

AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Mingus, Music, and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Sue Mingus and Clayborne Carson with Mark Gonnerman

Piggot Theater
1 February 2011

Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and we're very pleased that you've taken time out to join us this evening for a conversation on Charles Mingus, Music, and the Struggle for Civil Rights with Professor Clayborne Carson and Sue Mingus, widow of the great artist whose work we celebrate tonight.

I'm going to introduce our two guests and then we'll plunge into the conversation for a while among the three of us on stage. We'll have time in the last half-hour or so for you to contribute questions and comments.

I think most of you already know Professor Clayborne Carson, who was a participant and an observer of African-American political movements during his undergraduate years at UCLA. Since receiving his doctorate at UCLA in 1975, he has taught at Stanford, where he is director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Under his direction, the King Papers Project has produced six volumes of a projected fourteen-volume comprehensive edition of King's speeches. In addition to these volumes, he has authored numerous other works based on the papers including the *Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which was assembled from Dr. King's writings and published in 1998. Dr. Carson is always in demand as a speaker nationally and internationally, and I'm sure he'll be on the road during Black History Month, which begins today. So we're very pleased. Clay, that you are able join us here tonight.

Our guest from New York is Sue Graham Mingus, who first met Charles Mingus in 1964 while the bassist was playing at the Five Spot. Born in Milwaukee, educated at Smith College, and with strong ties to the avant-garde art scene, she was working in New York and making a film when she met Mingus, and she joined him and helped him set up his own record company. They fell in love and by 1966 exchanged vows in a ceremony conducted by their mutual friend, the poet Allen Ginsberg. Until Mingus's death on January 5, 1979, from Lou Gehrig's Disease, Sue Mingus was deeply involved in promoting his music. Now, more than three decades after Minus has passed, she continues to carry the torch for his musical legacy through groups such as the Mingus Dynasty, which will perform tomorrow night at Dinkelspiel Auditorium. The Mingus Big Band, heard on the CD that you were listening to as you came into the house, will be here on April 13.

In 2002, Pantheon of Random House Press released Sue's memoir of her life with Mingus entitled *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year. It was released in paperback the following year and has been translated into several languages.

Please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

Gonnerman to Sue Mingus: I think it would be great to start off by listening to you read a bit from your book and going back to 1964 when you first met Charles Mingus. I very much enjoyed reading *Tonight at Noon*. It's beautifully crafted and composed. It moves in and out of various scenes of your intimate life with Charles Mingus and his public life. There's this moment early in the book (page 34) when you write about Charles going to the Monterey Jazz Festival. We have this picture up here: Charles Mingus at Monterey in 1964. It's a point in the book that is a real emotional high, I felt. A lot of things were coming together for Charles Mingus and for the two of you in that year. I think we'd like to hear what you wrote about that.

Sue Mingus: I'm not sure it's as emotional as you say, but anyway:

In mid-September, Mingus announced that he was heading out to the Monterey Jazz Festival in California. Along with other compositions he'd written, he planned to present an extended work about integration that he called "Meditations for a Pair of Wire Cutters." We were sitting in a Madison Avenue deli uptown and he was bringing me up to date. "It's fully orchestrated," he said, from across the table, as people around us were ordering from the breakfast menu and he was ordering a high-protein array of meat and cheeses from the dinner page. Sometimes I call it "Meditations on Integration" and sometimes "Meditations on Inner Peace." The waitress had left to discuss his burgeoning order with some higher authority. "I mean, we'll be performing it with an expanded band. We'll rehearse it for three days out there. You know, in Europe we were only playing with a quintet."

I wasn't sure why the expanded band was special, but he was exuberant, and his high spirits were growing higher. He explained that the piece he'd written had become a hymn to injustice, that he'd dedicated it to black Americans imprisoned behind electric barbed wire in the South. "Where are they imprisoned?" I asked immediately. He took for granted that his assertions were self-evident. I was constantly catching up. Sometimes I only half believed him. They were facts out of my range. It was hard to separate his excesses from his truths, although frequently they were the same. He said he'd heard about the internments from his saxophonist Eric Dolphy before their final tour together. He said he couldn't get them out of his mind. "They don't have ovens and gas faucets in this country yet," he said grimly, as the waitress reappeared with a hunk of Gorgonzola and a giant steak. "But they have electric fences, so I wrote a prayer about some wire cutters. I wrote a prayer we'd buy some scissors and get out!"

A week later, moments after the concert was over in Monterey, he called me in New York from a phone backstage. He said the crowd had roared its approval for five solid, unbelievable minutes while he paced back and forth across the raised platform of the band shell, his leather sandals flapping against his bare feet while the crowd stood up and screamed. He said he never even looked up. He was too scared. At rehearsal, he told his trumpet player, Lonnie Hillyer, the music was a prayer and he, Lonnie, was the preacher. I told him it's like when disorganization comes in and you've got to straighten it out, he said. I told him it's like a minister in church or like a Jewish rabbi – everybody shouting at you. You've got to chant and put them back into condition. He was on a roll; I barely had a chance to speak. He said he'd been playing to God and that he felt close to death.

Next day, I read about it in the press. [They quote Charles]: "I felt pains in my chest," he told a reporter. "I felt them once before and it scared me. This time, it didn't matter. I said, 'To hell with it; I'll go on playing what I'm playing even if I die.'"

By the end of the week, *Time Magazine* had ranked him among the greatest composers in jazz. [Again, a quote]: "At the end of his gasser of a concert," raved the reporter, "5000 cats rose in a thunderous ovation they had not according Ellington or Dizzy Gillespie or even Thelonious Monk." [Monk had been on the cover of *Time Magazine* a few months before. This was in 1964.] Another paper compared his bowing to Pablo Casals and his compositions to Debussy. The *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that he had erased the memory of any other bass player in jazz. Mingus told someone else he was playing to love and to the spirit. When he came home, he said he was playing to me. I didn't really believe him. I didn't understand the size of his feelings for me or for anything else. I wasn't ready. His roar and his clatter were like the sound of breaking glass. I wasn't ready at all. [Applause]

Gonnerman: Before we talk about this, we have a video clip of him in the ensemble playing *Meditations on Integration*. They were touring in Europe in April. This piece was premiered at Cornell in March of that same year. Let's just take a look so we have an idea of what's going on before we talk about it.

