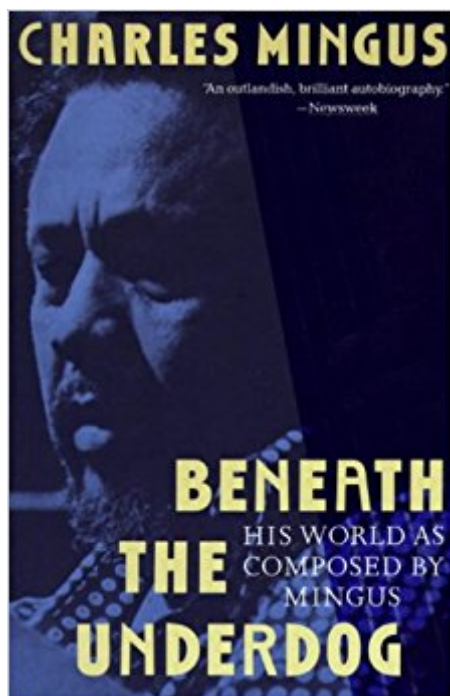


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Beneath The Underdog: His World As Composed By Mingus



Synopsis

Bass player extraordinaire Charles Mingus, who died in 1979, is one of the essential composers in the history of jazz, and *Beneath the Underdog*, his celebrated, wild, funny, demonic, anguished, shocking, and profoundly moving memoir, is the greatest autobiography ever written by a jazz musician. It tells of his God-haunted childhood in Watts during the 1920s and 1930s; his outcast adolescent years; his apprenticeship, not only with jazzmen but also with pimps, hookers, junkies, and hoodlums; and his golden years in New York City with such legendary figures as Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie. Here is Mingus in his own words, from shabby roadhouses to fabulous estates, from the psychiatric wards of Bellevue to worlds of mysticism and solitude, but for all his travels never straying too far, always returning to music. "This book is the purest of dynamite. Like the autobiographies of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday and like A. B. Spellman's *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*, it says more about the American psyche in general and black survival in particular than the sociologists and psychologists ever can in their stiff, soulless vocabularies.... Somber, comic, disturbing, boastful, confessional, sentimental, contradictory, poetic, irascible, impish...lyrical, nasty, angelic, reflective...expressionistic, picaresque, jive...this is a powerful book."

Rolling Stone

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Customer Reviews

A wild, lyrical, and anguished autobiography, in which Charles Mingus pays short shrift to the facts

but plunges to the very bottom of his psyche, coming up for air only when it pleases him. He takes the reader through his childhood in Watts, his musical education by the likes of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker, and his prodigious appetites--intellectual, culinary, and sexual. The book is a jumble, but a glorious one, by a certified American genius.

At once an essential composer in the history of jazz and a bass player extraordinaire, Charles Mingus was born on April 22, 1922 in Nogales, Arizona, and grew up in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts. He made his recording debut with Lionel Hampton in 1947, and performed on numerous recordings with Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Stan Getz, Duke Ellington, Bud Powell, Art Tatum, and many others. His several honors included a Guggenheim Fellowship, an honorary degree from Brandeis University, and the Slee Chair in Music at the State University of New York in Buffalo. Charles Mingus died in 1979 at the age of 56.

I am astonished at how few reviewers seem to "get" this book -- I knew it was a masterpiece, that much is obvious to me -- and it has fueled my love of Charles Mingus and his music to even greater heights than before. But I had no idea it were possible that it could be such a woefully and widely misunderstood masterpiece. To be clear where I'm coming from, I try to concentrate my reading on literature, rather than pulp and garbage, as I have the feeling that life is short and we've only got so much time to try and figure it out. Well, for passionate seekers, this book is literature, and it's far from a waste of time - it is, in fact, a crucial document. Sure, it's got some arguable flaws. He DOES go on about sex to a degree that might get a little tedious time and again. And per his disclaimer, there's plenty in here we won't feel compelled to take as 100% fact - yes, that might include the episode with the 20-plus prostitutes in Tijuana. But Good Lord, if you ever wanted a direct view into the mind of a towering, volcanic personality who was not only a musical genius, but a genius of a kind when it came to life itself, this is your book. Is sex not the stuff of life? Would most of us not wish there were more of it in our own memoirs? One of the most impressive aspects of this book are the speeches and dialogues - whether they are transcriptions from a near-photographic memory, or the artful compositions of a first-rate talent, they scream with authenticity, and provide an absolutely rich, riveting and priceless glimpse into the mind of Black America - and White America, for that matter - in the 20th Century. Life lived as hard as it can be lived: master musicians, master pimps, wizened old ladies, mean old bastards, precocious kids, happy-go-lucky wastrels, depressed geniuses, many of them waxing deep and philosophical, in short or at length. Much of it is pithy indeed, bouts of wisdom and foolishness that are at turns equally impressive. Heavy, cutting takes

on life from souls who have dived deeper into it than most of us could ever afford to, emerging with some of the most vivid and entertaining commentary on sex, race, religion, death and yes - music - that you'll ever read anywhere. Foremost among them is Mingus himself. While obviously capable of brutal and even cruel behavior, what is most striking is his profound sensitivity, his not-always-present but striking capacity for compassion, his astonishing intellect, his voracious appetite for everything - including an understanding of what the hell life is all about, anyway - and his talent for getting big portions of it, if not all of it. And yes - there's also his brilliance as a writer. Is it choppy, is it dirty, is it irresponsible, is it offensive, is it woefully, fragmentary, incomplete and arbitrary, is it sad and pathetic, is it excessive, is it awe-inspiring, does it make you want to quit it's so good sometimes, does it keep you coming back to drink in those sad, searing, hilarious, utterly moving and heart-breaking speeches by Fats Navarro? Damn, it's all of those things as far as I'm concerned, and that's OK. It's certainly fair that a lot of good folks might be offended by the naughty parts, which are in no short supply. Nevertheless, if you're not fascinated by this book, I would submit that your interest in jazz and all that concerns jazz - which is quite a lot of things in this world that are very, very important and sadly under appreciated - is tragically limited. So try reading it again!

As fictionalized autobiography goes, it rocked in some places (near the beginning) but the dialogue within quotation marks became saccharine - especially around the middle. Hard to finish reading. Mingus' note gives kudos to his editor, wonder why..

This is one of the best autobiographies I have ever read. It is a truly generous book: Mingus really lets you into his complicated, inspired, and suffering mind. Well worth the time for all jazz fans.

A raw, surprising sexy book that ranges from a wild childhood through musical genius to the halls of a mental institution. Better on race than anything that thinks it is better on race.

Total stream of consciousness...what a life of a Jazz giant..he was larger than his size and knew how to swing with the best...this book should be used as a study in neurosis and literature..not just the story of the underdog..the pain is there so is the awareness of personality..ones own..not as a disorder but as a spirit in motion. The colorful personalities are real, you won't learn much about Mingus the musician but Mingus the man.

Interesting

A Classic.

Mingus is a great story teller... If you've listened to his music then you already know that. Nonetheless, it's a very entertaining read; well written and funny as hell. Buy this book.

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