



• Do I Love You? by Big D and Minging Mike 1971. 12" x 12", acrylic paint, marker, and pen on cardboard.

addition to a stack of hand-made 45s, they found 8-track, reel-to-reel and audio cassette recordings that revealed a soulful creator with minimal resources. Almost everything in the lot was credited to Minging Mike, who appeared to have been a young black male in the 1970s, though a few records were attributed to Joseph War, Rambling Ralph, the Big D, Steve Frightened, and various soundtracks and collaborations.

"Who is Minging Mike?" This is the name of the now infamous discussion thread on Soulstrut.com, a small web community of crate diggers, through which members Secret Chimp (Dori) and Fatback (Frank) shared their find. After pictures of the album covers were posted online, the site got around 8,000 hits a day; word spread quickly through sites like Metafilter and Friendster. The reaction was huge.

Dori and Frank set out to find Minging Mike, which wasn't too difficult, given the identifying information on the goods and Dori's experience as a legal investigator. Their search led them to a humble, good-natured, and hilarious guy who had long shelved his dreams of celebrity. Having just recently found out that the contents of his storage unit were sold, Mike was in shock and was skeptical of their intentions. "But I think once we mentioned the artwork—the album covers and the albums—he smiled," said Dori. "You could see in his eyes that he was kind of happy to hear about that stuff." It quickly became clear that Dori and Frank truly appreciated and were fascinated by Mike's story, and thus, a sort of partnership was born.

I met with Dori, Frank, Minging Mike, and his cousin Joseph War in Dori's living room on March 21st. Mike, who does not wish to disclose his real name, brought over some *Soul Train* episodes featuring James Brown, which we watched before pressing "record."

Mini Music Review

by Fatback a.k.a. Frank Beylotte

"Nail in My Coffin" by Minging Mike: The best song I haven't heard yet. Luckily, Alan Lomax traveled to the future and found, in a remote Nevada trailer once occupied by Captain Beefheart, the great-great grandsons of Big Mama Thornton and Doug E Fresh belting out this acapella orchestral suite of hummed string washes guttural blues belting; featuring drum breaks courtesy of afro-pick and phone book.

Top Ten Song Titles from the Minging Mike collection

compiled by Secret Chimp:

1. "It's a Good Thing Big D & Minging Mike Weren't Here or They'd Be Wasted," from the album *Nightmare on My Couch* by Steve Frightened & His Nightmares.
2. "Think I'm Going to Have to Pawn My Set or Eat My Pet," from the LP *In My Corner* by Rambling Ralph.
3. "Let the Music Take Your Mind (the Brain Scramblers)" from the Original Soundtrack to the film *Tight Squeeze*, by Minging Mike Featuring the Big D.
4. "I Get Caught Up In My Rhymes Girl When I'm Rapping To You," from *Into It* by Joseph War.
5. "Tone Death," by the All Natural Funk Band (7" single).
6. "Here's to the Jive Cops," from the LP *Getting To the Root of All Evils* by Minging Mike.
7. "Underwear Drying at My Front Door," from the LP *In My Corner* by Rambling Ralph.
8. "You Don't Have to Wake Me, the Aroma Will Do That," from the LP *In My Corner* by Rambling Ralph.
9. "Being Cheap Can Put You (Not Me) In Six Feet Deep," from the LP *In My Corner* by Rambling Ralph.
10. "TV Dinners of Mines," by Rambling Ralph (7" single).

Erica Magrey: What came first—writing songs or making album covers?

Mingering Mike: Songs. I started, I think like '67, making up titles, but I never wrote any songs. Then when I did write a song, it didn't sound right because I just couldn't think of nothing. I think about a year later, everything just started coming together. Sometimes you might get a melody before you get the lyrics and this was vice versa. I just had words to work with.

EM: Tell us about the instrumentation and the equipment you used to record the songs. I read that you used afro picks and phone books and a bunch of inventive stuff.

MM: Just a regular tape recorder, and the beat—I'm not that good at beats, and his [Joseph War's] nephew [the Big D] is. I found out that he was writing songs too. And I said hey, maybe we ought to get together... So then we just started doing ad-libs. We turned something on, might have had a thought or idea, then bing! Then we listened to it after and said, Hey, that's pretty good! So then we started scripting things after that...I came up with a song one day called "I Need Your Soul" and I just happened to be riding my bike around the city, and a tune just came in my head. I just ran over to his house to record it. I said, hey, I just thought of a brand new song. I don't know what I'm going to say or anything, but we're going to do it right now. I had already prepared to say that when the recording came on because that's exactly how the concept came to me. So I said I'm going to express that on the recording, that it just came into my head and I don't know what I'm going to do.

Frank Beylotte: I noticed how you said that on the beginning of that "Coffee Cake" song. You said "I wrote this song, uh....right now!"

EM: How many songs do you estimate that you recorded?

MM: Shucks, I don't know. Maybe 200, maybe more than that.

EM: When you had these songs in your head, did you envision them to be fully orchestrated and eventually embellished with real instruments?

MM: Oh yeah. I heard music, I heard it.

EM: When you heard the recordings that you made, was that still satisfying to you?

MM: Yeah. Sometimes it wouldn't be, but most of the time it was because it was just about everything I thought of at that time, so it worked out alright.

EM: Who are your favorite musicians?

MM: Oh, Bach, Chopin, Barbara Streisand...I got inspired by everybody, but James Brown was the main force behind it because his music was just something that you had to have when you was at a party or something.

