

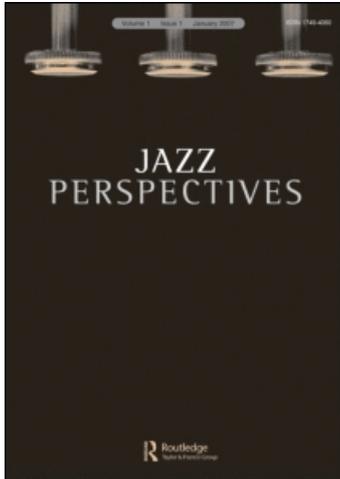
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Mingus in the Act: Confronting the Legacies of Vaudeville and Minstrelsy

Jennifer Griffith

Charles always knew what audiences wanted and how to entertain them—“which [I] didn’t do,” he said ... He could be something of a ham actor for his own enjoyment from time to time, but entertainment was not what he was after. He wanted audiences to listen to his music and take it seriously. He believed it belonged in concert halls, not noisy jazz clubs, but noisy clubs and ringing cash registers were the reality of his time.

Sue Mingus¹

Pimps were street entertainers posing as entrepreneurs, and their blatant commercialism set them against the artist Mingus hoped to be.

Scott Saul²

It is important to move beyond continually attributing black men’s (and women’s) identity as always and only functioning as a reaction to a white male gaze. To reconsider black masculinity without depending on how white men represent and/or appropriate that experience is an important step toward a space which embraces multiple articulations of black male subjectivity.

Nichole T. Rustin³

Nineteenth-century minstrelsy and vaudeville stereotypes of black men have had a variety of obscured influences on both white and African American musicians in the twentieth century. Such complex traces of the minstrel legacy can notably be found across the career and recordings of bassist-composer Charles Mingus. As a musician who long chafed at the racializing of African Americans, Mingus struggled to rearticulate black masculine identities both as a performer and as an artist. In this essay, I consider how the history of vaudeville and minstrelsy informed aspects of Mingus’s career as an entertainer between 1955 and 1965, a period when his career reached its zenith in terms of both performances and recordings. Rather than prove specific ties or influences in my exploration, I suggest and reflect on associations and inferences found in the aura surrounding Mingus’s historical moment. In my examinations of his writings, composition titles, and lectures to his audiences, as well as in my

¹ Susan Mingus, personal communication, January 19, 2007. Interestingly, the term “ham actor” derives from the practice of white minstrel performers using ham grease to remove burnt cork (i.e., blackface makeup) after a show. See Michael Rogin, “Democracy and Burnt Cork,” *Representations* 46 (Spring 1994): 8.

² Scott Saul, “Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Workshop,” *American Quarterly* 53 (Sept. 2001): 408.

³ Nichole T. Rustin, *Mingus Fingers: Charles Mingus, Black Masculinity, and Postwar Jazz Culture* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999), 68.

discussions of two of his compositions, “Eat That Chicken” and “The Clown,” I focus on his overt statements and on how he “signified”⁴ on blackface practices and their cultural legacy.

In his 1971 autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus wrote, “I am three.”⁵ He describes the three sides of his personality as a complex mixture of a witness who stands unmoving, a man who attacks because he is afraid, and a man who wants to trust and love. In her dissertation on Mingus, Nichole Rustin, in calling for deeper analysis of black male identities, also distinguishes between several personae in which Mingus—from his three perspectives—struggled to understand himself. She notes that these other personae include the composer, the performer, the bandleader, the celebrity, the pimp, and the intellectual.⁶ Mingus himself, she reminds us, “insists that there can be no single representation of him because his own sense of identity depends upon the complexity, multiplicity, and intimacy of his relationships.”⁷

Onstage, Mingus often drew from the early history of jazz, when black (and white) musicians functioned principally as entertainers. But even as he musically and verbally acknowledged his debt to key jazz forebears, Mingus questioned and challenged such relations in his aesthetic and political identity. For example, such complex relations can be seen in his connections to Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. Mingus’s performance identity is also linked to that of Louis Armstrong, with whom he worked in his early career, and who was regularly later labeled an Uncle Tom by Mingus and others of the younger generation. Mingus also invited comparison with Jelly Roll Morton in their shared identities as bandleaders and pimps.⁸ He wrote in 1959 that he “had bought a book of Jelly Roll Morton’s tunes that I planned to arrange.”⁹ In *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus used his identity as a pimp as a metaphor for the commercially compromised jazz musician. Playing the role of the “oversexed” pimp made Morton and Mingus both salesmen and showmen, giving their public personae an extroverted persuasiveness. Mingus the pianist

⁴ I refer to the concept of “Signifyin(g)” to analyze textual interplay as outlined by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For simplicity, I omit the capitalization and parentheses.

⁵ Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Random House, 1971), 3.

⁶ Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, 53–54. Rustin’s dissertation investigates Mingus’s multiple identities. Scott Saul’s work on Mingus (see especially “Outrageous Freedom”), implicit in the epigraph above and elsewhere, reinforces Rustin’s observations in his limited contextualizing of Mingus outside a white male perspective. For a related discussion, see Salim Washington’s “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now’: Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 27–49.

⁷ Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, 52.

⁸ About his composition, “Jelly Roll,” Mingus stated, “It had nothing to do with Jelly Roll’s music. I heard he was a pimp so I decided to relate myself to him—like I had a ‘Jellyroll Soul’ too.” From Charles Mingus, *Charles Mingus: More Than a Fakebook*, ed. Andrew Homzy (New York: Jazz Workshop, 1991), 69.

⁹ Liner notes to Charles Mingus, *Blues and Roots*, Atlantic SD-1305-2, 1990, compact disc (orig. Atlantic SD-1305, 1959, LP).

nodded to Fats Waller and the Harlem stride piano school.¹⁰ His debt to Waller as pianist and entertainer is especially clear in “Eat That Chicken,” on the 1962 album, *Oh Yeah*.¹¹ Perhaps Mingus claimed Morton, Armstrong, and Waller as his jazz forefathers in the sense that they, like him—and unlike Ellington—performed primarily in smaller ensembles and were usually associated with smaller venues.¹²

Despite such self-conscious debts to jazz history, Mingus differed from his predecessors—and even his contemporaries—in his insistence that his audience move beyond the roles of being passive consumers or mere recipients of “entertainment.” From this perspective, an audience was under his care and in a position to get hip to *his art*. This stance reversed the roles of audience and performer. He demanded outright that his audience transcend the role of passive listener, that they distinguish between art and entertainment, and that they make concerted efforts to *please him* by listening quietly to his music as other audiences were accustomed to doing in concert halls. This latter desire turned the traditional function of entertainment upside down. Mingus’s determination to challenge the received role of black entertainer derived from both the early history of black men onstage, of which he was well aware, and the white minstrels who in various and contradictory ways, who had emulated them. To consider Mingus’s influences in the lives of precursor black male entertainers, my discussion moves from a consideration of the early history of minstrelsy, through the careers of Morton and Armstrong, and then focuses Mingus’s performance identity in the ongoing transformation of artistic and political developments from the late 1940s to the late 1950s.

Minstrelsy, Vaudeville, and the Early Jazz Performers

Since the mid-1950s, minstrelsy historians have increasingly argued that the dynamics of racial exchanges in pre-Civil War culture bear significant implications for understanding later American entertainment traditions and race relations up to our current time. Eric Lott, for instance, has described how American minstrelsy first emerged in the late 1820s, “at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters.” Such stage precedents, he writes, included “the harlequin of the commedia dell’arte, the clown of English pantomime and the clown of the American circus, the

¹⁰ See, for instance, related commentary in Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* manuscript, Charles Mingus Collection, Library of Congress (LOC), manuscript box 45 7/5, p. 98. Mingus allied himself to a host of musicians in his introduction: “To the professional friends of jazz musicians in heritage of the traditions of Art Tatum, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, Teddy Buckner, Kid Ory, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Chu Berry, Oscar Pettiford, Slam Stewart, Lester Young, Henry ‘Red’ Allen, Sid Catlett, Baby Dodds, Baby Lawrence, Snake White, Lloyd Reese, Red Mack, Big Chief Scott, Joe Albany, Al Haig, Billie Holliday, Dick Twatzik, Jimmy Knepper, Earl Hines, Monk, Duke Ellington, Rex Stewart, Red Rodney, Charlie Parker—the black creator of the art and the heirs, Max Roach, Fats Navarro, and myself.”

¹¹ Charles Mingus, *Oh Yeah*, Atlantic 90667-2, 1990, compact disc (orig. Atlantic, 1962, LP).

¹² Although Armstrong fronted Luis Russell’s big bands, as well as other orchestras that were assembled for him, he was not known as a bandleader in the sense that Basie and Ellington were. He was primarily a soloist. Ellington’s influence on Mingus as a composer and bandleader obviously deserves greater attention, but an appraisal of how the older bandleader’s appearances onstage were models for Mingus’s own performances and presentations in concert and club venues might be better attended to in a separate study.

burlesque tramp, [and] perhaps the ‘blackman’ of English folk drama.”¹³ In American practice, minstrelsy depicted African Americans as lazy, boastful, and physically needy characters that represented the opposite of portrayals of hardworking, modest but ambitious, white Protestants.¹⁴ Michael Rogin has explained that, from the late nineteenth century, vaudeville succeeded minstrelsy as the most popular American entertainment form, and this stage tradition in turn was succeeded by silent film. He articulates how each of these successions involved extensions of minstrelsy practices, particularly as Jewish vaudeville entertainers (like George Burns, Eddie Cantor, and Al Jolson) used blackface in the strongly anti-Semitic climate of the 1920s to hide their Jewish identities behind parodies of a more despised social/racial group. Similarly, live vaudeville, staged-movie prologue revues, and silent movies across the 1920s continued to portray minstrelsy-derived black characters as grinning-mouthed, lazy, and greedy.

In her reading of the widespread, minstrelized stage versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Linda Williams notes the shift from Harriet B. Stowe’s sympathetic portrayal of Uncle Tom—a depiction that revolutionized whites’ abilities to see a black man as a human being whose virtue could evoke their empathy—to a ridiculed and desexed passive figure. The “Tom” material in minstrel shows, she observes, underwent a shift from racial sympathy to the “Anti-Tom” racial antipathy seen in Thomas F. Dixon, Jr.’s 1905 novel, *The Clansman*. Dixon’s novel was the source for D. W. Griffith’s landmark film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and both texts relocated sympathy from slaves back to masters. Tom’s “desexing” opposed the comically oversexed Zip Coon minstrel character, who became the sexually voracious Anti-Tom seen in the works of Dixon and Griffith.¹⁵

Lott suggests that a dialectic of “misrecognition and identification” formed around early white minstrelsy performances with white responses falling across a spectrum, from negative to positive, between ridicule and admiration of the stereotypes of African American style.¹⁶ In the South of the pre- and post-Civil War years, a small number of black performers ultimately began to mimic the stereotypes that whites projected onto them through new forms of black entertainment. For black audiences, their caricatures involved subtle ironies and not-so-subtle parodies of such white misconceptions. Similarly, William J. Mahar reminds us that minstrel performers in the antebellum years contributed to “the sometimes contradictory American attitudes and beliefs about race, gender, and class.”¹⁷ Without denying the racist stereotypes codified in blackface minstrelsy, Mahar explores ways in which male minstrels acted out their anxieties about women, elitists, and intellectuals, as well as other social issues, via the black mask. He observes that “minstrel performers, even the rank amateurs, assumed, if only for an evening, that all races, classes, professions, and genders were fit subject for comedy....

