

CHARLES MINGUS PLAYED BASS?: REDISCOVERING A JAZZ SOLOIST  
THROUGH TRANSCRIPTION

A THESIS IN  
Musicology

Presented to the faculty of the University of  
Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MUSIC

by  
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Kansas City, Missouri  
2014

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

ABSTRACT

Bassist and composer Charles Mingus (1922–1979) was one of jazz music’s most influential and prolific artists. Both his instrumental and compositional abilities were highly regarded during his life, and remain so today. However, current discussions focus more on his composing than soloing, which has led many to overlook his impact on jazz bass and his individual, virtuosic solo style. This shift in focus has weakened Mingus’s legacy and made his influence on modern jazz one-sided.

By concentrating on Mingus’s bass playing, this document seeks to reestablish Mingus’s position as an important and influential bassist. This will partly be accomplished by comparing past musicians’ opinions with today’s historicization of Mingus’s bass playing. An extensive analysis of various Mingus solos between 1947 and 1959 will further define Mingus’s style, highlight its progressive characteristics, and show his growth as a soloist.

Aside from prompting future discussions on Mingus’s solo style, the conclusions of this study will strengthen jazz history research by showing how historicization, if left unchecked, can easily lessen an important musician’s legacy.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the Conservatory of Music and Dance, have examined the thesis titled “Charles Mingus Played Bass?: Rediscovering a Jazz Soloist Through Transcription,” presented by Andrew Williams Stinson, candidate for the Master of Musicology degree, and hereby certify that it is worthy of acceptance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Obviously, this research would have been non-existent if not for Charles Mingus's work. While Mingus's legacy largely rests on his compositions, I am grateful that he chose the bass as his main instrument for improvisational expression. His technique, virtuosity, and unique ideas led me to this research and continue influencing my own style.

My professors at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the University of Central Arkansas have given me significant guidance, support, and knowledge throughout my academic endeavors. From UCA, I would like to thank Dr. Kimberly Little for encouraging my studies and writing and Dr. Jane Dahlenburg for shaping my approach to jazz history and critical listening. I am also appreciative for my bass lessons with Joe Vick and Jim Hatch, as they gave me an excellent foundation in upright bass performance and pushed my abilities. From UMKC, I first want to thank Dan Thomas for his inspiration and continuing support of my research and performance. I would similarly like to thank Bob Bowman, Doug Auwarter, Bobby Watson, Dr. Sarah Tyrrell, Dr. Ryan Oldham, and Gerald Spaits. Thanks go to Dr. William Everett for serving on the committee and assisting my historical pursuits. I am forever thankful to the committee's chair, Dr. Andrew Granade, who has been the consummate model of both a scholar and a teacher and has motivated my jazz history research and work on Mingus.

Special thanks go to John Goldsby for his e-mail correspondence and the staff at the Library of Congress's Performing Arts Reading Room for their help in browsing the Charles Mingus Collection. I would also like to thank Joe Vick, Ben Leifer, Erik Blume, and Roger Wilder for their insights on the transcriptions, as well as Nick Omiccioli for his advice on notating.

## PREFACE

Before I narrowed my thesis topic, I had known for months that I wanted to focus on Charles Mingus. Nevertheless, I was not sure what I wanted to research. His colorful character was too subjective to cover and did not necessarily focus on his music. Besides, numerous people had written countless pages about Mingus's personality as well as his compositions. Since I felt that further writings on those two aspects were not needed, my thesis was at a standstill. However, I soon realized that one side of Mingus had been acknowledged but barely analyzed: his solo bass playing.

As I wondered how I could discuss Mingus's bass style and accepted virtuosity, I remembered the scarceness of his solo transcriptions. His half-chorus solo on 1947's "Mingus Fingers" and seven-plus chorus solo on "Haitian Fight Song" are his only two solos that have been transcribed, discussed, and published more than once. When compared with Paul Chambers, Ray Brown, and other jazz bassists, this miniscule amount of Mingus transcriptions suggests that his solo style is less important than his contemporaries. But how can that be? I had read numerous texts that touched on his unequalled instrumental virtuosity and ties to the jazz bass tradition and heard even more recordings that supported those notions. My research uncovered how Mingus's bass soloing has been glossed over in today's discussions of great jazz bassists, and my work with his solos revealed Mingus's style and growth as a bass soloist from the late 1940s to late 1950s.



## CHAPTER 1

### BIOGRAPHY

Charles Mingus was born in 1922 in Nogales, Arizona. The family eventually moved to Los Angeles's Watts neighborhood, where Mingus grew up and attended school. His first instrument was the trombone, but due to a misunderstanding, his teacher deemed the young musician hopeless and told him to quit music.<sup>1</sup> Mingus's parents then bought their son a cello, which he excelled at playing. Nevertheless, his cello teacher did not explain how to read music notation or identify notes on the instrument. As Mingus recounted, "He took advantage of my ear and never taught me the fingerboard positions. He'd give me the first note and I'd be gone."<sup>2</sup> In spite of this oversight, the young cellist was good enough to play in the Los Angeles Junior Philharmonic, where he learned his parts by listening to other cellists in the section. This deficiency caught up with Mingus in high school orchestra, where he was the group's only cellist and could not rely on hearing others play his part. Upon recognizing that Mingus had difficulty reading music, the conductor elected not to teach the cellist and instead announced in front of the orchestra, "I've noticed that most Negroes can't read."<sup>3</sup>

Despite these musical and racial obstacles, Mingus continued playing cello. A trio performance with his sisters caught the attention of Buddy Collette. Collette, a respected musician at his and Mingus's high school, heard something in Mingus and persuaded the teenager's parents to trade in their son's cello for an upright bass. After receiving some advice

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<sup>1</sup> Ira Gitler, "Mingus Speaks—And Bluntly," *Down Beat*, July 21, 1960, 29. The trombone teacher told Mingus to learn the notes of the clef but did not specify which clef. When Mingus returned to his teacher and recited the treble clef's notes rather than the bass clef's, the teacher told Mingus's parents that their son was hopeless as a musician.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Mingus, quoted in *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Mingus, quoted in Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 30.

from bassist Joe Comfort (“Turn on the radio and start right in playing with it”),<sup>4</sup> Mingus quickly established an affinity for the instrument. In his autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus recalled first learning the bass, saying, “Not even knowing the names of the strings or how to tune his instrument, Charles began practicing hour after hour standing by the RCA Victor console radio in the living room and after a few weeks he began to get the feel of it. He could follow what he heard, using cello fingering.”<sup>5</sup> Within only a couple of weeks, the novice bassist was gigging around town. Collette recalled Mingus’s first performance, saying, “It’s amazing to hear somebody with musical talent. His notes that first gig were not right—not that he didn’t have good ears. It’s just that he didn’t know where they were and maybe his tuning may not have been perfect then. But his time was good, if you could believe that. And he was plucking at the bass.”<sup>6</sup> Further illustrating Mingus’s passion for playing upright bass, Collette said that the bassist’s enthusiasm sometimes led to impromptu streetcar jams.<sup>7</sup>

As naturally talented as Mingus was, he still wanted bass lessons with a teacher. The young musician was amazed upon seeing the revered West Coast bassist Red Callender perform, and immediately desired lessons with the older bassist:

Man, in the break he was sitting alone playing “Body and Soul.” I was so surprised to hear anybody doing that with a bass—using the bow like in the things Menuhin and Heifetz play—up high in the harmonic positions, like ... Bartok’s violin concerto—de ya do, do e de la—Britt, when I start really learning to play people will see me big, with a big bass, but when I want it they’ll hear a viola, my magic viola that plays high as a

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<sup>4</sup> Mingus paraphrasing Joe Comfort in Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*, ed. Nel King (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Buddy Collette, quoted in Clora Bryant et al., eds., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 137.

<sup>7</sup> “... [W]hen we started rehearsing in Los Angeles, which was a long trip from Watts, we’d get the Red Car [Pacific Electric interurban] at 103<sup>rd</sup> St, and Mingus was so excited about playing, he’d get on the car and zip the cover off the bass, and we’d start jamming on the streetcar... He was always a very open guy with all his thoughts: ‘Let’s play! Are we gonna play today?’ And I’d say, ‘Well, OK,’ and get the alto out, and the conductor and the motorman would wave—they didn’t mind.” Collette, quoted in Robert Gordon, *Jazz West Coast: The Los Angeles Jazz Scene of the 1950s* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 38.

violin and low as a bass and gets rid of all the muddling undertones and produces a pizzicato sound with the clarity of Segovia! Callender was doing something like that—I've got to study with him.<sup>8</sup>

In Callender, Mingus finally found a nurturing teacher who constructively assessed his playing and explained instrumental techniques. Callender's recollection of their lessons echoed the enthusiasm that Collette witnessed in the youthful Mingus:

Mingus would go through walls to get what he wanted. He was very nice, intense, eager—we had a rapport from the very beginning.... Mingus knew little about the bass, even though he'd been playing it.... I showed him the rudiments, the proper way to finger the instrument, gave him a direction.... What I taught him primarily was how to get a sound from the instrument. However, even then, he knew exactly what he aspired to be—the world's greatest bass player. That was his all-consuming passion.

To prove that genius is hard work, Mingus practised [*sic*] seventeen, eighteen hours a day. I'd drive by his house early in the morning and there would be Mingus out on his front porch practising [*sic*]. That's the secret of his greatness: the hours he put into it. Once he learned how to play the instrument, he figured he was ready for anything.<sup>9</sup>

After a couple years, Callender suggested that Mingus take lessons with Herman Rheinschagen, a former associate principal bassist with the New York Philharmonic. Mingus solidified his technique with Rheinschagen, who also taught the young bassist how to strengthen his grip and create a big sound on the instrument.<sup>10</sup> Callender's and Rheinschagen's bass lessons, in addition to Lloyd Reese's theory lessons, furthered both Mingus's instrumental technique and theoretical knowledge and prepared him for a musical career.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 75–76. This quote also alludes to Mingus's Western classical influence as he references noted performers and composers of the genre.

<sup>9</sup> Red Callender and Elaine Cohen, *Unfinished Dream: The Musical World of Red Callender* (London: Quartet Books, 1985), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Santoro, *Myself When I am Real*, 48. While Santoro says that Rheinschagen had Mingus squeeze rubber balls in order to “flex” his hands, this exercise actually strengthens your grip. This helps the left hand press the strings against the fingerboard and the right hand pull the strings, two acts that are difficult when the string height is set at orchestral level. Adjustable bridges now allow upright bassists to lower the string height to a more comfortable level, which in turn diminishes the instrument's volume.

<sup>11</sup> Numerous musicians have pointed to Reese's theory lessons as a significant step in their musical development. Saxophonist Dexter Gordon said that “[Reese] taught more than exercises in the books. He gave us a

Mingus became one of the preeminent West Coast bassists in the early forties. New York-based pianist Fletcher Smith visited California in 1943 and saw Mingus perform at a club. Smith was impressed, saying, “[Mingus] was a hell of a bass player. He was a natural, you know. That cat could play fast as lightning, and play correct.”<sup>12</sup> Other notable musicians, such as Kid Ory, Louis Armstrong, and Illinois Jacquet, also recognized Mingus’s talents and subsequently hired him for West Coast tours and record dates. Still, Mingus did not make a substantial enough living from gigs and studio sessions, so he joined the postal service in 1946. Less than a year later, Lionel Hampton toured the West Coast and hired Mingus for his big band’s second bass chair.<sup>13</sup> This stint brought Mingus his first national exposure when the band recorded his composition “Mingus Fingers.” He left Hampton’s band in 1948 and returned to California, where he led his own sessions and jammed with touring musicians. An encounter with some touring bebop musicians reaffirmed Mingus’s stature among jazz bassists and underlined the need to move to New York City. One of the musicians was Miles Davis, who recalled his and the band members’ impression of the bassist, saying, “Mingus could play the bass and everybody knew when they heard him that he would become as bad as he became.”<sup>14</sup>

Bassist Red Kelly’s departure from the Red Norvo Trio in the early fifties presented Mingus with the opportunity to move to New York. Although Mingus expressed uncertainty in

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broader picture and an appreciation of music. He made us more aware. He was teaching us musical philosophy.” Gordon, quoted in Michael Ullman, *Jazz Lives: Portraits in Words and Pictures* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1980), 94. Collette remembered that “[Reese] wanted all his students to play the piano, to learn the keyboard. He wanted you to learn all the chords to different songs in different keys, and he used the Roman numeral system so you could transpose easily. He liked you to be very versatile in reading and playing tunes, because he knew what was going to be demanded of you.” Collette, quoted in Gordon, *Jazz West Coast*, 29. Mingus highly respected Reese, saying, “If you say genius, well, everybody says genius, but he’s a man who did 90 percent work and got the results. Or he might have done 100 percent because he was above the average genius, more than a genius. He played and taught piano, played all the woodwinds, all the reeds, and trumpet.” Mingus, quoted in John F. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 60.

<sup>12</sup> Fletcher Smith, quoted in Bryant et al., eds., *Central Avenue Sounds*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Santoro, *Myself When I am Real*, 75. Before amplifiers, some big bands used two bassists for volume support. The second bassist usually played the instrument’s solo sections.

<sup>14</sup> Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, with Quincy Trope (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1989), 86.

playing with the group due to his supposedly diminished technique, his style and sound transformed the trio.<sup>15</sup> Tal Farlow, the group's guitarist, lauded Mingus's playing:

I found it real easy to play with Mingus. He gave us a fantastic foundation. I could play on top of the time or play it loose. Any way I wanted. He freed me. There was no need to think of the time. He made it possible for me to be more creative.

Mingus got such a distinct sound. Each note would 'ting' with great clarity, no matter what the tempo. Unlike so many other bass players, he could separate one note from the other, no matter how fast we played. And he was so relaxed. I was always amazed, just watching his right hand. He played as if it were no effort at all, as if the bass were a guitar.<sup>16</sup>

By the time Mingus left the trio in 1951, he was one of jazz music's top bassists. He performed with more trios in the early fifties, such as ones led by Art Tatum, Billy Taylor, and Bud Powell, and participated in 1953's celebrated Massey Hall concert, which included a quintet comprised of Mingus, Powell, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker. Mingus also co-led the progressive Jazz Composers Workshop, a composition-focused group that combined jazz and Western classical elements to create a style dubbed Third Stream.

