conscious or not, its effect on the readership – a readership that most often included the jazz musicians themselves – is evident.

Gitler was not the only writer to use references to other art forms in relation to Mingus. In a review of one of the Italian concerts on Mingus' 1964 European tour, Giancarlo Testoni, one of the most renowned Italian jazz critics wrote that "in general the public tried to understand and to appreciate the deformation of timbre à la Picasso done by the musical painting of Mingus', Dolphy's and Jordan's solos."⁷¹ In so doing, he associated Mingus and his band with a paragon of the avant-garde, thus giving clear cues as to how to understand Mingus' music as something other than mere entertainment.⁷²

Similarly, an unknown reviewer of a 1965 Mingus concert at University of California at Los Angeles wrote: "Many of the numbers, most of which bore odd titles, were actually 'happenings' in the pop-art sense of the word."⁷³ Although pop art performances and happenings were actually anti-modernist practices *par excellence*, these artists were envisaging their art in relation to that tradition of modern artists from the previous generations.⁷⁴ Relating Mingus to pop-art serves the double duty of defining him as an avant-gardist, while positioning him among

⁷¹ Giancarlo Testoni, "Charlie Mingus A Milano," *Musica Jazz*, translated by Sara Villa, May 1964, 9-10.

⁷² Italian and other European critics and fans were particularly destabilized by the music Mingus and his band played during that 1964 tour, according to multiple concert reviews and critiques.

⁷³ Unsigned review of a Charles Mingus concert at University of California, Los Angeles, *Down Beat*, November 4, 1965, 9.

⁷⁴ Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History Revised Second Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2005), 1101-3.

artists of his time, like already famous figures such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol.

All of these comments on Mingus' work demonstrate how his music was legitimized in the press by stressing its shared characteristics with European modernism. These testify to Mingus' association with jazz modernism and to the way it put pressure on the jazz artist to innovate, and to move beyond what has already been done. This pressure created a situation where Mingus, who always expressed the importance of retaining a strong association with past jazz tradition, had to be extremely careful in expressing his conception of music.

Chapter 4

Mingus' Conception of Jazz

True jazz is an art, and as with all the arts, is the individual's means of expressing his deepest and innermost feelings and emotions. What will live on past the arrested developments of boogie-woogie, Dixieland, and bop remains to be seen. It may take 500 years for the average American audience to advance sufficiently out of the mental turmoil and anxiety of the atomic age to be able to concentrate more on the art of music.

-Charles Mingus⁷⁵

Looking more closely at Mingus' writings on his conception of jazz as an art form allows us to see something much more nuanced than what is presented in the journalistic reports on his music. His ways of navigating between a constant militancy for the legitimisation of jazz and a profound attachment to its tradition is extremely subtle. As did many other contemporary jazz musicians, Mingus sought to distance his music – along with all jazz music – from mere entertainment music. Although this had been a dominant paradigm since the early bebop movement, Mingus' stance on it was that “all music was one,” without any distinction in term of genre, and that a creative composer was worth the same whatever the style of music he composed in:

⁷⁵ Mingus, in: Ralph J. Gleason, “Charlie Mingus: A Thinking Musician,” *Down Beat*, June 1, 1951, 7.

There's the ocean and there's a million waves and each piece is like one of the waves and different as each wave. A creative person is not one thing. That's why I'm trying to go back to the beginning to answer the question that's come to me so many times: 'What is jazz? What is my music in relation to jazz and what kind of a composer am I or what kind of a bass player am I?' ...Jazz to me was Duke and church but I thought all music was one... jazz, symphony. That's the bag I was working out then. In fact, I think I'm getting back to that again.⁷⁶

Three elements symptomatic of Mingus' conception of music are expressed in this quotation and will be explored in greater detail in this chapter. The first two sentences present a conception of jazz far removed from the mass-produced and market-oriented production that some detractors of jazz claimed it was. Of course very few jazz musicians would have declared the opposite, but Mingus makes a stronger statement in emphasising the uniqueness of each of his pieces and the fact that a real artist – or a “creative person” – does not need to have a single set of stylistic elements defining a unified creative output. As he said in an interview, in reply to a question about John Coltrane's mid-1960s music: “Why do guys stylize themselves? Don't they know in the summertime you wear thin clothes and straw hats and then in the wintertime you got a right to play a different tune? You don't have to be stylized.”⁷⁷ Preaching by example, Mingus' musical production is extremely varied as can be demonstrated just by a quick review of his recordings from 1956 and 1957: a flamenco influenced album (*Tijuana Moods*), a

⁷⁶ Mingus, in Ira Gitler, “Mingus Speaks,” 30.