¹³ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 22.

¹⁴ Rogin, “Democracy and Burnt Cork,” 30.

¹⁵ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 64.

¹⁶ Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 43 (June 1991): 237–238.

¹⁷ William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1999), 2.

At their best minstrels are social satirists, at their worst they joined in denigrating members of other ethnic groups.¹⁸

Where Lott sees appropriation and ridicule, W. H. Lhamon finds complex layers of “appeal and exchange” in black dancing, and further notes the white “public becoming patron to a specific [black dance] style.” That said, Lhamon further articulates an unmistakable historical “slippage from *patron* to *patronize*, nurture to condescension,” trends that parallel Lott’s identification and misrecognition continuum. However, Lhamon also warns that “the crudest mistake we can make ... is to assume that the connection between public and performance is ... either simple patrons or simple patronization.” In blackface performance, he maintains, the line between the two factions is blurred.¹⁹ As Williams points out, black minstrelsy performers languished under a lack of maneuverability, unable to “pass” out of their skin color. Nevertheless, the ridicule and desire/envy division was still alive in the later performance careers of African Americans such as Morton and Armstrong, and Morton’s Creole background gave him a particularly ironic perspective in the cultural exchange between black and white.

Lawrence Gushee has written of the dichotomous reception that dogged early performers such as Armstrong and Morton. For instance, he notes that “It is precisely the vaudevillian in Morton (and others of his generation) that has seemed barely tolerable to many only because he was otherwise a wonderful jazz musician.”²⁰ Gushee’s chronology shows that Morton performed as a blackface comedian for white and black audiences.²¹ Morton’s biographer, Phil Pastras, lists a variety of other occupations—pimp, vaudevillian, pool hustler, card sharp, pianist, composer, bandleader—that the pianist-composer was engaged in before going to the West Coast to concentrate on his music. Those earlier years were formative in Morton’s musical life, and they give some insight into his subsequent stage personality.

Morton’s ancestry, in part, makes him the exceptional example of how some early (non-white) jazz entertainers saw themselves operating within the shadow of minstrelsy-related roles. As a Creole, Morton’s identity lay outside black and white, yet he identified to some extent with both races. Up until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Creoles of color, the mostly Catholic, mostly French-speaking free people, had distinguished themselves from enslaved Anglophone-Protestants of African

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

²⁰ Lawrence Gushee, “A Preliminary Chronology of the Early Career of Ferd ‘Jelly Roll’ Morton,” *American Music* 3 (Winter 1985): 389–390. Gushee refers to the years before 1917, when Morton moved to the West Coast to focus on his music. He also notes that Morton’s nickname “Jelly Roll” was not uncommon in black show business of this day.

²¹ A publicity photo of Morton in blackface is well known. See William Russell, “*Oh, Mister Jelly*”: *A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook* (Copenhagen: JazzMedia ApS, 1999), 477. Gushee finds evidence of Morton’s minstrel and vaudeville performances in the contemporary African American newspaper the *Freeman*. See Gushee, “A Preliminary Chronology,” 391. Also, William Kenney notes that Morton’s stage acts were frequently listed in the vaudeville column of the *Chicago Defender*. Because a large circuit of black theaters emerged after World War I, Morton likely performed in blackface for mainly black audiences. William Howland Kenney III, “The Influence of Black Vaudeville on Early Jazz,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 14 (Autumn 1986): 233–248.

descent.²² Creoles of color saw their alternative to mere black and white as deriving from multiple influences of African heritage, Spanish rule, and French laws and culture. The degree of freedom they held was, in their view, tied to French culture and the Rights of Man tenets of the French Revolution, and especially the Haitian Revolution of 1804. After the Purchase, the intermediate legal classifications for Creoles gradually disappeared,²³ culminating in the failures of Reconstruction, Plessy vs. Ferguson (separate but equal), and Jim Crow laws. It was no longer a legal option to identify as Creole and Afro-French Creoles were forced into black and white identities based on skin color and social status.

With Creolité no longer an ethnic option, Morton was forced to create an identity from the white and black influences he had absorbed. His generation of Creole performers (which included Sidney Bechet and Fred Keppard) was the first to create its identity from the scraps of a destroyed heritage, and to forge a form of masculinity that could support a performing career. His own pronouncements about his ethnicity were contradictory as he mixed his Creole and French background into the gambling, entertainment, and pimping ways of the “sporting life” ethos in New Orleans. As the jazz guitarist and writer, Edmond “Doc” Souchon (a contemporary of Morton), pointed out, Morton’s attitudes on race were similar to those of many Creoles of his time. He observed that

Jelly Roll’s attitude was in no small measure due to his complete rebellion against the strict Jim Crow laws of the South ... [He] was the victim of his own particular “cult,” or “social group” if you will, for in New Orleans the self-imposed color line between the light and the dark Negro is much more marked than the Jim Crow line between white and colored.... Jelly scorned the blacks, detested the lights, and was not accepted by the whites!²⁴

Yet another contemporary, Charles Edward Smith, wrote that, “In personal talks with me, Jelly always knew himself to be a Negro, proud though he was of that ‘French background.’ He was just bitter underneath that being Negro during his lifetime assured one of little status.”²⁵

²² The history of both black and white Creole identity has been discussed more thoroughly in Virginia Domínguez, *White By Definition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Also see David Ake, “Blue Horizon: Creole Culture and Early New Orleans Jazz,” *Echo* 1 (Fall 1995), at <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/volume1-issue1/ake/ake-article.html> (accessed January 25, 2011). Ake notes that the French Black Code (or Code Noir) sought to unify the French “‘body politic’ within ‘One Blood,’” and intermarriage was arguably a “geopolitical objective of Louis XIV’s France.” This ensured that French slave owners acculturated their slaves into the Catholic religion and in other areas “both public and private.” With the Louisiana Purchase the laws were amended to generally follow the U.S. “one drop” classification practices, but certain articles provided dispensations for racial intermarriage and manumission of slaves.

²³ Thompson, *Exiles at Home*, 6.

²⁴ Edmond Souchon, as quoted in Martin Williams, *Jazz Changes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 146.

²⁵ Russell, *Oh, Mr. Jelly!*, 483. With reference to an April 1969 letter by Charles Edward Smith, Russell notes that “Charles did not believe at all that Jelly ever seriously claimed to be white, or wanted to associate only with white people.”

Morton's occasional denial of his skin color, and his attitude and actions regarding his French heritage, is further complicated by his Haitian ancestry.²⁶ Gushee has observed that Morton and his family, like many Creoles, believed in the usefulness of Haitian voodoo magic and rituals. Morton's godmother, Eulalie Hécaud, practiced the "white magic" of Haiti with its rituals that allegedly cure illness. Morton followed her advice and instructions at crucial moments in his life, as when he was convinced that Harrison Smith, a West Indian booking agent and promoter with whom he shared an office and did business, had put a curse on him.²⁷ Generally, diasporic people retain certain customs while jockeying for position in the dominant culture and the descendants of Haitians in New Orleans (or in the South in general) were no exception.

Richard B. Allen, the former curator of the Jazz Archive at Tulane University, has written that "Morton often insisted to singer Lizzie Miles that he was white."²⁸ If, as Souchon suggests, Morton "scorned the blacks [and] detested the lights [mulattos, quadroons, etc.]," he may well have adopted, for personal and professional reasons, a double consciousness as a blackface comedian. As both a Creole and a blackface performer, he learned to parody or deride blacks, and may not have perceived any irony if he believed himself to be white or as "good" as white. In front of African American audiences, then, Morton's complicated brew of identities allowed him to switch between his perceived identity as either white or Creole—both denigrating Anglophone African Americans—and, blacked up, as mocking his own (white) perceptions of black life. It is unlikely that Morton swallowed whole the mockery by blacks of whites' views of blacks, considering that he claimed, at least in some contexts, to be white. His attempts to participate in the tradition of whites mocking/envying blacks through blackface performance was surely an important element of his efforts to maintain his Creole image and to manage his anxieties of being perceived as black.

Morton's early days as a pimp and performer required him to spend hours on the street and to develop an appropriate persona. New Orleans clarinetist Barney Bigard recalled how, later in 1930s New York, he and others ribbed Jelly Roll, taking advantage of how his street personality had become a source of entertainment:

He always loved to fuss and argue with somebody. He knew it all. He was a big shot at that time and could always talk a good fight. He and Chick Webb would stand on a street corner and argue so bad you could have become rich selling tickets ... Jelly would tell Chick he [Jelly Roll] was the greatest and Chick would tell him[,] "Yeah?"

²⁶ Gushee, "Preliminary Chronology," 393. Morton spoke to Alan Lomax about his heritage, saying, "As I can understand, my folks were in the city of New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase, and all my folks came directly from the shores of France." Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1950), 8–9. Gushee's genealogy has Pierre Monette, Morton's great-grandfather, born in Cap François (today Cap Haitian), and his father's line—the Lamothe's—"quite probably going back to Port-au-Prince or Saint Marc.... In addition the roots of the Hécaud family [his godmother's family] were Haitian."

²⁷ Phil Pastras, *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 197, 202. Also see pp. 56–71 for a discussion of voodoo in Haiti and its connection to the Creole communities in New Orleans and related environs. Morton's fear was endemic to many Creoles and black Baptists in the South if we look at the preponderance of mojo, hoodoo, and other references to voodoo in recordings of blues artists.

²⁸ In David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 26. Ake writes that Alan Lomax, too, claims that Morton denied his "Negro status," although I have not found any reference to this.

Well come around to see my band tonight. We just got a new arrangement on so and so,” and Chick would hum him the whole thing out of his head. Top to bottom. Jelly would say: “That ain’t shit. Listen to this one,” and he’d go to humming his stuff. People would all gather round. They thought there was a fight going on I guess. It was a show, those two guys, Chick with his little crooked back and Jelly with that damned great diamond stuck in his teeth. I guess ordinary people had never seen nothing like that before.²⁹

Webb and Morton likely regarded their interaction as a cutting contest, and as Bigard implies, their street performance also acted as a site for advertising professional performances.

Stride pianist James P. Johnson describes an especially performative element in Morton’s act at a New York club in the 1920s:

I’ve seen Jelly Roll Morton, who had a great attitude, approach a piano. He would take his overcoat off. It had a special lining that would catch everybody’s eye. So he would turn it inside out instead of folding it, he would lay it lengthwise along the top of the upright very solemnly as if that coat was worth a fortune and had to be handled very tenderly. Then he’s [sic] take a silk handkerchief, shake it out to show it off properly, and dust off the stool. He’s [sic] sit down then, hit his special chord (every tickler had his special trademark chord, like a signal) and he’d be gone! The first rag he’d play was always a spirited one to astound the audience.³⁰

According to Pastras, Johnson’s description of Morton’s “priestly persona” invokes Ralph Ellison’s idea of the jazz performer as “leader of a public rite,” and as a figure who plays a role similar to that of a preacher or secular leader in African American culture. Jazzmen defended their way of life “no less ‘righteously’ than others dedicated themselves to the church,” Ellison wrote. In support of this characterization, Pastras further points to Morton’s Roman Catholicism, which would have given him real familiarity with the priestly persona.³¹

Morton’s vaudeville background notably reappears in the sound effects of a number of his 1920s recordings. An important precedent for such effects can be found in the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s first recordings of “novelty” jazz-related music, and most famously in their 1917 “Livery Stable Blues” with both the band’s barnyard noises (that were themselves indebted to 1860s and 1870s minstrel acts) and publicity photos that featured the performers in mugging grimaces and get-ups. During the late teens and early 1920s, Morton and other performers used these proven and profitable vaudeville tropes. In Morton’s case, much of this novelty music has a subversive playfulness punctuated with aural effects from animal, street, and harbor noises. In the mid-1920s, Morton’s innovations with his group, the Red Hot Peppers, produced uniquely rich arrangements, but he also paid attention to various details and effects that had worked well for others, particularly as he sought to increase his popularity by appealing to contemporary listeners with his own recorded novelty effects. In the 1927 recording of “Billy Goat Stomp,” for example, Morton used both animal noises and an annoyed

²⁹ Pastras, *Dead Man Blues*, 4.

