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Opening Extract from...

Beneath the Underdog

Written by Charles Mingus

Published by Canongate Books Ltd

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This edition published in 2011 by Canongate Books

First published in the United States of America in 1971 by
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 1995 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

www.canongate.tv

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 85786 218 1

Typeset in Goudy by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

ONE

‘In other words I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two. The second man is like a frightened animal that attacks for fear of being attacked. Then there’s an over-loving gentle person who lets people into the uttermost sacred temple of his being and he’ll take insults and be trusting and sign contracts without reading them and get talked down to working cheap or for nothing, and when he realizes what’s been done to him he feels like killing and destroying everything around him including himself for being so stupid. But he can’t – he goes back inside himself.’

‘Which one is real?’

‘They’re *all* real.’

‘The man who watches and waits, the man who attacks because he’s afraid, and the man who wants to trust and love but retreats each time he finds himself betrayed. Mingus One, Two and Three. Which is the image you want the world to see?’

‘What do I care what the world sees, I’m only trying to find out how I should feel about myself. I can’t change the fact that they’re all against me – that they don’t want me to be a success.’

'Who doesn't?'

'Agents and businessmen with big offices who tell me, a black man, that I'm abnormal for thinking we should have our share of the crop we produce. Musicians are as Jim-Crowed as any black motherfucker on the street and the . . . the . . . well, *they* want to keep it that way.'

'Charles, I know who you mean by *they*, and that's ironic. Because don't you remember saying you came to me not only because I'm a psychologist but also because I'm a Jew? And therefore could relate to your problems?'

'Haw haw! You're funny, doctor.'

'Ah, you're crying again. Here, dry your eyes, Mingus, and don't bullshit me.'

'Haw! Now I got *you* cursing!'

'You've got no exclusive on cursing. Don't bullshitt me. You're a good man, Charles, but there's a lot of fabrication and fantasy in what you say. For instance, no man could have as much intercourse in one night as you claim to have had.'

'The hell he couldn't! Maybe I did exaggerate some things like the weight-lifting and all that 'cause I really don't know how much those bar bells weighed but only two other guys could pick 'em up and their feet sank into the ground!'

'You're changing the subject, my friend. I was asking about the Mexican girls. Why are you obsessed with proving you're a man? Is it because you cry?'

'I am more of a man than any dirty white cocksucker! I *did* fuck twenty-three girls in one night, including the boss's wife! I didn't dig it – I did it because I wanted to die and I

hoped it would kill me. But on the way back from Mexico I still felt unsatisfied so I stopped and . . .’

‘Go on . . . are you ashamed?’

‘Yes because it felt better when I did it to myself than with all those twenty-three dirty-ass whores. They don’t love men, they love money.’

‘How can you know what they love, Charles? Here. Dry your eyes.’

‘Schitt. Fuck it. Even you just dig money!’

‘Then don’t pay me.’

‘Oh, I dig your psychology! You know saying that makes me want to pay you double.’

‘Nope, I don’t want your money. You’re a sick man. When the time comes that you feel I’ve helped you, buy me a tie or something. And I won’t call you a prevaricator again. What matters is that you stop lying to yourself. Now, earlier you said you were a procurer. Tell me about it. How did you get into that?’

‘Why don’t you ever let me lie on the couch, doctor?’

‘You always choose the chair.’

‘I feel you don’t want me on the couch ’cause I’m coloured and your white patients might be bugged.’

‘Oh, Charles Mingus! You can lie on it, kick it, jump on it, get on it, get under it, turn it over, break it – and pay for it.’

‘Man, you’re crazy! I’m gonna save you.’

‘You’re not trained to save. I am.’

‘I *can* save you. Do you believe in God?’

‘Yes.’

‘As a bogie man?’

'We'll get around to that later. Back to the subject, your one-time ill-famed profession.'

'Well, it's true I tried to be a pimp, doctor, but I wasn't really making it 'cause I didn't enjoy the money the girls got me. I remember the first one I knew – Cindy. She had all this bread under her mattress. Bobo laughed at me 'cause I didn't take it – he said I didn't know how to keep a whore.'

'If you didn't want the money, what was it you wanted?'

'Maybe just to see if I could do what the other pimps did.'

'Why?'

'That's almost impossible to explain – how you feel when you're a kid and the king pimps come back to the neighbourhood. They pose and twirl their watchchains and sport their new Cadillacs and Rollsies and expensive tailored clothes. It was like the closest thing to one of our kind becoming president of the USA. When a young up-and-coming man reaches out to prove himself boss pimp, it's making it. That's what it meant where I come from – proving you're a man.'

'And when you proved it, what did you want?'

'Just play music, that's all.'

'I've been reading about you in a magazine. You didn't tell me you were such a famous musician.'

'That don't mean schitt. That's a system those that own us use. They make us famous and give us names – the King of this, the Count of that, the Duke of *what!* We die broke anyhow – and sometimes I think I dig death more than I dig facing this white world.'

'We're making progress, Charles, but perhaps we've done enough for today.'

BENEATH THE UNDERDOG

‘I wanted to tell you about Fats – I dreamed about him again last night.’

‘Fine. Keep it on ice till next time. Good-bye, Chazz.’

‘So long, doctor.’