⁷⁷ Saul, *Freedom Is*, 181.

“jazz tone poem” (“*Pithecanthropus Erectus*”), an album fusing jazz and poetry (*Weary Blues*), numerous blues- and bebop-oriented compositions, as well as jazz standards.

The second element of Mingus’ conception of music expressed in the previous quotation is one that can be found at the heart of any avant-garde artist: his constant reengagement with the same questions about his relationship to the tradition.⁷⁸ These questions are necessary to the artist willing to redefine and expand in new ways the established boundaries of an art form. It is this constant questioning that made journalist Harvey Pekar write a few years later that “throughout his career, Mingus has been concerned with new methods of expression. Today, when most of his contemporaries are regarded as mainstream modernists, he is still in the advance guard.”⁷⁹

The third and last element stated in the earlier quotation concerns directly the fusion of jazz with European art music as conceived by Mingus. His comment that “all music was one,” opens the door to the then *en vogue* idea of the possibility of a ‘third stream’ jazz – a compromise between jazz and classical music.⁸⁰ The most evident of these third stream experiments by Mingus are certainly his albums *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, and *Let My Children Hear Music*, in which the complexity of the counterpoint, the extensive formal

⁷⁸ Paul Wood, “Modernism and the idea of the avant-garde,” in Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde, eds. *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 216.

⁷⁹ Harvey Pekar, “The Development of Modern Bass,” *Down Beat*, October 11, 1962, 18-21.

⁸⁰ Mingus was speaking of an earlier period in his career, but in the next sentence he confirmed that he was still thinking the same way at the time the article was written.

construction, the instrumentation closer to the symphonic orchestra than to the jazz band, and the larger space allowed to written composition (see “Adagio Ma Non Troppo”) are counterweighed by sections of intense swing and collective or solo improvisation (see for example “Solo Dancer”).⁸¹ These examples of third stream jazz, more composed than improvised, are only the most obvious examples of how Mingus used elements from both musical traditions in his music. But it is also possible to find more subtle traces of this even in his more blues-influenced hard bop pieces.

The Clown

An album perfectly illustrating these three principal elements of Mingus’ conception of jazz – as well as illustrating the difficulties of flirting with jazz modernism in the 1950s – is *The Clown* (1957).⁸² This album in particular was important for Mingus since he conceived it as a response to his detractors who were accusing him of not swinging – then a usual criticism of jazz musicians thought to be engaging a little too much with European art music.⁸³ Indeed, Mingus’ precedent album as a leader, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, was quite experimental.⁸⁴ Right from the start, the title track of this album is one of the early attempts from Mingus to extend the AABA standard form; its theme having no

⁸¹ Charles Mingus, *Let My Children Hear Music*, Columbia KC3 1039, 1972, 33¹/₃ rpm; Charles Mingus, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*, Impulse A35, 1963, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁸² Charles Mingus, *The Clown*, Atlantic 1260, 1957, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁸³ Talking about the four tracks on the album, Mingus is quoted in the liner notes from *The Clown* saying that he “selected these four over two others that were more intricate because some of the guys had been saying that I didn’t swing. So I made some that did.”

⁸⁴ Charles Mingus, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, Atlantic 1237, 1956, 33¹/₃ rpm.

fewer than 5 sections.⁸⁵ The second piece of the album is a jazz standard (“A Foggy Day”), but over its theme has been superimposed various sounds depicting an urban city soundscape (whistles, cars passing by and honking, sirens, etc.). Most of the of the third piece, “Love Chant,” does not actually swing, has a square rhythmic feel, and a quite elaborated form with varying grooves. As illustrated in appendix 1, most of the piece is built around a two-measure piano riff, and the sections (A,B,C, and D) often have irregular length and appear in varied order, making the whole structure of the piece more dynamic and surprising than what the usual AABA form that jazz standards afford.⁸⁶ Finally, the last track of the album starts as a regular ballad, where the rhythm section moves back and forth between the original pulse and double time sections, but as the theme is repeated to conclude the piece, Mingus plays quite elaborated melodic lines as accompaniment instead of the straight quarter note walking bass one would expect.

As an answer to the criticism this album faced, Mingus conceived the album *The Clown* as an ironic comment on his present situation. Mingus made sure to be identified as the clown on the album cover by superimposing a small picture of himself over a close-up picture of the face of a clown filling the whole of the album cover.⁸⁷ Mingus also gave literally a voice to his alter-ego by incorporating text in the last track of the album. This last track, also entitled “The Clown” presents its protagonist as a poor entertainer split between, on the one side, his need to please, to be heard, and to make a living, and on the other, to

⁸⁵ About Mingus’ use of extended forms, see Jost, *Free Jazz*, 40.