³⁰ Quoted in Martin Williams, “The Roll,” in *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* (New York: Da Capo, 1967), 52.

³¹ Pastras, *Dead Man Blues*, 9.

interjection (“Man, take that goat outta here”) to capture his listeners’ attention with the novelty of hearing a goat’s bleat through a phonograph. In “Sidewalk Blues” and “Dead Man Blues,” he used street and harbor noises. Such vaudeville and minstrelsy bits were subject to racial misreadings; the novelty and dramatic hooks Morton enjoyed held derogatory meanings for whites about black culture. For instance, with Lew LaMar’s laugh in the 1927 “Hyena Stomp,” Morton’s choice of effects promotes—as his generation would recognize—the racist stereotypes from his vaudeville days.³² Here, the hyena’s laugh can be read as both a novelty effect and a bestial gesture (black man as hyena), since the inference of primitivism was already well-inscribed in Euro/African binaries. Thus, tension exists between Morton’s perceptions of his own racial identity and both the novelty aural effects his recordings exhibit (what whites might perceive as “primitive” black signifiers) and the minstrel tropes he performed as a blackface comedian in the Zip Coon role. This latter figure, in turn, countered other white representations of black masculinity in American culture, particularly the aforementioned hypersexualized brute depicted in Dixon’s and Griffith’s works (characterizations that were echoed, as Williams argues, in the media’s images of O. J. Simpson in the 1990s).³³ Such disparaging black male stereotypes were more directly confronted by the later generation of jazz performers that included Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis. Mingus later honored Morton with his own creative interpolation of minstrel tropes in his “Jelly Roll,” and by punctuating some of his own early recordings with siren and cymbal reproductions of street and harbor noises, notably in “A Foggy Day (in San Francisco).”

Like Morton, during the 1910s, Louis Armstrong witnessed the minstrel acts of traveling performers passing through New Orleans. According to Thomas Brothers, beyond Armstrong’s adolescent interests in these sorts of performances, the sheer joy of experimenting with dramatic gestures and facial expressions were among the favorite games Armstrong enjoyed as a youngster. Brothers explains that “the degree to which minstrel styles were saturated with racism and social exploitation was overlooked [by black musicians and performers], simply because of the opportunities for performance that minstrelsy provided.”³⁴

Armstrong reportedly began his performing career in a talent show at the Iroquois Theater in New Orleans. During this appearance, he covered his face with flour. The Iroquois was a nickelodeon and vaudeville theater for African Americans, and this reversal of blacking up overtly signified on white conceptions of black caricature. Later, Armstrong onstage often played the self-mocking plantation negro, an enterprise that by the 1920s had become synonymous with “Uncle Tomming.”³⁵ By the 1940s and

³² “Billy Goat Stomp,” Victor 20772-B, 1927; “Hyena Stomp,” Victor 20772-A, 1927.

³³ Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 266, 269, 362n35.

³⁴ Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 231.

³⁵ James Weldon Johnson, a prominent writer of the Harlem Renaissance, explained that “For my part, I was never an admirer of Uncle Tom, nor of his type of goodness; but I believe that there were lots of old Negroes as foolishly good as he; the proof of which is that they knowingly stayed and worked on the plantations that furnished sinews for the army which was fighting to keep them enslaved.” Cited in “Uncle Tom,” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom (accessed January 23, 2011).

1950s, when figures like Gillespie, Davis, and Mingus chastised Armstrong for his onstage tommying, they were almost surely unaware of such early signifying efforts as the Iroquois performance. Through his mugging performance persona, Armstrong perfected a style of shifting quickly between the comic and the serious. Such practices reflect a stage sensitivity that involves (as it did with Morton) perpetual shifting between artist and entertainer. Within the same act, Armstrong presented both what black audiences might see as a parody, and what white audiences interpreted as a validation, of stereotypes that whites felt compelled to impose on black identity. He drew animosity from blacks in later generations who came to resent his great success in embodiments of roles that verified or indulged whites' stereotypes of blacks. Only in Mingus's generation was there a forceful rejection by black audiences of Armstrong as the surviving representative of the now outmoded strategy.

Brothers asserts that Armstrong's mugging stage persona stemmed partly from the trumpeter's early experiences with racist violence in New Orleans. Armstrong wrote that, as a ten-year old,

I could see—the Bluffings that those Old *Fat Belly Stinking very Smelly Dirty White* Folks were *putting Down* ... the poor white Trash were Guzzling down, like water, then when they get so *Damn Drunk* until they'd go out of their minds—then it's Nigger Hunting time. *Any Nigger*. They wouldn't give up until they would find one.³⁶

According to Brothers, Armstrong liked the idea that his music could ameliorate this kind of violence. For instance, in his later account of a performance before an integrated audience in Miami in 1948, Armstrong wrote,

I walked on stage and there I saw something I thought I'd never see. I saw thousands of people, colored and white on the main floor. Not segregated in one row of whites and another row of Negroes ... These same society people may go around the corner and lynch a Negro. But while they're listening to our music, they don't think about trouble. What's more they're watching Negro and white musicians play side by side. And we bring contentment and pleasure. I always say, "Look at the nice taste we leave. It's bound to mean something. That's what music is for."³⁷

Despite this ameliorating intent, Armstrong's early-career entertainment roles surely complicated his integrationist effect on audiences. For instance, as Austin Graham suggests, in the 1932 film short, "A Rhapsody in Black and White" (Paramount), Armstrong was

hardly recognizable, as he is wearing a sort of faux-leopard skin costume and is growling in an almost pre-verbal manner. He is an intriguing mix of savage and modern minstrel type (amidst the animalistic noises is the line "when you're down under six feet, no more fried chicken will you eat ... [O]h, that'll break your heart!")³⁸

³⁶ Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ Austin Graham, "Armstrong's Film Roles," <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug99/graham/roles.html> (accessed July 21, 2009).

Likewise, in the verse of the 1929 recording of “Rockin Chair,” Armstrong plays plantation slave to (white) Hoagy Carmichael’s master,

HC: Fetch me that gin, son.
 LA: I ain’t got no gin bottle.
 HC: Boy, I tan your hide, now.
 LA: You gonna tan my hide.
 HC: I cain’t get from this cabin.³⁹

Among other similarly troubling examples, Armstrong played “devil’s helper” alongside the early black comedian and film actor Willie Best in the 1943 film musical, *Cabin in the Sky* (MGM), Vincent Minnelli’s all-black cast morality fable, which furthered stereotypes of black males as grinning, dim-witted, or lazy. In the number “Now You Has Jazz” from the 1956 film *High Society* (MGM), Armstrong calls trombonist Trummy Young’s vocal “Bing Crosby in Technicolor,” a racially rich comment, which—since Young’s vocals were less like Crosby’s sound than was his trombone—perhaps commented on Armstrong’s substitution of Young, a light-skinned black man, for Crosby (who also sang this tune with Armstrong). When, in 1949, Armstrong appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as the King of the Zulus in the annual Mardi Gras ritual, his good-natured acceptance of the role further annoyed those who thought he pandered to white audiences. His costume of a wig, blackface make-up, grass skirt, and tights personified the feminine and acquiescent black man that for many African Americans was the archetypal Uncle Tom.

Armstrong’s diplomatic approach and skirting of conflict came up against ideas of masculinity in the 1940s and the postwar period, when African American men were more likely to see the hypocrisy in Jim Crow laws at home during and after the war. Black male musicians who came of age during these decades had witnessed or experienced firsthand the U.S. fight against fascism. They expressed their outrage for unequal treatment in their own country with their refusal to accept the kinds of characterizations their forebears had tolerated.

Minstrelsy Legacies in the Postwar Era

Mingus’s earliest recordings likely included the 1943 session with Louis Armstrong, which featured Turner Layton and Henry Creamer’s 1921 “Dear Old Southland,” a song that was heavily associated with romanticized notions of the pre-emancipated South and the minstrel tradition.⁴⁰ Mingus took keen interest in racial depictions and race politics throughout his life, and he reached his mid-twenties during the 1940s when the influence of WWII race politics shaped his beliefs and experiences. Jon Panish argues that in the 1940s the ill-treatment of black soldiers and the continued violence

³⁹ *Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra with Hoagy Carmichael*, New York: Okeh Records, 1930. Carmichael wrote the song and lyrics.

⁴⁰ *Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra*, AFRS Jubilee 21 (or 22), ca. early 1943. In Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, 248. Priestley draws from Hans Westerberg’s Armstrong discography. The group also recorded “Ol’ Man Mose.” Louis Armstrong and Zilner T. Randolph are credited for the 1935 “Ol’ Man Mose.”

toward blacks during and after WWII contributed to the bitter way bebop musicians expressed defiance in reaching beyond the commercially white-dominated swing music to some of the musical innovations of bebop.⁴¹ Even as positive critical reviews and growing audiences helped to gain interest in the new music and its intellectual practitioners, as Panish notes, an opposing force emerged where “outside those locales [the clubs where they played] most [jazz musicians] faced the same violence and terror confronted by the typical black man of the era.”⁴² Racial prejudice experienced by black jazz musicians during the first third of the century continued to hound their mid-century successors. And, Panish observes that bebop drummer Max Roach believed that musicians in the 1940s countered prejudice by playing new tunes over old changes in an attempt to withhold royalty money from both white-owned record companies and white Tin Pan Alley composers. To echo Panish quoting Gillespie, in this later era, black bebop musicians not only disparaged white appropriations of black music, but they also sought to hold accountable those black musicians who pandered to white audiences. On this latter agenda, Gillespie recalls,

I criticized Louis for ... his “plantation image.” We didn’t appreciate that about Louis Armstrong, and if anybody asked me about a certain public image of him, handkerchief over his head, grinning in the face of white racism, I never hesitated to say I didn’t like it. I didn’t want the white man to expect me to allow the same things Louis Armstrong did.⁴³

These bebop musicians viewed themselves as artists, shunning the sort of outdated black entertainment identity that Armstrong embraced.⁴⁴ The younger generation’s general resistance to entertaining was also represented by their more serious comportment, which drew notice to musicians such as Gillespie—despite his own humorous or light-hearted onstage persona, as will be discussed—and, later on, Miles Davis. With his rise to celebrity in the late 1940s, some in the mainstream press, such as Gilbert McKean, cast Gillespie as both the intellectual and the bohemian, thus a new kind of entertainment figure.⁴⁵ But Gillespie—whose name became synonymous with bebop

⁴¹ Jon Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 11. Scott DeVeaux notes that from early on jazz historians have generalized the origins of bebop as either a revolutionary, defiant music, or as an evolutionary step in “the seamless unfolding of musical style.” However, both he and Panish (and others) have also quoted Hampton Hawes (“We were the first generation to rebel”), Max Roach and other bebop musicians to support aspects of the bebop-as-revolution trope. DeVeaux, *Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

⁴² *Ibid.* Panish quotes Dizzy Gillespie’s recollection of an incident with Oscar Pettiford where the two were attacked in 1944 by white sailors near the Onyx Club on 52nd Street. The sailors’ aggression stemmed from their seeing, or supposedly seeing, the musicians accompanying a white woman.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12–13. Panish quotes both Roach’s and Gillespie’s statements. Gillespie, Panish writes, later altered his commentary, saying he had “misjudged” Armstrong’s behavior.