VIDEO CLIP IS SHOWN.

Mingus: We still play this in the Mingus Big Band. Last night they played it. We have a band that plays every Monday night in New York. We have three different bands, actually. We still are carrying on this wonderful music. Last night, the Mingus Big Band was playing "Meditations" in New York at a club. The Mingus Big Band will be out here on April 13.

Gonnerman: What really struck me about the passage you read is how Mingus was recognized then as a composer. I read somewhere that he has left us the second-largest legacy of compositions in the history of American music, the first being Duke Ellington, I suppose.

Mingus: Well, that's really the biggest change in perception of Charles from the time he died thirty-two years ago. When Mingus was alive, because he was such a huge personality on stage and he was a virtuoso bass player and he was an outsized band leader, people did not think of him essentially as a composer. People weren't playing his music the way they played Duke's. So this is really what has happened since Charles died – this understanding that he left an enormous legacy of twentieth-century American composition second only to Duke Ellington. Charles always said he was first and foremost a composer, and I took my cue from Charles. People didn't really play his music when he was alive. I don't think they wanted to trespass the territory. He kind of dominated his own music and other people weren't playing it. But he left over 300 works of composition.

Gonnerman: Is that part of your work now – cataloguing, publishing?

Mingus: Well, that's right. When Charles died, there was a tribute at Carnegie Hall with a number of different bands playing. They asked me to put together a band to play Mingus's music – something I'd never done and had never talked to Charles about doing anything like this. I put together a band with the makeup of the one that had been on these historical Columbia record albums from 1959: *Mingus Dynasty*. It was a seven-piece band and it had so much spirit that we just kept it going after that. The interesting thing at this particular concert was that nobody played Mingus's music. Our little band was the only one that played Mingus's music, and that's when the realization came that there was a reason for having a band to carry it on. People thought I was crazy in the beginning, particularly in Europe. They said, How can you have a Mingus band without Mingus there? As I say, I took my cue from Charles, who always knew, as composers know, that their music will live on.

Gonnerman: I want to get back to that, but I want to bring Clay into the conversation because the last time Mingus performed “Meditations on Integration” was at UCLA in 1965 when you were there for your first year. Did you hear Mingus? Did you know about him?

Clayborne Carson: I thought I first heard him at a club, so that would have been Shelly's Manne-Hole, probably, and not in a concert setting, but it's hard after all these years to remember exactly when.

Gonnerman: Were you Mingus-aware as a student?

Carson: Probably not, no. Just a little bit of context in terms of my own background: I arrived in Los Angeles late in '64 and enrolled in UCLA in 1965. Coming from a small town and kind of getting immersed in the cultural life of Los Angeles ... I never lived on campus; I lived in West Hollywood, and really, for me, it was the most exciting period of my life, coming into this new environment which was interesting in itself. LA was changing so rapidly during this time. [To Sue Mingus]: I just noticed in your memoir that at the same time you were spotting these underground newspapers, I was writing for the

Los Angeles Free Press, and that provided me access to a lot of the aspects of the Los Angeles scene. In fact, it allowed me as a poor student to get into a lot of things. I could get a press pass to get into things that normally I couldn't afford. For me, also, I think, and you've kind of hinted at this: Charles Mingus, apart from the music, which, quite frankly, I don't think I would have fully understood its significance at that time, but the way in which he expressed the political tone of the time – the mid-1960s, when many people, and I think in some ways it's expressed by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* – the way in which the movement for integration was coming to the point where people were saying, Are we sure we want to be integrated into that? There were people who were expressing those kinds of doubts, and really challenging in a way that the mainstream civil rights leaders were not challenging the kind of tone of integration and beginning to put forward something more militant, something more abrasive, even. One of the things that happened right at that time when I came was that LeRoi Jones (Baraka) came to LA with his play *The Dutchman*. In a sense, that signaled in the world of drama the same thing that was happening with Coltrane and obviously Charlie Mingus in terms of beginning to comment on what was going on in the political scene. I think he had always done that.

Mingus: He used his bandstand like a soapbox. He delivered his views about everything. It was part of the performance, really. He was sharing with the audience his feelings about everything that was going on in the music industry, racially, socially ... whatever problems there were, he talked about them always from the stage and off the stage – wherever he was.

Carson: You were mentioning how people didn't play his music as much while he was alive. I wonder whether you could comment: maybe that was because it was very difficult to play his music to his satisfaction at the time.

Mingus: Well, I think partly because he was this large figure and he dominated his music, and maybe people thought there wasn't a place.... Who knows? Charles's music at the time was considered difficult, inaccessible, the way any original sound is. Our ears grow up with time. We just started a Mingus high school competition two years ago. We're in our third year in two weeks from now. It will take place in New York with kids coming from all over the country, and you should hear them play Mingus's music. It's not inaccessible at all. It's just that thirty years later, something that appeared to be inaccessible – and maybe when Charles was there, that was the general feeling that it was hard music, it was difficult music.

Carson: In your book, you have some anecdotes of performances where he's not satisfied with the piano player, and right in the middle of, or at the end of a set, tells him to leave the stage, and things like that.

Mingus: He fired people all throughout. I tell the musicians now that if Charles were here he'd fire all of them because he fired everyone all the time. His drummer would get fired two or three times a night, often. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: He was incredibly demanding, wasn't he?

