

Swinging Along the Border: Charles Mingus' Album 'Tijuana Moods' Finds New Resonance

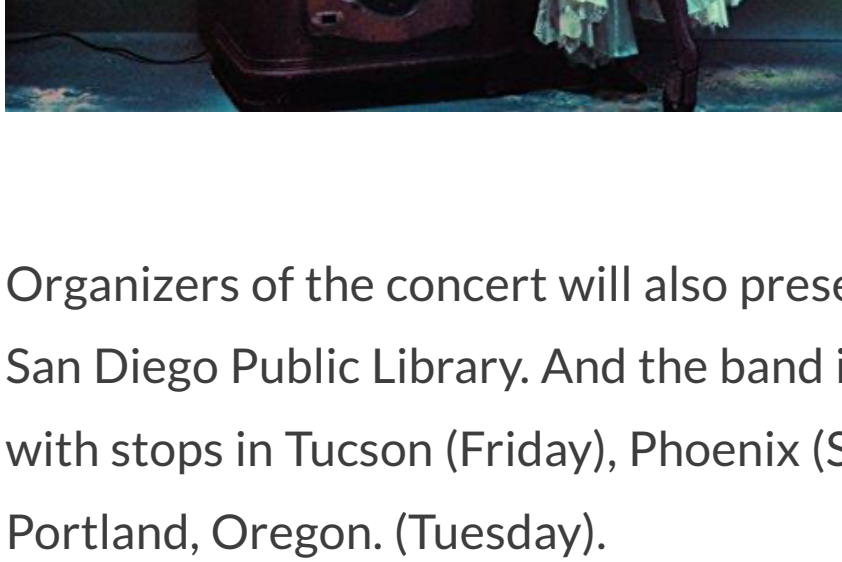
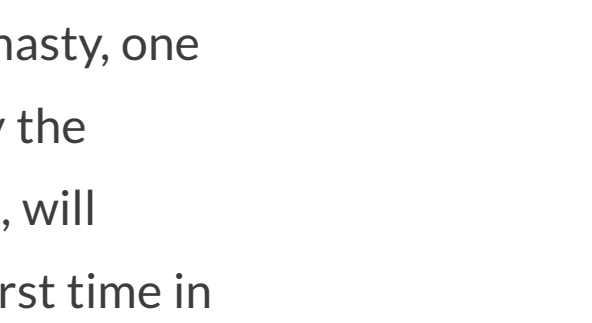
By DAVID R. ADLER • JAN 18, 2018



"All the music in this album was written during a very blue period in my life," the bassist Charles Mingus observed in the liner notes to *Tijuana Moods*.

Recorded a little over 60 years ago, on July 18 and August 6, 1957, it's an album that remains unique not only in the Mingus discography but also in jazz as a whole.

Less an expression of Mexican musical influence than a personal evocation of a place, the album belongs to a vibrant category of border art. At a moment of heated political debate around immigration, it strikes a deep and vital chord.



And in the coming week, thanks to some resourceful programming on the west coast, *Tijuana Moods* is returning home. Mingus Dynasty, one of three legacy bands run by the bassist's widow, Sue Mingus, will perform the album for the first time in Tijuana, Mexico on Sunday, in a free concert at the CECUT Cultural Center.

Organizers of the concert will also present a panel discussion on Saturday at the San Diego Public Library. And the band is performing the album on a regional tour with stops in Tucson (Friday), Phoenix (Saturday), La Jolla, California (Monday) and Portland, Oregon. (Tuesday).

The current Mingus Dynasty features tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery, alto saxophonist Brandon Wright, trumpeter Alex Sipiagin, trombonist Ku-umba Frank Lacy, pianist Theo Hill, bassist Boris Kozlov and drummer Adam Cruz. These are players steeped in the demands and subtleties of Mingus' art, yet mindful of Mingus' credo of individuality.