⁸⁶ Please refer to Appendix 1 for the formal structure of “Love Chant.”

⁸⁷ Please refer to Appendix 2 for a reproduction of the Album cover of *The Clown*.

create an art of his own. Contrary to his clown (who eventually dies for having tried to please his crowd too much), with this album Mingus sought to hit right in the middle: to please both his public and critics, and write a music of his own.

As a reply to his critics, Mingus composed four pieces that made sure he “could swing,” but in which he manage to integrate some particularly innovative aspects. “Haitian Fight Song,” for example, has all the characteristics of a blues piece played in the jazz tradition. It starts with a solo double bass introduction, followed by a theme, and then by trombone, piano, alto saxophone and again double bass solos, before one can hear the theme again. The solos are improvised on a regular minor blues chord progression which is rendered more dynamic by a back and forth between regular pulse and double time, and by a series of punches – emphasising the first three beats of each measure and omitting the fourth – played by the entire band to accompany the soloist.

What made this piece one of Mingus’ most famous pieces is its theme.⁸⁸ The theme seems to grow out of the ending of the solo double bass introduction by means of a repetitive one-measure bass riff that Mingus repeats throughout the entire theme. This riff is built on the blues scale and emphasises its characteristic notes (the minor third and flattened fifth/augmented fourth). Over this riff the trombone plays a first melodic phrase of four measures, to which replies a second phrase of also four measures. Like the bass riff, the whole eight-measure melody is constructed on the blues scale. What is particular in the arrangement of this theme is that during the second repetition of the theme, the saxophone replies to the trombone and plays the melody, but starting on the downbeat of the fifth

⁸⁸ Please refer to Appendix 3 for a transcription of the first half of the theme.

measure of the theme; the two melodic phrases are then heard simultaneously, creating a melodic canon. This progressive entrance of the musicians (first the bass playing the riff, then the trombone with the first melody, and then the saxophone four measures after) contributes to a general effect of crescendo culminating at the complete end of the theme. During the five repetitions of the eight-measure theme, we can hear the drum and the bass progressively playing louder and louder, the trombone and saxophone gradually moving toward their upper registers, and the piano appearing during the third repetition with heavy notes and chords. In the fourth and fifth repetitions, Mingus' voice is heard filling the upper register with wailings and bent notes, creating an improvised counterpoint over the written lines.

By using very simple but effective and astute means, Mingus managed to create an impressive intensity and made his small quintet sound close to a full big band. Mingus also found here a way to create a sound that fused black/white racialised sonic markers.⁸⁹ On the one side, he used elements like a swing feel, repetitions, riffs, blue scale, and call and response; and on the other he combined these with the kind of orchestrated treatment of the material one would be more likely to find in a symphonic movement than in a jazz combo piece.

Without trying here to pinpoint some musical elements as strictly belonging to an airtight European art music tradition versus a similarly closed-on-itself jazz tradition, it still remains that in this piece as well as in others, the different ways in which Mingus sought to extend the jazz idiom have been

⁸⁹ Again referring to Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 74-78.

influenced by European art music. This has been acknowledged repeatedly by many Mingus scholars, but also by Mingus himself.⁹⁰

I studies Bird's creative vein with the same passion and understanding with which I studied the scores of my favorite classical composers, because I found a purity in his music that until then I had only found in classical music. Bird was the cause of my realization that jazz improvisation, as well as jazz composition, is the equal of classical music if the performer is a creative person. Bird brought melodic development to a new point in jazz, as far as Bartok or Schoenberg or Hindemith had taken it in the classics. But he also brought a primitive, mystic supra-mind communication that I'd only heard in the late Beethoven quartets, and even more, in Stravinsky.⁹¹

More than simply justifying his study of Charlie Parker, this quotation – pulled out from a set of liner notes about authenticity in jazz – shows Mingus' interest in classical composers. The fact that he puts them on the same ground with Charlie Parker, whom Mingus considered one of the greatest artists of all time, is also a comment on how he viewed them as models.

Heterogeneity in Mingus' conception of music

Despite Mingus' penchant for more elaborated composition than the norm, he always avoided being labelled a 'third stream' composer. His musical

⁹⁰ On Mingus' influences from European classical music, see Jost, *Free Jazz*, chapter 2; Béthune, *Charles Mingus*, chapter 7; Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real*, 33.