⁴⁴ An example of the musicians’ refusal to entertain can be found in Eddie Bert’s account of a 1943 gig where Oscar Pettiford refused to be a song-and-dance man: “We had two basses for a while, Chubby Jackson and Oscar Pettiford, until one night Chubby told Oscar that they were going down front to do a feature and a dance, which is when Oscar said, ‘I’m a bass player—bye!’” Gordon Jack, *Fifties Jazz Talk: An Oral Retrospective* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 33.

⁴⁵ Gilbert McKean, “The Diz and the Bebop,” *Esquire Magazine*, October 1947, n.p. See also similar period commentary in such publications as the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*.

in the mid-1940s—acted out the “clown” even as he chastised Armstrong for his tomming. Scott DeVaux writes that Gillespie, “in reaching beyond the circumscribed world of the jazz virtuoso to the broader sphere of commercial entertainment, ... discovered his own accommodation with audience expectation—what he later called ‘my own way of Tomming.’”⁴⁶ DeVaux characterizes this side of Gillespie’s persona as an update on the stage mannerisms of Cab Calloway (“it is not very far from ‘hi-de-ho’ to ‘oop-bop-sh’bam’”⁴⁷) or Armstrong. Gillespie’s simultaneous dual identities as entertainer and artist, and his playful, quick changes between each side of his persona—switching as occasion demanded—evokes the character of a trickster role. The ironies in this dual stage persona serves as a midcentury update on Morton’s or Armstrong’s performance identities (at least as they were characterized by many jazz enthusiasts and post-1930 jazz critics), entertainers who were also serious musicians (who nonetheless played down the latter identity).

As he moved away from acting out the old stereotypes, Gillespie stood on Armstrong’s shoulders, and his good-humored hype and onstage clowning earned him some criticism, though not as much as Armstrong received from the beboppers. In the new era, by parlaying his hipster public persona with his musicianship, Gillespie could move fluidly from entertainer to artist without judgment. On the whole, beboppers still respected Armstrong for his musical artistry, as they did Gillespie, but Gillespie’s intellectual persona steered an alternative course, one where he managed to capitalize on his predecessor’s success while avoiding the hostile intraracial policing of his own peers.

Less than a decade later, Miles Davis resisted the entertainment practices of older jazz musicians by reportedly ignoring his audience. The idea that he shut out his audience, he later said, was simply one perspective on the behavior of not pandering to his audiences; he claimed he was simply focusing on the musicians and the music, and that if his audiences misinterpreted this turn as rudeness, it was an inevitable by-product. He maintained that the audience “wouldn’t be there if they didn’t want to hear some music, so you don’t have to con them into believing that this music is great.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Scott DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 435.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Originally from Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews* (New York: Perigree Books, 1971); quoted in Robert K. McMichael, “‘We Insist—Freedom Now!’: Black Moral Authority, Jazz, and the Changeable Shape of Whiteness,” *American Music* 16 (Winter 1998): 395. McMichael’s discussion uses Davis’s onstage manner (not introducing selections or acknowledging applause) to argue that he “rearticulated” the black body, where mind (Davis’s art) dominated body (bowing, entertaining, and serving whites), 297. Gerald Early has also noted that after Davis’s return from his European success with audiences, he could not find work in the U.S., which may have been another possible factor in his estranged comportment toward American audiences. When Davis later became highly successful in the U.S., he continued to play on racial stereotypes, as can be seen, for instance, in his response to a white female fan: “When you have stock in Con Edison and make all the money I make, you have to act the way people expect you to act. They want me to be their evil nigger and that’s what I’m ready to be.” Quoted in “Miles Davis and American Culture,” ed. Gerald Early (Missouri Historical Society Press, 2001), 154. Other views of Davis’s onstage behavior differ. See, for instance, John Szwed’s characterization of this sort of behavior in his biography, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 90. Similarly, Eddie Jefferson’s lyrics to Davis’s tune, “So What,” offer yet another perspective on the trumpeter’s style: “Miles Davis walked off the stage. SO WHAT!”

Musicians dealt incongruously with their perceptions of each other. Gillespie, for instance, may have disparaged Armstrong in private and public, yet he still grinned and clowning on the bandstand. And audiences of both races continued to differ in the mid-century, as they had in Armstrong and Morton's day, in how they perceived African American jazz musicians. The particular perceptions can be usefully distinguished in this discussion by examining the ways in which these often unconscious and conflicting views impacted Mingus's senses of both agency and self-determinacy within the cultural contingencies of race. Onstage and off, Mingus was a *reactor* to the legacies of minstrelsy as well as an *actor* in his critique of the black male entertainer where he expressed himself in discursive and paradoxical ways to a white "hipster" audience. Mingus explicitly addressed both his peers and his predecessors with his own seemingly incongruous behavior as bandleader and entertainer.

Mingus in the Act: Confronting Black Minstrel Stereotypes

In defining and claiming his own racial identity, Mingus initially came up against a confounding set of beliefs. As a boy, when his father attempted to teach his children that their lighter skin made them superior to darker blacks, Mingus and his sister Grace were upset because she, having the darkest looks of the family, was made to feel inferior. And, because of his multi-ethnic look, Mingus experienced the alienation of prejudice from both blacks and whites, in his neighborhood and at school. He later wrote: "I am Charles Mingus. Half-black man, yellow man—half yellow—not even yellow, not even white enough to pass for nothing but black and not too light enough to be called white. I claim that I am a negro."⁴⁹ Where Morton disowned his black identity, from early on, Mingus aligned himself within the black community in Watts, California, where in his teens he began to identify primarily with his black heritage. Brian Priestley believes that "what evidence there is suggests that it was a conscious choice to be an underdog instead of an outcast, and that, having made an intellectual decision to relinquish his father's delusions of racial superiority, he felt compelled to expose the similar delusions of white society."⁵⁰ Hence, Mingus responded—in his autobiography, his public writings, and in his music—not only to racial prejudice toward blacks, but to intraracial prejudice, and the stereotyping and invisibility he experienced as a black male musician.

During the brief period as a sideman with Armstrong, Kid Ory, and Barney Bigard, among others, Mingus became versed in the conventions of early jazz traditions. Working with Armstrong, however, left a bitter taste. As Priestley notes, "although Mingus was full of admiration for Louis's instrumental creativity, he could not stomach his facial grimaces and apparent self-abasement before white audiences."⁵¹ Here, Mingus

⁴⁹ Charles Mingus, "Other Voices: The Meditations of Charles Mingus," no source, n.p. This source is a clipping about a broadcast production of CBC-TV, Toronto, Canada, which documents an October 31, 1964, Mingus performance. From the Mingus clippings file, Institute of Jazz Studies ("IJS"), John Cotton Dana Library, Rutgers University-Newark, New Jersey.

⁵⁰ Brian Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography* (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

came face to face with the legacies of minstrelsy in the career of a respected musical elder whose wild popularity with white audiences promulgated such negative racial stereotypes.

Mingus quit Armstrong's band in the early 1940s, partly because he was too uncomfortable with Armstrong's entertainment style, but also because he was unwilling to tolerate Jim Crow laws and the ill-treatment of blacks in the South.⁵² Though overstated, an interviewer for a 1962 *Time* magazine article claimed that Mingus's reputation became associated with reverse discrimination, but he "denies that Crow Jim exists."⁵³ When the interviewer asked Mingus whether he believed in Crow Jim, the bassist-composer retorted: "How can you talk about Crow Jim and look at Mississippi?"⁵⁴ In this comment, Mingus was implicitly asking how whites can claim reverse discrimination when white violence has caused African Americans to withdraw into their own communities. Elsewhere, Mingus illuminated the wide disparity between the effectiveness of Jim Crow and Crow Jim practices when he chastised Cannonball Adderley for his shortsightedness in criticizing blacks who refused to hire white musicians: "Yet he [Adderley] goes about commenting on Negroes' crow jim against the white so-called jazzmen as though crow jim were as effective as the ancient nooses around the black man's neck that isn't too far removed from the count of Hitler's destruction of the Jews."⁵⁵

The convolutions of racial identity illustrate the hall of mirrors negotiated by all—Mingus, his contemporaries, and predecessors. In the following quotations from the manuscript to his quasi-autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus articulates his frustrations with the white musical imitators (which is seen as a modern form of black-face) and the divide-and-conquer tactics of the music industry. He further questions those in his own camp who remain blind to how they abet in their own oppression:

Where is the jazz industry of wealth that the Negro is able to crow jim out of in the same manner that the white system jim crowed Ornette Coleman out of by crushing him into obscurity and poverty when that same system saw themselves about to build another *true* Bird? That sent the white boys into poverty and seclusion trying to figure out how in the fuck he did it all. And as long as they couldn't [figure it out] they followed him around, copied his playing and living until they could get a foothold on Bird's style the same as Stan Getz long had on Lester Young, which extended well into Lester's pockets, that sticky little hand that was even inobvious to Prez up until his dying time at the Alvin Hotel when I last saw him.⁵⁶

For Mingus, the reality of the jazz industry meant that a black male jazz musician (here personified by Lester Young) had no guarantee his artistry would be either recognized or rewarded:

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Crow Jim," *Time*, October 19, 1962, n.p.

⁵⁴ "Crow Jim." The writer adds: "To younger jazzmen a great musician like Louis Armstrong is suspect—instead of hopping on the freedom bus he has been content to remain an 'Uncle Tom.'"

⁵⁵ Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* manuscript, 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

He [Lester] was surprised that Stan Getz paid Jimmy Riney [sic.; Raney was white] more money than I received from Stan. But the funny thing was that I was paid more than the man Stan copied—Lester Young—in Birdland when Lester came to visit “old Stanley” as he called him.

How can an Uncle Tom not see his foolish siding and selling of his black brother when he closes his eyes to the truth that obviously held [him] in inobvious slavery long past Hannibal and the Moors’ conquering of the white flesh[,] and disarming splendor of pride and self worship is what reversed us to this present situation.⁵⁷

It is difficult to say with certainty who Mingus refers to as a Tom in the above passage, but he implies that anyone who witnessed or accepted unequal treatment without objection was complicit with the practice.