Beginning in the mid-fifties, Mingus led his own groups and composed more works. His playing, compositions, and leadership created a string of distinct and artistically successful albums during this time, which included *Mingus at the Bohemia*, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, *The Clown*, *Tijuana Moods*, *Jazz Portraits: Mingus in Wonderland*, *Blues & Roots*, *Mingus Ah Um*, and *Mingus Dynasty*. The early sixties continued Mingus's successes and were highlighted by what many consider his seminal recording, *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. Even though he concentrated more on composing than soloing by this time, many still considered Mingus "the

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<sup>15</sup> Shirley Klett, "Red Norvo Interview," *Cadence*, July 1979, 10. According to Norvo, Mingus was concerned about getting his technique back into shape, which had suffered because of his postal job. Norvo recalled Mingus's demeanor during the first months, saying, "... [E]very night for a month he'd cry, 'Oh, no. I can't do it... I can't play with you and Tal. It's too much. You're doing so many things I can't keep up with it.' And I'd say 'Now, just settle down.' And this went on for a couple months."

<sup>16</sup> Tal Farlow, quoted in Burt Korall, Liner Notes, *The Red Norvo Trio with Tal Farlow and Charles Mingus: The Savoy Sessions*, recorded May 3, 1950 to April 13, 1951, Savoy SJL 2212, 1976, LP.

Segovia of the bass.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, various factors such as the evolving music scene—specifically rock ‘n roll’s rise and jazz’s decline in popularity—and the bassist’s infamous temper, which had burned too many bridges with promoters and club owners, caused Mingus to take a musical hiatus in the late sixties.<sup>18</sup>

When Mingus returned to the music scene in the early seventies, he recorded the acclaimed album *Let My Children Hear Music* and received a Guggenheim Fellowship. Tours and other record dates followed, but the music business’s lack of interest in jazz, coupled with a dissatisfaction of contemporary jazz bassists, jaded Mingus. His comments on the *Me, Myself, an Eye* bassists’ playing showed Mingus’s frustration with the latter:

They don’t swing at all. They don’t phrase any notes. They only play up high. They don’t play the whole range of the bass. They don’t make any intervals—those wide intervals.... And dig this, man. Up high they ain’t playing anything. They ain’t playing any ideas.... Trouble with young cats today, nobody looks at the past. They start out like it all just started. Don’t they know if you want to play bass, you have to play like Jimmy Blanton? You have to play like Oscar Pettiford. You have to play like Charles Mingus. You have to play like everyone who ever went before, and then, when that’s over, you get around to playing yourself.<sup>19</sup>

Mingus battled ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) for the last couple years of his life. The disease stripped Mingus of his instrumental capabilities before it forced him to a wheelchair. He died in Mexico on January 5, 1979, and his widow Sue spread his ashes in India’s Ganges River. The Mingus Orchestra, Mingus Big Band, Mingus Dynasty, and various tribute shows have kept the music and spirit of one of jazz music’s greatest artists alive.

Few jazz artists have matched Mingus’s combination of instrumental virtuosity,

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Santoro, *Myself When I am Real*, 225. This description of Mingus was from the 1964 Monterey Jazz Festival’s press release.

<sup>18</sup> For a glimpse of Mingus’s late-1960s struggles, see *Mingus (Charlie Mingus) 1968*, directed by Thomas Reichman (Inlet Films, 1968), VHS (Rhapsody Films, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Mingus, quoted in Sue Mingus, *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 144. Because Mingus was too weak to play on his record, Eddie Gomez and George Mraz filled the bass chair. These comments were likely directed at Gomez, a talented bassist who repeatedly solos in thumb position to this day.

compositional brilliance, and band leadership acumen. Combined with his infamous stage antics and outspoken demeanor, Mingus left a substantial amount of compositions and recordings that scholars, musicians, and music fans have enjoyed and discussed. While most writings about Mingus look at his compositions and life, few pay attention to his bass playing. Of these, even fewer discuss his style and impact on jazz bass. This disconnect is baffling since numerous people affirmed Mingus's place among great jazz bassists.

## CHAPTER 2

### RECEPTION OF MINGUS'S SOLO STYLE

The numerous quotes that exalt Mingus's bass playing could fill a chapter. Miles Davis said that "[Mingus] was one of the greatest bass players who ever lived."<sup>1</sup> Nat Hentoff gave similar praise in 1959 when he called Mingus, "a virtuoso soloist who is technically the most accomplished bass player in jazz."<sup>2</sup> Five years earlier, *Vogue* dubbed Mingus, "the greatest bass player since the late Jimmy Blanton."<sup>3</sup> Sy Johnson went so far as to say that Mingus emerged in the early forties, "a fully developed artist.... He was a bass virtuoso and he had his thing very fully developed at that point."<sup>4</sup> Martin Williams also called Mingus a "virtuoso," and said Mingus's soloing was, "outstanding enough to be numbered among the great soloists regardless of instrument."<sup>5</sup> Williams also said that "it is Mingus the bassist who has made the most important and durable contribution to jazz."<sup>6</sup> Following Mingus's death, Leonard Feather commented on the amount of attention Mingus's bass playing received, saying that "inevitably his virtuosity as an instrumentalist, which became Mingus's original identification, overshadowed an even more significant role as a composer, leader and catalyst."<sup>7</sup> These comments and many others illustrate the high regard that Mingus's peers and critics held his bass playing.

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<sup>1</sup> Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, with Quincy Trope (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1989), 92. Davis went on to say that "Charles Mingus was a motherfucking man who didn't take no shit off nobody."

<sup>2</sup> Nat Hentoff, "Charles Mingus: Function before Form," in *These Jazzmen of Our Time*, ed. Raymond Horricks (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959), 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Vogue*, September 1955, quoted in Gene Santoro, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 113–14.

<sup>4</sup> Sy Johnson, quoted in John F. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Williams, "Charlie Mingus: The Pivotal Instrument," in *The Jazz Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 225.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Feather, "Charles Mingus," in *The Passion for Jazz* (New York: Horizon Press, 1980), 66.



Mingus was aware of his bass prowess, but more notably, he knew his place in the jazz bass lineage. In a late-1970s *Down Beat* interview, Mingus said, “I just followed Oscar Pettiford. He was doing all those things before I was. If Nat Cole followed [Earl] Hines, then Bud Powell followed Cole. I just followed in a natural progression.”<sup>8</sup> But Mingus did more than follow. He developed new bass techniques and soloed in a manner that went beyond playing horn-like lines or outlining chords:

I’d practise [*sic*] the hardest things incessantly. The third finger is seldom used, so I used it all the time. What happened, however, is that for a while I concentrated on speed and technique almost as ends in themselves. I aimed at scaring all the other bass players. I stood right, and I was conscious of every note I ran. There seemed to be no problems I couldn’t solve. Then one night (when I was eighteen or nineteen) all this changed. Vernon Alley had set up a session to see if I could cut Oscar Pettiford, but Pettiford wasn’t feeling well and didn’t show. I began playing and didn’t stop for a long time. It was suddenly *me*; it wasn’t the bass anymore. Now I’m not conscious of the instrument as an instrument when I play. And I don’t dig any longer thinking in terms of whether one man is a “better” bassist than another. You’re up there—everyone is—trying to express yourself.... And the instrument, any instrument, shouldn’t get in the way. Now too, a wrong note doesn’t completely throw me. I make something out of it that’s right. In a way, there are no wrong notes.<sup>9</sup>

Observations like these epitomize both Mingus’s respect for the jazz bass tradition and his efforts to advance the instrument’s capabilities and expectations.

While present-day bassists and jazz scholars still uphold Mingus’s virtuosity, Feather’s aforementioned concern with Mingus’s legacy—that he would be primarily remembered as a bassist—has faded. Today, Mingus is remembered chiefly as a composer. His official website contains a page with links to purchase twenty-eight different arrangements of his tunes for big band or combo, a collection of arrangements for guitar quintet, a book of lead sheets with photos

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Mingus, quoted in Arnold Jay Smith, “Charles Mingus: Developmental Changes,” *Down Beat*, January 12, 1978, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Mingus, quoted in Hentoff, “Charles Mingus: Function before Form,” 179–80.

and commentary, and a play-along book with fourteen charts.<sup>10</sup> Even though all of the book covers on the site have a picture of Mingus playing bass, his instrumental abilities are glossed over. For example, *More Than a Play-Along: Charles Mingus* calls Mingus a “virtuoso bass player”<sup>11</sup> and says his renowned “Lion’s Head bass” was played on the accompanying play-along disc.<sup>12</sup> Those comments are merely peripheral, as the book’s focus is on Mingus’s compositions. Another play-along was published in 2007, but that book only presents charts.<sup>13</sup> Arguably the greatest book about Mingus and his music is *Charles Mingus: More Than a Fake Book*.<sup>14</sup> The book contains fifty-five lead sheets, accompanying tune analyses, discographical information, photographs, score facsimiles, two essays by Mingus, and a concise biography. You might assume that the book would also have solo transcriptions or at least a detailed discussion of his bass style, but that is not the case. Judging by these publications’ contents, the people directly linked to upholding Mingus’s legacy are most concerned with letting the man’s compositions inform his legacy. In this regard, Mingus’s bass playing becomes secondary.

Unfortunately, this de-emphasis of Mingus’s bass style is prevalent in modern jazz bass pedagogy. The issue is most apparent when you survey various jazz bass transcription books, which focus on individuals’ instrumental styles rather than compositions. A 2013 collection of jazz bass transcriptions features Mingus’s 1957 performance on “Haitian Fight Song,”<sup>15</sup> but this is the lone highlight among jazz bass transcription books. A 2001 collection has Mingus’s

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<sup>10</sup> “Charts,” Charles Mingus: The Official Site, accessed June 19, 2014, <http://mingusmingusmingus.com/jazz-education/charts>.

<sup>11</sup> [Andrew Homzy?], quoted in Charles Mingus, *More Than a Play-Along: Charles Mingus*, C ed. (New York: Jazz Workshop, 1999), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Sue Mingus, quoted in *ibid.*, 4. The book also mentions that the session’s bassist and Mingus tribute bands participant Boris Kozlov found a video of Mingus bowing in an unusual part of the instrument, which Kozlov determined was for, “swifter execution.”

<sup>13</sup> Charles Mingus, *Hal Leonard Play Along Volume 68: Charles Mingus*, prod. Sue Mingus (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, [2007]).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Mingus, *More Than a Fake Book*, [ed. Andrew Homzy?] (New York: Jazz Workshop, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Scott LaFaro et al., *Jazz Bass Classics: 16 Great Performances Transcribed Note-for-Note with Tab for Acoustic and Electric Bass* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2013), 68–84.

accompaniment line from a J. J. Johnson recording of “Too Marvelous for Words,” but the bass line is simple and the transcription is mistitled.<sup>16</sup> Todd Coolman’s 1985 transcription collection is one of the best, for it contains biographies, brief analyses, and thirty-six transcriptions of eighteen jazz bassists.<sup>17</sup> However, the book does not contain a Mingus transcription. Mingus’s underrepresentation in these books is exacerbated when you consider the multiple transcription books devoted to individual bassists, such as Pettiford, Paul Chambers, Scott LaFaro, Ron Carter, and Stanley Clarke.<sup>18</sup> If Mingus is considered a virtuoso, one of the instrument’s innovators, and an important part of the jazz bass lineage, then why is there a paucity of his bass transcriptions?

Some argue that, unlike his contemporaries, Mingus’s distinct style and note choices do not contribute vocabulary-building phrases and lines. As bassist John Goldsby says,

Mingus was a more stream-of-consciousness and emotional player than many of his contemporaries, and he always seemed to play spontaneously and in the moment. In contrast, Paul Chambers and Ray Brown are usually outlining chords, although in very creative, swinging and melodic ways. When I hear Mingus, it sounds like his emotions come first, and then the form and changes are secondary.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Reggie Workman et al., *Bass Standards: Note-for-Note Transcriptions of Jazz Bass’s Classic Performances*, trans. Steve Gorenberg, Chris Kringel, Steve Peplin, and Matt Scharfglass (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2001) 69–72. The Mingus transcription is erroneously titled “Old Devil Moon.”

<sup>17</sup> Todd Coolman, *The Bass Tradition: Past, Present, Future* (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Oscar Pettiford, *The Music of Oscar Pettiford, Volume One: 80 Bass Solos*, trans. Volker Nahrman (n.p.: Volker Nahrman, 1988); Paul Chambers, *Arcology: The Music of Paul Chambers, Volume 2*, trans. Jim Stinnett (n.p.: Stinnett Music, 1999); Scott LaFaro, *Scott LaFaro: 15 Solo Transcriptions Taken from the Bill Evans Recordings Sunday at the Village Vanguard and Waltz for Debby*, trans. Phil Palombi ([New York?]: Palombi Music, 2003); Ron Carter, *Ron Carter Solos: Transcribed from 22 Classic Standards*, trans. Eric Fusillier (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 2007); Stanley Clarke, *The Stanley Clarke Collection*, trans. Chris Kringel, Jeff Jacobson, and Matt Scharfglass (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2002). There are additional transcription books devoted to Chambers and LaFaro. Electric bassist Jaco Pastorius has the most transcription books, the best of which contains detailed solo analyses. Sean Malone, *A Portrait of Jaco: The Solos Collection* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> John Goldsby, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2014. For an insightful yet somewhat humorous depiction of Mingus’s bass style, listen to vocalist Jon Hendricks’s four blues choruses sung in the styles of bassists Percy Heath, Paul Chambers, Ray Brown, and Charles Mingus. Jon Hendricks, “Swingin’ Till the Girls Come Home,” by Oscar Pettiford, recorded February 19, 1962, with Dave Lambert, Annie Ross, Gildo Mahones, Ron Carter, and Stu Martin, on *The Hottest New Group in Jazz*, Columbia/Legacy C2K 64933, 1996, 2 CDs, disc 2.

Goldsby further contrasts Mingus's style with other bassists when he describes Mingus's playing as more visceral than cerebral, saying, "Compared to his contemporaries Oscar Pettiford and Ray Brown, Mingus didn't demonstrate as much harmonic sophistication in his bass lines and solos—but he had flash, chops, power, and a relentless, driving vision."<sup>20</sup> His knowledge and execution of both traditional and progressive jazz styles notwithstanding, differences like these are precisely why Mingus's solos warrant more attention. Instead, discussions inevitably focus on other aspects of his artistry, as bassist John Clayton demonstrates in the following statement:

The thing I got from Mingus was his free abandon of energy. I learned from him that it's okay to just do whatever you want on the bass—to not feel inhibited by everybody else's rules. I enjoy his bass playing, but the thing I artistically love about Mingus was his composing. His composing revealed the Mingus his playing couldn't show off for whatever reasons—maybe he had more time to think about it. Art is about you expressing what you want to express. Whether or not people relate to your message is absolutely subjective.<sup>21</sup>

Clayton's comments reinforce Mingus's current legacy, which is that of a composer rather than a bassist. Regardless of today's staid view of Mingus's bass style, his solos deserve more serious discussion than has occurred.