⁹¹ Mingus, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Mingus Dynasty*, Columbia 1440, 1959, 33¹/₃ rpm.

production is so varied in terms of genres that he still remains today extremely hard to categorise convincingly. As long-time colleague and friend of Mingus, Jimmy Knepper, recalled:

Jazz took itself very seriously in those days [the end of the 1950s]. Musicians and fans alike were fractured into warring camps – hard boppers, beboppers, swing, Dixie, East Coast, West Coast, Third Stream – and endless streams of print were expended attacking one or the other. A few went their own unabashed way, like Garner and Monk, but most were categorized whether they liked it or not. Into this stratified atmosphere, these records [*Mingus Ah Hum* and *Mingus Dynasty*] dropped like a bomb. Everybody was confused. The music embraced the whole history of jazz and more in a natural and vital way, and there was no way to dismiss the results as dilettantish dabbling. Mingus had been doing these things for years, but now it has coalesced into a searing whole.⁹²

As we have seen with the album *The Clown* in relation to *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, Mingus regularly went back and forth between more traditional composition and more avant-garde practices. The albums Knepper discusses share a similar dynamic. For example, *Mingus Dynasty* starts with a gospel-influenced fast-tempo swing in ternary (6/4) groove (“Slop”) which contrasts enormously with the almost atonal introduction for piano, flute and bowed double bass of the next piece (“Diane”). The music on *Mingus Ah Hum* (1959) is similarly hard to

⁹² Jimmy Knepper, in Sy Johnson, liner note from: Charles Mingus, *Nostalgia in Time Square*, Columbia 35717, 1979, 33¹/₃ rpm.

categorise although on the whole it sounds more homogeneous than *Mingus Dynasty*.

This heterogeneity in Mingus' music has even been identified as one of its principal characteristics, as Scott Saul rightfully argues:

The one principle of continuity [in Mingus' multifaceted personality], it seems, was the identity Mingus treasured the most: as the jazz musician who aimed to be the most tradition-based yet experimental of thinkers. Mingus loved to tap into a wide variety of genres – modernist tone poems, Ellingtonia, bebop, mariachi, gospel, cumbia, soul-jazz, free jazz – and pit them against one another in a struggle for mastery. In doing so, he not only negotiated conflict in his music but also threw its challenge back onto his fellow musicians and his audience, who were forced to engage with volatility in real time: his music might be followed, but rarely could it be anticipated.⁹³

The fact that Mingus created a music that defied the usual generic boundaries was also a means for him to include more experimental elements in his music without alienating his public and critics. At the same time, it helped him to walk the line between tradition and avant-gardism. It is in this sense that Saul's quotation hits at one of the principal reasons why Mingus is an interesting figure to relate to jazz modernism. He is in fact a Janus-like figure, a gatekeeper between past tradition and future innovation. As an artist, he did not feel he had to overwhelm or to do better than his predecessors in order to create. He sought to embrace the whole

⁹³ Saul, *Freedom Is*, 148.

history of jazz in order make it his own and build *from* it, not against it. No slighting comments from Mingus on artists whom he considered as his most important musical influences (principally Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Jelly Roll Morton) can be found anywhere in the literature. Gunther Schuller confirms this idea of Mingus as looking simultaneously at the past and the future of jazz in the liner notes from the 1965 album *Tonight at Noon*:

As such, Mingus' music looms large today as not only one of the few genuine links to past traditions, especially that of Duke Ellington, but also as a significant intimation of things to come.⁹⁴

This state of things is reflected in Mingus' conception of what a jazz composer should be. Mingus, in interviews, always played the card of authenticity: "Personally, to unmask those who copy, I have no other solution that to write and play my own music in accord with the real emotions of the moment when I am writing and playing"; "I've never tried to be weird. I may have been. I'm sorry. Most of the time I was trying to write something I felt but couldn't describe."; "At least, I know that when I play I make no conscious effort to think to something, but I only play depending on what I feel, and try to communicate my feeling about life, people, the world and their conditions."⁹⁵ These comments demonstrate how Mingus sought to present his music as honest and authentic, but

⁹⁴ Gunther Schuller, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Tonight at Noon*, Atlantic 1416, 1963, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁹⁵ Nat Hentoff, "Mingus In Job Dilemma, Vows 'No Compromise'," *Down Beat*, May 6, 1953, 21; Stanley Dance, "Mingus Speaks," *Jazz*, October 2, 1963, 12; Charles Mingus, "Où va le jazz," *Jazz Hot*, September 1952, 13.