Unafraid to voice his perceptions in even more sensitive racial territory, Mingus confronted the intraracial knowledge that a black man is forced to turn on his own kind, given white male fears of miscegenation. Elsewhere in the manuscript, in a nuanced critique that addressed southern white male fears of black males, he outlines his perceptions of black musicians by means of a fictionalized version of his conversation with friend/colleague Fats Navarro. In his discussion of miscegenation, Mingus uses minstrel stereotypes to ridicule the racist practice of reducing black men to their sexuality:

You take a man like Louis Armstrong. See? I dig him. He hurts the white man more than Paul Robeson ’cause they don’t believe Robeson even exists.

“What you talking ’bout, Mingus? You changing the subject?”

“No, Fats. Wait. Now add Stepin Fetchit and Fats Waller. Add them all into one man, a black man. The white man has his sick images of the black man, which exist in the stereotyped caricatured Negro that he terms ‘nigger.’ Now, I guarantee you to let me take your southern white man in one of my group therapy classes and show him the truth—the phenomenon of the black man and the white woman. I guarantee I can either rehabilitate them completely or send them to the morgue, killed by their own minds.”⁵⁸

Mingus further argues that whites ridiculing a “false image” of the black man as a subservient naïf—an image that he equated with the public personae of various real performers—illustrates how both white and black men work out their fears of racial difference and masculinity. He writes,

The false image he has of slobbering Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, Louis Armstrong’s “Yas suh, boss”, Fats Waller’s cigar, checked vest, derby, patent leather shoes with spats—when actually the man in the next room with one of the daughters making advances by laying her head in his lap is a black dignitary, an Oxford graduate, which means little to you or me ’cause brainwashing [a] black man that much you might as well finish the job. Toss him some instant bleach and slap a blonde wig on his head an’ he’ll call me or Louis Armstrong a nigger and tom.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid. Hannibal (248–183 or 182 B.C.), the Phoenician military commander, was probably dark-skinned, at least compared to the Romans he fought.

⁵⁸ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* manuscript, 752–753.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Willie Best, Armstrong, Stepin Fetchit, and Waller were famous black entertainers prominently associated with vaudeville and minstrelsy-derived black caricatures. Mingus compares each of these figures to Paul Robeson, a powerful figure in film and concert halls who, for whites, represented admired and feared black masculinity. With Best, Armstrong, Fetchit, and Waller, white audiences accepted such caricatures because they conformed to white conceptions of traditional black entertainers. By contrast, Robeson worked in the professional white world of “high art” music, where he threatened white bigoted notions of where black artists belonged in the American culture-class spectrum. However, Robeson’s purported membership in the American Communist Party went beyond professional boundaries and, in the mid-century Cold War climate, this association also went beyond the limits of acceptable citizenship.⁶⁰ Were Robeson white, Mingus seems say, his membership might be grounds for an F.B.I. dossier, but because he was black, he was neither fully recognized as an artist nor as an entertainer—and so, rhetorically, he did not exist.

According to Mingus’s arguments, whites and white-identified blacks confined black performers to roles either of emasculating self-abasement or hypermasculine danger. In either case, he suggests, whites are simply playing out their own repressed sexual desire. Mingus writes,

See, Fats, Louis Armstrong ain’t no tom, Stepin Fetchit, or actually nobody. They, you, me all serve as a scale of balance that always keeps the total to the truth of life[,] there for anyone who cares to read the scale total. And those that conform to their own lies as the *truth of the world* is living dead when he could on the other hand be living alive.⁶¹

While noting the complicated relationships among African Americans, Mingus’s critique of white avoidance of this “scale total” reflects his desires for both white males/audiences to face their fears of miscegenation, and for black musicians to resist the entertainer stereotypes that whites project onto them. His “conversation” with Navarro calls for an alternative black male performer, one that, as Rustin has said, can “work through/act out his racial/sexual anxieties.” Rustin emphasizes that Mingus internalized these categories of masculinity, and his thoughts on such matters were closely tied to concerns around miscegenation, the taboo, “which his father beat into him literally and figuratively.”⁶²

Mingus sought in his own entertainment style a middle way, but unlike the more diplomatic Armstrong, who sought to ameliorate violence between the races with his music, Mingus (and other artists, such as Gillespie and Davis) could demonstrate for his audiences the kinds of cultural and identity politics of the 1950s that had relegated him to contend with ingrained stereotypes of a racist jazz industry. He made his struggle their problem, too. Armstrong may have been conflicted about his performative identity, but after the Iroquois Theater performance, any alternative to this role

⁶⁰ Mingus notably refers to the protracted (1941–1974) FBI and HUAC investigations of Robeson, who never pronounced publicly that he was a member of the American Communist Party.

⁶¹ Emphasis in original. Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* manuscript, 256.

⁶² Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, 79, 81.

he camouflaged in his stage persona. For Mingus's onstage alternate persona, the black entertainer could simultaneously signify on white conceptions of black entertainers (and on black male musicians who may have unwittingly promoting these caricatures) while he lashed out as a black musician and entertainer who refused to promote such types. But if white audiences had been unable or unwilling to sort out the significations of such minstrel caricatures or the implicitly contradictory public role played by Robeson, could Mingus's own more explicitly conflicted alternative performer (a construction that shall be discussed below) lead audiences to really see him?

As he matured as a performer, Mingus's civil rights awareness increasingly gave him the agency to attempt to confront Armstrong's performative solutions for engaging with both white and black audiences. Nevertheless, Armstrong as a trumpeter had more star appeal than Mingus who, as a bass player, could not grab his audiences with the bright and more audible higher register of the trumpet, or the viscerally more captivating vocal ingenuity of Armstrong. Instead, Mingus relied on his interactions with his players and on his audience rapport to address such concerns as he articulated in the conversation with Navarro on the issue of performance identity. His derogatory comments toward his players depicted an act that, while paradoxically victimizing his fellow actors, defiantly refused the subservient actions of Armstrong's and traditional minstrelsy-derived configurations of the black male entertainer. And, where Armstrong's soloistic showmanship could obscure and complicate the minstrel stereotypes he portrayed to audiences, Mingus sought to educate his audiences (black and white) about racial inequality still present in the jazz industry, and for this he relied on invoking and subverting identifiable minstrel tropes and devices. In doing this, however, he additionally confronted a 1950s generation of whites that brought a different sort of appreciation to black music and culture.

Mid-1950s Minstrelsy and the Jazz Industry

The prewar U.S. segregationist politics that emerged from a deeply entrenched racism had just begun to crack open in the 1940s and 1950s, even as overt white violence toward blacks still ran rampant up through at least the mid-1950s. Panish notably distinguishes traditional racism from a new racial ideology that extended from the New Deal era of the 1930s up through the 1950s. The new ideology promoted the notion of "race-neutrality" or "colorblindness," a stance which presumed that assimilation by African Americans into white society was natural. As Panish notes,

Whereas the previously dominant paradigm of "scientific racism" contended that racial difference was not only biological but also determined the development of culture, the new color-blindness discourses argued that while physical, racial difference was biological, it had no influence on individual or group attributes.⁶³

⁶³ Panish, *The Color of Jazz*, 6–7. This outlook "emanated from the work of such scholars as Boas, Benedict, Myrdal ... [who] encouraged public policy makers to ignore race."

Challenges to the legitimacy of this ideology were made from “subordinated discourses.” Such challenges were particularly made against claims that an equal exchange existed between the circle of white hipsters (including members of the Beat generation) that Norman Mailer dubbed the “white negro”⁶⁴—Mingus’s audiences for the most part—who flocked to jazz clubs, and African American jazz artists in the mid-1950s and mid-1960s.⁶⁵ Panish suggests that “whiteness remained the *invisible* norm,” subordinating “the process by which these ‘black values’ were incorporated into ‘mainstream’ American postwar culture.”⁶⁶ Thus, he argues, any white representation of African American culture is necessarily “distorted and decontextualized.... It’s extremely unlikely that these black values were transmitted through Euro American outsiders into mainstream American culture without being fundamentally and ideologically altered by those Euro American mediators.”⁶⁷ While white nonconformists believed that they absorbed these values, and that they conveyed them just as they had been expressed by black people, in fact, the moment they were expressed by whites they were no longer black.

The white hipster blindness to their own misreadings of black values landed in the love/envy margin (on the opposite side from ridicule) of Lott’s “identification-misrecognition” dialectic. Panish points out that

Like minstrel performers and audiences during the nineteenth century, those white men around the mid-twentieth century who were attracted to black men and black culture expressed their attraction in images that announced simultaneously their indebtedness to and their mastery over black human and cultural resources. Moreover, as with the Civil War-era [entertainment] phenomenon [of blackface minstrelsy], the [C]old [W]ar-era incarnation featured frequent appearances of such features as homosociality, romanticization, sexism, stereotyping, primitivism, economic appropriation and exploitation, and vicarious pleasure.⁶⁸

Panish argues for a shift from the personae of mid-century white minstrelsy-derived entertainment values, reflecting racial hierarchy, to one that signifies on whites themselves, in a distorted mirror. Only the socially aware among white musicians and the emerging counterculturists understood how adopting black practices also acted out racial anxieties. These anxieties were increasing in the 1950s and early 1960s, spurred by the assertive civil rights movement, and especially the early Black Power movements. Mailer’s conception of the “white negro” and Jewish jazz devotee Mezz Mezzrow’s autobiography, Panish observes, also display how alienated whites (in turning away from the mid-century, corporate middle-class conformity) imitated the

⁶⁴ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 337–358. “The White Negro” was originally published in *Dissent* 4, no. 3 (1957).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 21–22. Panish refers to the “mostly white countercultural movement,” of the 1950s and 1960s, and, before that, the “Beat generation” (Mingus performed for both audiences). Panish notes 1960s activist Todd Gitlin’s account of the “romantic racialization” of African American communities by the youth culture participating in the civil rights movement in the South (and who often characterized such communities as poor, uneducated, yet “close to the earth,” and bound by struggle).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

new black attitudes, styles, and slang in what they assumed to be tributes, but was in fact yet another appropriation.⁶⁹

White and black consciousness of integrationist culture had no small effect on Mingus's audiences. Although it is too simplistic to say that later generations of black male musicians had it better or worse, Mingus's tactics that relied on provocative challenges to his audiences amounted to a different kind of survival technique. His "poppalopper" diatribe, as we shall see, worked to provoke his audience to struggle, as he had, with racial tensions brought about by stereotyping and inequality, where Armstrong's strategy had been to envelop the performance space with communal good cheer. Moreover, liberal white audiences diverged from those of earlier periods, as Robert McMichael observes, "mainly because the situation in the 1960s relied on a rearticulated [interracial social context] ... that resisted reproducing racist stereotypes of blacks as primitive, noble savages." On this point, McMichael specifically observes that most performance spaces were black-defined in the growing integrationist subculture of jazz, and this environment presented an "historically unique co-presence of black autonomy and authority and a predominant (but not universal) white affirmation of black authority."⁷⁰

McMichael has also argued that, in the mid-century, an unprecedented number of jazz programs on U.S. television—a number as yet unmatched—reflected the "socio-political emergence of black culture into majority culture, which corresponded with changing mainstream attitudes toward blackness."⁷¹ Mingus himself had two television engagements in 1960, one of which included a performance with Max Roach and Randy Weston on NBC.⁷² In social and musical contexts where blacks defined the dominant roles and performance practices and standards,⁷³ such developments failed to influence the economics of jazz, as black musicians still struggled to gain the kind of attention and financial success enjoyed by their white counterparts. As Mingus wrote in the early 1960s, "I am Charles Mingus—to me I am nothing. I am Charles Mingus, a famed jazz musician but not famed enough to make a living in society that is in America, my home."⁷⁴

In the early 1950s, Mingus and Max Roach established their own record label, Debut, in part as an expression of the frustration they felt about unequal performance and recording opportunities experienced by African American musicians. Mingus also founded a publishing imprint, Chazz-Marr. Both companies were essentially run by Celia Mingus, his wife at the time, while Mingus was busy writing and performing.⁷⁵ Despite the artists' entrepreneurial ambitions, by the late 1950s, after a period of some

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 54–56. See Panish's more thorough discussion of these and related texts in his chapter on the postwar jazz musician construction.