Goldsby is one of the few who have outlined Mingus's techniques. He states that Mingus was a transitional bassist who bridged the innovations of Blanton and Brown with those of LaFaro and Red Mitchell, saying, "[Mingus] pioneered virtuosic scale-wise shifting in and out of thumb position in the early '50s."<sup>22</sup> Still, the only person who has both discussed Mingus's bass style and debated its reduced presence in today's discussions is Dave Hunt. In *Jazz Bass Artists*

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<sup>20</sup> John Goldsby, "Power and Passion: The Bass According to Charles Mingus," with E. E. Bradman, *Bass Player*, April 2002, 48.

<sup>21</sup> John Clayton, quoted in John Goldsby, *The Jazz Bass Book: Technique and Tradition* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2002), 87. The last two sentences are intriguing since they allow Clayton to use art's subjectivity as the reason he does not connect with Mingus's bass playing.

<sup>22</sup> Goldsby, *The Jazz Bass Book*, 86.

of the 1950s, Hunt notes the gradual emphasis toward Mingus's compositions and how it has affected his instrumental legacy, saying that "The main problem with Mingus' obvious stature as a composer is that it obscures—from the minds of newer generations—his earlier reputation as an established instrumental accompanist and bass soloist."<sup>23</sup> This statement initiates Hunt's focus on Mingus's stylistic elements, a discussion that is far more in-depth than similar ones.

Hunt transcends the usual method of dissecting a soloist's harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic tendencies by illustrating how Mingus used his techniques and tendencies to serve a compositional solo approach. According to Hunt, these include: "Leaps of wide intervals that result in possible related melodic directional changes and simulation of greater forward motion or drive in the music;" "Contrasting tension and release by structuring rhythmically exciting repetitive phrasing that abruptly ... transitions into flowing note sequences of great length (with no immediate thought of repetition);" "Shifting registers of the instrument in a musical effort to offer even more means of melodic and harmonic creativity;" "Timbral effects;" "The desire to dynamically contrast 'inside' and 'outside' harmonic interpretation;" "prominent use of pizzicato tremolo, not only as a method of sustaining notes but also as a technique for logically staging dramatic effect in the tradition of European classical music."<sup>24</sup> The most enlightening part of the discussion is when Hunt comments on Mingus's treatment of different material and how it reflects his compositional side. As Hunt says, "[Mingus] seldom played a solo out of the context of a specific mood or artistic symbolism inherently woven into the piece, be it a time-honored standard or sociologically relevant original."<sup>25</sup> By relating Mingus's solo approach to a

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<sup>23</sup> Dave Hunt, *Jazz Bass Artists of the 1950s*, with Virginia Koenke Hunt (Dearborn Heights, MI: Cranston Publications, 2010), 188.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 190–91. Hunt also disputes the notion that Mingus's playing lacked "harmonic sophistication," saying, "This assessment is curious, because the very nature of Mingus' music demanded that he perform with a level of harmonic sophistication beyond that of the repertoires performed by the contemporaries with whom he was being compared."

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

compositional mindset, Hunt combines two of Mingus's most important contributions to jazz and confirms why his solos need a larger presence in current jazz bass discussions.

Even though Hunt's comments and solo analyses show that Mingus's playing can be discussed on the same level as his contemporaries, the book's lack of transcriptions hinders a full appreciation of Mingus's bass style. The aforementioned Mingus transcriptions also leave this appreciation unfulfilled through their small number and brief or nonexistent textual analyses. Presenting transcriptions without providing insight into the soloist's performance invites confusion over unique techniques or a misunderstanding of harmonic choices. By analyzing a variety of Mingus's solos and discussing his techniques, harmonic and rhythmic tendencies, and developing style, today's generation of jazz bassists and musicians will rediscover Mingus's legacy as one of the twentieth century's greatest bass soloists.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOLO ANALYSES

These solo transcriptions show Mingus's virtuosity, ability to melodically solo over chord changes (which some have questioned), and examples of his unique style. Except for "Blue Cee," I chose and completed all of the transcriptions in a span of five months over the fall and winter of 2013. Halfway through the transcribing process I realized that sticking to performances before 1960 placed focus on Mingus's early to middle period solo style. Working within this time frame also provides an understanding of Mingus's solo style before he became a jazz icon in the early 1960s. During that time, Mingus began to solo less frequently and, when he did, it was mainly on original compositions. I agree with Goldsby that this last point is one reason why Mingus's solos have not been transcribed and published to the degree of other mid-twentieth century bassists such as Chambers, Brown, and Pettiford.<sup>1</sup>

The transcriptions included within this document feature standard chord progressions as well as one of Mingus's original works. There are two ballads (one which was a personal favorite of Mingus's), four blues, two rhythm changes (both different performances of "Mingus Fingers"), three standards—in addition to "I Can't Get Started" and "Things Ain't What They Used to Be"—, and one original. Aside from presenting a variety of tunes in dissimilar styles, including multiple ballads, blues, and rhythm changes, this collection presents different treatment of similar material. The best example of this aspect is both versions of "Mingus Fingers," which were recorded a year apart and with different bands and allotted solo space. Though unrelated,

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<sup>1</sup> As Goldsby stated, "On his later records, he played a lot of originals. As you suggest, when people transcribe, we often go for a standard where we understand the harmony, and where we can easily assimilate the transcription. That said, Mingus did record a lot of standards, especially on earlier records." John Goldsby, e-mail message to author, January 23, 2014.

the two ballad transcriptions illustrate Mingus's rhythmic freedom on pieces in that style. The same can be said of the four blues solos.

One detail that distinguishes some of these transcriptions from ones of Chambers, Brown, Pettiford, and others is Mingus's regular use of accents. Due to the varying recording qualities, I was unable to be as accurate with this notational aspect as I wanted. For example, although the recording quality of "Blue Cee" is good and one can clearly hear the bass notes, many of Mingus's attacks are lost in the mix. While a listener might argue that the first three or four notes of that solo should have accents, I have left them as is because of more apparent accents in other parts of the solo, such as the final note in bar four. This is just one example of how the recording quality dictated the transcribing process. The recording quality that impacted its transcription the most was "Woody 'n' You," as the combination of a bass-heavy mix and streams of eighth notes at a fast tempo (240 beats per minute) obscured the accents and, more importantly, the pitches. Regardless of those difficulties, I feel it is of utmost importance to include the discernible accents in these transcriptions because they were a large part of Mingus's style. Besides, his attack was so strong that I could argue for putting accents over nearly every note.

Though each transcription has chord changes and the analyses often refer to how Mingus's lines altered these changes, the chord changes are not definitive. For example, I have given the basic chord changes to "I Can't Get Started" without any reharmonizations or altered changes. This is mainly because Mingus altered the chord changes from year-to-year, often because of changing personnel in his band or artistic impulse, as is apparent when you see some



of his modifications to the song.<sup>2</sup> The solo section to “Love Chant,” a contrafact of “Perdido,” contains the original tune’s chord progression even though Mingus treats the G dominant seventh chord in the bridge as major each time he plays over it. Other transcriptions have disparities between the solo line and chord progression, so remember to factor in improvisation’s spontaneity and the bassist’s harmonic knowledge when you examine these solos.

Rather than supply a tempo marking in the customary spot above each transcription’s first bar, I have included the time that the solo begins in the recording. This practice is meant to push the reader to find and listen to the recording rather than study or play the music on its own. Although the analyses could be read and compared to the transcriptions without referring to the recordings, key elements such as Mingus’s sound and the accompanying music, the latter of which enhances and sometimes influences Mingus’s rhythm and note choices, would be overlooked.

In completing these transcriptions, I mainly used the computer program Audacity to slow down the recordings.<sup>3</sup> I sent an mp3 of each recording through the program and slowed the tempo down in order to more precisely discern pitches, rhythms, and accents.<sup>4</sup> Except for “Woody ‘n’ You” and the two versions of “Mingus Fingers,” I slowed the tempos down to no more than one tenth of the original recording speed. While some might balk at this method and exclaim, “That’s not how the masters or I did it” or “You cheated by slowing down the recording,” my intention with these transcriptions is to represent Mingus’s solo playing as accurately as I can. This required me to hear the notes as clearly as possible, which original

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Mingus, “I Can’t Get Started,” lead sheet, Box 30, Folders 16–18, Charles Mingus Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. Each of the three lead sheets contains various alterations to the song’s chord progression.

<sup>3</sup> <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

<sup>4</sup> Slowing the tempo on Audacity does not alter the pitch, unlike slowing the speed, which affects both the tempo and the pitch.

recording speeds do not always permit. As an example of the method's utility and limitations, I slowed down the recording of "Woody 'n' You" by twenty percent and the notes were still difficult to distinguish.

Simply using Audacity and a keyboard to transcribe the solos runs the risk of notating something unplayable on the upright bass. So, after I completed the first draft of each transcription or when I encountered a unique phrase, I played the music on my upright bass to ensure its practicality. Much of the following analyses evolved from repeatedly playing through these solos. Doing so also greatly influenced my own playing as I adapted some of Mingus's phrasings and attacks, which in turn modified my overall style and made me approach soloing differently. For me, these elements of Mingus's style, not necessarily his note choices or harmonic alterations, make his solos genuine and unique. Transcription analysis and assimilation should go beyond merely borrowing melodic phrases. You have to step back and view a solo on the macro level. Doing so builds a greater understanding of the soloist's compositional arc. Fortunately, Mingus's playing demonstrates a masterful understanding of improvisation's micro level (measure-by-measure) and macro level (entire form).

The analyses and transcriptions are presented chronologically. This allows you to see Mingus's solo development over a twelve-year period. Although Mingus's early solos displayed his impeccable technique and ties to the jazz bass lineage, a notable difference in his note choices, rhythmic content, and solo approach is apparent halfway through these analyses. I believe his solo on "Love Chant" marks a pivotal point in his development as one of jazz music's greatest bassists. In that solo, Mingus combines bebop-style eighth-note lines with innovative techniques and distinctive phrases and note choices. Seeing this development distinguishes Mingus as a progressive yet traditionally minded jazz bassist.

“Mingus Fingers” – from *Midnight Sun* [compilation]

Debuted by Lionel Hampton’s big band in 1947, “Mingus Fingers” brought Mingus his first national exposure.<sup>5</sup> Just as Duke Ellington’s band featured Blanton on “Jack the Bear” and Dizzy Gillespie’s band featured Brown on “One Bass Hit,” “Mingus Fingers” featured Mingus alongside Hampton’s band. Mingus explained the tune’s creation and his stature in Hampton’s band, saying, “I wrote it for Lionel Hampton’s band when he had two bass players, me and another bass player named Charles. I think ‘One Bass Hit’ was out. Or either ‘Jack the Bear.’ Anyway, Lionel cancelled the other bass player and told me to record by myself.”<sup>6</sup> More chromatic and texturally dense than other big band bass features of the 1940s, the tune showcases Mingus’s burgeoning compositional style and skillful bass playing.

Because the LP format did not come out until 1948, the length of Mingus’s solo was dictated by the technological time constraint of records in 1947. In spite of this limitation, Mingus exhibits speed and chromaticism over half a chorus and two solo breaks. Though it is not included in this transcription or the subsequent one, the bassist also plays the tune’s melody. This, in addition to the fleeting arco passage that leads into the bass solo, should be considered when assessing Mingus’s solo style in the late 1940s.

Rather than start his short solo with a melodic line or demonstration of his virtuosity, Mingus alternates between C# and D in the first bar. The next two bars contain harmonically peculiar but diatonic note choices, as Mingus avoids each chord’s root note by either omitting it or placing it on an upbeat. Bars five and six and partially bars seven and eight feature a unison melody played by the bassist and the horn section. Mingus again avoids the tonic in the eighth

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Mingus, “Mingus Fingers,” by Charles Mingus, recorded November 10, 1947, with Lionel Hampton and His Orchestra, on *Lionel Hampton and His Orchestra (1946–47): Midnight Sun*, Decca GRD-625, 1993, CD.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Mingus, “Mingus Explains Song Titles,” Charles Mingus: The Official Site, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://mingusmingusmingus.com/mingus/mingus-explains-song-titles>.

bar and instead plays a descending minor third figure (C–A then Gb–Eb).

The half-chorus's remaining eight bars showcase Mingus's speed through a stream of eighth and triplet eighth notes. Though Mingus places some root notes on downbeats and thus emphasizes them more than he did in the first eight bars, a fair amount of chromaticism persists in this section. Bar ten sees Mingus alter the F dominant seventh chord by playing a minor third (Ab) on a downbeat. In bars thirteen through fourteen, the bassist plays a descending figure that utilizes triplet eighth notes on beats one and three and descending eighth notes on beats two and four. The chromaticism in this figure is a result of the line's overall movement, which gradually descends an octave starting on D. Although they are treated like neighbor tones, the B $\natural$  and Db eighth notes in bar fifteen alter the Bb major seventh chord. After the previous bars' chromaticism, Mingus ends his solo by landing on the tonic (Bb) before Hampton starts his half-chorus solo.

Following the vibraphone solo and a five-bar interlude, Mingus returns with a three-bar solo break. The first two bars consist of a weaving series of eighth-note pull-offs and are chromatic by way of Mingus's use of upper neighbor tones. Possibly implying a tritone substitution, he lands on a B $\natural$  in the third bar before outlining a Bb sixth or pentatonic chord that leads into the next section. Mingus's final solo break occurs thirty bars after the partial restatement of the head and a climactic buildup. This two-bar break is Mingus's most harmonically exciting phrase on the recording, as he plays a series of eighth notes that suggest a Db tonality before concluding in the dominant (F). Further linking Mingus to the jazz bass tradition, this last solo break is reminiscent of Blanton's final solo break on "Jack the Bear," both

in the lines' chromatic movement and continuous position shifts.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, Mingus's solo playing on this recording exhibits an influence of Blanton and Pettiford through the melodic horn-like lines. Along with Brown and Israel Crosby, this makes Mingus one of the few bassists of the 1940s who produced solos that pushed the expectations of what was possible on jazz bass. By playing melodic lines that were akin to those of horn players like Lester Young, Buck Clayton, and Charlie Parker, these bassists liberated their instrument, which had been rooted in accompaniment lines even during bass solos. Mingus further separated himself from his peers by displaying a tendency for upper chord tones and chromaticism. Regardless of the recording quality, Mingus's signature attack, which is much more pronounced than other bassists, is audible. As will be apparent in the following analyses, these elements are fundamental to Mingus's solo style.

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<sup>7</sup> Jimmy Blanton, "Jack the Bear," by Duke Ellington, recorded March 6, 1940, with Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra, on *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band; 1940-1942*, Bluebird 82876-50857-2, 2003, 3 CDs, disc 1.

