Mingus is a frequently overlooked jazz composer and bandleader because he did not write or play “pleasant” music and because he played the bass, which gets too little attention by jazz listeners. Yet jazz musicians know his music and consider him one of the music’s most important composers. Mingus defies “easy-listening.” But he did create music that rewards listening. Mingus carried forward the music of Duke Ellington, whom he admired and for whom he composed many songs. Like Ellington, Mingus’s music was often narrative in style; it was “about” something – for example, the black church (Better Get It in Your Soul), the blues (Boogie Shuffle), politics (“Fables of Faubus,” “Freedom-Part One), and perhaps his attitude towards civilization ("Pithencanthropus Erectus). It could also be about individuals like Lester Young (Pork Pie Hat) or Duke Ellington (Duke Ellington’s Sound of Love). Mingus’s style was uncompromising, emotionally honest, sensuous, and commands your attention.

In 1956 in “Pithencanthropus Erectus,” he experimented with “free jazz” that was later expanded upon by John Coltrane (in the album *Ascension*). Mingus often taught his musicians his new compositions in the aural tradition, teaching everyone their parts so they would hear it, feel it, and internalize it instead of reading music. In *Mingus Ah Um* (1959), his compositions are like a survey of all his influences. It’s an essential album for knowing what the music of Mingus is about. Other key albums are “The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady,” “Mingus at Antibes,” and “Mingus” (on his own Candid label).

Born in Nogales, AZ, Charles’s family soon moved to Watts, a black district of Los Angeles. His family was of mixed ancestry, including Chinese, European, black, and Native American. He was exposed primarily to church music under the influence of his mother. He studied both piano, trombone and cello as a teenager and wanted to pursue classical music as a cellist, but was dissuaded by his teachers, who told him that a career as a black classical musician was impossible. He took up the bass when he was offered a job by a dance band led by Teddy Hill. Mingus was by some accounts a prodigy and began writing music in his teens. By 21, he was touring with Louis Armstrong. He also worked briefly with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Max Roach. He was a great admirer of Parker’s innovative soloing. A superb bassist, Mingus was briefly
working for the Duke Ellington Orchestra, but he was soon fired for starting a fight with Juan Tizol, Duke’s long-time trombonist. Mingus’s temper flared often, not only at other musicians, but at audiences, whom he chastised if they made too much noise while the band was playing.

His angry temperament frequently got in the way of his relationships with some band members; there were many players who would not work with him for that reason. But those who could handle his personality were intensely devoted to his music and these included exceptional soloists, like Jaki Byard (piano) Ted Curson (trumpet) and Eric Dolphy (alto sax and bass clarinet) and drummer Dannie Richmond. The Jazz Icons DVD series has an excellent video of Mingus’s concerts in Europe with these players in the band. It offers a rare look at Mingus coaching, rehearsing, and joking with his six-piece band on the road.

Mingus frequently added spoken lyrics to his compositions, some of which were very poetic (Freedom – Part One) or political (“Fables of Faubus” – which was also recorded without lyrics). His autobiography Beneath the Underdog is a fascinating read and its title conveys how Mingus thought of himself as a black man in America. His literary writing is wandering, imaginative, and undisciplined, and while it may not be wholly factual, it is emotionally honest, passionate, and clear, just like his music. His song titles were also very imaginative: “Peggy’s Blue Skylight,” All the Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother,” Orange Was The Color of her Dress, Then Blue Silk,” and “If Charlie Parker Were a Gunslinger, There'd be a Whole Lot of Dead Copycats” – a comment on the many imitator’s of Parker’s style.

Essential Mingus compositions include those mentioned in the short BIO above.

Mingus died at the age of 56 of ALS. At the time of his death, he was working on an album with one of his admirers, the folk singer Joni Mitchell. Eventually Mitchell released an album entitled “Mingus” which included several of his compositions to which she wrote her own lyrics. The album included several prominent jazz musicians of the 1970s – pianist Herbie Hancock, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, and bassist Jaco Pastorius. Mingus is perhaps the jazz composer and player most worthy of more listeners than he has.