The Mingus Dynasty, in a previous iteration
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According to promotional materials for the tour, *Tijuana Moods* hasn't been performed in its entirety since the late '70s, and technically this is true: the original Dynasty lineup, including key Mingus associates Dannie Richmond and Jimmy Knepper, took it on shortly after Mingus' death. (He died in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 1979 while seeking futile treatment for ALS.)

But as Kozlov notes, "We play 'Tijuana Gift Shop' quite a bit with the Mingus Big Band because it's a very interesting piece: it has the Latin section, and it has this 17-bar obstacle course of changes and melodies that people like playing on. 'Ysabel's Table Dance' is another fan favorite."

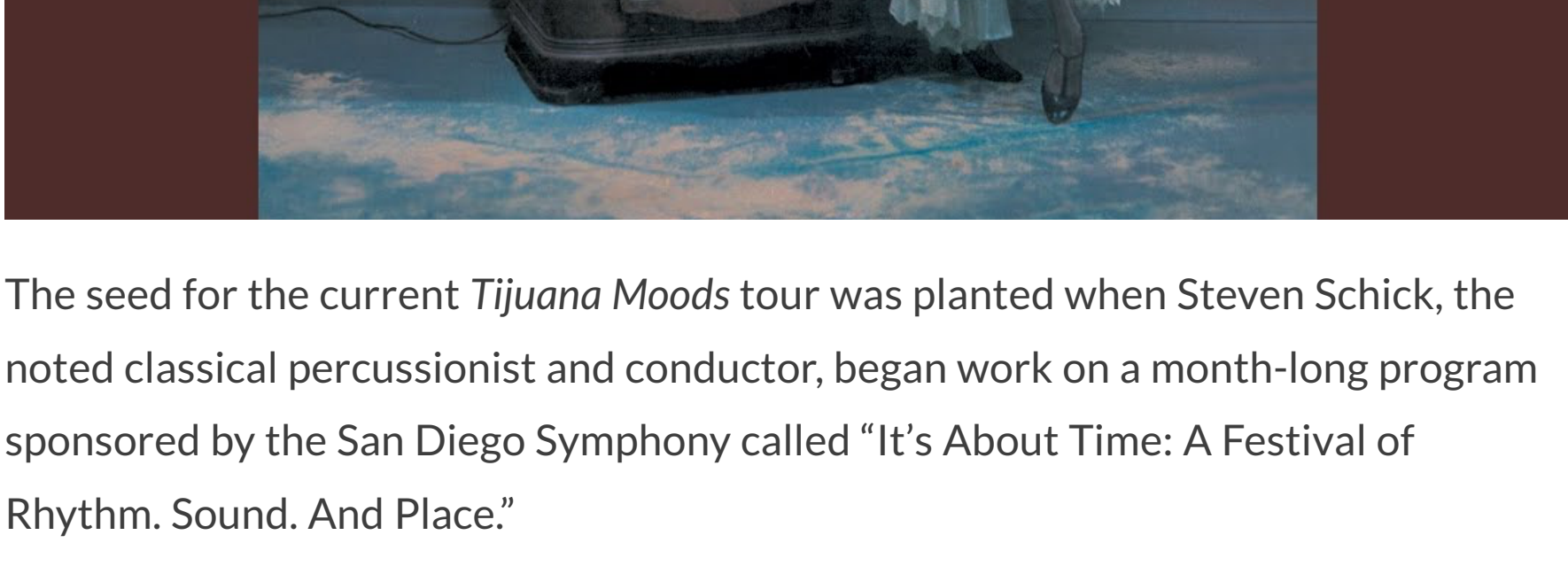
The Dynasty's revisitation, in other words, doesn't come out of the blue. But to perform the material in this political climate, in Tijuana and the border region, is to invite new understandings not just of the music, but of Mingus and his place in American art.

Mingus was born on the Southwest border, in Nogales, Arizona. (Ironically, his Army father was stationed there to stop illegal crossings.) Growing up in Southern California, he made the occasional foray to Tijuana, which he saw as a place of adventure and escape, "a wild, wide-open town."