# Mingus Fingers [Hampton]

Charles Mingus

[1:04]  $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $G^7$   $C^{-7}$   $F^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $G^7$   $C^{-7}$   $F^7$

5  $Bb^7$   $Eb^7$   $Ab^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $F^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$

9  $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $G^7$   $C^{-7}$   $F^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $G^7$   $C^{-7}$   $F^7$

13  $Bb^7$   $Eb^7$   $Ab^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$   $F^7$   $Bb^{\Delta 7}$

17 vibes solo 16 interlude 5

38 [2:00]

41 head out 30

71 [2:52] vibes break and ending 3

“Mingus Fingers” – from *Charles ‘Baron’ Mingus: West Coast; 1945–49* [compilation]

One year after he recorded “Mingus Fingers” with Hampton’s band, Mingus went into the studio and recorded his own version of the tune.<sup>8</sup> Backed by a small group and given two full solo choruses, this version of “Mingus Fingers” offers a more complete view of Mingus’s late-1940s solo style. The bass solo’s length is surprising, as few bassists had large amounts of solo time on record prior to the 1950s, the biggest exception being Blanton’s duets with Ellington in 1940.<sup>9</sup> Mingus leading this recording session and deciding the allotted solo space is a main factor for the solo’s length, but also demonstrates that he perhaps wanted to stretch out on his tune since Hampton did not give him that opportunity the previous year.

The beginning of Mingus’s first chorus brings to mind the Hampton recording, as he approaches each off-beat D with a grace note C#. The accented G quarter notes in bar four highlight both Mingus’s powerful sound and skill at using forceful attacks to shape his phrases. After an insistent B $\flat$  in bar eight, Mingus begins the next A section by playing an ascending syncopated line; this line is repeated in the second chorus. The bar before the bridge is notable for its chromaticism, as Mingus begins on the flat seventh (A $\flat$ ) before working down to an accented major seventh (A $\sharp$ ) and leading into the bridge’s first chord (D dominant seventh) by playing E $\flat$  to B $\flat$ . As bars three, seven, eleven, sixteen, and twenty-three show, Mingus alters the quality of the G minor seventh, B $\flat$  major seventh, and F dominant seventh chords by playing an A $\flat$  instead of an A $\sharp$ . This tendency to alter chord changes contradicts Mingus’s statements, as he

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Mingus, “Mingus Fingers,” by Charles Mingus, recorded November 1948, with Buddy Collette, Jimmy Bunn, and Chuck Thompson, on *Charles ‘Baron’ Mingus: West Coast; 1945–49*, Uptown UPCD 27.48, 2000, CD. While the CD liner notes list Jimmy Bunn as the session’s pianist, Tom Lord’s jazz discography lists Wilbert Baranco as the pianist. Tom Lord, *The Jazz Discography* (Redwood, NY: Cadence Jazz Books, 1996), M7877.

<sup>9</sup> Blanton and Ellington recorded four duets (“Pitter Panther Patter,” “Body and Soul,” “Sophisticated Lady,” and “Mr. J.B. Blues”) on October 1, 1940. Showcasing Blanton’s remarkable abilities on the bass, these recordings were unprecedented for the time. The duets can be found on the previously cited compilation *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band; 1940–1942*.

once noted when criticizing avant-garde jazz, “‘here’s a B-flat seventh. I’ll change the chord from a B-flat major seventh, I’ve got an A-natural in B-flat; I’m gonna play a B-natural.’ . . . Well, on the major seventh chord, that’s the wrong note. Now if the chord was not a major seventh and was a B-flat cluster, and if the chord is a row, then I can play all the notes. But [not on] a major seventh.”<sup>10</sup> He highlights the final eight bars of the first chorus with an anticipated descending eighth-note figure in bar twenty-seven and a switch to straight eighth notes for the second half of bar thirty.

Mingus leads into the second chorus with accented notes before giving way to an eighth-note phrase that revolves around C# and utilizes hammer-ons. Bars thirty-five through thirty-six contain the first occurrence of Mingus repeating a phrase from the first chorus and placing it in nearly the same spot. In this case, he takes the phrase from bars two through three and plays it nearly note-for-note in bars thirty-five through thirty-six. The next two bars feature the unison melodic line that was also played during the bass solo on the Hampton record. In bars forty-one through forty-two, Mingus repeats and displaces the syncopated figure from bars eight through ten by one beat. He continues echoing the first chorus in bars forty-three through forty-four by displacing phrases from bars ten and eleven. The ascending and descending diatonic figure in bars forty-five through forty-seven is punctuated by muted eighth-note triplets and displays both phrase development and Mingus’s deft technique. Another echo occurs in bar fifty-three, where the first two beats’ melodic direction and rhythm are both the same as in bar twenty-one. The slightly rushed pattern in the bridge’s final two bars foreshadows the kind of phrase and pitch repetition that became part of Mingus’s style. Similar repetition occurs in bars fifty-eight through sixty. Centered on Ab, this harmonically static and rhythmically varied one-note

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Mingus, quoted in John F. Goodman, *Mingus Speaks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 30.



repetition is a staple of Mingus's solo playing and illustrates just one of his stylistic breaks from the bebop solo style. Subverting harmonic expectations, Mingus ends his solo with a held tritone substitution ( $B^{\natural}$ ) in bar sixty-four.

Mingus establishes a number of his solo characteristics in this recording. His powerful sound and weaving eighth-note lines cut through at a quick tempo of 196 beats per minute. Typical of the late 1940s bass style, his lines are largely diatonic. Still, some of the note choices hint at Mingus's progressive harmonies. This solo also contains examples of the one-note and phrase repetitions that appear in many of his later recordings. These two solos on "Mingus Fingers" also show a preference for playing below the bass's thumb position and in the instrument's standard range. Subsequent transcriptions see Mingus play above thumb position more often, but compared to contemporary bassists like Brown, Mitchell, and the soon-to-be influential LaFaro, Mingus used the thumb position to enhance his lines briefly rather than play in it for extended periods.

# Mingus Fingers [Mingus]

Charles Mingus

[0:53]  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

5  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

9  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

13  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

17  $D7$   $G7$

21  $C7$   $F7$

25  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

29  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

straight 8ths

33  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

37  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

41  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

45  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

49  $D7$   $G7$

53  $C7$   $F7$

57  $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $G-7$   $C-7$   $F7$

61  $Bb7$   $Eb7$   $Ab7$   $Bb\Delta7$   $F7$   $Bb\Delta7$

“Lady Bird” – originally released on *Charles Mingus Quintet + Max Roach*

Mingus’s solo on the Tadd Dameron standard “Lady Bird” shows some of the bassist’s humor and ability to play much more diatonically than some might think.<sup>11</sup> This solo also represents one of the few times that Mingus improvised over a non-Ellington standard, something he did less frequently as his career advanced.

The first five bars see Mingus wrestling with a melodic quote, specifically, the opening melody to Johnny Mercer’s “I’m an Old Cowhand.” The possible incentives behind this quote are intriguing. Did Mingus see an audience member wearing a cowboy hat? Did a band member mention the song during a set break? Did he hear someone whistle it that night? Whatever the inspiration, the unexpected quote provides some humor at the beginning of the solo. Following the quote, Mingus plays diatonic eighth-note phrases that lead to a slide up to an F in bar thirteen. He outlines a descending A minor seventh arpeggio beneath a C major seventh chord in the first half of bar fifteen, then lands on the major seventh (D) of Eb major.

Mingus correctly quotes the opening melody to “I’m an Old Cowhand” in the final bar of his first chorus and ends the quote in the second bar of his second chorus, thus completing the thought he had at the beginning of his solo. Bar twenty begins with an eighth-note phrase he played earlier in bar seven. While bars twenty-one through twenty-four show Mingus playing diatonic eighth-note phrases up and down the bass, the beginning of bar twenty-three features one of the solo’s few instances of chromaticism. After venturing into thumb position for less than two beats in bar twenty-five, Mingus starts to wind down his solo in bar twenty-six with a series of broken descending fifths that soon lead into a broken descending scalar passage in bars

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Mingus, “Lady Bird,” by Tadd Dameron, recorded December 23, 1955, with Eddie Bert, George Barrow, Mal Waldron, and Willie Jones, on *A Night at Cafe Bohemia plus the Pithecanthropus Erectus Session*, Giant Steps GSCR 029, 2009, 2 CDs, disc 2. This European release contains the material that formed the mid-1950s albums *Mingus at the Bohemia*, *Charles Mingus Quintet + Max Roach*, and *Pithecanthropus Erectus*.

twenty-seven through twenty-eight. An abrupt register shift in bar twenty-nine is followed by an ascending phrase to the flat ninth (Ab) of the dominant (G). Mingus ends his final chorus with a descending diatonic phrase.

Though this is one of his more restrained solos, the two bass choruses on “Lady Bird” illustrate Mingus’s ability to play diatonic lines over a shifting chord progression. Even though the solo is diatonic, there are some colorful note choices, such as the B–E figure under the D dominant seventh in bar twelve, the aforementioned A minor seventh arpeggio under the C major seventh chord in bar fifteen, the half-note major seventh (D) under the Eb major seventh chord in bar fifteen, and the F–G glissando under the C major seventh chord in the solo’s penultimate bar. The “I’m an Old Cowhand” quote also provides an interesting color at the beginning of the second chorus, as the melody’s sustained D becomes a major ninth under the C major chord. Taken as a whole, this solo is noteworthy for its humor and diatonicism, but it should also serve as one of the many examples of Mingus’s ability to outline chords and the tune’s form, which some have questioned.

# Lady Bird

Tadd Dameron

[3:28] C<sup>Δ</sup> F<sup>-7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup>

5 C<sup>Δ</sup> B<sup>b-7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup>

9 A<sup>bΔ</sup> A<sup>-7</sup> D<sup>7</sup>

13 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>Δ7</sup> E<sup>bΔ7</sup> A<sup>bΔ7</sup> D<sup>bΔ7</sup>

17 C<sup>Δ</sup> F<sup>-7</sup> B<sup>b7</sup>

21 C<sup>Δ</sup> B<sup>b-7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup>

25 A<sup>bΔ</sup> A<sup>-7</sup> D<sup>7</sup>

29 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>Δ7</sup> E<sup>bΔ7</sup> A<sup>bΔ7</sup> D<sup>bΔ7</sup>

“Love Chant” – originally released on *Pithecanthropus Erectus*

Following the 1955 winter sessions that formed the albums *Mingus at the Bohemia* and *Charles Mingus Quintet + Max Roach*, Mingus went into the studio and recorded his first significant album as a bandleader, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*. Of the album’s four tracks, “Love Chant” features one of his most impressive solos on record up to that point.<sup>12</sup> A contrafact of Juan Tizol’s “Perdido,” the head to “Love Chant” revolves around an F minor pedal point and does not allude to the original tune’s chord progression.<sup>13</sup> Once the band kicks into the solo section, the performance’s feel and sound completely change from the head’s pensive mood to an upbeat (182 beats per minute), joyous feel.

The bass solo follows J. R. Monterose’s saxophone solo. Mingus immediately displays his quick ears by quoting the descending thirds pattern that Monterose played over the last nine bars of his solo.<sup>14</sup> After a slide up to G on beat two of bar three, Mingus completes this four-bar phrase by landing on the supertonic (C) at the end of bar four. Considering that bar’s ii–V movement (D minor seventh–G dominant seventh), the way Mingus ends this opening statement suggests the tune is in the key of C. Just as he does for the majority of his two-chorus solo, Mingus plays diatonic phrases over the next four bars, beginning with a scalar pattern in bar five. In bar seven, Mingus emphasizes the major seventh of Bb (A $\natural$ ) before outlining a descending Bb sixth arpeggio and playing another scalar pattern in bar eight, which ends with a chromatic line

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Mingus, “Love Chant,” by Charles Mingus, recorded January 30, 1956, with Jackie McLean, J. R. Monterose, Mal Waldron, and Willie Jones, on *A Night at Cafe Bohemia plus the Pithecanthropus Erectus Session*, Giant Steps GSCR 029, 2009, 2 CDs, disc 2.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Mingus, “Love Chant,” lead sheet, Box 10, Folder 3, Charles Mingus Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. Mingus likely told the musicians to simply play the “Perdido” chord changes during the solo section, as the tune’s lead sheet only contains the melody and its corresponding chord progression.

<sup>14</sup> When I heard this for the first time and realized what Mingus had done, I recalled a conversation I once overheard between a jazz musician and an audience member. In the musician’s attempt to explain how musical conversations occur between jazz musicians, they said, to paraphrase, “It’s like if you walk up to me and say, ‘It’s a beautiful the day,’ and then I respond with ‘I like pizza.’ That doesn’t make sense. You have to relate. So part of what we try to do is build off of what the other musicians say on their instruments.”

(A–Ab–G). Bars nine through twelve begin with a series of grace-note hammer-ons that lead into an ascending Bb pentatonic scale in bar eleven and end on an Ab in bar twelve, a note that changes the bar's G dominant seventh chord to a G dominant seventh flat nine chord. Diatonic eighth-note phrases are played in bars thirteen through sixteen, but note how Mingus effortlessly outlines a C minor seventh arpeggio in bar fourteen to get to the accented D, which is followed by an accented C in bar fifteen and another outlined Bb pentatonic scale (bar sixteen). Mingus ends the first half of his first chorus by landing on the key's major seventh (A).

Mingus increases his chromaticism and harmonic alterations over the next sixteen bars. However, one of the solo's most interesting moments is bar seventeen, where Mingus displays his unique solo style by playing triple stops. Though this technique was known by other bassists in the 1950s, comparable bassists such as Pettiford, Brown, and LaFaro played double stops at most. The second bar of the bridge starts with an accented chromatic figure before the bassist outlines a G major triad and then emphatically lands on B $\flat$  in bar nineteen. He seems to remain in the key of D Mixolydian in bar twenty as that bar's scalar passage features an F $\sharp$  rather than the chord progression's implied F $\flat$ . After sliding up to an F in bar twenty-two, Mingus plays a broken descending scale (Eb–D then D–C) whose movement is reminiscent of the accented figure in bars fourteen through fifteen. He once again alters the chord progression by playing a minor third (Ab) under the bridge's F dominant seventh chord in bar twenty-four. The chorus's final A section begins with Mingus's fourth glissando in the solo. These bars also slow down Mingus's harmonic and rhythmic movement as he plays only a sustained C followed by D for five-and-a-half beats. He returns to an eighth-note scalar passage and once again alters the chord progression on beat two of bar twenty-seven, this time scooping into a minor third (Db) under the Bb sixth chord. The first chorus concludes with a rhythmically-varied one-note repetition of



Ab—a note outside the tune’s key and the bars’ chord progression—from the end of bar twenty-eight to bar thirty-one.

