



Pithecanthropus Erectus
Charles Mingus (Atlantic-Speakers Corner)
by Scott Yanow

Charles Mingus was at the crossroads of his career when he went into the studio on Jan. 30th, 1956 to make his first album for the Atlantic label. Recognized as one of the major bassists to emerge during the bebop years, the then-33-year old Mingus had worked previously with many of the who's who of jazz including Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Red Norvo, Charlie Parker and Bud Powell.

However, he wanted to be more than just a bassist and one of his main goals was to express his emotions and thoughts through his music. At first Mingus was involved in what could be termed Third Stream music, writing adventurous works as influenced by modern classical as by jazz, leading to music that was often dry and missing a key element in his life: soul. By the time he made his Atlantic debut, he was trying a different and much more successful approach—and demonstrating his originals to musicians rather than giving them written arrangements—resulting in his first classic album.

Utilizing a quintet, Mingus begins the set with the title track, a ten-minute work that sought to depict the rise and fall of man. Along with some conventional swinging and boppish solos from saxophonists Jackie McLean (alto) and J.R. Monterose (tenor), the episodic work has some short free-form sections (a bit revolutionary for the time) where Mingus pushes his sidemen to express themselves fully.

The bassist displays some of his humor on the Gershwins' "A Foggy Day", which has the horn players imitating a traffic jam, foghorn and other various sounds Mingus heard in San Francisco. The brief "Profile Of Jackie" is a melancholy ballad featuring its dedicatee. Closing "Love Chant", nearly 15 minutes, has a romantic theme, gets cooking and demonstrates that love is not only expressed in one mood.

Pithecanthropus Erectus, the beginning of a remarkably creative decade for Mingus, has been reissued on LP by the audiophile Speakers Corner label. In any format, the music is timeless and essential.

For more information, visit speakerscornerrecords.com. The Mingus Big Band is at Jazz Standard Mondays. See Regular Engagements.