Mingus: He was very demanding, and he did everything to get the kind of music that he wanted. He insulted, he loved you, whatever. He had that enormous energy, and he cared so deeply about the music. There wasn't resentment, in that sense. People understood that all of this passion and rage and love came out of his involvement and this deep caring that he had for music. He wanted it played right. He wanted it played the way he wanted it played, and he did everything to make that happen. And not everybody liked it. That wasn't everybody's cup of tea.

Gonnerman: I want to go back to what you said. In that passage you read, there's an allusion to the band leader as a preacher or the composer as someone who tries to put things in focus and bring things back into order. I think there's an interesting thing throughout the music – a dialectic of chaos and order. You said that when he was on stage and talking about his opinions, that was part of the performance. You said it was offstage, too. I get the sense when I read your memoir and I read other things about Mingus that he was really the same person on stage and in the street – that he was always authentically who he was.

Mingus: Charles was always the same person. He was one of the most honest people I've ever met in my life, and he expressed his truths at all times on the bandstand and off. Life was more difficult in society for Charles at the time. People always ask, because Charles was called "jazz's angry man," when I met him in 1964. At home, he spent his time at the piano composing. He always took credit for his virtuosity on the bass because he worked, so the story went, seven hours. This [the pinky] is your weakest finger because there's no muscle of its own, and he worked whatever it was – an impossible number of hours a day – to make it his fastest finger. But he always said the melody came from God, and he said he would go to the piano and the music was waiting for him on the keys. He spent hours and hours at the piano composing and playing. Charles was a very gentle person, but he was also a person who believed strongly in what he believed, and he encountered a lot of obstacles in the real world. His skin was the wrong color, his passions were outsized, and life was not always easy. He wasn't always just. He made a lot of ridiculous scenes, and he made a lot of scenes that mattered and that were maybe ahead of his time. He always said he couldn't go south because he knew he would get himself killed because he spoke out about anything that he believed was unjust and unfair. That was one of the things that caused difficulties for Charles in his life because he was always speaking out. There are not always occasions when we're supposed to speak out about everything. Yes, he was a genuine voice wherever he was – on the street or on the bandstand.

Gonnerman: One of the obstacles the two of you confronted together was the way the music industry works and the production of records and publishing, so you decided to take matters into your own hands. That's another thing that's happening here as he comes out of Monterey and he decides to produce this record from the Monterey Jazz Festival himself.

Mingus: He had done that before. Charles, I think, started possibly the first black-owned record company back in the days of Debut Records, which was in the late forties, early fifties. He and his wife Celia started Debut Records, and this was the second time around, that after Monterey he decided to start his own record company again because he felt he wasn't getting the right numbers from the record companies – that they were favoring white artists over black artists, and for a whole lot of reasons he started his own label, Charles Mingus Records, I think. We released four albums, one of which was this *Mingus at Monterey*. That was the first.

Gonnerman: It seems like in that project the two of you were testing each other, checking each other out. I got the feeling in reading your memoir that almost reluctantly you got more and more involved in the work and then you brought your own voice into it more and more, and the partnership really evolved through a series of struggles about what it would mean to produce something like that together. What was your hesitation about getting into this?

Mingus: It wasn't so much about the record company; it was just about our relationship. We fought for about eight years, essentially because I did not want to get married. I didn't want a live-in relationship. What Charles used to say is he wanted love with an address, and I didn't want love with an address. I wasn't ready. But after eight years ... it only took eight years and then he moved in. The minute he moved in, we never fought again. It was only about that. That was really the core of our friction.

Gonnerman: But he did move right across the street from you at one point.

Mingus: Well, that was early on. The first or second year, he found an apartment right across the street from me. He set up this light show so that I couldn't escape. Light shows were starting in New York at the time. People had these light machines. I remember the Village Vanguard had a light machine. Charles created these masterpieces of lights. They were obscene, they were religious, they were sacred. They were exploding day and night. He got letters in his mailbox saying, "Dear Mr. Lightman, your show is fabulous," or "Magician, you're a groove" – all these letters, because everyone on the block noticed them, and they reflected off my walls. There was no escaping Charles. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Did you think they were fabulous?

Mingus: I did not think they were fabulous. I thought they were a big royal pain in the.... He would sit outside on the street in his convertible with his music playing.

Gonnerman: So you were being courted.

Mingus: I was courted.

Gonnerman: He was a troubadour beneath your window with lights.

Mingus: He was always coming up with ideas. He found something called the Marriage Museum. I was working at this *New York Free Press*. Joe was co-publishing at the time. And around the corner and down the block, there was something called the Marriage Museum. So Charles, just to be a bother, from my point of view, decided he was going to have a wedding at the Marriage Museum. There were going to be different women. It was going to be sort of a lottery. He sent these messages up to the *Free Press* where I worked, inviting them all to his wedding at the Marriage Museum. There were going to be three or four candidates and it would be determined at the last minute who the wife was actually going to be. Of course, he never did it.

Carson: One of the things this gets at is the way in which he stayed on the cutting edge. There's an aspect of jazz that wanted to stay ... I mean, there were still people who played "Dixieland," and not wanting to change and not wanting to move, and here is Charles Mingus, who is really on the cutting edge from the big band era through bebop all the way to Joni Mitchell in the seventies and the psychedelic scene, and I think you get into, also, always being creative in a way that reflects the times.

Mingus: And incorporating the history at the same time. I mean, he used "Dixieland." He included "Dixieland" and every kind of music.

Carson: There's probably no other person who can bridge the eras from even back to Louis Armstrong and Lionel Hampton and the big bands and just everything in between. And that's maybe one of the reasons why his composing is such a valuable resource. You were part of that.

Mingus: Then he left a lot of openness in his music, which is what attracts the musicians so much because it's very demanding music. It demands you to come in and play yourself and be yourself. Charles always used to yell, "Be yourself." "Play yourself." So musicians come in and they bring in their own identity, their own voices, which keeps the music modern and up to date and fresh.