Since one-repetitions are prominent in Mingus’s playing and appear in many of these transcriptions, it helps to understand how they function. Pianist Paul Bley coined the term “erasure phrase” to describe a musical statement that interrupts the preceding solo line’s harmonic and rhythmic content: “An ‘erasure phrase’ is meant to do nothing else except erase from your memory what you just heard ... clean the blackboard, so to speak, before you write the next music. It’s not there to tell you anything; it is there to make you forget. It’s there to cleanse the palette.”<sup>15</sup> While some of Mingus’s one-note repetitions function like erasure phrases, they are rhythmically stimulating on their own and sometimes repeated later in the solo, such as in the “Haitian Fight Song” bass solo.

The ascending Bb major scale that begins in the first chorus’s last bar leads into the second chorus. The scalar figure that begins in bar thirty-four leads to Mingus using the open G string to move up the fingerboard and land on the F below thumb position in bar thirty-five. Starting on beat four of bar thirty-six, Mingus plays a descending chromatic line that features an accented note on the first upbeat in bar thirty-seven. In conjunction with the hammer-on that leads into the bar, this accent on a weak beat in the middle of a chromatic line nearly hides bar thirty-seven’s downbeat. This type of phrasing adds further significance to Mingus’s eighth-note lines. Another instance of Mingus lowering the third occurs in bar thirty-eight, where he plays an Ab beneath the F dominant seventh chord. The next two bars see the bassist once again use an open G in the middle of a line to help him quickly move up to the F under thumb position. Bar forty-one features the solo’s only occurrence of thumb position, which once again shows

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Bley, quoted in Norman Meehan, “After the Melody: Paul Bley and Jazz Piano after Ornette Coleman,” *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 12 (2002): 101.

Mingus's preference for playing in the instrument's distinct lower range. More descending chromatic lines occur between bars forty-two and forty-three and forty-three and forty-four, the latter of which Mingus plays straight eighth notes. He creates tension in bar forty-four by accenting another upbeat in the middle of an eighth-note line and once again changing the A to Ab. In bars forty-five through forty-seven, Mingus contrasts the solo's eighth-note dominance with two beats of rest and a half-note D. The notes in the final bar before the bridge might suggest either the key of A major or A Mixolydian.

The descending syncopated melody in the first two bars of the bridge is diatonic, and a few musicians propose that the line is a melodic quote, though none of us can determine the original melody.<sup>16</sup> Just as he did in the first chorus, Mingus plays an F# instead of an F# in the bridge's fourth bar; his scalar line starting on the final upbeat of the third bar outlines the key of G major. Bar fifty-three stays in G major as Mingus plays B# under the C dominant seventh chord and avoids the root note. An ascending chromatic line in bar fifty-four leads to an impressive move down the fingerboard in bar fifty-five. Like the first chorus's bridge, Mingus plays minor thirds (Ab) under the F dominant seventh chord in bars fifty-five and fifty-six. The bassist initiates the final A section with a descending triplet figure that uses fourths. The next three bars see a return to more scalar and diatonic lines as Mingus outlines Bb major, while the last four bars remain diatonic. The solo ends with four descending eighth-note lines in bars sixty-three and sixty-four that lead back to the tune's head, which is played in the solo section's up-tempo style instead of the opening melody's half-time feel.

Compared to the preceding transcriptions, this solo reveals the ease at which Mingus executes streams of eighth-note lines at a fast tempo, an aspect of his playing that is even more

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<sup>16</sup> Bassist Ben Leifer and saxophonist Erik Blume heard a familiar melody but could not identify the song. Pianist Roger Wilder was also asked to hear this line but could not discern a melodic quote.

impressive when considering Mingus's skill at navigating a wide range on the bass in bar fifty-five's first two beats. Perhaps only his solos on "Woody 'n' You" and "Tensions" surpass this solo's combination of speed and precision. Mingus's decision to play mostly eighth-note lines brings this solo closer to the style of contemporary bebop bassists like Pettiford, Brown, and Chambers. This reinforces the idea that Mingus was as much a part of the jazz bass tradition as those bassists and thus his soloing should be studied more closely than it has been, especially as Mingus's use of glissandos, accents, unpredictable one-note repetitions, triple stops, and harmonic alterations create a more distinctive style than his contemporaries. This solo perfectly reflects Mingus's individual style and acts as a point of reference for his fully-developed solo style.

# Love Chant

Charles Mingus

[8:50] C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

5 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

9 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

13 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup>

17 D<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

21 C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup>

25 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

29 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b6</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

33 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

37 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

41 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

straight 8ths

45 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6

49 D<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

53 C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup>

57 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

61 C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>6 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

“Haitian Fight Song” – from *The Clown*

Recorded in the spring of 1957, “Haitian Fight Song” is one of Mingus’s most popular tunes.<sup>17</sup> A twelve-bar blues in G minor, the tune is a bass-driven piece that sees the ensemble material develop from a bass ostinato. Even though Mingus’s compositions receive ample attention, some might overlook the connection between his bass playing and his compositional process. As he once explained, “One time a bass player (George Mraz) asked me about *Better Get Hit In Your Soul*. He said it felt like it was written for the bass. I told him it was. Sometimes I do write things for the bass, you know.”<sup>18</sup> As distinct as the tune’s bass riff is, the bass solo is outstanding in its own right.

Mingus solos over seven choruses in addition to a fifteen-bar section and a fourteen-bar section. Though identifying emotion in an improvised solo is nearly impossible to do and is subjective at best, Mingus gave insight to this tune when he remarked, “My solo in it [“Haitian Fight Song”] is a deeply concentrated one. I can’t play it right unless I’m thinking about prejudice and hate and persecution, and how unfair it is. There’s sadness and cries in it, but also determination. And it usually ends with my feeling: ‘I told them! I hope somebody heard me.’”<sup>19</sup> Even if these qualities are not obvious in the solo, Mingus’s stated attempt to portray non-musical ideas and events with his instrument distinguishes his improvisational approach. This type of mindset reinforces the tie between Mingus’s soloing and composing.

Mingus’s first solo chorus begins after Shafi Hadi’s saxophone solo. The first phrase ends with a descending G minor triad in bar three. Bars five through seven feature melodic

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Mingus, “Haitian Fight Song,” by Charles Mingus, recorded March 12, 1957, with Shafi Hadi (Curtis Porter), Jimmy Knepper, Wade Legge, and Dannie Richmond, on *The Clown*, Rhino R2 75590, 1999, CD.

<sup>18</sup> Mingus, quoted in Arnold Jay Smith, “Charles Mingus: Developmental Changes,” *Down Beat*, January 12, 1978, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Mingus, quoted in Nat Hentoff, Original Liner Notes, *The Clown*, recorded February 13 and March 12, 1957, Rhino R2 75590, 1999, CD.

development of a three-beat phrase that stresses the tonic (G). Mingus plays an ascending eighth-note line in bar eight followed by two beats of alternating C and D eighth notes in bar nine, the latter of which is similar to his opening statement on Hampton's recording of "Mingus Fingers." The first chorus ends with a move to thumb position G and Mingus emphasizing the tonic with half-step grace notes.

The first four bars of the second chorus are more active with an almost uninterrupted stream of eighth notes. These bars also demonstrate the various ways that Mingus alters the bass's dynamics and timbre, as he plays some notes softer than others (the first G in bar fourteen), accents a group of notes (bar fourteen), and diminuendos with a descending line (beginning of bar fifteen). The repetitive Db–C movement in bars seventeen and eighteen contrasts with the previous bars' harmonic activity and shows Mingus using the instrument's glissando effect. He lowers the fifth (Ab) in bar twenty-two before playing a four-bar one-note repetition on G that runs into the third chorus. Note how Mingus varies the G either by scooping into the note, accenting the note, changing the note length, or playing the note on different strings.<sup>20</sup>

After continuing the one-note repetition in bars twenty-five through twenty-six, Mingus plays another alternating eighth-note pattern (C–Bb) and then lands on the tonic. Like in the second chorus, he lowers the ninth scale degree to Db beneath the C minor seventh chord in bars twenty-nine and thirty. Mingus returns to a one-note repetition of G in the following two bars and accents some of the notes by playing them staccato. Bars thirty-three and thirty-four feature more chromaticism, including another Ab beneath the D dominant seventh flat nine chord. This chorus ends with an outlined G minor triad in bar thirty-five.

The fourth chorus opens with an alternating C#–D eighth-note figure before moving up to

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<sup>20</sup> The letters above the last three notes in bar twenty-four indicate which string the G is played on.

thumb position G. Mingus stays in thumb position until bar forty-five and once again plays a flat ninth (Db) beneath the C minor seventh chord in bar forty-two. He leaves thumb position with a descending scale that lands on an E $\sharp$  on beat one of bar forty-five, which alters the A minor seventh flat five chord until the Eb on beat three. He also alters the D dominant seventh flat nine chord in bar forty-six by playing a minor third (F $\sharp$ ) and a flat five (Ab). The last two bars of this chorus reprise a one-note repetition of G for the second time.

Mingus plays what sounds like a staccato accompaniment bass line at the top of his fifth chorus. Except for the quarter note in bar fifty, the next three bars contain a stream of diatonic eighth-note lines. Note the occurrence of two descending G minor triads, first in bar fifty-one and again at the end of bar fifty-two. The phrase slows down in bar fifty-three when Mingus slides up to a C and holds the note for four-and-a-half beats. Another example of Mingus shaping his phrase through manipulating his attack occurs when he uses accents on the upbeats of bar fifty-five. The scalar line in bar fifty-seven outlines a Bb Mixolydian scale, changing the chord's root to Ab. The one-note repetition of G returns again in the chorus's final two bars. The band drops out for the remainder of Mingus's solo after this chorus.

Alternating triplet eighth notes and eighth notes cover the first two-and-a-half bars of the sixth chorus. Mingus creates harmonic interest in this rhythmic pattern by playing a chromatically rising line for each triplet grouping's first two notes. This pattern also recalls the solo line in bars thirteen through fourteen of the Hampton recording of "Mingus Fingers." An accented eighth-note line in bar sixty-four leads to a glissando from Db down to C. Both the glissando's placement in the form and the notes it stretches between echo the second chorus. The eighth-note line in bar sixty-seven quickly moves Mingus up to thumb position for the following bar, but the line is also harmonically striking because it begins in G minor and ends in



G major. Although the C $\sharp$  occurs on beat three, the slide up to the note and shape of the line imply that the note is a chromatic passing tone. A series of falls from F $\sharp$  in bars sixty-nine through seventy leads to Mingus's departure from thumb position in bar seventy-one, which he accomplishes by using the open G on beat two's upbeat. Mingus plays descending fifths (A–E, G–D, F–C) in the last two bars to work his way down the fingerboard.

The bassist's last full chorus begins with an ascending melody that is repeated using rhythmic foreshortening, as its first appearance spans two bars while its repeat spans only one. Mingus again implies a flat ninth (Db) beneath bar seventy-seven's C minor seventh chord and outlines another G minor triad in bar eighty. The following two bars appear to outline the D dominant seventh flat nine chord except that Mingus plays Ab and switches between Eb and E $\natural$ .

A fifteen-bar solo section immediately follows the seventh chorus. Despite a fairly consistent pulse, the tempo fluctuates during this section and the following one. No chords are given since Mingus abandons the tune's form, but the majority of his notes correspond to the tune's G minor key. In this section, bars eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety and ninety-four feature either descending or ascending G minor triads; Mingus outlined this triad earlier throughout his solo. You should also understand that this triad is easy to play on bass since the open D and G strings allow quick and efficient movement across the fingerboard. There is an abundance of triplets in this section, starting with the first bar's repetition of eighth-note triplets on D and bar ninety-two's triplet eighth notes on F and E. Mingus begins a ritardando in bar ninety-five with quarter-note triplets. He returns to quarter-note triplets in bar ninety-seven before ending this fifteen-bar section with eighth-note triplets on the flat ninth (Ab).

The fourteen-bar section that ends Mingus's solo starts with a heavily accented line in bar one hundred. The next three bars are notable for both Mingus's quote of the Johnny Mercer and

Harold Arlen song “Blues in the Night” and Dannie Richmond’s drum fills on the rests. A staccato triplet line in bars one hundred four and one hundred five leaves G minor momentarily as the bassist plays E $\flat$  and F $\sharp$ , possibly suggesting G major.<sup>21</sup> After the heavy vibrato and slide down to Db in bar one hundred six, the ensuing eighth-note line up to bar one hundred eight recalls bars twenty-seven through thirty and eighty-seven by way of its scoops and note choices (Bb, C, and Db). Mingus’s one-note repetition of G returns in bar one hundred nine. This solo ends with an outlined dominant (D) in bars one hundred ten through eleven and a G minor triad in the final bar.

These seven choruses and two solo sections perfectly represent Mingus’s solo style. More prominent than in other 1950s bass solos, the accents, staccatos, scoops, slides, and vibratos once again show his various timbre manipulations. His predilection for playing these effects and not relying on outlining melodic and harmonic material distinguishes Mingus from his contemporaries. However, he regularly outlines the G minor triad in this solo. His characteristic one-repetitions and harmonically static passages further separate Mingus from the bebop style and its near-constant harmonic movement. The reoccurrence of the one-note repetition of G indicates a compositional approach in Mingus’s soloing and also demonstrates his awareness of the tune’s form since some of the repetitions occur at the end of a chorus. This solo also exhibits the bassist’s melodicism and harmonic sensibility. The former is especially apparent in both the melodic quotes and the bars with melodic development and repetition, such as bars five through eight and seventy-three through seventy-five. Aside from the recurrent chromaticism, the regular Ab and Db alterations enhance Mingus’s diatonic lines and establish the note choices as intentional. Nevertheless, the solo’s overall diatonicism exemplifies his

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<sup>21</sup> I hear the C $\sharp$  in bar one hundred four as a lower chromatic neighbor tone, so I do not count it as part of the line’s tonality. These bars sound like Mingus plays over a D dominant seventh chord, and the line might also be a melodic quote.

command of conventional soloing over chord changes, unlike the more progressive musicians who rarely stuck to chord progressions in their solos, such as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler.<sup>22</sup>

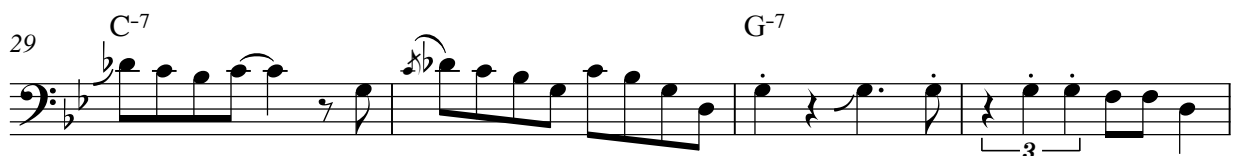
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<sup>22</sup> Bley's approach to soloing describes this harmonically progressive, or, avant-garde style: "The idea is that you are going from point 'A' to point 'B,' and it's totally up to you what you want to do in that interval, so long as you leave point 'A' and you arrive at point 'B.' I call it 'harmonic improvising.' Improvising doesn't need to be confined to melodic and rhythmic improvising; why not include harmonic improvising?" Bley, quoted in Meehan, "After the Melody: Paul Bley and Jazz Piano after Ornette Coleman," 91.

