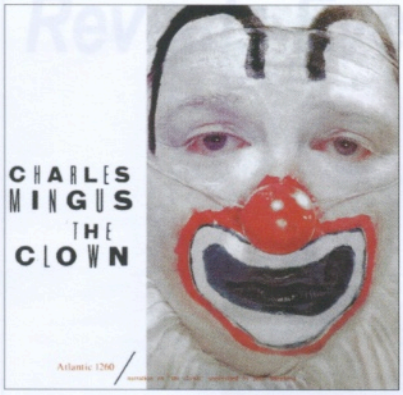

The Clown

180g

Charles Mingus

Speakers Corner/Atlantic 1260

Charles Mingus was one of the most restless souls in jazz history, and one sign of that restlessness was the large number of record labels upon which he recorded. But one label consistently delivered the "best" or most representative Mingus recordings: Atlantic Records, which recorded Mingus both early and late in his career. It was with his first Atlantic release, *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, that Mingus' gifts as a composer, bandleader, and bass player reached full flower in 1956. *The Clown* followed in 1957. *Blues & Roots* was released in 1959, the same year Mingus's best-known albums, *Mingus Ah Um* and *Mingus Dynasty* were released on Columbia. Two more LPs came out on Atlantic over the next couple years, followed by an estrangement from Atlantic until another series of albums between 1973 and 1977, the year after Mingus' death.

The Clown features Dannie Richmond's first recording with Mingus, and he stayed as Mingus' drummer for the rest of Mingus' life. Chris Porter plays alto and tenor sax, Jimmy Knepper trombone, and Wade Legge piano. Jean Shepherd, a radio and TV personality best known for his role as narrator for the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, provides an improvised narration on the title track.

The four tracks were selected by Mingus to prove wrong his detractors who claimed he could not swing, and Mingus includes his first blues on record. The clown image was a metaphor for jazz musicians, who Mingus felt spent their lives trying to please people who only appreciated them after they were dead. The LP opens with 'Haitian Fight Song', a real showstopper fusing folk, blues, and gospel into not just a preview, but also an encapsulation of the Mingus sound that would gel over the next several years. Following that is 'Blue Cee', a standard blues tune that gives the listeners a chance to catch their breath before getting up to flip the record. Side two opens with Mingus' tribute to Charlie Bird—'Reincarnation Of A Love Bird', a love note to the great alto player who encouraged and inspired Mingus. The album closes with the title song, a brilliant evocation of the joy felt by Mingus for his craft, tinged with sadness for the lack of appreciation for his art.

Tom Dowd and his assistant Larry Hiller recorded the tracks on February 13 and March 2 of 1957 at Atlantic Studios in New York. Atlantic's recording facility was still pretty Spartan—only a year earlier it had been recording in its office space by pushing the furniture out of the way. If this sounds a bit like the Blue Note story, it should come as no surprise that the sound produced by these early recordings shares an honest, up front sound, a sound familiar to all from those early Ray Charles hits. Still, it's not an audiophile sound, and reissue companies have only dipped their toes in the Atlantic pool, wary that record buyers will not react well to the sound. ORG Music reissued a number of classic Coltrane and Ornette Coleman Atlantic titles, all in stereo. Unfortunately, Atlantic's stereo recordings of the 1950s and early 1960s suffer from the worst sort of "left-right" stereo soundstaging, and no amount of great mastering skill or 45 RPM detailing make these viable ways to enjoy these recordings. In part because *The Clown* was recorded only in mono, Speakers Corner has avoided this trap and reissued this title (along with an equally fine reissue of Ray Charles' *The Genius After Hours*) in mono, and the sound is fabulous.

Atlantic's stereo imaging improved as time went on, and Speakers Corner's has successfully released versions of Charles Lloyd's *Forest Flower* and Wilson Pickett's *The Sound Of Wilson Pickett* in excellent sounding stereo versions. Kevin Gray mastered *The Clown*, like Speakers Corner's other Atlantic reissues, and the results are exceptional. The sound of the reissue compares favourably with a black label original. This is an essential Mingus title that every jazz collector should have. While Atlantic's mono sound is shy of the very best mono recordings produced in the 1950s, it's still excellent and far superior to what so often passed for stereo in that era. Highly recommended. **DD**

RECORDING

MUSIC