Carson: And didn't he write specifically for the people he thought would be playing?

Mingus: Many times he wrote, like Duke did, with specific musicians in mind, like Eric Dolphy or Jack Walworth and George Adams, at a later time. There was a time when Charles dispensed with what he called pencil composers. There were musicians who weren't good readers, so he would write a different way. When Jack Walworth and George Adams came into the band, who were really good writers, he wrote out more extended compositions. So, in that sense, he reflected the guys who were playing in his band, also.

Gonnerman: Your comment reminds me of a line in your book, Sue, which goes something like: there was this tension in Mingus between a kind of Puritanism and a regard for boundaries and rules. At the same time, there was this incredible openness to experience. So, respect for the musical and other traditions, yet always moving out into

new territory. This was a really creative tension in his life and work, right? It seems to me that this is a fundamental point you're making about him in your book.

Mingus: Yes, absolutely. I remember Charles saying, without any sort of arrogance at all: "How could I not be better than Bach or Beethoven?" he said, because "they laid it all out for me," was the way that he put it. If you're a serious musician, you take everything that came before you and you incorporate that into your music and then you go on from there with your own voice.

Gonnerman: So, you said he would immerse himself at the piano in the activity of composing. Did he study a lot?

Mingus: Well, all that was behind him, I think, all the studying.

Gonnerman: And yet, you say when you're going through his studio and you find his Bible, the margins are full of annotations. Did he spend time sitting with books and looking at the past and looking at texts?

Mingus: Well, Charles was always expressing himself, whether it was in the margins of books or yelling on the street. The expression was there. But as far as learning or studying, there's a time in your life when you're studying and then you go on. Most of the musicians I know listen.... At Sonny Rollins's house, you hear Sonny Rollins. At Mingus's house, you hear Mingus. He was not listening, when I knew him, to others anymore because he had done that before. Maybe he listened to Beethoven and Bach, but generally he wasn't.... Most of the time he was composing; he was not listening to other people's music. That was part of his training when he was growing up.

Gonnerman: And did composing keep him sane?

Mingus: I suppose you could say that. I mean, it was a world he could count on. It was his own world. It was the center of his being – his composition – and he would go to the piano and find his peace, certainly.

Carson: One of the questions that I asked myself before reading the memoir was: Who was this person who was going to have a long-term relationship with a person who might have been somewhat difficult in many respects. So part of the surprise of the book is that it's not like you came from a jazz background or you were familiar with that scene before you.... You might say a few words just about what you, in 1964 ... what you came from into the relationship with Charles Mingus, because it seems a little bit of an improbable when you look at the backgrounds.

Mingus: It was highly improbable. It had nothing to do with music. Charles was a man of great energy and imagination and courage, and he was a fascinating individual. Was he easy in a normal, standard way? No. But I came from a musical family. It had nothing to do with jazz. My mother was a harpist and a piano player and my father loved opera and sang opera all the time. I studied music from the time I was six until I went to

college. But I didn't know anything about jazz when I met Charles. I was in a movie of Robert Frank, and Robert wanted a jazz soundtrack, which is how I happened to go out for the first time in my life to a jazz club. I went to hear Dizzy Gillespie and then I went to hear Mingus, and I didn't really know who anybody was. But that was my introduction. And I got to know jazz through Charles.

Carson: You had come from a very privileged background, also. Is that how you would describe it?

Mingus: I guess you could say that. It was certainly very different from Charles's background, my safe, Middle West background. It was worlds in collision at the beginning, but we were very similar in many ways. It probably sounds odd, but Charles felt like family from the first time I saw him. Who can explain that? There was something very familiar about him and there was a very moral, pure.... He was very much like my father in many ways. I think that was a connection I felt.

Carson: I think you described them both as very strong-willed individuals.

Mingus: Angry, pure.

Gonnerman: When you first met Charles you were in New York acting in a film. How were you discovered as an actress by Robert Frank?

Mingus: Well, an actress I really wasn't, but at the time I used to photograph well, and I did a screen test and it came out well, so I was in a movie of Robert's that played at the first film festival here in New York. And it was in connection with that. Robert wanted Ornette Coleman to do a soundtrack, and I think the money wasn't right for Ornette. That was one of the first questions I asked Mingus when I met him: if he knew he was my only connection with the jazz world, if he knew Ornette, and he said immediately, "Are you his old lady?" I had no idea what that meant. I said, "His mother?" [Laughter] It was just another language entirely.

Gonnerman: So you went on and founded a magazine – *Changes* magazine. What was that magazine about?

Mingus: We were all putting out the *New York Free Press* at the time, and I think the story was that one of the people who owned all the newsstands said to the publisher.... *Rolling Stone* had come out on the West Coast and it was very popular, and this news person, whoever he was, said to Jack Manning, "If I gave you \$5,000, how soon could you give me a music magazine?" Jack famously said, "Next week." That was a bundle of money at the time. So, anyway, I flew out to California and I met with different record company executives, because all the money was paid for with ads from record companies, oddly enough, because we were an underground radical writing about.... Well, the sixties, you know. There was a lot of student protest going on and movements festering all over the place. This was underwritten by the record companies until they suddenly realized that maybe we weren't on their side and they pulled out. But that's

how *Changes* started. It was a music magazine and it grew and it developed into other things.

Gonnerman: Part of your history seems to be taking on large projects and just jumping in and figuring it out as you go.

Mingus: Very much like jazz. Very improvised.

Gonnerman: A jazz life. How did you decide to write this memoir?

Mingus: I didn't want to write a memoir. I wanted to write about the year that Charles died in Mexico because it was an astonishing year. To take a man as physical as Charles was and to wipe him out the way Lou Gehrig's Disease does, where you just become a cabbage in a wheelchair.... I learned so much that year from Charles, the angry man of jazz who never railed at the gods for his condition and was constantly inventing things to do, mountains to climb, valleys to explore in his wheelchair. We had a special car that accommodated the wheelchair. We had gone to Mexico to hang out with the witches there in Cuernavaca because we were told there was a witch by the name of Pachita who could cure Charles, which didn't happen. But we had a very colorful, energetic, astonishing year for a man who was dying. It was filled with invention and vitality.