⁷⁰ McMichael, "We Insist," 392–393.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 386. McMichael references the following programming: Robert Herridge's *The Sound of Jazz* and Timex's *All Star Jazz* shows on CBS (December 1957 to January 1959); Ralph Gleason's *Jazz Casual* on PBS; the Steve Allen-produced *Jazz Scene U.S.A.*, which was hosted by Oscar Brown, Jr.; and broadcasts of the 1960 and 1961 Newport Jazz Festival (which were segmented into two-dozen broadcasts across each year).

⁷² Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, 130.

⁷³ McMichael, "We Insist," 386.

⁷⁴ Mingus, "Other Voices."

⁷⁵ See chapter 3 of Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, for a discussion of these enterprises and Celia's role.

success, Debut was ultimately forced to fold due to financial concerns. (The challenge of promoting his own music through an independent label was one that, in 1939, Morton had taken on by establishing his own publishing company, Tempo. This latter development occurred long after Morton had unwittingly signed away the legal rights for his earlier music to the Melrose Brothers publishers.⁷⁶)

Mingus's limited success in the music business up until the late 1950s financially and artistically drove him to exhibit a kind of madness, and to commit himself to the Bellevue Hospital psychiatric ward. But what he deemed to be his madness stemmed from an understandable anger and from his turning in on himself, unable to cope with the kind of racial obstacles and preconceptions that society expected him to swallow. Mingus threw his outrage into his music and he likewise brought such views to his audience's attention in whatever ways he could. He acknowledges that he used such bad behavior to draw public and critical notice:

After going (to Bellevue) on my own, and the news got out, I drew more people. In fact, I even used to bounce people out of the clubs to get a little more attention, because I used to think that if you didn't get a write-up, you wouldn't attract as many people as you would with a lot of publicity. But now I see what harm that kind of write-up has done to me, and I'm trying to undo it.⁷⁷

As part of a performance routine, he once disparaged band member Jimmy Knepper (who was white) onstage in a fashion that Priestley calls "reverse tomming":

When Mingus again visited the West Coast in 1961 with Jimmy Knepper in the band, [journalist] Patricia Willard recalls that: "He was going on and on to the audience about this white guy in the group, and about what a drag it was to tour down South with him. And they hadn't even been down South! A friend said to Mingus afterwards, 'Why are you saying all these terrible things about this nice guy, who really loves you?' And Mingus's reply was, 'Don't mess with my act!'"⁷⁸

This "act" notably recalls Armstrong's early stage routine in whiteface at the Iroquois; in such self-conscious race-norm play, Mingus and Armstrong reversed the conventions of tomming by challenging white expectations of the black entertainer. In other routines, Mingus specifically berated his musicians in order, as he said, to get a write-up or simply as an antic for grabbing his audience's attention. As trumpeter Ted Curson recounts:

For instance, like Eric Dolphy was getting a lot of applause, he made him go into the dressing room and play where nobody could see, just hear the saxophone. Or if a chick came in and she dug you or winked at you, he would take you to what we called the "whipping post." Like all the songs started with the bass intro, and if you go to the "whipping post," he would change the key and you wouldn't know this unless you had perfect pitch. So you would get wiped out. Or he would leave you on the bandstand to play by yourself for like 20 minutes.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Pastras, *Dead Man Blues*, 144.

⁷⁷ Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, manuscript, 343.

⁷⁸ Priestley, *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, 87.

⁷⁹ Ted Curson, interview by Gary Giddins and Bob Rusch, [source unknown], transcribed by Bob Rusch, from the CMC.

These anecdotes demonstrate a desperate response, as Mingus's testimony suggests, as a result of the failure of the music industry to recognize him artistically or financially for his contributions to jazz.

Lectures from the Pulpit

Mingus's lectures to his audience convey an awareness that both musicians and audience were conscious of, and interested in, the cultivation of an integrationist subculture. He responded to audiences, and a music industry that, on some level, expected black jazz musicians to entertain, by inverting conventional entertainer behavior, demanding his predominantly white audiences to shut up and listen. Reflecting his autobiographical insistence on three "real" selves in *Beneath the Underdog*, Mingus's alternative to the stage strategies/personae of Armstrong and Davis refused the white construction of black masculinity, neither kow-towing in the way he perceived that Armstrong had, nor silently resisting as did Davis. He acted out a narrative of personal struggle with race rather than acting out a personality onstage, or as an enigma. As Rustin describes this approach, onstage Mingus was "perform[ing] an identity and how that story is itself participating in a series of performances for insights about the subject of race and masculinity."⁸⁰

In a 1957 outburst at the Five Spot,⁸¹ Mingus conveyed a performative identity that poured into his music the denials and erasures of racial difference for which he chastised his self-congratulatorily "integrated" audience:

You, my audience, are all a bunch of poppaloppers. A bunch of tumbling weeds tumbling round, running from your subconscious ... minds. Minds? Minds that won't let you stop to listen to a word of artistic or meaningful truth.... You don't want to see your ugly selves, the untruths, the lies you give to life.

He continued:

So you come to me, you sit in the front row, as noisy as can be. I listen to your millions of conversations, sometimes pulling them all up and putting them together and writing a symphony. But you never hear that symphony.... All of you sit there, digging yourselves and each other, looking around hoping to be seen and observed as hip. You become the object you came to see, and you think you're important and digging jazz when all the time all you're doing is digging a blind, deaf scene that has nothing to do with any kind of music at all.⁸²

Mingus made clear that his political views were part of his music; he reacted internally from his sense of multiple selves. However, as Rustin observes, Mingus argues that "there is no separation between the music and the man; that the man does not privilege his race over his craft."⁸³ His ideal audiences would be those who entered into the music

⁸⁰ Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, 70.

⁸¹ Diane Dorr-Dorynek, "Mingus ..." in *The Jazz Word*, ed. Dom Cerulli, Burt Korall, and Mort Nasati (New York: Da Capo, 1960), 14–15.

⁸² Quoted in Saul, "Outrageous Freedom," 33.

⁸³ Rustin, *Mingus Fingers*, 99.

as both spiritual participants and discerning listeners. In many of his performances and on recordings such as “Better Git It in Your Soul” (*Mingus Ah Um*, 1959) and “Ecclesiastics” (*Oh Yeah!*, 1961),⁸⁴ Mingus played the preacher—perhaps even a sort of blues preacher that parallels Morton’s priestly persona. In the liner notes to the original Atlantic LP that contained “Ecclesiastics,” Nat Hentoff quotes Mingus as saying: “The blues was in the churches—moaning and riffs and that sort of thing between the audience and the preacher.”⁸⁵ The portmanteau word “ecclesiastics” blends the title of the Old Testament book, “Ecclesiastes” (in English, this word sometimes translates as “preacher,” or “the book of the preacher”), with the meaning of the word “enthusiastic” (deriving from the Greek meaning, “possessed by, or full of, God”).⁸⁶ At times, Mingus the onstage preacher cast his audience as a congregation needing to be led. By insulting his flock then, he would guide them to grasp the nature of his art.

McMichael has pointed out that Mingus “reached a wide variety of audiences in the late 1950s and early 1960s and regularly connected his performances with civil rights struggles at home and abroad through composition titles, spoken word pieces, and in liner notes he wrote accompanying his recordings.”⁸⁷ In his Town Hall concert in 1962, for instance, using a motif emulating a slave work song, Mingus vocalizes a poem of black uplift in his performance of “Freedom: Part One”:

This mule ain’t from Moscow, this mule ain’t from the South,
But this mule’s got some learning—mostly mouth to mouth.
This mule could be called stubborn and lazy.
But in a clever sort of way, this mule’s been
waiting and learning and planning,
And working for a sacred kind of day.⁸⁸

Similarly, on a live 1965 performance of “Don’t Let It Happen Here,” a spoken-word composition using a text by Martin Niemöller, Mingus made his audience aware of their compliance with oppression:

One day they came and took the communists and I said nothing because I was not a communist. Then one day they took the people of the Jewish faith and I said nothing because I have no faith ... left. One day they came and took the unionists and I said nothing because I was not a unionist.... Then one day they came and they took *me* ... and I didn’t say nothing because I was as guilty as they were for not saying that all men have a right to freedom on any land. I was as guilty of genocide as you, all of you, for you know that when a man is free and when you set him free from his slavery ... so I charge you all with genocide, the same as I. Of the 18 million dead Jews, *eight-teen* million *dead* people.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Charles Mingus, *Mingus Ah Um*, Sony BMG 88697127572, 2007, compact disc (orig. Columbia, 1959, LP), and *Oh, Yeah!*, Atlantic SD-1377, 1961, LP (reissued as Atlantic 90667-2, 1990, compact disc).

⁸⁵ Nat Hentoff, liner notes to Mingus, *Oh, Yeah!*

⁸⁶ Horace J. Maxile, Jr., *Say What: Topics, Signs and Signification in African-American Music* (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2001), 75. Maxile defines “ecclesiastes” as part of his analysis of Mingus’s piece.

⁸⁷ McMichael, “We Insist,” 386.

⁸⁸ Mingus, *Town Hall Concert*, United Artists UAJ 15024, 1962, LP.

⁸⁹ As transcribed from Charles Mingus, *Music Written for Monterey, 1965 Not Heard ... Played in Its Entirety at UCLA*, Sunnyside, 2006, compact disc.

In the above-mentioned performances and in numerous recordings, we hear expressions of Mingus working out his racial performance identity. We distinctly hear this in the bemoaning and disparaging, in the laughing with and at his audience, and in the desperate measures taken—and ingenuity necessary—for him to get his message across. Nowhere is this performative process of “working out” identity more striking than in Mingus’s recordings of “Eat That Chicken” and in “The Clown.”

Battling Minstrelsy Tropes

The 1957 recording of the “The Clown” was the title track to Mingus’s second recording venture with Atlantic Records (Atlantic had produced his *Pithecanthropus Erectus* album in 1956).⁹⁰ At this juncture, Mingus was 35 years old, and Atlantic’s founding Ertegun brothers were challenging major labels by nurturing new jazz talent. Along with “The Clown,” Mingus included the confrontational “Haitian Fight Song” on this February 12 recording session.

Mingus characterized the related minstrel/entertainer framing of the narrative in the spoken word composition, “The Clown”:

The story as I told it to Jean Shepherd, is about a clown who tried to please people—like most jazz musicians do—but whom nobody liked until he was dead. My version of the story ended with the clown blowing his brains out, with the people laughing and finally being pleased because they thought it was part of the act. I liked the way Jean changed the ending; it leaves more up to the listener.⁹¹

As narrator of “The Clown,” Jean Shepherd described the title character as someone who “just wants to make people laugh,” and who is languishing artistically and professionally because of the inability of his audiences to comprehend his intense emotions. This scenario of course reflects Mingus’s contemporary artistic plight. In articulating this predicament, the composer challenged both his audience’s blindness to racist stereotypes of the black entertainer (or perhaps artists of any color), and white appropriation of black music and musicians through their complicit approval of the clown’s tragic end, which symbolically suggests the fate of entertainers who must please their audiences.

