

Jazz Greats: Charles Mingus



Charles Mingus was a jazz bassist, composer, and band leader. He was born in 1922 in Arizona, and was raised mostly in the Watts area of Los Angeles, California. When he was a child, his mother allowed only church music in the home, and gospel later became a major influence on the way he played and wrote music.

Mingus studied trombone, and later cello. He was not able to play the cello professionally because there were almost no African-American musicians in classical music at the time. He began learning to play the bass in the late 1930s.

He received a poor education and could not even read music notation when he began playing. Still, he began writing music in his teens. His music was far more complex than might have been expected from a teenager, and he earned a reputation as a bass prodigy. He toured with the legendary Louis Armstrong in 1943. By 1945, he was recording with well-known Los Angeles bands. He began to receive praise and acclaim, and played with the likes of Charlie Parker in the early 1950s. Mingus had a terrible temper, though, and his on- and offstage fights got him fired from several bands and groups.

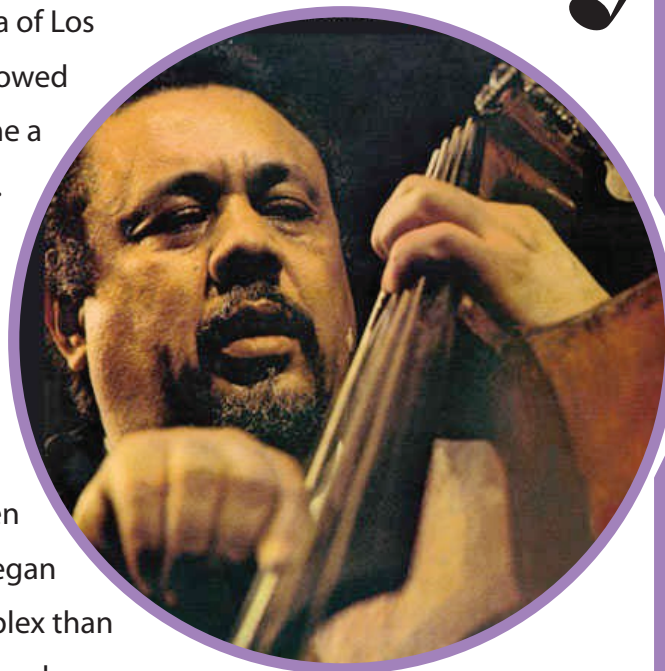
In 1952, Mingus helped found a record label so he could play his music as he saw fit. He formed the Jazz Workshop, a mid-sized ensemble of rotating musicians. He pushed his musicians to reach new heights of excellence and innovation. The decade that followed was his most productive. He was a part of ten record releases over the next ten years. He began suffering from a degenerative muscular disease in the 1970s and was unable to continue to play bass or piano, but he composed and led bands right up until his death at the age of 56.

Answer Sheet - Sample Answers

Directions: Answer the questions below. Use text evidence to support your answers.

1. What is the main idea of Jazz Greats: Charles Mingus? Write it in your own words.

Charles Mingus was a composer, band leader, and musician in the music genre of jazz.



Name _____

Date _____

Jazz Greats: Charles Mingus

2. Choose a quote from the text that supports the following statement, and record it on the lines below.

Charles Mingus chose to persevere through challenges so he could reach success.

“He received a poor education and could not even read music notation when he began playing. Still he began writing music in his teens.”

3. What can you infer about Charles Mingus continuing to compose and lead bands right up until he died?

Student answers will vary, but may include: I can infer that Charles Mingus was still motivated and enjoyed his role in jazz music since he continued to compose and lead bands even though he had a muscular disease.

4. Describe what the author means when the text says, “...His music was far more complex than might have been expected from a teenager, and he earned a reputation as a bass prodigy.”

The author means that Charles Mingus was able to write advanced music, even though he had a poor education and could not read music notation when he began playing. People saw his skills and realized that he was extremely talented.

5. How was Charles Mingus a leader in the jazz community?

Charles Mingus was a leader in the jazz community because he started his own record label. He also formed the Jazz Workshop, was part of ten record releases over ten years, and composed and led bands toward the end of his life.

6. How did Mingus’s terrible temper affect his music career?

Mingus’s terrible temper affected his music career because he was fired from several bands and groups, and this made it difficult for him to move forward with his career.

7. Who or what influenced Charles Mingus as a musician? Include two pieces of evidence from the passage.

a. The church and gospel music was a major influence on Charles Mingus.

b. He played with Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and other well-known Los Angeles bands.