Gonnerman: It was grueling.

Mingus: Well, it was grueling, but I have to say, Charles kept an astonishing vitality going and we were always doing something. And food ... food was always a great destination for Charles, sick or well.

Gonnerman: Well, you were always getting in the little bus you had and going on excursions all over the countryside.

Mingus: We were – all over Mexico, all night long. Charles couldn't sleep, ever. He wrote a piece called "The Man Who Never Sleeps." We would catch him every now and then sleeping, but he would claim that he dreamt he was awake so it didn't count.

[Laughter]

We would drive all night long. He was tied to a wheelchair in the back of the van. It was like a cradle that would give him some comfort driving through the night through the mountains in Mexico and finding food stands, road stands on the side, with great excitement.

Gonnerman: Always a spirit of adventure.

Mingus: Just a spirit of life. Charles had this astonishing spirit of life, and that's what was so remarkable about this year of dying in Mexico, that it never lapsed – this appetite for life. Frozen in a wheelchair with his hands tied because they would fall off if they weren't tied on. It was amazing. He was destroyed physically and that energy and passion.... I was going to call it *Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man*. But then, as you

were saying, who is this for? The editor said, Who's writing this story? You have to tell us who you are, which was nothing I was interested in doing, and that was the hardest part because I'm not a professional writer. To be interesting, you have to unearth your truths and your embarrassments and expose yourself, but then you never know if you're going too far and you're just boring and running off at the mouth. And it's attention that, if you're not a professional, it's very scary and you don't know really what you're doing. But my editors wanted to bring me into the mix.

Gonnerman: I'll have to say, I started reading it at three o'clock in the afternoon and, but for a dinner break, I just kept reading until one in the morning. I couldn't put it down.

Mingus: I'm so glad because I was wondering, how do you keep things moving? How do you have this forward thrust? So I'm glad to hear that.

Carson: I'd like to say a few words about the significance of the title because it fits with what you were saying about the lack of sleep – *Tonight at Noon*.

Mingus: As Charles said: In the good old days, jazz clubs used to close at four in the morning and then you'd go and hang out, maybe outside Birdland. He and Miles would talk until six or seven and then they'd head up to Harlem and play in an after-hours club until ten or eleven, and they'd get home at noon. So their midnight was noon, hence the title *Tonight at Noon*. I took Charles's ashes to India to scatter them in the Ganges, which he had requested (he believed in reincarnation), so I was thinking of this also as a kind of reincarnation: his death being tonight and then being reincarnated once again into the sunlight at noon, so it had a few different meanings.

Gonnerman: He was interested, he would say, in *all* the prophets. He said that Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna really spoke to him. So there is this India connection.

Mingus: Well, the Hindu religion incorporates all the other religions, and I think Charles liked it because it is tolerant. There was no prejudice. They included all the religions, and he would call out their names on the bandstand: Jesus, Moses, Buddha – all the prophets. He enjoyed that.

Gonnerman: Let's open up to questions from members of our audience that will spark additional conversation.

Question from the Audience: I wanted to ask about *Changes*.

Mingus: It was a magazine that was called *Changes*. Actually, Charles wrote a piece he wanted to call "Sue's Moods," because it goes through all sorts of changes in moods and because I had the magazine, I said, "Call it 'Sue's Changes.'" So he would make a point whenever he talked to any reporter that it was *not* about my newspaper even though it was called "Sue's Changes." It should have been "Sue's Moods." It probably would have been a better title. The band is going to play it tomorrow, actually, if they get here.

Gonnerman: Do you identify with the piece? Does it capture your moods?

Mingus: I do, I do.

Question from the Audience: How would Charles describe you?

Mingus: Well, in this piece, if you hear “Sue’s Changes,” there are lyrical moments. There’s an absolutely chaotic, insane section with everybody playing at once, and it goes through a lot of different kinds of moods, and I think that was his idea of a biography ... a portrait.

Gonnerman: How would Charles describe the human condition?

Mingus: I don’t know. He would describe it differently, probably, every time you talked to him. It was always interesting because it would be the same event, but he would describe it ten different ways depending on what was in his mind at the time or what he remembered at that moment. His mind was so fertile; his imagination was so fertile, that he was always reinterpreting things.

Gonnerman: And this sometimes verged on paranoia.

Mingus: Sometimes absolutely based on paranoia. The distinction between reality and imagination was often very difficult for Charles himself to distinguish because he was getting so much feedback. His imagination was so towering, and it spilled over into real life. I think it was often hard for Charles himself to know where one started and the other picked up.

Gonnerman: He and you had a relationship with Timothy Leary, and it’s interesting because Charles was just tripping on his own imagination.

Mingus: Indeed. We would go up to Millbrook and never dropped acid. Charles never dropped acid and I never did.