also as detached from entertainment values. By stressing the idea that he is trying to communicate his feelings through music, Mingus associates with a romantic conception of the composer, therefore establishing the seriousness of his music, but not the kind of formalism one would associate with modern art music in the 1950s. Mingus has never espoused the “art for art’s sake” stance of high modernism, therefore we can see him as reinforcing Paul Gilroy’s conception of Afro-modernism as a rejection of the “modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics.”⁹⁶

Mingus and the Social Role of the Composer

If Mingus saw jazz music as more than entertainment music, it does not mean that he rejected its functionality altogether. His conception of the composer implies a strong social role. As we have seen, for him, music was primarily a means for communicating ideas and emotions, but it was also a tool for social comment: “What’s so funny is some people think a composer’s supposed to please them, but in a way a composer is a chronicler like a critic. He’s supposed to report on what he’s seen and lived.”⁹⁷ For him, composers have to testify publicly to what they see around them: “I believe most great people in art were trying to express what they saw in their time – political, philosophical, and so on.”⁹⁸ To communicate his ideas and emotions as precisely as possible using jazz music as a medium, Mingus helped the purely musical semiotic by giving quite explicit titles

⁹⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 38.

⁹⁷ Mingus, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus*, Impulse A54, 1963, 33¹/₃ rpm.

⁹⁸ Mingus, in Dance, “Mingus Speaks,” 12.

to his compositions, some referring directly to political events or social ideas: “Fables of Faubus,” “Meditation on Integration,” “Remembering Rockefeller at Attica,” “Haitian Fight Song,” “Freedom (Parts One and Two),” and “Work Song.” Of these six, only two have actual lyrics – “Fables of Faubus” and “Freedom.” In all the others, the composition and improvisations are the principal bearers of the message – sometimes helped with a few words describing the signification of the piece in the album liner notes. Imbuing political meaning to some of his pieces was another way for Mingus to counter the criticism of conceding to formalism and to an aesthetic deriving from modern art music; as it was also a means to keep alive a link between his art, what his audience lived, and the social context in which his creative process was embedded.

The political message present in some of Mingus’ music is paralleled by his more direct engagement with political issues. Most of his social critique concerned two related topics: racial power relations in the United States, and the poor social status of jazz musicians. The first topic has already been discussed at length by many Mingus scholars.⁹⁹ Mingus was extremely sensitive to racial issues and anyone talking to him had to be careful not to strike too heavily on this heartstring to avoid a burst of anger.¹⁰⁰

From a very young age, his light skin tone made him subject to racism from both sides of the colour line, since even if he was identified as African American by the majority, he was still considered “not dark enough” by some of

⁹⁹ Notably by King (2000); Béthune (1988); Santoro (2000); and Priestley (1982).

¹⁰⁰ King, “World Against Me,” 66.

his African American contemporaries.¹⁰¹ He remained sensitive to these issues throughout his career. In 1953, he was the instigator of the fusion of the still segregated Locals 767 and 47 of the American Federation of Musicians in Los Angeles; the first locals to be desegregated.¹⁰² Later in his career he would quite often start long diatribes about inequalities inherent to the racial dynamics in the United States, or about the lack of recognition endured by jazz musicians.¹⁰³

Responding to the racist climate of the post-war period, Mingus tried in many ways to fight “the system” – which for him was synonymous with “the music industry” – in order to be in financial control of his work, and to diminish what he felt was exploitation by the music industry of jazz musicians. What he called his “thus far seeming single-handed battle to defrock the unclean scenes behind the present day major record industry” was a long term project that took many forms throughout his career.¹⁰⁴

The first major moment of this battle is certainly the creation of Debut, an independent, musician-owned record company that Mingus started with his wife, Celia, and drummer Max Roach in 1952, following the lead of such similar projects – like Dave Brubeck’s *Fantasy* (1950), Dizzy Gillespie’s *DeeGee*, or Lennie Tristano’s *Jazz Records* (both 1951).¹⁰⁵ Debut was quite short-lived but managed to record and distribute more than 25 albums, including the work of its owners, and of artists such as Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie, Paul

¹⁰¹ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 27-8.

¹⁰² King, “World Against Me,” 64.

¹⁰³ An example of such long diatribes can be heard in: Charles Mingus et al., *Mingus*, directed by Tomas Reichman (1968; New York: Rhapsody Films, 1990), VHS.

¹⁰⁴ Mingus, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Town Hall Concert*, Fantasy OJC-042, 1964, 33¹/₃ rpm.

¹⁰⁵ Saul, *Freedom Is*, 154.

