

THE AUSTRALIAN

Mingus gig celebrates freedom at Foundry 616



Baritone saxophonist & bandleader Steve Fitzmaurice... PHOTO CREDIT DANIEL NOLAN...

JAZZ

Mingus Amongst Us
Foundry 616
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In an exuberant performance at Sydney's Foundry 616 on Thursday night, the nine-piece ensemble Mingus Amongst Us celebrated the jazz community's release from four months of lockdown.



Palpable feelings of liberation and freedom were in the air. The event not only highlighted emancipation from covid restrictions; it also demonstrated the unique capacity of jazz as an art form to express deeply felt sentiments in the wider community.

Mingus Amongst Us celebrates the sprawling legacy of African American bassist Charles Mingus, who died in 1979. In jazz terms, Mingus’s multi-dimensional music has just about everything: “powerful rhythms, collective free improvisation, gospel ecstasy and looseness, sudden changes of tempo and shouts of encouragement”, to quote jazz writer Ian Muldoon. I would add three further elements to round out Muldoon’s picture: the immortal swing-feel, the blues, and the avant-garde.



The great Charles Mingus, who died in 1979...

Mingus Amongst Us presents arrangements by baritone saxophonist Steve Fitzmaurice. While it has performed around Australia for eight years with differing personnel, the current Sydney line-up is an all-star ensemble.

The opening composition *Tensions* began with the bold sound of Hannah James's double bass. Not overawed by having to fill the big shoes of Mingus himself, one of the great bassists in jazz history, James set the tone of the evening at a very high level from the first note. Throughout two explosive sets which followed, that level was maintained by a gifted team of passionate musicians.



Hannah James on double bass: not overawed by having to fill the big shoes of Mingus himself, one of the great bassists in jazz history...

Other than Fitzmaurice and James, it included Tessie Overmyer (alto sax), David Theak (tenor sax), Ray Cassar (trumpet), James Greening & Mike Raper (trombones), Steve Barry (piano) and Michael Quigley (drums).

Also vocalist George Washingmachine was on hand. Surrounded by music of excellence, he still provided memorable highlights, singing the compositions *Freedom*, and *Don't Let It Happen Here*, reciting Mingus's poetry each time. In a tune with a typical Mingus title *E's Flat Ah's Flat Too*, he presented lyrics recently written by Elvis Costello, a new experience for most listeners. Washingmachine also provided a lovely version of Mingus's well-known elegy for Lester Young, *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*.



Vocalist George Washingmachine: a lovely version of Mingus's well-known elegy for Lester Young "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat"...

Rather than have the band playing at fortissimo throughout, Fitzmaurice cleverly provided musical contrast with such techniques as the rhythm section dropping out, giving soloists the space to express themselves in extensive soliloquies; and other elements I've rarely witnessed: rhythmic hand-clapping and wordless singing by the horn players, underlying the jubilant fun being had by all.



The improvisations which most caught my ear were those played by trumpeter Ray Cassar (left) in “Fables of Faubus”; tenor saxophonist David Theak (below) in “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat”; and alto saxophonist Tessie Overmyer (far below) in “Noon Night/Cecilia”...



In a short review, it may be indelicate to single out individuals when virtually every solo on the night was a heartwarming experience. Nonetheless, the improvisations which most caught my ear, for various reasons, were those played by trumpeter Ray Cassar in *Fables of Faubus*; tenor saxophonist David Theak in *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*; and alto saxophonist Tessie Overmyer in *Noon Night/Cecilia*.

Also, I feel a shout-out for pianist Steve Barry is well-deserved. He was brought in at short notice for an unavailable Kevin Hunt, and performed with commendable brilliance.



Pianist Steve Barry: brought in at short notice, he performed with commendable brilliance... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The night was brought to a close with the classic Mingus flagwaver *Better Get Hit In Your Soul*. It was a reminder not only that it's worthy to commemorate the seminal contributions of a great past icon, but also that the healing force of jazz can be fulsomely experienced.

Mingus Amongst Us is performing at Foundry 616 on the third Thursday of the month.