According to Lott, in early white minstrelsy, “clowns and harlequins are as often lovable butts of humor as devious producers of it; slave-tale tricksters are frequently (though not always) champions, heroes, backdoor victors for the weak over the strong.”⁹² (For instance, the celebrated Virginia Minstrels, who supposedly started the first minstrel group in 1843, got their start as circus clowns.) The clown and the

⁹⁰ “The Clown” was one of several spoken word pieces by Mingus. Other such compositions include “Scenes in the City” (on *Scenes in the City*, Affinity 105, 1957, LP) and “The Chill of Death” (on *Let My Children Hear Music*, Columbia, 1971, LP; reissued on Sony 40589, 2007, compact disc) as well as his setting of Langston Hughes’s poem “Weary Blues,” which was read by the poet (on Langston Hughes, Charles Mingus, and Leonard Feather, *Weary Blues*, Polygram 841660, 1991, compact disc; orig. 1958, LP).

⁹¹ Charles Mingus, liner notes to Charles Mingus, *The Clown*, Rhino 8122737492, 2004, compact disc (orig. Atlantic Records, 1957, LP).

⁹² Lott, *Love and Theft*, 22.

trickster figure thus sometimes overlapped in minstrel shows, especially later in African American performances. This latter point is important to Mingus's minstrelsy tropes, since in African oral tradition the trickster is known for disobeying normal rules and conventional behavior, cleverly manipulating the language in order to overcome a restrictive hierarchy or systematic oppression from within.⁹³ Moreover, as Lawrence Levine writes,

The traits of the trickster are important also in the considerable number of toasts centering on pimps and whores. In their study of black pimps in San Francisco, Christina and Richard Milner concluded that the pimp's attraction as a hero stems from the fact that he is a trickster. [As they note,] "He must be able to observe the society around him with honesty and awareness ... pimps and hustlers depend for their livelihood on an awareness of social forces and an understanding of the human psyche."⁹⁴

Moreover, as clown and social satirist, biographer Gene Santoro usefully notes that Mingus had related himself to prophets of Vedanta and Hindu religion, the "holy fools, manifestations of the changeless reality behind the impermanent world."⁹⁵ Also, with his exaggerated features and whiteface makeup, the figure in "The Clown" presented Mingus's satirical self-portrait.

Mingus notably used a simulated audience on this studio recording, where the sounds of applause and laughter clearly evoke an ersatz live entertainment and serve Mingus in signifying on his "hip" audiences. Formally, several episodes of the tonal waltztime theme alternate with the more dissonant, polyphonic melodies from Mingus's progressive ear. The latter passages represent the clown's artistic sensibility through this music's harmonically complex style. Such artistic complexity is also evoked in the text ("Oranges and greens and yellows in him, all these colors") and in Mingus's orchestration.

The audience is told that the clown plays the Rotary Club, the Kiwanis Club, and the American Legion Hall—all of which were popular community service clubs to which many middle-class, white Americans belonged in the 1950s. This brand of Midwestern, white demographic/audience was likely the parent generation of many of the bohemians for whom Mingus performed. "But he [the clown] just wasn't makin' it," the narrator sighs. In the narrative, the clown's act features a seal that accompanies him up and down a ladder as he plays "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" on a "B-Flat Sears Roebuck, model 1322A plastic bugle." The act fails to amuse or to get much attention until one night when the seal gets sick onstage. The audience laughs and—although the clown does not find this funny—he is glad to get more attention. The clown gets more laughs in Dubuque, Iowa, when he falls and bloodies his nose, a development in which the narrative highlights the self-mockery of the dimwit caricature. After this, he begins

⁹³ Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁹⁴ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 382. Levine is quoting from Christina and Richard Milner, *Black Play-ers: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (New York: Bantam, 1973), 242.

⁹⁵ Gene Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

to change his act in order to cater to his audiences' tastes by hiring a girl to throw a sack of flour on his head. This act "*breaks them up—but not like Dubuque!*" Dubuque, a city that for bohemian New Yorkers exemplifies the Midwest's lack of sophistication—and perhaps the parents they fled—also connoted to urbanites, particularly African Americans, the dominant, white, mainstream culture. Soon,

All the colors, greens, oranges, yellows, aren't as bright as they used to be. But he just wanted to make the audience laugh. They were laughin' all right. The dough starting to come in with bigger towns, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh—big towns.

[The climax:]

About three quarters through his act the rope broke and he was down. He looks at the audience. They're rolling in the aisles ... This was bigger than Dubuque! ... He really had 'em goin' ... This was the last one.

[Trombone comments with short, descending, broken glisses, then alto sax enters with waltz theme.]

He really knew now! But it was too late. They were laughing. But now he knew. That was the end of the clown. And you shoulda seen the bookings come in. The Palladium, MCA, William Morris. He really knew, now! He really knew. But it was too late.

[Moaning in bass and sax.]

He really knew, now.

[Long pause.]

William Morris sends regrets.

[In this last line, Mingus is referring to the exploitation of artists by the Music Corporation of America and the William Morris agency that had alienated many black artists.]

In a composition where Mingus sought to hold a mirror up to his audiences to make them aware both that they were the very "poppalopper" crowd he was speaking of, and that they were undiscerning except for their own enjoyment, Mingus also satirized the jazz musician as prostitute. But in another sense, he is also acting as the pimp who is selling the story of a prostitute. As if to connect prostitution to vaudeville, throughout the performance, the horns produce sounds reminiscent of the aforementioned late nineteenth-century recorded effects by vaudevillians and minstrels, and of those later heard in Morton's recordings. The text of "The Clown" further makes explicit the fate of performers less fortunate than a star such as Armstrong—in other words, those closer to the career of Mingus himself or late period Morton, who was nearly forgotten by the late 1930s and the time of his death in 1941.

Mingus's comments on the legacy of jazz, confined to the function of white entertainment in "The Clown," can be further enhanced by examining the related minstrelsy tropes of Mingus's "Eat That Chicken." On the 1961 studio recording of "Eat That Chicken," we hear the bandleader signifying on another minstrel figure that had survived into the twentieth century: the Zip Coon, which was later transformed

into both the images of the urban black dandy and the pimp. Mingus evidently felt strongly about invoking this trope, and he probably enjoyed making his audiences uncomfortable by turning to such images. His use of “Eat That Chicken” as his theme song for many of his appearances in 1962, including his signature sign-off on his broadcasts from *Birdland* in New York City, further attests to his inclination to provoke.⁹⁶ The lyrics of this number speak to precursor texts—the derogatory “coon” songs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and the entertainment aura of “Eat That Chicken” calls on both early jazz and minstrelsy. The chicken trope had been prevalent in twentieth-century popular songs, some of which Mingus would have heard. It is found, for instance, in Cab Calloway’s rendition of Babe Wallace’s “Chicken’s Nothin’ but a Bird” (1940), but goes much further back in recorded music to turn-of-the-century white minstrels, as can be heard, for example, in Arthur Collins’s recording of “Chicken Reel” (1911). Mingus probably never heard this recording but another precursor song, by white minstrel Frank Dumont, with the related title “Bake Dat Chicken Pie,” and first recorded in 1907 by Collins with Byron G. Harlan—a popular minstrel duo of the day—deserves to be examined more closely.⁹⁷ The obvious resonances between the titles of this recording and Mingus’s own composition suggest a direct influence, but Mingus would most likely not have known about Collins and Harlan’s early recording. He may have heard or known about the comedian Lenny Bruce’s rendition of this song, however. Sue Mingus recalls both that, “[Charles] liked and admired Lenny Bruce’s intelligence and outspokenness—not surprising for someone who himself spoke his own mind on every occasion.” She also told me that Mingus shared a stage with the comedian at the Village Vanguard for a week in the early 1960s, although I have not been able to learn exactly when that booking took place.⁹⁸ But there is no question that Mingus and Bruce traveled in the same circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and even if Mingus never heard Bruce sing “Bake Dat Chicken Pie,” the minstrel legacies of the tune and its lyrics still permeated entertainment of the day. By the 1950s, Hollywood had hardly begun to reevaluate their promulgation of racist stereotypes of black men and women. Actors were appearing in blackface in American movies at least until 1953, and this was the same year that produced the final television episodes of *Amos ’n’ Andy*, the long-running, minstrelsy-derived (and African American-themed)

⁹⁶ As a response to the ethos of the Old South, “Eat That Chicken” is not an isolated instance in Mingus’s oeuvre. He also responded to this same subject in his “Shortnin’ Bread,” which is part of the title track on his 1977 album “Cumbia and Jazz Fusion” (Atlantic, SD8801). In this performance, Mingus recites: “Who said mama’s little baby likes shortnin’ bread? / Who said mama’s little baby likes shortnin’, shortnin’ bread? / That’s some lie some white man upped an’ said! / Mama’s little baby likes truffles! / Mama’s little baby likes caviar!” After these lines, drummer Dannie Richmond joins Mingus in reciting the lines “Diamonds! Diamonds in the nose! Diamonds in the toes! Diamonds all over mama’s little baby!,” as well as “Schools! So our kids won’t be raised to act like no fools!” As quoted in Donald Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music*, online at <http://www.donaldclarkemusicbox.com/rise-and-fall/detail.php?c=20> (accessed December 31, 2010).

⁹⁷ I am indebted to Andrew Homzy for pointing out Dumont’s piece and associating it with Mingus’s recording.

⁹⁸ See D. Smith, “The Complete Lenny: Lenny Bruce Chronology,” at <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/dan54321/lennybruce/chronology.htm> (accessed January 26, 2011). Also information from Sue Mingus, personal communications with the author, January 18 and 19, 2007.

comedy that was first written and voiced as a radio version of blackface comedy in 1928 by the white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll.⁹⁹

According to Richard Weide's 1998 documentary, *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*, Bruce and his girlfriend, Honey Gordon, performed Collins's "Bake Dat Chicken Pie" in one of their early routines somewhere around the late 1940s or early 1950s. The performance is said to have included choruses of iterations of the N-word.¹⁰⁰ Hentoff has likewise recollected Bruce's long-held fascination with the social power of taboo subjects and words: "'Why do you let words paralyze you?' Bruce asked [his audiences]. Then he [would] merrily dissect those—and other unpardonable—words as to their origins and use to deny individuality."¹⁰¹ Bruce similarly exposed white racial anxieties with his 1958 routine, "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties," which touched on white middle-class fear of African Americans met within private white communities as "equals," i.e., outside of the occupations and cross-racial contexts to which blacks were then typically relegated, primarily in entertainment, sports, and service jobs.¹⁰² In the routine, Bruce asks an African American guest at a party if he is hungry, then offers to find some chicken or watermelon for him. Both this routine and his use of "Bake Dat Chicken Pie" gave Bruce a vehicle through which to comment on the hypocrisy of supposedly "colorblind" mid-century whites. No contemporary reviews or testimonies of the latter performance have turned up, although one reviewer notably reported that the clip of Bruce and Gordon's performance of "Bake Dat Chicken Pie" elicited "nervous laughter" from the mostly-white viewers of Weide's documentary.¹⁰³

Although Collins's and Mingus's tunes should not be misconstrued as one and the same song, a consideration of "Bake Dat Chicken" (both the Collins and Bruce versions) alongside "Eat That Chicken" highlights the kinds of distortion that both turn-of-the-century white minstrels and their descendents in interwar white entertainments (such

⁹⁹ Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30. Also see *Encyclopedia of Radio*, ed. Christopher H. Sterling (New York: Routledge Press, 2004), and Ben Steelman, "From *Star Wars* to *Amos 'n' Andy*," *Star-News*, November 17, 1985, n.p., quoted at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos_%27n%27_Andy#cite_note-Radio-0 (accessed January 23, 2011). While Gosden and Correll were regularly depicted in blackface in print advertising for the radio show, and while they even acted in actual blackface make-up in the 1930 *Amos 'n' Andy* film, *Check and Double Check* (RKO), the comedy's minstrelsy-derived characters were later played by black actors in the 1950s television production. Despite this updating, these later actors were instructed to closely follow the minstrelsy-derived vocal and physical character traits of the original radio Amos and Andy. The television show notably continued to be broadcast until late in 1960, and was circulated in syndication until 1966.