# Haitian Fight Song

Charles Mingus

[6:58] G-7



33 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 D7b9

37 G-7

41 C-7 G-7

45 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 D7b9

49 G-7

53 C-7 G-7

57 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 D7b9

61 G-7

65 C-7 G-7

69 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 D7b9

73 G-7

77 C-7 G-7

81 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 D7b9

85

89

92

94

96

Musical notation for measures 96-99. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) under groups of three notes.

100

Musical notation for measures 100-103. The key signature is one flat. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) and accents (indicated by a '^' symbol) over notes.

104

Musical notation for measures 104-106. The key signature is one flat. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) and a wavy line above a group of notes in measure 105.

107

Musical notation for measures 107-110. The key signature is one flat. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) and accents (indicated by a '^' symbol) over notes.

111

Musical notation for measures 111-114. The key signature is one flat. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a bracket) and a 'rit..' marking below the first measure.

“Blue Cee” – from *The Clown*

“Blue Cee” follows “Haitian Fight Song” on *The Clown* and offers a more reserved take on the twelve-bar blues.<sup>23</sup> Even when compared with other Mingus performances, “Blue Cee” sounds tame, partly because of the band’s adherence to tempo (strict 160 beats per minute) and partly because they do not drop into double time, stop time, or triple time feels during the solos, as in “Haitian Fight Song.” While some might prefer the more impulsive Mingus in terms of his ensemble directing, the subdued effect of maintaining both the tempo and feel on a non-ballad piece is of note to those familiar with the band leader’s recordings.

As Mingus states in the album’s liner notes, “[‘Blue Cee’] is a standard blues. It’s in two keys—C and Bb—but that’s not noticeable and it ends up in C basically. I heard some Basie in it and also some church-like feeling.”<sup>24</sup> Listeners might also detect an Ellington influence based on the tune’s key, as that bandleader’s “C-Jam Blues” was a blowing piece for his band.

Following Hadi’s saxophone solo, Mingus improvises over four choruses. Just as the band’s performance has a restrained quality, so does Mingus’s solo. The predominant note lengths are eighth notes, but Mingus creates space in his phrases using either rests or quarter or half notes. For example, the stream of eighth notes in the first three bars is immediately followed by four beats of rest and an accented quarter note. This creates a sense of finality to the opening phrase. The first chorus also finds Mingus generate tension by sustaining a raised seventh (B) under the C dominant seventh chord between bars seven and eight. The bassist closes his first chorus by playing his signature one-note repetition. In this case, Mingus varies the G by adding scoops and slides and playing the note on different strings to create slightly altered timbres.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Mingus, “Blue Cee,” by Charles Mingus, recorded March 12, 1957, with Shafi Hadi (Curtis Porter), Jimmy Knepper, Wade Legge, and Dannie Richmond, on *The Clown*, Rhino R2 75590, 1999, CD.

<sup>24</sup> Mingus, quoted in Hentoff, Original Liner Notes, *The Clown*, Rhino R2 75590.



The second chorus begins with an eighth-note melody that could be a melodic quote, though I do not know what melody it might reference. In bars fifteen through eighteen, Mingus develops an eighth-note lower neighbor tone idea that alternates between A and Bb twice before climbing up a minor third—just as the chord progression does—to C and Db before resting on the Db. Creating space through longer note values, Mingus holds the Db for four beats before playing a four-bar series of eighth notes that eventually lands on an accented C in bar twenty-three. He adds harmonic tension by holding a flat ninth (Db) for most of the chorus’s final bar.

One of the solo’s most arresting sections is in the third chorus, where Mingus plays the sliding octave line that became the opening bass riff to his pieces “E’s Flat Ah’s Flat Too” and “Hora Decubitus.”<sup>25</sup> Despite being harmonically simple, this figure exemplifies Mingus’s tendency to play phrases idiomatic to the bass; non-string instruments can only approximate the downbeat unison octaves and glissandos. The chorus ends with four bars of melodic material, although bars thirty-three and thirty-four sound like one of Mingus’s walking bass patterns.

Going into the fourth and final chorus, Mingus moves into thumb position for the only time during his solo. Starting in bar thirty-six, an eighth-note scalar run up to the Bb above thumb position G quickly descends back into the bass’s lower register. As diatonic as Mingus has been so far in this solo, he plays an ascending chromatic line in bar forty-one that begins quiet and crescendos back to mezzo-forte in bar forty-two. The last four bars have four repetitions of a scalar melodic figure. This phrase repetition is similar in effect to Mingus’s one-note repetitions, though it is not as rhythmically or dynamically irregular.

Other than the occasional Ab, Mingus’s four solo choruses on “Blue Cee” are largely diatonic to the C blues. His sparse use of chromaticism and harmonically static one-note

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<sup>25</sup> Mingus sometimes played this riff while accompanying soloists, such as behind part of the second trombone solo on “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” from *Mingus Dynasty*. The bass solo on that recording will be discussed later.

repetitions, in addition to his use of space, makes this solo one of Mingus's most inside sounding improvisations. If you need proof that Mingus could reserve his virtuosic playing and produce an improvisation closer to the style of Pettiford or Percy Heath, this bass solo is an adequate example. The solo is also a good introduction for those unfamiliar with Mingus's bass playing, as his definitive, powerful sound is easy to hear and there are multiple instances of motivic development.

# Blue Cee

Charles Mingus

[3:31] C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 3-4. The staff is in bass clef and 4/4 time. Measure 3 contains a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G<sup>b</sup> and a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>. Measure 4 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

5 F<sup>7</sup> A<sup>b-Δ7</sup> D<sup>b9</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 5-6. Measure 5 contains a quarter rest, a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>. Measure 6 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

9 D<sup>-7b9</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 9-10. Measure 9 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. Measure 10 contains a quarter rest, a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

13 C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 13-14. Measure 13 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. Measure 14 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

17 F<sup>7</sup> A<sup>b-Δ7</sup> D<sup>b9</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 17-18. Measure 17 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. Measure 18 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

21 D<sup>-7b9</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 21-22. Measure 21 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. Measure 22 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

25 C<sup>7</sup>

Musical staff for measures 25-26. Measure 25 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. Measure 26 contains a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note F<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note E<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note D<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note C<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note B<sup>b</sup>, a quarter note A<sup>b</sup>, and a quarter note G<sup>b</sup>. A fermata is placed over the final G<sup>b</sup> note.

27

29

F7 Ab-Δ7 Db9

31

C7

33

D-7b9 G7 C7

37

C7

41

F7 Ab-Δ7 Db9 C7

*mf*

45

D-7b9 G7 C7

“I Can’t Get Started” – originally released on *Mingus Three*

Mingus performed the standard “I Can’t Get Started” throughout his career, as it was one of his favorite songs. His opening chorus on the performance from *Mingus Three* reveals a remarkable ballad approach by a 1950s bassist.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to these analyses, this transcription’s chord changes are the basic chord changes and do not necessarily reflect Mingus’s various harmonic alterations or reharmonizations. Although he took two solo choruses on this recording, I only transcribed the opening chorus since it contains more than enough information with which to assess his style. As I transcribed this chorus, I was astounded by Mingus’s virtuosity and phrasing. His timing, command of the thumb position, and chromaticism are on full display in this chorus.

After a brief out-of-time bass introduction, Mingus plays the song’s opening melody. He plays a pizzicato tremolo on beat one of the first bar and exhibits ease at moving between straight eighth notes and swung eighth notes, which he does throughout this chorus. Mingus further embellishes the melody in bars three and four, where he deviates at one point and plays a succession of floating triplet eighth notes before returning to the melody’s B $\sharp$ . The next part of the melody is compressed to beat one in bar five, after which Mingus abandons the melody and solos. Bar six sees Mingus move into thumb position and stay there until the second half of bar eight. Unlike in the previous transcriptions, Mingus frequently displays his mastery of the thumb position in this solo. He is more rhythmically free in the next A section as he contrasts straight eighth-note lines with triplets and even quintuplets. His descending sixteenth-note line in the second half of bar eleven is harmonically stimulating. The line begins with octave F $\sharp$  sixteenth notes and moves down chromatically to the following bar’s first beat. Beat four of bar twelve

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Mingus, “I Can’t Get Started,” by Vernon Duke and Ira Gershwin, recorded July 9, 1957, with Hampton Hawes and Dannie Richmond, on *Legendary Trios*, Gambit Records 69222, 2005, CD. This European release also contains Paul Bley’s debut album as a leader, *Paul Bley Trio*, which Mingus also performed on.

and the first half of bar thirteen imply a different chord than the tune's usual C major seventh, as Mingus plays Eb and Ab. This might indicate a ii–V in Db. After his move into thumb position in bar fourteen, which begins with a Db on beat one, Mingus slows down in the two bars before the bridge by both gradually moving the solo line down the fingerboard and increasing the note values.

The bridge begins with a momentary return to the melody before Mingus plays a one-note repetition at the beginning of bar eighteen. He repeats a sixteenth-note figure in bar twenty while also moving into thumb position from the instrument's low G. Following the rhythmically busy passages in bars twenty-one and twenty-two, there is a one-note repetition in bars twenty-three and twenty-four that begins on G, moves to Ab, and returns to G. Mingus plays the melody in thumb position for the first two bars of the final A section and includes another pizzicato tremolo, just as he did at the beginning of this chorus. The most remarkable portion of this solo is bars twenty-seven through twenty-eight, where Mingus outlines thumb position triads that descend, ascend, and then shift down chromatically. The speed and precision at which he executes this passage sounds graceful and asserts Mingus's exceptional thumb position technique. Seeing Mingus sparingly play in thumb position greatly contrasts his style with that of the virtuoso bassists of the 1960s, such as LaFaro, Richard Davis, Eddie Gomez, and Gary Peacock, who routinely exploited the thumb position during their solos. Mingus works his way down the fingerboard in bars twenty-nine through thirty and plays various approaches to a low A in bar thirty-one. The final bar is diatonic and ends with descending fifths on beat four that lead into Mingus's accompaniment behind the piano solo.

Unlike many bassists of the 1950s, Mingus plays the instrument as if there are no limitations. The effortlessness with which he plays in thumb position—not to mention how he

approaches and leaves thumb position—is equaled only by 1950s bassists Brown and Mitchell. While other bassists soon viewed thumb position as the bass’s ideal solo register, Mingus shows that when used sparingly, the higher register enhances bass solos that use the instrument’s more normal, lower register. In this sense, Mingus is more closely related to the traditional bass styles of Blanton, Pettiford, and Brown than to the progressive styles of LaFaro, Gomez, Davis, and Peacock. Coupled with his virtuosic playing and unique stylistic elements, this link to the tradition makes Mingus’s bass playing notable among 1950s bassists. This solo also features signature elements of Mingus’s style, such as one-note repetitions, glissandos, and chromaticism. Still, the first noticeable part of this chorus is its rhythmic freedom. If you need proof that a bassist can phrase like a horn player on a ballad, look no further than this opening chorus.

# I Can't Get Started

Ira Gershwin and Vernon Duke

[0:18]

3 C $\Delta$ 7 A-7 D-7 G7

3 E-7 A7 D-7 G7

5 C $\Delta$ 7 A-7 D-7 G7b9

7 E7 A7 D7 G7

9 C $\Delta$  A-7 D-7 G7

11 E-7 A7 D-7 G7

13 C $\Delta$ 7 A-7 D-7 G7b9

15 C $\Delta$ 7



17 E<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>7</sup> E<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>7</sup>

19 D<sup>Δ7</sup> G<sup>Δ7</sup> D<sup>Δ7</sup>

21 D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

23 E<sup>-7</sup> E<sup>b</sup>0<sup>7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

25 C<sup>Δ7</sup> A<sup>-7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

27 E<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

29 C<sup>Δ7</sup> A<sup>7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

31 C<sup>6</sup> G<sup>7</sup> E<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>7</sup> D<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

“Woody ‘n’ You” – from the *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry* sessions

Mingus’s solo chorus on his 1957 recording of “Woody ‘n’ You” is one of his most technically astonishing solos.<sup>27</sup> Over an extremely fast tempo (240 beats per minute), Mingus plays waves of eighth-note lines that span a large range on the instrument. His tune “Dizzy Moods” was twice recorded earlier in 1957 and features the same chord progression as “Woody ‘n’ You,” though it is much slower (144 beats per minute). Although Jim Durso transcribed Mingus’s solo on “Dizzy Moods” from *Mingus Three*, this transcription presents a much more “dazzling” display of Mingus’s technique considering the tempo.<sup>28</sup>

Mingus quickly moves down from thumb position in bar two and works his way to a repeat of F–Ab in bars five and six. A descending thirds pattern (Ab–F, G<sup>b</sup>–Eb) in bar six leads to an outline of the root, fifth, and ninth of Db major seventh in bar seven (Db–Ab–Eb). Mingus plays a scalar passage in bar nine and uses the open G to switch positions on the fingerboard. He continues playing scalar lines but adds harmonic alterations such as the G<sup>♯</sup> beneath the F half-diminished seventh chord in bar eleven. The second A section ends with a figure that outlines Db pentatonic in bars fifteen through sixteen.

The bridge’s first four bars feature a constant stream of eighth notes that see the Eb and F punctuated by muted eighth notes. Mingus moves down the fingerboard in bars twenty-one through twenty-two before ending the bridge on the Eb dominant seventh’s ninth (F). The downbeats of bars twenty-five and twenty-six see Mingus approach the notes by either a hammer-on or a glissando. Note the accented C in bar twenty-eight, which conflicts with the Bb dominant seventh flat nine chord. A chromatic line in bar thirty leads to the solo’s conclusion in

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Mingus, “Woody ‘n’ You,” by Dizzy Gillespie, recorded October 1957, with Jimmy Knepper, Shafi Hadi (Curtis Porter), Dannie Richmond, and Horace Parlan, on *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry*, Shout Factory DK 37964, 2005, CD.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Durso, “Charles Mingus’ Dazzling Bass Solo on ‘Dizzy Moods,’” *Down Beat*, January 2012, 76–77. Durso notes that Mingus’s bass soloing is overshadowed by his composing.

the following bar, which sounds similar to the second A section's ending.

While this is not the most rhythmically varied or melodic transcription, Mingus's solo on "Woody 'n' You" provides an overwhelming demonstration of his fast and precise technique. His ability to play streams of eighth-notes without stumbling over them at a fast tempo places Mingus on a technical level that many 1950s bassists did not reach. His solo on 1960's "Mysterious Blues" achieves a similar affect, though it contains more melodic ideas and moments of rest than this solo.<sup>29</sup> At the least, modern bassists could use this transcription to increase their dexterity, speed, and precision.