Bley, Miles Davis, Kenny Dorham, John LaPorta, Thad Jones and Jimmy Knepper. Debut had to close its doors in 1957 when the American Federation of Musicians revoked its license.¹⁰⁶

Mingus made a second attempt at owning his own record label with the foundation of the Jazz Workshop label in 1964. On its very first record to be released, Mingus included a long fragment from his future autobiography about the jazz industry, and ended the notes thus: “With disgust for the American recording industry, I give you, the public, this day seven people set to free themselves in music.”¹⁰⁷ By this set of notes and their conclusion, Mingus makes explicit the link between his need to innovate musically and his fight against an oppressive capitalist system (here taking the form of the music industry).

He conveyed the same message by organising a counter-festival against George Wein’s 1960 edition of the Newport Jazz Festival. On that occasion, Mingus refused to participate in the Festival because Wein had started booking folk and rock ‘n’ roll bands, and paid the jazz musicians who had to play during the afternoon significantly less.¹⁰⁸ With other jazz musicians’ discontent of the growing commercial success of the Festival, he helped put together a week-long anti-festival with an impressive line-up of musicians including Jo Jones, Booker Ervin, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden, Kenny Drew, Abbey Lincoln, Kenny Dorham and Roy Eldridge. Following this event, Mingus and other “rebels” started the short-lived Jazz Artist Guild, a collective of jazz musicians wanting to

¹⁰⁶ Priestley, *Mingus Critical Biography*, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Mingus, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, *Town Hall Concert*, Fantasy OJC-042, 1964, 33¹/₃ rpm.

¹⁰⁸ Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real*, 169.

combine their efforts in order to level the power balance between jazz artists and the music industry.¹⁰⁹

Mingus also tried in many ways to reach a broader public by organising events with pedagogical objectives. Perhaps the most representative event of this type is the *Developments in Modern Jazz* concert series. In the January 1955 issue of *Down Beat*, we can read that Mingus' "Jazz Composers' Workshop has evolved into an organization called *Developments in Modern Jazz*.... The goal of the group is to give jazz musicians and audiences a chance to present, hear, and talk about experimental efforts in modern jazz."¹¹⁰ The objective of this series of three concerts followed by a period of discussion was apparently to present new developments in jazz, obviously, but also to open a dialogue between the artists and their public. Similarly, in 1963, Mingus attempted create a "School of Arts, Music, and Gymnastic" which would give classes taught by Mingus himself, by Max Roach, and by dancer Katherine Dunham for aspiring musicians coming from the Harlem community.¹¹¹ This project never materialised, but demonstrates once again Mingus' will to share with his community. Finally, in 1971, he also participated in the Jazz and People Movement (JMP), an association principally advocating more exposure for jazz in the mass media.

¹⁰⁹ See Benjamin Piekut, "New Thing? Gender and Sexuality in the Jazz Composers Guild," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2010): 25-48.

¹¹⁰ Unknown author, "New Series Explores Jazz Developments," *Down Beat*, January 12, 1955, 14.

¹¹¹ Saul, *Freedom Is*, 156.

All these more or less successful enterprises share common goals: the betterment of the social condition for himself, for his fellow musicians, and less specifically for oppressed people generally. These goals resonate with the signification of his music and contribute to a political understanding of his art. For Mingus, jazz was more than just a way to express himself through music. It was a tool to change things, to criticise what he saw around him. Doing so was a means for him to avoid being criticised for creating a music for musicians only, composed without any care for the auditor, elitist. His multiple attempts at enabling a dialogue with his audience, at explaining to them the un-strangeness of his music also demonstrate of this will. As he himself replied to criticism of his 1955 album entitled *Jazz Composers Workshop*:

Since I don't believe that such music can be classified as 'atonal' or 'weird music' (as atonal is often classified), I would identify it as 'a little beyond the elementary.' If and when these present constructions are accepted, I will venture to delve a little more into the so-called dissonance of free form improvisation – which one may then label atonal.¹¹²

Comments like this share the double purpose of presenting Mingus' music as accessible, and of presenting Mingus as an innovator without assuming the label "atonal" which would have been considered an acknowledgement of the superiority of modern art music, here implied behind the term 'atonal'. This refusal is representative of the sinuous ways in which Mingus carefully selected

¹¹² Mingus, liner notes from: Charles Mingus, John LaPorta, Ted Macero, and Kenny Clarke, *Jazz Composer Workshop*, Savoy RM 211, 1955, 33¹/₃ rpm.

elements from European modernism to forge his conception of himself as an artist.