¹⁰⁰ *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*, dir. Robert Weide, HBO Documentary, 1998. In Michael Sragow's review of the film, *SF Weekly* March 17, 1999, at <http://www.duckprods.com/projects/lb/lb-sfweekly990317.html> (accessed December 9, 2006).

¹⁰¹ Nat Hentoff, "Lenny Bruce: The Crucifixion of a True Believer," *Gadfly Online*, March/April 2001, from <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/MarchApril01/archive-lennybruce.html> (accessed February 10, 2007). Hentoff writes: "'What I [i.e., Bruce] wanted people to dig,' Lenny used to say, 'is the lie. Certain words were suppressed to keep the lie going. But,' Lenny insisted, 'if you do them, you should be able to say the words.'"

¹⁰² Bruce commented on race in such routines as his "How the Negro and Jew Got into Show Business," "Ku Klux Klan," "Black Democracy and Liberals," and "A White White Woman and a Black Black Woman," among others.

¹⁰³ James Bowman, "Movie Reviews, *Lennie Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*" (from October 1, 1998), at <http://www.jamesbowman.net/reviewDetail.asp?pubID=697> (accessed December 31, 2010).

The image shows two musical excerpts in 2/4 time, key of A-flat major (three flats). The top excerpt, labeled 'A7', shows a descending eighth-note riff on the third of the A7 chord (F) over a series of chords. The bottom excerpt, labeled 'Eb7', shows a similar descending eighth-note riff on the third of the Eb7 chord (Bb) over a series of chords.

Example 1

(Above excerpt):

Frank Dumont, “Bake Dat Chicken Pie,” mm. 1–4. New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1906.

(Below excerpt):

Charles Mingus, “Eat That Chicken,” mm. 1–4, from the 1966 Charles Mingus album, *Oh Yeah*.

as *Amos ’n’ Andy*), as well as midcentury white “outsiders” (to borrow Panish’s term for emerging countercultural circles in the 1950s), perpetuated around blackness. Mingus’s ironic response to this social milieu is particularly complex in “Eat That Chicken.” Somewhat surprisingly, a significant number of musical similarities also appear between the two songs, most prominently in comparing the melody of the verse of “Bake Dat Chicken Pie” to that of the (verseless) “Eat That Chicken,” as shown in Example 1. The songs also share the key of A-flat major, though “Bake Dat” starts on the tonic where “Eat That” delays with the dominant for eight bars. Both start with three iterations of the short descending riff on the third of their respective chords whose differing functions obscure this otherwise striking pitch match.

“Bake Dat Chicken Pie” and “Eat That Chicken” interact in a collision of historical eras, particularly in their texts. Some fifty years had passed between these compositions, years that culminated now, at Mingus’s moment, in an ongoing mid-1950s civil rights social transformation that publically organized and articulated the antagonistic dynamic between blacks and whites. Mingus’s response to the minstrel legacy of racial patronization reads as a satire of earlier white minstrel caricatures, including that found in Dumont’s turn-of-the-century song. But in “Eat,” Mingus is also paying tribute to African-American performers who inherited and performed such minstrel roles. For instance, at the piano, he imitates the stride players, and this stylistic nod operates on two levels: self-mockery, particularly in the stereotyping lyric, “Oh, Lawd, I wanna eat that chicken pie!” and also a playful but affectionate tribute to Fats Waller, whose appetite was legendary, and whose reputation as an entertainer and parodist of such stereotypes was well known.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Of course, Mingus too had a seemingly insatiable appetite, which lends even more authenticity to the lyric.

Dumont was a prolific writer of minstrelsy tunes and entire shows, and thus we can assume the actor/singer protagonist of the lyrics to “Bake Dat Chicken Pie” is meant to be presented in blackface. In an overt disparagement of African American culture and cuisine, the lyrics give instructions to the (presumably white) audience on how to “make a nigger happy,” by making his “favorite” food. Singing “Eat That Chicken,” Mingus as mid-century performer, caricatures a minstrel entertainer from a different era—and, in an almost literal sense, he spits out the stereotype of the black musician/entertainer. His chorus of band members—black, white, and mixed-race—sings with lustful abandon (reciting, in a down-home accent, “chicken *pah!*”), but Mingus is completely at the helm, calling out encouragement while they solo, and in enthusiastic Waller-like vocal asides. The musical era depicted in this recording, with band members participating (singing-speaking the lyrics) recalls New Orleans collective performance practice, and, indeed, in the first chorus of the song, Mingus has his horn players play together in a collective interplay. Both here and in the out chorus, the general outpouring of individual performance contributions to the song evokes an ecstatic mood, much like that evoked by frontline players in the typical final shout choruses of many early jazz performances.

In “Eat That Chicken,” Mingus takes center stage as the singer-pianist/entertainer (particularly since the microphone catches his voice above those of the other performers). While his encouragement of the musicians in their solos reflects Mingus’s general approach as a leader, the verbal interjections that arise specifically from his lusty performance as a reincarnation of Fats Waller are perfectly pitched, especially in his evocations of the exuberant showman’s laughter, a detail that was one of Waller’s trademarks. Nat Hentoff has aptly written that the performance recalls Waller’s novelty songs of the 1930s, both in terms of its resemblances to the witty lyrics Waller wrote to entertain, and in terms of its evocations of Waller’s exceptional gift for cutting up the crowd. In a manner reminiscent of how his “Jelly Roll” pieces play to Morton’s vaudeville tropes, Mingus here emulates the racial and sexual innuendos that filled Waller’s amiable parodies. Asides and fills by the other members combine in call-and-response with good-naturedly irreverent singing. For example, the first call in the chorus is answered by one band member with “Hot and chewty!” and another with “Razz-a-ma-pa-tootie!”

Mingus’s “Eat That Chicken” was part of the same racial climate that produced Bruce’s “How to Relax Your Colored Friends” and the comedian’s revival of “Bake Dat Chicken Pie.” When Bruce sang Dumont’s tune, he parodied the entertainment tradition of figures like Collins and Harlan, his minstrel forebears (since the stand-up comic literally descends from the legacies of minstrel and vaudeville performers). Alongside his perspective as a mixed-race performer, Mingus commented on the contemporary modality of white misconceptions imposed on black identity while simultaneously nodding to precursor black entertainers who had had to restrict their overt parodies of these misconceptions to black audiences. And while his impatience with such a popular forerunner as Armstrong is obvious, one may suppose Mingus also pays tribute in the end to the trumpeter’s iconic exaggerations. In doing so, Mingus intends to put his immediate white audience on the spot. Whereas Waller, Morton, and Armstrong

indulged both black and white audiences, Mingus challenged them. Many in his audience overlooked (and still overlook) how his commentary took the dual form of both a parody and tribute. In this formation, Mingus revised the legacies of Morton by fusing white and black minstrelsy legacies in his own commentary. Whereas in his desire to inhabit separate white and black identities Morton had kept his performing personae segregated in order to cater to racial preferences of his black and white audiences, Mingus's more integrated provocations as a trickster figure lead to reactions such as the following criticism from writer Carlton Smith, who perceived Mingus's performance of "Eat That Chicken" as a put-down of Waller:

This so-called "tribute to Fats Waller" is one of the worst exhibitions of poor taste and meanness that I've ever heard. Fats will be remembered as a musician much longer than Mingus will as a social philosopher, and if Eat That Chicken represents the level to which Mingus'[s] musical taste and talent have sunk, maybe he'd be happier in a minstrel show.¹⁰⁵

At the end of his performance of "Eat That Chicken," Mingus's voice has the final unaccompanied pronouncement of "Oh yeah, I wanna—look-at-that chicken there, boy!" Here, Mingus perhaps demands that we re-examine such racist stereotypes. His reanimation of the chicken trope from a mid-century vantage point revises misreadings of African American culture. Mingus's confrontational evocation of the style and sentiments of minstrelsy, set ridicule and ownership side by side—ridicule of white misconceptions of black, and ownership in Mingus's understanding of the kind of entertainment participated in by Waller, Morton and Armstrong in order to survive in their time.

Conclusion

Mingus saw himself primarily as a bassist/composer/bandleader, but he was well aware that his stage persona was part of an act. In his stage patter, he was an entertainer who delivered *serious* ideas to his audience, ideas many of its members would not have anticipated grappling with in such a venue as the 1950s jazz nightclub. He seemed inspired by his power to manipulate an audience, despite the fact that he needed that audience not only for support and approval to make a living, but also as a container for expressing all parts of himself (whether they approved or not) as chronicler of his personal observations and experience.

In his entertainment persona, Mingus's frequent exhortations of encouragement or lament during a performance or recording brought important facets of the traditions of early jazz, minstrelsy, and vaudeville into his own time, as he further sought out, like others (i.e., Gillespie and Davis), to transform such historical images of the black entertainer. His artistic reach backwards embraced entertainment traditions well before him, and thus he simultaneously paid a qualified tribute to the legacies of his predecessors and protested against the degrading experiences he and other black musicians

¹⁰⁵ Carlton Smith, "Overdone Chicken," source unknown, September 27, 1962, n.p. From the Charles Mingus clippings file, IJS.

endured in the music industry of his day. Mingus's response to his forebears, and to the larger historical exchanges between black and white in minstrelsy discourse, shows his confrontation to be an outright rejection of these old performer roles, and displays his gestural means of adopting an image, or an act, to subvert or pay tribute to them. Such conflicting messages in Mingus's expressions of indignation, as well as his signifying revisions on his own identity as a black male performer, marked his ongoing struggle for an artistic and financial recognition that continued to elude him.

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Abstract

This essay explores Charles Mingus as performer through the lens of vaudeville and minstrelsy entertainment legacies of earlier jazz performers, and particularly the careers of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Fats Waller, each of whom Mingus included in his list of a "heritage of traditions." Within the context of the so-called colorblind racial ideology of midcentury American jazz culture, the author examines Mingus's critique of the jazz industry and of his mainly white audiences, to whom he explicitly and implicitly articulated black male performance identities in his writings, liner notes, lectures to audiences, spoken-word compositions, and in, among other works, the compositions "Eat That Chicken" and "The Clown."