Carson: Maybe for him it would have been redundant. [Laughter]

Mingus: Yeah, he didn’t need acid. I don’t know if you can see that I have bandages on my forehead. Just in connection with this, last week by mistake.... I was going to Europe and I had pills out and I thought I was taking a pain pill and it was an Ambien. I don’t know if any of you have ever taken Ambien. It’s a sleeping pill. Every now and then, I’ll take a third of an Ambien, but I took a whole Ambien. If I take a piece of an Ambien, I go to bed and I go to sleep, so I’ve never really known the effect it has, but I was in the office and I was supposed to go to a fancy party at the mayor’s mansion. We were nominated for a Grammy for the latest Mingus Big Band album. I was all dressed and ready to go and I took this Ambien. It was amazing. I had no idea I was hallucinating. The furniture was talking to me. I look at my tables and chairs differently

now. [Laughter] They were so supportive and so wonderful, and they were all talking to me and we were having just a wonderful time, and my desk was merging with other furniture and it was all woody and warm and like a library. I talked to the friend I was supposed to pick up, and she sensed something was a little odd, so she sent a car to get me. I got up and I walked into a door. It surprised me a little bit, but it fit in with everything else. There was blood all over the place and I was wiping it up. The next day, people told me they had seen me in the hall clutching my forehead with Kleenex. Anyway, I took this car that was sent, and my friend immediately took me to the hospital and they sewed six stitches. So this was my trip that I never had at Tim Leary's. This is the reason I'm telling you this. It was an amazing experience – hallucinating like that without even knowing. It seemed completely normal, and the room was full of people. That was the other thing. I told my friend. I actually voiced it, so it stepped beyond my hallucination. I was telling someone else about all the people. I don't think I told her about the furniture.

Gonnerman: Do you want to try that again?

Mingus: No, it was kind of harrowing afterwards because I was dizzy.

Gonnerman: Since we're on the subject of your visits to Timothy Leary's place, could you tell us about the wedding and Allen Ginsberg?

Mingus: That was in Peggy Hitchcock's apartment. We had gone to Peggy Hitchcock's. It was actually the Hitchcock estate where Tim Leary was conducting his experiments with a couple of other professors from Harvard. Peggy had a townhouse in Manhattan, and I think we had all gone there to celebrate somebody's wedding the next day. It was kind of a prenuptial party. Peggy lived in a brownstone with five floors. There was an elevator. So Charles wanted to explore, typically, and we ended up on the fourth floor, where there was a library, and there, typically, was Allen Ginsberg, who had also decided to explore. I would never have thought to explore somebody's private home and gone and snooped all over the place, but this was typical of Mingus and Allen. So we saw Allen, and Charles out of the blue said, "Marry us." Dear Allen, whatever came up he was ready for, so he pulled up two spindly chairs and we sat down and at the time he used to carry these little cymbals, so he chanted for an hour: Rama, Rama, Krishna, Krishna, Krishna Rama, whatever, for an hour. Then he stopped and Charles looked at him and he said, "You married me," because Allen was focusing on Charles, I think. Charles said, "You married me; now marry her." So he went again for a whole other hour of "Ramakrishna, Ramakrishna." When we sort of came to after these two hours, we were surrounded by all the people who had come for this other prenuptial occasion, and they had wrapped up presents from things around the house and they uncorked a couple of bottles of champagne.

Gonnerman: Another improvisation.

Question from the Audience: Did *you* live the noon-at-midnight life as well? Did you live the life with the jazz schedule and the clubs?

Mingus: No, not really. I had two kids that were growing up. Now, since Charles died and with these repertory bands, and so forth.... And now the jazz life is pathetic. Our last set ends at ten-thirty, I'm ashamed to tell you. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Why is that?

Mingus: I don't know. Charles saw the handwriting on the wall, I remember one night, because the last set would end at four, and there four sets. I remember Max Gordon, who owned the Village Vanguard, which was a landmark jazz club in New York, telling Charles he was cutting out the fourth set. Instead of being glad that he had to play less, Charles looked at him and said, "You're killing jazz, man." He saw that things were shriveling. Now there are two sets, except on weekends, when it actually goes to eleven-thirty. Good heavens!

Gonnerman: So that was killing jazz, and was rock killing jazz?

Mingus: Well, actually, when the Beatles came in, that had a big impact on jazz.

Gonnerman: Because of what was on the radio? Because of the way rock was marketed?

Mingus: No, just the shift in interest of crowds. There are cycles, and rock came in and jazz slowly petered out – not completely, but jazz was in its heyday in 1964. Charles and Monk could play for six months at a time at the Five Spot. When I met Charles, he was playing there. He'd been there for six months and Monk had been there for six months before that. Now you're lucky if you play a week somewhere in a club. That was a big difference.

Question from the Audience: What are you working on now?

Mingus: I'm working on another book. I just had the same "book doctor," as she calls herself, who looked at this look at about 150 pages last week. We have a band that plays every week in New York, and we tour and we publish.

Gonnerman: What's the new book about?

Mingus: I don't want to jinx it by talking about it yet. We publish music. Then, for example, the high school competition is taking place in a couple of weeks. There are myriad activities.

Question from the Audience: What are you doing politically now?

Mingus: Beyond speaking on the bandstand about issues that happen, what am I doing now? Nothing, probably.

Gonnerman: You published a Mingus CD, *Blues and Politics*, where you pulled together some political speeches and music. Isn't your publishing political?

Mingus: I'm trying to think. When we had the *New York Free Press*, we were out marching for birth control and civil rights, and so forth, it's true, and I'm not out marching now for things. We grow old, we grow old. What would you suggest?
[Laughter]

Question from the Audience Did you help with the selection of the musicians for the Mingus Dynasty and Mingus Big Band?