In the 2000 book *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (Oxford Univ. Press), Gene Santoro places *Tijuana Moods* in an American artistic lineage that includes Orson Welles, Jackson Pollock and Jack Kerouac, among others. These figures, as Santoro writes, viewed Mexico as "North America's prickly Latin underbelly with a history of revolution and repression." Welles, in his 1958 film *Touch of Evil*, saw Mexico "refracted ... as through a funhouse mirror, distorted and thus more deeply revealing."

For Mingus in particular, Santoro continues, "Mexico was a release and a challenge. He loved the Spanish guitars, the clipped rhythms, the yearning operatic voices.... He was gripped by the music's resilient sadness and wanted to transform it."

Kozlov describes the result as "one of the first fusion albums." The bebop melodic orientation, the blues shouts, the tempo shifts, the chamber-like ensemble passages and textures: these are the hallmarks of his sound. When Mexican or Spanish influences come in, none more overt than the castanets and vocals of Ysabel Morel on "Ysabel's Table Dance," they play a key structural role as themes and subthemes weave in and out. Mingus never allows them to become static. Nor is he striving for authenticity; far from mimicking Tijuana's street musicians on "Los Mariachis," he evokes his subjective experience of them.

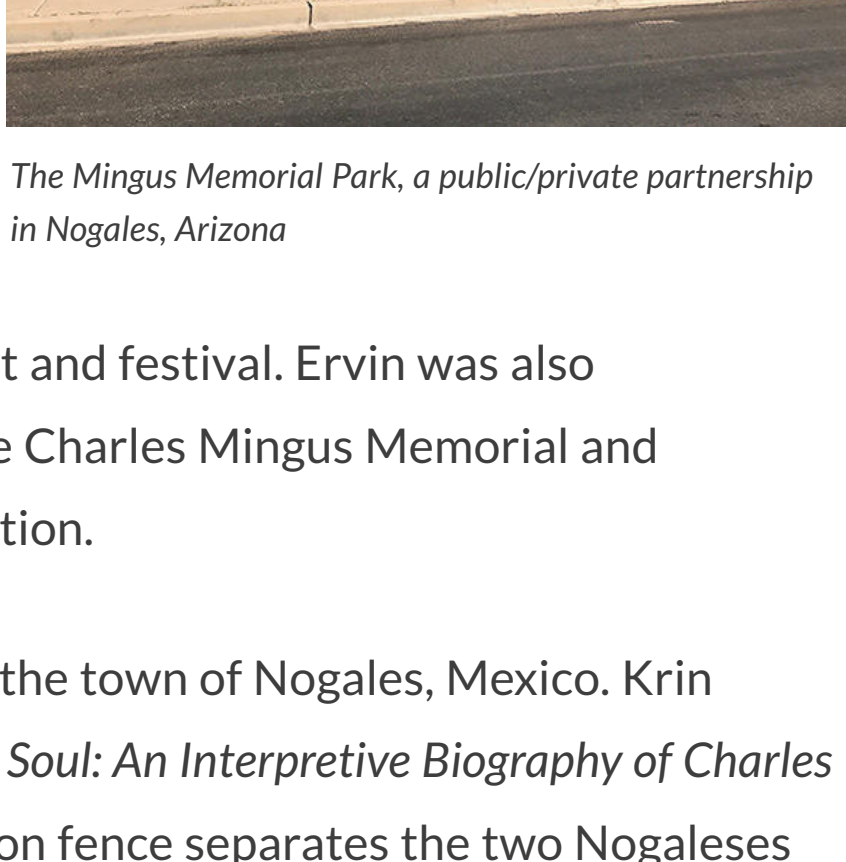


The seed for the current *Tijuana Moods* tour was planted when Steven Schick, the noted classical percussionist and conductor, began work on a month-long program sponsored by the San Diego Symphony called "It's About Time: A Festival of Rhythm. Sound. And Place."