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Mingus, "Mysterious Blues," by Charles Mingus, record on November 11, 1960, with Roy Eldridge, Jimmy Knepper, Eric Dolphy, Tommy Flanagan, and Jo Jones, on *Mysterious Blues*, Candid CCD 79042, 1989, CD.

# Woody 'n' You

Dizzy Gillespie

[5:29]  $G\emptyset7$   $C7b9$   $F\emptyset7$   $Bb7b9$

5  $Eb\emptyset7$   $Ab7b9$   $Db\Delta7$

9  $G\emptyset7$   $C7b9$   $F\emptyset7$   $Bb7b9$

13  $Eb\emptyset7$   $Ab7b9$   $Db\Delta7$

17  $Ab-7$   $Db7$   $Ab-7$   $Db7$   $Ab-7$   $Db7$   $Gb\Delta7$

21  $Bb-7$   $Eb7$   $Bb-7$   $Eb7$   $Bb-7$   $Eb7$   $Ab\Delta7$

25  $G\emptyset7$   $C7b9$   $F\emptyset7$   $Bb7b9$

29  $Eb\emptyset7$   $Ab7b9$   $Db\Delta7$

3

“Nostalgia in Times Square” – from *Jazz Portraits: Mingus in Wonderland*

Performed live at New York City’s Nonagon Art Gallery, Mingus’s bass solo on “Nostalgia in Times Square” is one of his most adventurous over the blues form.<sup>30</sup> This transcription looks at the bassist’s four solo choruses, all of which feature unique harmonic alterations, typical Mingus characteristics, and a command of the instrument’s full range. Compared to the other transcriptions, this solo also features the most passages in and around thumb position.

Despite the harmony’s constant movement, the tune is an Eb blues. Thus, the first four bars can be simplified to Eb dominant seventh rather than describe them as constantly switching between Eb and Db. Mingus often treats the chord changes in bars five and six as they are and plays over Gb minor seventh and B dominant seventh rather than the blues form’s traditional four chord, which in this key would be Ab dominant seventh. Some of the solo’s most harmonically interesting lines occur in each chorus’s final four bars, which contain the descending ii–V movement and subsequent return to the tonic.

The solo begins with a four-bar phrase in thumb position. Mingus’s triplet-heavy phrase displays melodic development and emphasizes the major third (G) rather than the blues form’s usual minor third. The next four bars contain notable harmonic alterations beginning with the crescendo in bar six that outlines a C minor seventh arpeggio beneath a B dominant seventh chord. The descending C minor seventh arpeggio at the beginning of bar eight lands on a D<sub>♯</sub> on beat three, one half-step above the harmony’s implied Db. The eighth-note phrase from beat three of bar eleven through beat two of bar twelve starts on a G<sub>♯</sub> rather than a Gb. Mingus’s lowest note of the phrase—the flat seventh of Db (Cb)—lands on a downbeat and gives the

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Mingus, “Nostalgia in Times Square,” by Charles Mingus, recorded January 16, 1959, with Booker Ervin, John Handy, Richard Wyands, and Dannie Richmond, on *Jazz Portraits: Mingus in Wonderland*, Blue Note CDP 7243 8 27325 2 5, 1994, CD.

harmony a Db seventh sharp eleven quality in conjunction with the G<sup>b</sup>. Note the frequent use of descending and ascending chromatic lines in this chorus, such as in bars one, two, three, six, nine to ten, and eleven.

The second chorus begins with a melody that suggests a Bb dominant seventh tonality, as Mingus moves up in fourths (Bb–Eb, C–F, then D) and lands on a Bb with heavy vibrato in bar fourteen. Though slightly ornamented, this is a quote of the Bronislaw Kaper and Gus Kahn song “All God’s Chillun Got Rhythm.” Upon leaving that quote in bar sixteen, Mingus approaches a B dominant seventh arpeggio in bar seventeen by playing a descending chromatic line that starts on Db. He moves into thumb position and plays a thirds pattern in bar twenty followed by a descending sequence in bars twenty-one through twenty-three. The first note of each phrase in this sequence begins either a minor third or a major second apart (Db, Bb, then Ab) and descends either scalar or chromatically.

Similar to his melodic phrases at the beginning of the first two choruses, Mingus’s third chorus begins with a sixteenth-note figure in bar twenty-five that is repeated in bar twenty-seven. The beginning of bars thirty and thirty-one feature more chromaticism and are followed by an eighth-note scalar line in bar thirty-two that becomes chromatic on beat two. The last four bars of this chorus contain a descending sequence that suggests either an Eb or Bb dominant seventh tonality in bar thirty-three. This leads to a descending scale starting on Gb followed by another descending scale that suggests an E Phrygian tonality in bars thirty-four through thirty-five. Although the sequences in these choruses largely eschew the tune’s chord progression, Mingus makes the notes sound logical to his developing solo lines.

Rather than begin the fourth chorus with another melodic phrase, Mingus suspends the harmony by playing one-note repetitions, moving from thumb position G up to Ab then back to

G. He adds further interest to the line by accenting notes in bar thirty-seven and playing one-finger tremolos in bars thirty-eight and thirty-nine. Mingus remains in thumb position for bar forty-one and plays another descending chromatic line. Bar forty-three through the first half of bar forty-four features a jaunty, seesaw-like eighth-note phrase that implies either an Eb sixth chord or a C minor seventh arpeggio. On beat three in bar forty-four, the bassist once again plays a D<sup>♯</sup> that conflicts with the chord progression (Db dominant seventh). Mingus ends his solo with a diatonic triplet melody in bars forty-five and forty-six that leads to a series of eighth notes. He emphasizes the sixth of Eb (C) in the final bar.

Unlike some of the earlier transcriptions, this solo showcases Mingus's command of the thumb position, as he plays in this area of the bass four times throughout the solo. His flawless shifts into and out of thumb position are on display in bar twenty and the phrase from bar thirty-three to thirty-five. Many of his phrases are situated in the fingerboard area on the G string that covers the notes Eb to thumb position G. In fact, Mingus does not play below the Bb on the A string for the solo's duration. This register preference makes the lower-pitched phrase in bar thirteen stand out. His chromaticism and harmonic alterations regularly belie the chord progression, but as Goldsby notes, "[Mingus] sometimes plays unorthodox notes, but he plays them with such conviction that I feel like he's hearing them. He makes the listener hear unorthodox notes as correct."<sup>31</sup> As seen in previous transcriptions, the consistency of Mingus's harmonic alterations help make his conflicting note choices sound correct. When compared with the previous transcriptions, this transcription and the following one perfectly illustrate the development of Mingus's solo style.

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<sup>31</sup> Goldsby, e-mail message to author, January 28, 2014.

# Nostalgia in Times Square

Charles Mingus

[6:35]

Chord symbols: Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

5 Gb-7, B7, Gb-7, B7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

9 C-7, F7, Bb-7, Eb7, Ab-7, Db7, Eb7

13 Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

17 Gb-7, B7, Gb-7, B7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

21 C-7, F7, Bb-7, Eb7, Ab-7, Db7, Eb7

25 Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

29 Gb-7, B7, Gb-7, B7, Eb7, Db7, Eb7, Db7

*mf*



33

C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b-7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> A<sup>b-7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup>

37

E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup>

41

G<sup>b-7</sup> B<sup>7</sup> G<sup>b-7</sup> B<sup>7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup>

45

C<sup>-7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b-7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup> A<sup>b-7</sup> D<sup>b7</sup> E<sup>b7</sup>

“Alice’s Wonderland” – from *Jazz Portraits: Mingus in Wonderland*

From the same performance as “Nostalgia in Times Square,” Mingus’s solo on “Alice’s Wonderland” is one of his most awe-inspiring.<sup>32</sup> His sixteenth-note outbursts coupled with the tune’s ballad-feel create a pacing unlike any other 1950s bassist on a ballad. This solo shares similarities with his chorus on “I Can’t Get Started,” as moments of clear melodic ideas are surrounded by out-of-tempo bursts of scalar and arpeggiated passages. Also like “I Can’t Get Started,” Mingus makes extensive use of thumb position. Beginning with his half-chorus solo on “Mingus Fingers,” Mingus’s gradual command of the instrument’s range culminates in this solo from 1959.

The notes pour out of Mingus’s bass from the start of the solo. The four consecutive sextuplet passages between bars one and two are astonishing for their quick up-and-down movement across the fingerboard. Bar three contains a one-note repetition of thumb position G punctuated by two E sixteenth notes, the first of which is in the instrument’s lowest register. Bar four is notable for its rhythmic density and outlining a G major seventh arpeggio (D–G–B–F#). Mingus descends in bar five starting on the C above thumb position and then plays more sixteenth tuplets. The sextuplet in bar five contains similar notes to the one on beat three in bar two (G–A–Eb–E). Though there is still an abundance of sixteenth notes, Mingus slows down the rhythmic movement in bars seven through eight by playing two quarter notes and only one sixteenth-note tuplet. Bb’s in bar eight make that bar’s tonality C dominant seventh. An ascending sixteenth-note line is played in the next two bars, and Mingus shapes the line by creating downward movement on bar nine’s fourth beat and upbeat and the second sixteenth note in bar ten. The descending movement in bar eleven leads to three quintuplet groupings of E, D,

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Mingus, “Alice’s Wonderland,” by Charles Mingus, recorded January 16, 1959, with Booker Ervin, John Handy, Richard Wyands, and Dannie Richmond, on *Jazz Portraits: Mingus in Wonderland*, Blue Note CDP 7243 8 27325 2 5, 1994, CD.

and C. A surprising use of chromatically rising double stops occurs in bars twelve and thirteen before Mingus ascends from a low C to the B $\flat$  above thumb position, which he adds tremolo to and then moves to A between bars fourteen and fifteen. The first chorus ends with one-note repetitions on A $\flat$  and G.

Mingus again moves into thumb position for the beginning of the second chorus. The rhythmic density in bars eighteen through nineteen is impressive, as is Mingus's move from thumb position B $\flat$  down to a low A. The accented A $\flat$  and G in bar nineteen is followed by a shifting glissando that leads to another accented G and a scalar line in bar twenty. Mingus quotes the tune's top-line melody in bars twenty-one through twenty-two, which provides a break before his rhythmic acceleration in bars twenty-three through twenty-four. Note his accents on beats one and two in bar twenty-three and the amazing septuplet to sextuplet run that ascends to the C above thumb position in bar twenty-four. He stays in thumb position and plays an accented chromatic line in bar twenty-six. The most difficult phrase to transcribe out of all these solos is in bars twenty-seven through twenty-eight. This is because Mingus ends up between semitones and plays a rhythmically off-balance phrase on two strings. Further work with this transcription will hopefully yield a more accurate representation of these bars, though there are still limits to notating jazz improvisation with the Western notation system. Another quick descent down the fingerboard at the end of bar twenty-nine leads to the chorus's conclusion. Mingus outlines an interesting harmony in the final bar by playing B $\flat$  rather than the chord's implied B $\natural$ . The last two beats are reminiscent of Mingus's end to the opening chorus in "I Can't Get Started."

This second ballad transcription offers an enthralling look at both Mingus's mastery of thumb position and ability to play rhythmically dense phrases. Just looking at the notes on the

page demonstrates how Mingus effectively adapted horn players' ballad-phrasing to the upright bass. Still, the rhythmic activity is relieved by one-note repetitions and slower melodic passages, such as the tune's melody in bars twenty-one and twenty-two. The piece's melodic inspiration may reveal part of the drive behind Mingus's solo: "It may be the prettiest thing I ever wrote—a girl trying to make it in this big rough world, like I am. I try to show her sadness (the alto on top) but also her strength in her art and in her conviction in what she believes in (the tenor on bottom) even if there are harsh, unresolved parts of her life.... It was written for her because I loved her at one time."<sup>33</sup> Considering Hunt's comments about how Mingus's solos often referenced a piece's title or meaning, as well as Mingus's motivation behind playing "Haitian Fight Song," it is plausible to think that Mingus tried to portray this tune's inspiration in his two solo choruses. His solo in the next transcription also supports this notion.

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<sup>33</sup> Mingus, quoted in Charles Mingus, *More Than a Fake Book*, [ed. Andrew Homzy?] (New York: Jazz Workshop, 1991), 24.

# Alice's Wonderland

Charles Mingus

[5:08]

The musical score consists of 15 measures of music in 4/4 time. The notation is primarily in bass clef, with some treble clef staves. Chord changes are indicated above the notes. Measure numbers 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 are marked at the beginning of their respective staves. The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. Some notes are marked with an 'x' to indicate natural harmonics or specific techniques.

Chord changes: C<sup>6</sup>, F<sup>Δ</sup>7, E<sup>-7</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>-7</sup>, D<sup>b</sup>Δ<sup>7</sup>/G, C<sup>6</sup>, G<sup>7</sup>, C<sup>6</sup>, F<sup>Δ</sup>7, E<sup>-7</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>-7</sup>, D<sup>b</sup>Δ<sup>7</sup>/G, C<sup>6</sup>, C<sup>7</sup>, F<sup>Δ</sup>7, B<sup>b</sup>Δ<sup>7</sup>, B<sup>-7</sup>b<sup>5</sup>, E<sup>7</sup>b<sup>9</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>7<sup>b</sup>5, D<sup>-7</sup>, D<sup>b</sup>Δ<sup>7</sup>, C<sup>6</sup>, C<sup>6</sup>, F<sup>Δ</sup>7, E<sup>-7</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>7, D<sup>-7</sup>, D<sup>b</sup>Δ<sup>7</sup>/G, C<sup>6</sup>.

17 C<sup>6</sup> F<sup>Δ7</sup> E<sup>-7</sup> Eb<sup>7</sup>

19 D<sup>-7</sup> Db<sup>Δ7</sup>/G C<sup>6</sup> G<sup>7</sup>

21 C<sup>6</sup> F<sup>Δ7</sup> E<sup>-7</sup> Eb<sup>7</sup>

23 D<sup>-7</sup> Db<sup>Δ7</sup>/G C<sup>6</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

25 F<sup>Δ7</sup> Bb<sup>Δ7</sup> B-7b5 E7b9

27 Eb7b5 D<sup>-7</sup> Db<sup>Δ7</sup> C<sup>6</sup>

29 C<sup>6</sup> F<sup>Δ7</sup> E<sup>-7</sup> Eb<sup>7</sup>

31 D<sup>-7</sup> Db<sup>Δ7</sup>/G C<sup>6</sup>

passage is slightly flat

“Tensions” – from *Blues & Roots*

The master take bass solo on “Tensions” is Mingus’s third recorded solo from 1959 that shows him in exceptional form.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps no other solo displays Mingus’s skill at effortlessly navigating the bass at a fast tempo (220 beats per minute) while providing numerous musical ideas that either reference the bebop idiom or display his unique and virtuosic style. For example, the phrase beginning in measure thirty-three exhibits his ability to play the bass in an unconventional yet musical way. Although not present, the introductory bass solo features a typical Mingus technique wherein the G string is pulled across and beside the fingerboard to produce a choked sound. Combined with other stylistic tendencies, the bass solo on “Tensions” is one of Mingus’s most impressive and representative solos.

