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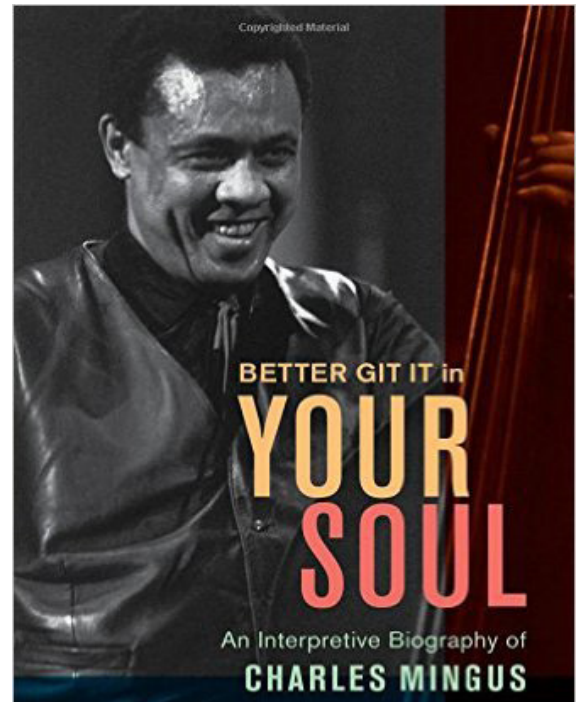
A Portrait and Three Retellings

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The word “interpretive” in the subtitle of Krin Gabbard’s new book *Better Git It in Your Soul: An Interpretive Biography of Charles Mingus* (California, 2016) offers a clear clue to the book’s mission. It is not a replacement for either of the two existing biographies—Brian Priestley’s *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (1982) and Gene Santoro’s *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (2000). Nor is such a replacement needed. But in the fifteen years since Santoro’s book was released, a wealth of new Mingus material has emerged: the collection of John Goodman’s interviews *Mingus Speaks*, Sue Mingus’s chronicle of her life with Charles Mingus titled *Tonight at Noon*, and the recorded interviews with Mingus’s sisters, among others. Gabbard integrates these new sources into a wide-ranging consideration of the Mingus’s life and works in a project that is both personal and celebratory. Similar to Gabbard’s groundbreaking earlier work on jazz, the book takes a broad view of Mingus’s artistic contribution, including poetry and film. A complex, sometimes contradictory portrait of Mingus emerges. As Gabbard writes in the introduction, “Anyone hoping to read the biography of a man with a single, unified identity should read no further.” (8)

Fittingly, *Better Git It In Your Soul* does not proceed in a single, unified narrative. The first part comprises a conventional biography, with a retelling of Mingus’s life from beginning to end in just over one hundred pages. In each of the remaining three parts, Gabbard circles back to the beginning of Mingus’s life and revisits its outline with a different focus. Part two covers Mingus’s literary work, including his texted music, poems, and autobiography. Part three reviews Mingus’s music with particular attention to Mingus’s participation in the Third Stream. Part four examines in detail Mingus’s relationships with three important collaborators: Dannie Richmond, Eric Dolphy, and Jimmy Knepper. The book closes with a brief epilogue, “Mingus in the Movies,” detailing Mingus’s film appearances as well as the use of Mingus’s music in later movies.

Those already familiar with Mingus’s life will find few new stories in part one, but Gabbard’s ever-present interpretive voice makes for an interesting read nevertheless. During the otherwise swift recounting, the narrative intermittently dallies on topics not obviously critical to Mingus’s life story, but that Gabbard describes as deserving of special attention. These eddies include a history of the Watts Towers from Mingus’s childhood neighborhood, and Mingus’s encounter with Ralph Ellison. Mingus’s relationship with Duke Ellington, which Gabbard frames as a kind of lifelong father/son struggle, also plays prominently in Gabbard’s retelling, as does



A Portrait and Three Retellings (cont.)

Mingus's mental health. These themes and vignettes bring some fresh perspective in a section that otherwise draws heavily from the Priestley and Santoro biographies.

Gabbard's most innovative contributions come in the latter half of the book. The research and insights in part two alone make it a worthwhile project. In this section we get a much-needed examination of the many ways in which Mingus worked with language as an expressive medium. As Gabbard observes, "Mingus always had the touch of a poet," (114) and many scholars have noted Mingus's proclivity towards using text as a mode of expression.¹ Although there have been several useful analyses of individual pieces, never before has there been such an exhaustive overview of Mingus's texts. Here, Gabbard's analysis flows as he examines the song titles, lyrics, poems, and the longer-form writings of Mingus. He begins from a stance of taking Mingus's poetic approach seriously, writing that, "if the center of action for Mingus had not been music, he might have become the peer of [Ted] Joans and [Bob] Kaufman." (116) This section includes a transcription of a poem that Mingus recorded himself reading, found among the audiotapes in the Charles Mingus Collection at the Library of Congress. Moving from song lyrics to complete poems, Gabbard traces themes in Mingus's writing and makes a compelling case for the written medium as a significant component of Mingus's artistic life.

Whereas Mingus the poet had not been thoroughly studied previously, Mingus the autobiographer certainly had. Gabbard brings helpful new material to the flourishing discourse on Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* in his thorough examination of the book's editorial process. This section decenters Mingus himself, focusing instead on the women who helped shape the famous book into its final form. Particularly useful is Gabbard's research into the work of Nel King, whose role in the book lies somewhere between editor and co-author. In the letters from the Alfred A. Knopf Archives, Gabbard finds a patient and committed King. Her resilient shepherding revised the autobiography from the sprawling typescript draft that resides in the Library of Congress into the much-lauded book that was eventually published. What Gabbard makes clear is that Mingus's vision was always at the center of Nel King's process, and yet *Beneath the Underdog* could not have taken its form without her.

The organization of *Better Git It in Your Soul*—the constant return to the beginning of Mingus's life to cycle through with another lens—comes with an inherent challenge: repetition. With each pass, there are echoes of previous sections and the redundancy might frustrate some readers. But in a way, the structure evokes the process of research, in which we circle our subject, approaching it through different archives, works, and ever-developing theories. Each day in research is like a new encounter with a slowly changing subject, seen anew from every angle. Mingus changes over the course of Gabbard's retellings, and by the end I had come to see the recursive structure as a strength of the book and a reflection of the multiplicity at the core of Mingus's identity.

When Gabbard opens his book with a reflection on his first encounters with Mingus's music and titles the section "Charles Mingus Changed My Life," he signals that this book is personal. For Gabbard, "Mingus was exceptional," and the admiration for the man and his music evident in that statement permeates the whole of the book. Gabbard strikes a tone that is celebratory, just shy of reverent. As he writes in his introduction, "I present this book in hopes that it will bring Mingus more of the esteem he deserves." (9) On the whole, this book offers a valuable and well-documented contribution to the burgeoning studies on Mingus and his music.

NOTE

1. See, for example: Nichole T. Rustin, "Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999); Scott Saul, *Freedom Is Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Harvard University Press, 2003); David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton University Press, 2006).