"I think a far more interesting way of looking at rhythm is to think of it as time," says Schick via phone. "And as soon as you do that you also think about *where* things happen. What we're after are connections with this place, San Diego, and the ways in which rhythm and time can activate that place."

Enter Daniel Atkinson, director of UC San Diego's Department of Arts, Humanities, Languages and Digital Arts as well as Jazz Program Coordinator of the Athenaeum Music & Arts Library. When Atkinson learned of Schick's plans he immediately thought of *Tijuana Moods*. "I talked with people who confirmed my suspicion that *Tijuana Moods* is the only major piece by a major jazz composer about this area, the cross-border region," he says.

Not only did *Tijuana Moods* fit seamlessly with Schick's festival, it also dovetailed with the mission of Yvonne Ervin and the Western Jazz Presenters Network (WJPN), sponsor of the tour. Their efforts to honor Mingus' memory date back to the early '90s with the forming of "Jazz on the Border: The Mingus Project," which has fostered educational and concert programming, including an annual Mingus birthday concert and festival. Ervin was also instrumental in acquiring and dedicating the Charles Mingus Memorial and Performance Park, in a central Nogales location.



The Mingus Memorial Park, a public/private partnership in Nogales, Arizona

Across the border from Nogales, Arizona is the town of Nogales, Mexico. Krin Gabbard, his 2016 book *Better Get It In Your Soul: An Interpretive Biography of Charles Mingus*, writes: "Today, an enormous, ugly iron fence separates the two Nogaleses and stretches as far as the eye can see in either direction."

There is also a wall at the U.S. border with Tijuana, Atkinson notes: "It's been there for years. And standing just across the U.S. side are six prototypes, contenders for what the 'bigger and better' wall could be."

The "It's About Time" festival, in addition to presenting *Tijuana Moods*, will make ingenious use of the Tijuana border wall by staging John Luther Adams' sprawling percussion piece *Inuksuit*. Half the ensemble will play in Mexico, the other half in the U.S., with the performers able to hear but not see one another.

"We're also doing a new version of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*," says Schick, "replacing the original text with new text drawn from Luis Alberto Urrea's poetry collection *Tijuana Book of the Dead*. Urrea will read, and there's a dance company coming from Tijuana to join us. So there's a context for the Mingus performance that reaches toward the border and goes beyond our evident musical interest in the album."

The panel discussion on Saturday will feature Schick, alto saxophonist and Mingus alum Charles McPherson, pianist and composer Anthony Davis, and bassist Julian Plascencia, director of the Tijuana Jazz and Blues Festival, who was instrumental in making the CECUT concert a reality. The interdisciplinary character of the panel itself speaks to Mingus' reality as border-crosser, or in Gabbard's words, "a true American creole with a small c."

The border region that Mingus knew was vastly different from the one of today. Atkinson points out that in the mid-'50s, the combined population of Tijuana and San Diego was less than half a million. Crossing the border was far simpler; even recently, Atkinson recalls doing it with just a driver's license. Now one needs a passport and "sometimes there are waits of two to three hours to come back north," he says.

And yet Schick insists that increased border tightness makes the need for collaboration all the more urgent. "There are sentiments all over the political map here," he says, "but I think there is a lot of good will, in places you wouldn't expect. And that really eased the way. We've had a lot of cooperation from the U.S. Border Patrol for the performance of *Inuksuit*, for instance, so the desire to maintain closeness, even on governmental levels, is really there."

Tijuana Moods epitomizes music's broader ability to "ease the way" in Shick's words, to build bridges, and so this Mingus mini-epic continues to fulfill that function over half a century later. It's now a part of Tijuana's cultural history as well, and yet a deeply American document.



"Dizzy Moods," the opening track, is Mingus' complex, bluesy, swinging take on a canonical bebop progression. "Flamingo," the closing ballad, is deeply Ellingtonian, a mental image of Tijuana "though I may be miles away," as Mingus wrote. It is the calmest, most contemplative of endings, illuminating a way out of political despair.

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