Mingus: Oh, yeah. I choose the musicians. I try to find a balance each week. Victor Lewis, a drummer, once said that playing Mingus was like a three-ring circus. I said, "You should have said four because you have to read like a classical musician, you have to be able to improvise like a jazz musician, you have to play in the ensemble together, and you have to have a personality or a voice." It's very demanding. Not everybody has all these things. Some people are better readers. Other people don't read so well but they're great improvisers, so I try to find a balance with the musicians. We're lucky enough to be able to have brand new kids come in. Last night when the Mingus Big Band was playing, Seamus Blake, who is supposed to be playing here tomorrow night (we have a problem right now because there's an ice storm in New York and we've been on the phone all day trying to figure out when the plane is arriving tomorrow), but Seamus couldn't play last night in the Big Band because he had a recording. So somebody came in who had never been in the band before by the name of Chris Cheek. He was amazing; he was incredible. So we have this new fresh blood coming in all the time. When a new musician comes into town, you hear about it like a brush fire. Word travels through the jazz community. Then we have the regulars who know the music, and there's always that risky edge because Mingus's music is not ... it's not inaccessible the way it used to be considered, but it's not easy. It's complex – wonderfully complex music. So it doesn't always work if you have new kids there who don't necessarily ... who can't grasp it right away. It's an adventure. We don't always know what's going to happen. I have to say, last night there was the most extraordinary piece called "Little Royal Suite" that Charles wrote for Ernie Royal. It's an extended work. It's so complicated, and the band had not played it in a year. Only these guys.... This is the wonderfully lucky thing about Mingus's music, that we have these musicians who can interpret it so incredibly and with such spirit and with music as full of obstacles as it can be. This is a work that changes tempos, changes harmonies, the backgrounds are different in every section, and then there's this soaring horn that comes through that was played by Alex Sipiagin, who will also be here tomorrow. But I thought, how could they play this piece without any rehearsal at all? You have to have fourteen geniuses up there to do that. I know I've wandered astray. I don't know what led to this.

Gonnerman: You're very involved with choosing....

Mingus: Yeah, I choose the musicians and sometimes choose.... We get together and decide, for example, when we go on the road, what we're going to play. What I try to do

above all is show this great range of music that Charles wrote because he wrote extended European classical pieces, he wrote Latin music, he wrote political pieces, he wrote the blues, he wrote lush ballads. And what I try to do whenever we do.... It's freer at home at the club; I'm not as demanding. But when we're on the road, the idea is just to show this enormous spectrum of music that Charles wrote that covers so much ground.

Gonnerman: Could you talk a little bit about *Epitaph*? You arranged a performance in 1989.

Mingus: *Epitaph* was Charles's effort to tell the world who he was musically. It was like a long autobiography, and he tried to get it performed in the early sixties and it was a disaster because the record company moved up the date, and so forth. He thought he was going to show the world who he was musically then with this enormous ... the score is 500 pages. It weighed fifteen pounds on my bathroom scale. It was enormous. It took almost three hours to play. We finally performed it posthumously, ten years after Charles died. It took a year to just make the parts for the score. It was written for 31 musicians. Gunther Schuller conducted it. We performed it a couple of years ago again at the Disney Center in LA. I think we performed it here maybe ten years ago in San Francisco.

Question from the Audience: How long was the performance?

Mingus: Close to three hours. Gunther Schuller called it the Gotterdammerung of jazz. [Laughter] It would even be probably four and a half hours. We've discovered more pieces that should have been a part of it: "Black Saint and the Sinner Lady," for example, which was on the same yellow score paper. It was kind of a detective story. A musicologist came to my place not long after Charles died and discovered a trunkful of music just thrown willy-nilly into this trunk. He asked if he could come back and organize it as a project. He and his wife for about a year took a train from Montreal and came back and forth and organized all this music, in the course of which he discovered *Epitaph*. He kept finding pieces that began "Measure number 2,305" called "Peggy's Blue Skylight," and then he'd find another piece called "Noon Night" with Measure 4,000 and something. He pieced it together by measure numbers and found this missing *Epitaph*. Since then, we've discovered still more pieces that have not been performed.

Gonnerman: Are there musicologists working now on this?

Mingus: Not any longer, but as I say, we have sections that if we ever perform it again.... The last time we performed it, we added two more pieces to it.

Gonnerman: Where are the manuscripts archived?

Mingus: The Library of Congress.

Gonnerman: So they're available to anyone.

Mingus: Yeah.

Gonnerman: Are there dissertations being written on Mingus now?

Mingus: Yeah, people have written books and dissertations, more and more, and there are courses on Mingus that are being taught around the country. As I say, with this high school competition, it's encouraged music directors also to have their kids learn Mingus.

Question from the Audience: Did he talk about what he thought his legacy would be, and how do you think he would feel about what his legacy is at this point?

Mingus: I don't think he'd be surprised at all. He once said when he was dying that he would be reincarnated. He said, "I'll probably be reincarnated as some unknown cello player playing Bach, Beethoven, and Mingus." [Laughter] So he wouldn't be surprised, but we never talked about my carrying on the music or anything, ever. We were trying to beat the rap when we were in Mexico.

Gonnerman: That's a really interesting comment given that he started off as a cello player and then a friend said, "Look, as a black man, you're not going to make it as a cello player in America. You'd better learn the bass." That's quite an optimistic statement that he's foreseeing that he could come back and make it as a cello player playing Bach and Beethoven ...

Mingus: ... and Mingus.

Gonnerman: ... and Mingus, but that he could make it in that scene – that things would improve to that degree. So he was optimistic.

Mingus: He was.

Question from the Audience: Was Charles driven by a certain political ideology?

Mingus: No, Charles just expressed himself at all times, and if there was something on his mind or if there was something happening politically or racially, or if something was going on in the streets, or whatever, he would talk about it. It didn't spill over into his.... It had nothing to do with his music. Charles did not put his music at the service of his political ideas. He was too much of a composer for that. He wrote some political pieces with narrations, which we'll be doing tomorrow: "Oh, Lord, don't let them drop that atomic bomb on me," or "Fables of Faubus" or "Freedom." He wrote political pieces, but his political views had nothing to do, on the whole, with his compositions, but he would talk about everything on the bandstand. I don't want to confuse the two. He wasn't putting his music at the service of his ideas.

Mingus: For example, Tim Leary wanted him to do something musically with him at a time when Tim was very fashionable and popular, and Charles turned him down. Allen Ginsberg wanted him to do something and Charles turned him down. The Black Panthers.... His music wasn't for sale.

Gonnerman: And would he also talk to the audience about their role as an audience?

Mingus: No, he just wanted them to listen.

Gonnerman: And *just* to listen.

