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LP Review: Charlie Mingus – Tijuana Moods



Charlie Mingus – *Tijuana Moods* (Speakers Corner/RCA LSP-2533. LP review by Andrew Cartmel)

In 1957 **Charles Mingus** was running his own small independent record label, Candid, and recording for it when he got his first big break and signed with one of the majors, RCA. Having recently returned from a sojourn in Mexico, and inspired by the bittersweet mariachi sounds he'd heard there, Mingus and his musicians recorded *Tijuana Moods* for his new label. Unfortunately RCA then released an album by Thad Jones, who had been exclusively signed to Candid by Mingus. There ensued an acrimonious falling out, and a lawsuit, between Mingus and RCA.

All this is relevant because RCA then vindictively shelved *Tijuana Moods* and refused to release it for a full five years, and then credited to "Charlie" Mingus, a version of his name which reportedly annoyed him. When the album did finally see the light of day in 1962 it was recognised as a classic. And now it has been reissued in a splendid audiophile vinyl edition from Speakers Corner in Germany. As the label's notes observe, this isn't just excellent music, it's a sonically spectacular recording. And that exceptional sound quality has been done full justice here. The Speakers Corner pressing has great spatial characteristics and wonderful presence. So much so that sax player **Shafi Hadi** (still known as **Curtis Porter** at the time of the recordings) appears to be a benign presence in your sitting room.

Dizzy Moods is instantly thrilling with its rattlesnake shimmer of castanets — Mingus wasn't kidding about that Mexican influence — provided by one **Ysabel Morel**. The spacious wide-screen sound image is as fresh and clear as an open window.

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Clarence Shaw's trumpet goes slipping and sliding into the spaces that Mingus has left for his soloists while Mingus's bass is ripe, rolling and melodiously thunderous. It's a hip, sleek, swinging piece which almost has an Elmer Bernstein movie score feel: take a walk on the wild side in Tijuana.

Ysabel's Table Dance features tart, sharp vocalisations by Ysabel Morel, with the sour angularity of Mingus's bass adding grit to them. The castanets here are proceeding at an exhilarating, machine-gun rapidity of fire. There are swift changes of mood like a movie constantly cutting to a new scene, with Shaw's trumpet and **Jimmy Knepper's** trombone evoking the changed atmosphere before everyone joins together in a frantic melange, a musical collage which is so fierce, impassioned and frenzied that you expect the neighbours to start hammering on the studio door in 1958 and complain. Then the strands separate out again leading to a beautiful, talkative solo from Shafi Hadi which is like sculpting solid forms in the air, with an excited exhortation from what I take to be the leader but could be **Lonnie Elder**. It's striking how much air and space Mingus provides for his soloists in the course of these dense and ever changing compositions — air and space which is beautifully rendered on this fine pressing. The music is reminiscent of Gil Evan's long form pieces from much the same period, though reportedly Mingus's scores were more improvised. This tune provide a constantly shifting spectrum of moods, right down to the cartoony "That's all folks" ending of the track, and the side.

Tijuana Gift Shop has a kind of avant-garde opening consisting of short rhythmic phrases which again provides a collage — or montage — effect before coalescing into tight ensemble playing from the horn and reeds with Shafi Hadi chirping and chipping. Jimmy Knepper takes a set-piece solo and then Hadi swirls around him. There is a rapturous, romantic flamenco feel to the tune. Mingus is on bulging, booming form but the last word, by a whisker, goes to the elegiac Shaw.

Los Mariachis begins with heart-wringing unison horns before Mingus's bass strides into their midst and Shaw wails with a mute in a stuttering statement. The dense, cluttered experimental passage suddenly ends and we're not in Kansas (or Tijuana) any more. **Dannie Richmond's** drums and cymbals provide a constant escort of a backdrop while Clarence Shaw's playing is breathy, vocalised and sweetly concise, setting off a bouncing calypso section which is almost parodic but which soon modulates into more of that Gil Evans style modernism. Shafi Hadi plays taut, bitten-off phrases as Lonnie Elder cries out in ecstasy in a kind of transported church-style call and response. **Bill Triglia's** trilling and jovially slanted piano phrases return us to Calypso territory. The constant shifting of moods and genres without hesitation or the batting of an eyelash is seriously impressive. These sudden shifts, and the ability to balance structured orchestration with free improvisation, are Mingus's major contribution to jazz. As the piece draws towards an ending, Shaw wrings out a mournful blues commentary, Mingus sawing long melancholy lines under him, and the ensemble gives a group cry of sensual agony. Mingus signs off with a modest shimmer of bass.

The beautiful *Flamingo* was written for Duke Ellington by Ted Grouya, with lyrics by Duke's friend Edmund Anderson, and proved to be a big hit in its day. Its beautiful theme is preserved here, presented to us by Jimmy Knepper, with his trombone drawing out the melody as Hadi and Mingus join in with Dannie Richmond's subdued drumming thickening the mixture. Shaw's magnificent trumpet explores the boundary of the melody, the beauty of which has also intoxicated Bill Triglia's piano and Hadi's meditative sax. All the players show great respect for the lovely contours of the tune. As does Mingus's arrangement, which keeps imposing explosive bursts of abstraction on the melody like a hand crushing note paper, then relaxing and releasing and smoothing it out again. Bill Triglia plays a beautifully spare solo in this exquisite piece, rounded off by Knepper's trombone. Shaw signs it off, his ghostly, lovely trumpet fading in the distance.

This is an indispensable release. My only tiny caveat is that the cover art isn't as brilliant as the original — Speakers Corner take great pains with their covers, and in this case they were having to work with a less-than-perfect 1960's copy. But what matters is the music, and that has never sounded better.

On Wednesday, July 09, 2014

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