The first four bars feature melodic development of an eighth-note scalar passage. The first line implies a G melodic minor scale while the second line in bars three through four implies a G natural minor scale, though the last note lands on a minor ninth (Ab), which is the chord progression’s root for that bar. Note that Mingus frames these introductory bars by emphasizing a G at the beginning of the solo and again after each scalar run. Following the eighth-note runs in bars five through seven, he plays a glissando Ab in bar eight that creates a moment of rest to contrast with the preceding bars’ activity. Mingus reverts to eighth-note lines in bars nine through thirteen and displays his speed and precision at running up and down the fingerboard. Spots like beat one of bar eleven show him using an open G to transition conveniently down the fingerboard. The scalar descent and decrescendo in bar thirteen leads to the rhythmically varied repetition of E $\flat$  and Bb that ends the first chorus.

The second chorus’s first three bars continue the alternating E $\flat$ –Bb figure, though the E $\flat$

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Mingus, “Tensions,” by Charles Mingus, recorded February 4, 1959, with Jackie McLean, John Handy, Booker Ervin, Pepper Adams, Jimmy Knepper, Willie Dennis, Horace Parlan, and Dannie Richmond, on *Blues & Roots*, Rhino R2 75205, 1998, CD.

is emphasized by accents and muted Bb's. Similar to bar eight, Mingus contrasts this activity by playing a glissando F in bar nineteen that extends through the following bar. The repeated thumb position G eighth notes in bar twenty-one contrast with the low register E<sub>4</sub> eighth notes in bar twenty-two. He repeats bar twenty-two's rhythm in the next bar and stays in thumb position to play a phrase whose notes are within a major second range (Ab–G–F $\sharp$ ). An emphatic G in bar twenty-four falls and signals the end of these harmonically static eight bars. Bar twenty-five is an inversion of bar nine as Mingus plays a descending scale starting on the C above thumb position. He ends this three-bar eighth-note phrase with an accented G in bar twenty-eight, similar to how he ended the first chorus's opening four-bar phrase. His third drawn-out glissando occurs in bar twenty-nine, followed by a scalar run that ends on a non-diatonic Ab in bar thirty. This chorus ends with the sliding glissando line in bars thirty-one and thirty-two.

The first eight bars of the third chorus are epochal, as they contain Mingus's most astonishing virtuosic display out of all these transcriptions. Some might overlook his progressive technique in these bars since the two solo lines are harmonically simple, the top line being a slow rise from thumb position G to Bb and the bottom line containing pedal points that mainly use the open E, A, and D strings. However, the presence of two simultaneous lines in a bass solo is difficult and extremely rare, especially for a late-1950s bass solo. Mingus accomplishes this feat by using his left index finger to pluck the top line and letting his thumb press against the fingerboard to supply the chromatically rising pitches while using the right index finger to play the bottom line's pitches, just as they normally are. Still, I wonder how Mingus plays Eb in bar thirty-eight since it is not an open-string note. His solo on a recorded performance of "Orange Was the Color of Her Dress, Then Blue Silk" features an example of this technique, though in that performance Mingus's right hand mimics the left hand's chromatic movement on one string



rather than across three open strings.<sup>35</sup>

Following this virtuosic display, Mingus plays two eighth-note phrases in bars forty-one through forty-four that share similar movement and note choice. The G to B $\flat$  and descending scale in bar forty-one is echoed in bar forty-three, while the sustained off-beat C and ascending scale in bar forty-two reappears in bar forty-four. The alternating tritone pattern at the end of the first chorus briefly returns down a half-step (A $\sharp$ –E $\flat$ ) in bar forty-six. After eighth-note phrases in bar forty-seven, the third chorus ends on the tonic (G) in bar forty-eight.

The fourth and final chorus starts with another D–G figure before Mingus plays a stream of eighth-note lines that ends in bar fifty-two. Note that Mingus uses the open G string to switch positions and registers quickly and efficiently going into bar fifty-one and then half-way through that bar. He repeats bar fifty-two’s eighth-notes in the next bar, providing another example of phrase repetition. The glissandos in bar fifty-six anticipate the next six bars, where Mingus completely suspends the harmony and slides up to a harmonic thumb position G. The final two bars outline the tonic and chord progression’s ii–V movement as Mingus starts his walking bass line in bar sixty-four.

For all of the solo’s numerous examples of Mingus’s bass style,—i.e. timbre manipulations, speed and clarity of notes, overall diatonicism with contrasting non-diatonic passages, one-note repetitions, and virtuosic technique—this solo also represents the bassist’s attempt to musically portray a non-musical idea. In this case it is the piece’s title. Mingus’s inspiration for the title “Tensions” hints at a feature in his solo: “It’s a technically involved

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Mingus, bassist, “Orange Was the Color of Her Dress, Then Blue Silk,” by Charles Mingus, University of Aula, Oslo, Norway, April 12, 1964, on *Charles Mingus: Live in '64*, Jazz Icons, 2007, DVD. This occurs at the DVD’s 1:07:07 mark.

composition. I called it that because the guys were tense playing it.”<sup>36</sup> This tense playing is portrayed multiple ways in the bass solo. First, the seven extended glissandos conflict with the chord progression by suspending the harmony. The E $\flat$ –B $\flat$  eighth-notes in the first and second choruses also create harmonic tension due to their tritone interval and accents. This tension carries into bars twenty-one and twenty-two, where Mingus plays repeated thumb position eighth notes and interrupts them with eighth notes in the instrument’s lowest register. Finally, the rising chromatic line that is part of the impressive technical display in the third chorus creates further harmonic tension. These examples reveal a compositional process in Mingus’s bass soloing that goes beyond merely outlining and connecting chord changes. By expanding on an idea associated with the tune, Mingus creates an outlet for his compositional side that invites the use of non-bebop style lines and phrasings. However, Mingus’s solo still exhibits his background in the bebop idiom by way of scalar and arpeggiated lines and chromatic alterations. It is once again this combination of progression and tradition that makes Mingus’s bass solos so fascinating and worthy of discussion.

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Mingus, “Mingus Explains Song Titles,” Charles Mingus: The Official Site, accessed June 8, 2014, <http://mingusmingusmingus.com/mingus/mingus-explains-song-titles>.

# Tensions

Charles Mingus

[1:18] G<sup>-7</sup> Ab<sup>Δ7</sup>#11

5 G<sup>-7</sup> Ab<sup>Δ7</sup>#11

9 C<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>-7</sup>

13 A<sup>-7b5</sup> D7<sup>b9</sup> G<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>-7b5</sup> D7<sup>b9</sup>

17 G<sup>-7</sup> Ab<sup>Δ7</sup>#11 *mf*

21 G<sup>-7</sup> Ab<sup>Δ7</sup>#11

25 C<sup>-7</sup> G<sup>-7</sup>

29 A<sup>-7b5</sup> D7<sup>b9</sup> G<sup>-7</sup> A<sup>-7b5</sup> D7<sup>b9</sup>

33 G-7 AbΔ7#11

37 G-7 AbΔ7#11

41 C-7 G-7

45 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 A-7b5 D7b9

49 G-7 AbΔ7#11

53 G-7 AbΔ7#11

57 C-7 G-7

61 A-7b5 D7b9 G-7 A-7b5 D7b9

“Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” – from *Mingus Dynasty*

The two-chorus bass solo on *Mingus Dynasty*’s “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” is one of Mingus’s last recorded solos of 1959.<sup>37</sup> Although this is the fourth transcription from a 1959 recording, Mingus began deemphasizing his solo playing that year as he turned his attention to composing.<sup>38</sup> Considering the preceding transcriptions’ mounting virtuosity, discussing this short and rather restrained—though still stylistically unique—solo is an appropriate conclusion to these analyses. This solo also provides a fourth look at Mingus’s approach to the twelve-bar blues. Though it shares some stylistic tendencies with “Haitian Fight Song,” “Blue Cee,” and “Nostalgia in Times Square,” this solo presents new phrases and uses of older techniques.

Upon hearing the unedited recording, you might notice some confusion between Mingus and trombonist Jimmy Knepper at the beginning of the second trombone solo, as Mingus plays an eighth-note heavy solo line for two bars though Knepper begins to solo again.<sup>39</sup> The actual bass solo begins after Don Ellis’s trumpet solo. Mingus starts his first chorus with a heavily accented descending chromatic line. Note the repetition of D $\flat$  in the first bar, which helps Mingus land on the dominant (C) on bar two’s downbeat. After a bluesy phrase in the second and third bars, Mingus creates tension by sliding down to a B $\flat$  under the B $\flat$  dominant seventh chord in bar five. Apparent in many of the previous transcriptions, Mingus’s penchant for inserting triplets into his eighth-note lines is on display in this solo. Because of the exceptional

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Mingus, “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be,” by Mercer Ellington, recorded November 13, 1959, with Don Ellis, Jimmy Knepper, John Handy, Booker Ervin, Roland Hanna, and Dannie Richmond, on *Mingus Dynasty*, Columbia/Legacy CK 65513, 1998, CD.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Priestley notes this in the album’s new liner notes when he describes this solo: “Mingus takes a brief opportunity to spotlight his brilliant, speech-like bass work, seldom featured on record at this period because of the emphasis on his compositions.” Brian Priestley, Liner Notes, *Mingus Dynasty*, recorded November 1 and 13, 1959, Columbia/Legacy CK 65513, 1998, CD.

<sup>39</sup> Mingus, “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be,” Columbia/Legacy CK 65513. This occurs at the recording’s 4:11 mark.

recording quality, you can hear the clarity of these triplets, which first occur in bar seven and soon thereafter in bar nine. The recording quality also allows the listener to hear accented notes more clearly compared to the older recordings. As is evidenced in bars nine and eleven, Mingus frequently places accents on upbeats in the middle of phrases, thereby creating solo lines that occasionally sound off balance in relation to the downbeat.

Just as Mingus started his solo with accented eighth notes, he plays offbeat accented eighth notes leading into his second chorus. He plays an almost uninterrupted stream of eighth-note and triplet eighth-note phrases in bars thirteen through eighteen. These bars are highlighted by rhythmic and melodic repetition in bars fifteen and sixteen and an accented A lower neighbor tone on bar seventeen's downbeat. In what should now be heard as a classic feature of Mingus's style, the solo's final four-and-a-half bars contain a rhythmically varied one-note repetition. In this case, Mingus plays a stream of accented quarter-note and eighth-note triplets on Eb that seem to alter the meter, though he maintains impeccable time and ends his solo with an eighth-note phrase that starts directly on the third downbeat in the final bar.

Many of the bassist's stylistic elements are in this solo. The accents, scoops, slides, and hammer-ons create a wide range of timbres on the bass and subsequently shape Mingus's phrases by emphasizing upbeats (bar eleven) or non-chord tones (bar seventeen). Bars twenty-one through twenty-four contain a combination of accented notes and Mingus's distinctive one-note repetitions, the latter of which imposes a static harmony on the chord progression. Chromatic passages, such as in bars one and eleven, also suspend the harmonic movement. Although the previous transcriptions exhibit a similar use of chromaticism found in this solo, Mingus regularly plays diatonically. While some may claim that Mingus's bass solos inadequately reference tunes' harmonic progressions, a traditional sounding solo such as this one—especially after

recognizing the bassist's developing virtuosity over these transcriptions—refutes those opinions and frames Mingus's bass playing as more deserving of study and discussion than is found today.

# Things Ain't What They Used to Be

Mercer Ellington

[5:54] F<sup>7</sup>

5 B<sup>b</sup>7 F<sup>7</sup>

9 G<sup>-7</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

13 F<sup>7</sup>

17 B<sup>b</sup>7 F<sup>7</sup>

21 G<sup>-7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>

23 F<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup>



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

I am reminded of the full-length title to Mingus's "Gunslinging Bird," which is, "If Charlie Parker Were a Gunslinger There'd be a Whole Lot of Dead Copycats."<sup>1</sup> Unlike Parker or a number of other great jazz soloists, Mingus has never had a problem with musicians stealing his phrases. Part of that is because of his unique style, as his one-note repetitions, glissandos, triple stops, attacks, and other techniques are not the types of things that most teachers tell their students to explore, much less absorb into their playing. However, Mingus did not use these techniques exclusively. Rather, he combined them with the traditional and modern techniques, phrasings, and harmonies that he learned in lessons and on the bandstand. Remember, Mingus shared the Massey Hall stage with Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Max Roach, musicians whom many consider to be the top bebop stylists on their respective instruments. But even outside of his early bebop recordings, Mingus displayed a technique and language steeped in the bebop tradition. Nevertheless, Mingus's bebop-style phrases are not assimilated into musicians' vocabularies like those of Chambers, Pettiford, Brown, LaFaro, and numerous other bassists.

If Mingus's minimal influence on vocabulary-centered teaching is the reason that his solo playing is overlooked today, then that speaks on the mindset of current jazz education and its students. That being said, one of Mingus's most important contributions to improvisation is the concept that the soloist can look beyond the chord progression and play outside the bebop style without sounding avant-garde. As detailed in the solo analyses, Mingus repeatedly contrasted

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Mingus, Original Liner Notes, *Mingus Dynasty*, recorded November 1 and 13, 1959, Columbia/Legacy CK 65513, 1998, CD.

his bebop roots with virtuosic, progressive, and sometimes simple passages that remained musically effective. Doing so allowed Mingus to portray non-musical ideas that could not be interpreted convincingly by even the longest harmonically altered eighth-note bebop line. I imagine that countless musicians would benefit from Mingus's approach since it would teach them to solo beyond theory and interpret non-musical ideas in individual ways, all while maintaining their fundamentals in traditional jazz styles.

Mingus recorded many more solos than I have transcribed. His solos with the Red Norvo Trio, Jazz Composers Workshop, and at the Massey Hall Concert make up a large portion of his early-1950s work. There are also his more adventurous and sometimes more virtuosic solos from the 1960s. While not as strong, his solos from the 1970s should also be considered. Individually, the solos illustrate the various stages of Mingus's musical development and feature differing approaches to both the musical content and the art of improvisation. Collectively, Mingus's solos reflect his wide-ranging musical influences and ability to merge these influences. I have much more work to do, as this study is only the beginning of my efforts to elevate Mingus's solo bass playing to the level it deserves.

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