Mingus: To listen. One time there were people at a table in front of the bandstand talking, so he said, "OK, you talk for four measures and we'll shut up, and then we'll play for four measures and you shut up." [Laughter]

Gonnerman: So he had a sense of the jazz club as a concert hall.

Mingus: Oh, absolutely. He felt his music probably deserved to be played in concert halls rather than in noisy jazz clubs, but he expected people to listen and he let that be known. He didn't want cash registers ringing when people were playing solos.

Gonnerman: It looked on the Europe tour in '64 that he was in concert halls. Would he be in concert halls in Europe but not in concert halls in the United States?

Mingus: I think both. It was a question of money, also. It's more expensive to perform in a big concert hall. I don't remember back then how often jazz was played in concert halls. It was probably mostly played in clubs in the early days.

Question from the Audience: How much did he want to control the music?

Mingus: Well, he wanted his musicians to play in the spirit of what he wrote. He was a composer and he wanted his compositions performed, but as I say, within the context of those compositions, there's an enormous amount of space and freedom for musicians. When musicians solo, that's when they can do whatever they want to, and ideally they will play within the context of the piece. On occasion, I will walk in and have no idea of what piece they're playing because they've gone so far afield. But a good soloist is going to play within the context of the music and find his own way of bringing his own expression to that. But yeah, Charles was all for "Play yourself, man."

Gonnerman: We have a concert tomorrow night. You've been busy all day because of the ice storm figuring out how this is all going to work. Where do things stand right now?

Mingus: Right now, I know that we're going to have two musicians. We have the marvelous piano player Kenny Drew Jr., who's coming here from Florida, where fortunately there's no snow, so there's no problem with Kenny getting here. Craig Handy is already out here in San Francisco visiting his parents. The other five: we're already tapping musicians here in San Francisco. There are great musicians. John Handy, for example, played with Mingus and has played with the Mingus Dynasty. He's here in San

Francisco. We don't know yet what's happening. In the tradition of Mingus and jazz, everything is uncertain and full of surprise.

Gonnerman: It is happening tomorrow night, and friends of the Aurora Forum can go for 50 percent off. The code for that is Mingus AF, for Aurora Forum. You can say that at the door. You're going to be there and you speak from the stage during Mingus Dynasty performances?

Mingus: Sometimes, sometimes not. It depends.

Gonnerman: You're going to talk to the audience about listening, being an audience?

Mingus: Well, if our bass player, Boris Kozlov is here, I probably won't because Boris knows more about the music than I do, I think, at this point. It depends.

Gonnerman: Well, I hope we'll hear more from you.

Thank you very much, Professor Clayborne Carson and Sue Mingus for being with us tonight. I hope that what our conversation tonight has done has whetted your appetite for reading the book yourself, *Tonight at Noon: A Love Story*. The Aurora Forum - Stanford Lively Arts Jazz Book Club will meet tomorrow night in the coffee house at 6:30 before the concert to talk about the book. Please come whether you've read it or not. We can read passages and talk about them together and talk about the things that we've learned here together this evening.

Carson: You can download it onto your Kindle and get it right now.

Gonnerman: That's right.
Thank you very much. [Applause]

...

Sue Mingus

Since Charles Mingus's death in 1979, Sue Mingus has created and continues to direct repertory ensembles to carry on the music of her late husband. The most well known is the Mingus Big Band, a New York institution that performs weekly to packed crowds at the Jazz Standard. Other bands include the Mingus Dynasty, the original, seven-piece ensemble founded shortly after Mingus's death; and the Orchestra, a ten-piece ensemble that focuses on some of the lesser-known works in the composer's vast catalogue, and which features bassoon, French horn, bass clarinet and a guitar. In 1989, to great acclaim, she produced Mingus's two-hour masterwork, *Epitaph*, for 31 musicians conducted by Gunther Schuller at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall.

In June 2005 she started her own label, Sue Mingus Music, in conjunction with Sunnyside Records and Universal Music Jazz France, and released *I Am Three*, an album which features all three current repertory bands. An extension of her pioneering Revenge Records label, initially formed in the 1990s to combat the piracy of Mingus's music, the move also reaches back to the spirit of independently released music, a tradition that in

part was started by Charles Mingus. Future Sue Mingus Music releases include the first CD reissue of the 1965 Music *Written for Monterey, Not Played, Performed at UCLA*, a '60s live date from Cornell University with Eric Dolphy, and more previously unreleased material.

Since 1993, she has produced seven Mingus Big Band recordings for the Dreyfus label, including *Tonight at Noon* (2002), *The Essential Mingus Big Band* (2001), *Blues and Politics* (1999), *Que Viva Mingus* (1997), *Live in Time* (1996), *Gunslinging Birds* (1995), and *Nostalgia in Times Square* (1993), which were nominated for Grammy awards.

In 2002, Pantheon (Random House) released Sue's memoir of her life with Mingus entitled *Tonight At Noon: A Love Story*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year. It was released in paperback the following year by Persus Books, and has been translated into several languages.

**Clayborne Carson, Founding Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Research and Education Institute and Professor of History at Stanford**

Clayborne Carson, Founding Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute and Professor of History at Stanford, has devoted his professional life to the study of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the movements King inspired. Since 1975, he has taught at Stanford University, where he is now professor of history and founding director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Under his direction, the King Papers Project, a component of the Institute, has produced six volumes of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*—a projected fourteen-volume comprehensive edition of King's speeches, sermons, correspondence, publications, and unpublished writings. An honorary degree from Morehouse College granted in 2007 is among his many academic honors and awards.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Comments?

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu

Aurora Forum at Stanford University
537 Lomita Mall, MC 2250
Stanford, CA 94305-2250

The Aurora Forum is directed by Mark Gonnerman and sponsored by Stanford Lively Arts, The Stanford Institute for Creativity and the Arts (SiCa), The Office of the President and Provost, and Stanford's Office of Public Affairs