Conclusion

Mingus' will to innovate and to create a music of his own always came with a refusal of the elitism of European modernism. Despite this rejection, his conception of jazz as a legitimate art form – and particularly his way of conceiving of his role as a composer – forced him to embrace some of the ideological characteristics of modernism. The contradictions that might have resulted from such a selective appropriation of elements stemming from a different musical tradition were counterweighted by Mingus' political militancy and his use of musical elements referring to African-American musical traditions. As the example of “Haitian Fight Song” demonstrates, Mingus had a particular way of incorporating innovations in his music without dismissing what had been done by his predecessors. It is in this sense that we can see him as confirming Paul Gilroy's argument that Afro-modernism is a counterculture of modernity, a subversive appropriation of elements from European modern music.¹¹³ Mingus rejected the notion of progress, of a linear evolution linking a genealogy of great composers, be they from within the jazz tradition or from any other. This is demonstrated by the eclecticism of his musical production, by his way of incorporating stylistic features stemming from the past history of jazz in his own music.

¹¹³ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 38.

Mingus' musical production also confirms what Baker, Gilroy, and Radano have put forward: that there is no clear cut boundary between what should be considered as modern art and what should not. Mingus blurred that boundary by incorporating elements of avant-gardism in his conception of the jazz composer – constant questioning about his relation to the tradition, will to innovate and find his own musical voice, political militancy, and redefinition of the usual aesthetical criterion.

Much of Mingus' work can be seen as an attempt to “raise awareness and organise consciousness” about political and social issues – a quality that goes hand in hand with his multiple attempts to modify the power relation between artists and the music industry.¹¹⁴ This response from the artist to capitalist society also goes along with the broader definition of modernism presented by Marshall Berman in which modernism is to be found in the interaction between the subject – in this case, the artist – and the modern world. Mingus did not think of himself as merely an entertainer (which in a way is another means for the artist to interact with the modern world), but neither did he conceive of himself as the misunderstood artist composing music for posterity, as demonstrated by his multiple attempts at explaining his art and educating people on jazz. As Scott Saul rightfully noted:

In Mingus's art we hear...the struggle between high and low art, between elite modernism built on the heroic striving of genius and a populist modernism built on the creativity of collaborative

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

revolt. We hear a struggle between the classical legacy of German composers like Wagner and Strauss and the jazz-blues legacy in all its catholicity. And we hear a struggle about individual and community in jazz, a struggle between the jazz composer as authoritative fountainhead and the jazz workshop as a site of spontaneous combustion.¹¹⁵

Such struggles are part of the reasons why many critics and journalists found Mingus' work hard to grasp and to define. Particularly during the early 1950s, Mingus' attempts to legitimise jazz as a serious art form was quite often misunderstood in the jazz milieu and exposed him to many criticisms. Nevertheless, a closer look at his comments in the press and in album liner notes presents a clearer idea of his role as a composer as not only looking at the future of jazz and trying to innovate further, but as also trying to emphasise the inherent quality of African-American music and revivify its past tradition. Struggles are inherent to any artistic production. Mingus' originated from his understanding of music as being free from generic divisions and sub-divisions, his will to embrace past, present and future in his compositions, his need to address issues of racism and oppression, and to forge his own musical personality. All these struggles were influenced by the discourses of jazz modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, and looking at this dialectic with the particular lenses provided by the more recent research on Afro-modernism allows us to comprehend with more insight the apparent contradictions in Mingus' music and career, as well as his historical significance.

¹¹⁵ Saul, *Freedom Is*, 181.

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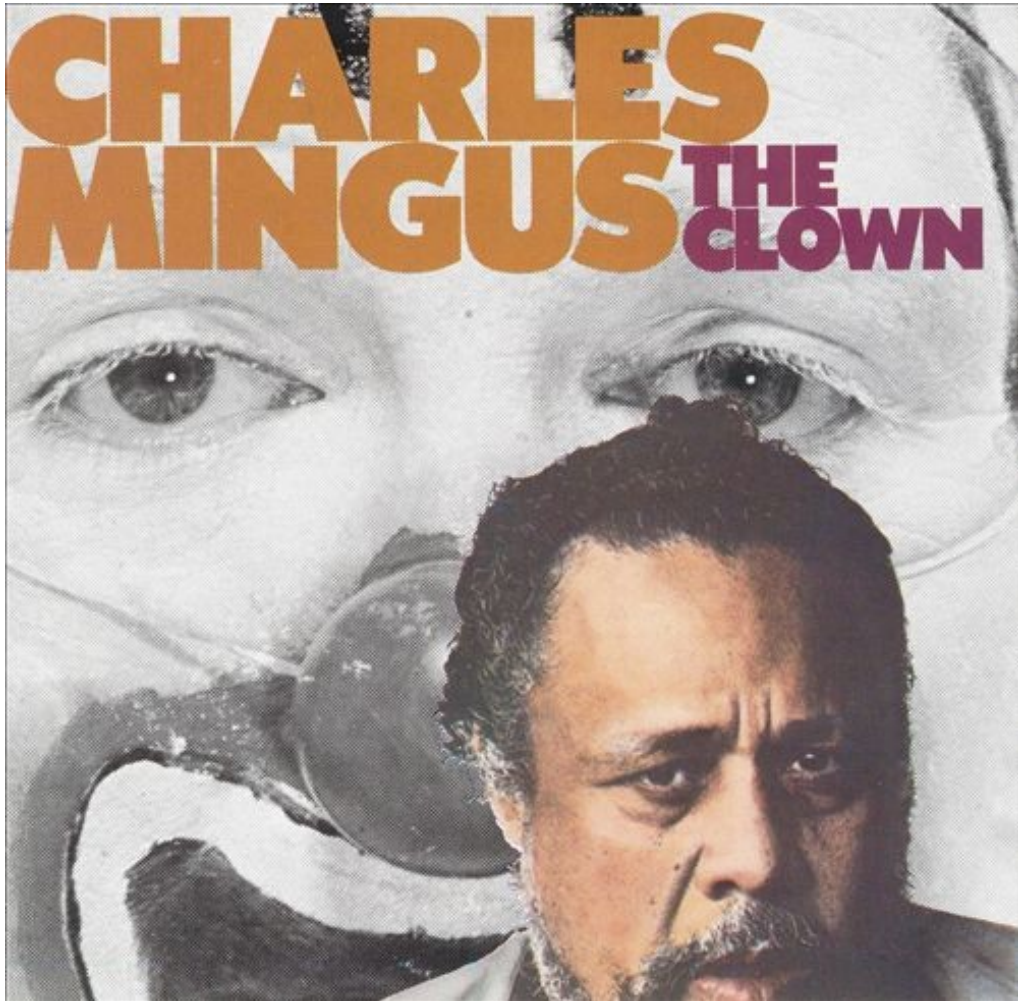
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Appendix 1

Sections	Number of Measures	Short Description
Introduction	12	2 chords piano/bass riff, “square feel”
A	16	melody A over piano/bass riff, “square feel”
B	8	melody B, “square feel”
A	14	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
C	10	drum and bass stop, “swing feel”
A	28	<i>same as first A</i> , horns busier, “square feel”
B	8	<i>same as previous B</i>
A	16	<i>same as first A</i>
C	9	<i>same as first C</i> , piano with variations, “swing feel”
A	2	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
Break	4	one sustained chord
A	20	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
B	8	<i>same as previous B</i>
A	16	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
C	8	<i>same as first C</i> , piano with variations, “swing feel”
Solos	8x32 + 48	2x32 measures (aaba) each: alto sax, piano, tenor sax, bass; last longer form (aaabaa): tenor sax all “swing feel”
C	8	<i>same as first C</i> , piano with variations, “swing feel”
Solos	52	(aaabaa+ ¹ / ₂ a) both saxes improvise together, “swing feel”
C	10	<i>same as first C</i> , piano with variations, “swing feel”

D	24	<i>sim. to B</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, and chords from b section of solos, “square feel”
Break	4	<i>sim. to previous Break</i>
A	20	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
B	8	<i>same as previous B</i>
A	14	<i>sim. to A</i> , with varied (improvised?) melody, “square feel”
C	7	<i>same as first C</i> , piano with variations, “swing feel”
Conclusion	-	drum solo

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

Theme Haitian Fight Song Charles Mingus

The musical score is for the piece "Theme Haitian Fight Song" by Charles Mingus. It is written for three instruments: Alto Saxophone (untransposed), Trombone, and Double Bass. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into five systems, each containing staves for the three instruments. The first system (measures 1-4) shows the initial entry of the instruments. The second system (measures 5-8) introduces triplet patterns in the Trombone and Double Bass. The third system (measures 9-13) continues the triplet patterns and adds a melodic line for the Alto Saxophone. The fourth system (measures 14-17) features more complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs in the Alto Saxophone and Trombone. The fifth system (measures 18-21) concludes the piece with a final melodic statement in the Alto Saxophone and a sustained bass line in the Double Bass.

Alto Saxophone (untransposed)

Trombone

Double Bass

5

Alto Sax.

Tbn.

Db.

9

Alto Sax.

Tbn.

Db.

14

Alto Sax.

Tbn.

Db.

18

Alto Sax.

Tbn.

Db.