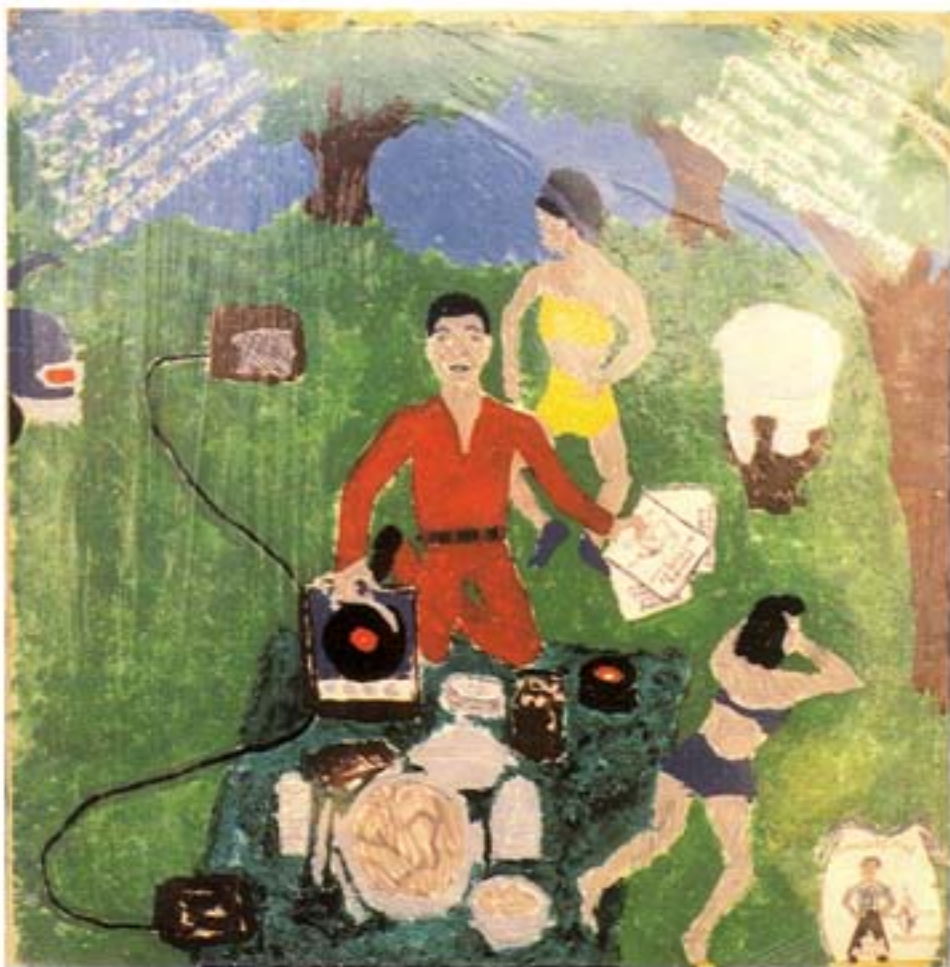
EM: Can you explain the relationship between the recordings and the album covers? Is there a song for every track listing on the records and vice versa?

MM: Well, like some songs we just made them up. And then some songs actually came to me and then a concept came to me to do an album cover for it... Some of the stuff I actually wrote later just because of the title I had... So I said, yeah, I could have everything in place just in case that little dream came true.

EM: What was the first album cover that you made?

MM: I think that was *Sittin' by the Window*. That was about '68-'69, I think. I had to figure out how to do it because I could look at something and draw it, but just the thought of something...[wasn't enough]. So I set up a mirror and had a stool and I would just draw it like that.

EM: Even when there were different characters, you would draw yourself over and over again?



• *Instrumentals and One Vocal* by the Mingering Mike Singers & Orchestra. Acrylic paints, pen, markers and pencil, on cardboard.

I wanted everything my own. I wanted an original—not something that's already out there. When you're original, it strikes peoples' interest a little more.

I might as well go ahead and go for it. You've got the label—you know, see what I could do with that.

EM: How did you come up with all the little details? What about all of the different labels—Ramit Records, Sex Records, Division Records...?

MM: Sex Records—that was something the Big D thought of. So I said gee, it's got sex on it, what kind of logo could I have for that? Then I thought about a headboard, you know? ...Back then I was real creative and everything, and just the ideas and thoughts kept popping into my head. When you see the album or the label, you know who's on that particular record. So then I figured well, me being all the artists and everything, gee, I'd better star on all the labels. Then I said that's kind of crazy. I'm going to

crack open every label like this, so I said well, let me be more realistic and have various artists. Then after, we started playing shows...

Mingering Mike and the Colts, Joseph War, The Big D, and Steve-a-Reno (Mike's brother, the self-proclaimed "world's worst magician") entertained audiences with The Mingering Mike Show. They played charity performances on several occasions, in hospitals, schools, and once in a soldier's home; their "most steady gig," as Frank put it, was at St. Elizabeth's, a mental hospital in D.C. They more or less performed karaoke instead of their original songs. When asked whether he would play another live show, Mike laughed, conceding that he "probably could...I might have to do a little exercise and everything for six months or something."

* Clockwise from top: record single of "It's a good thing Big D and Mike weren't here or they both would have been wasted"; from the album, *Nightmare on a Couch*, by Steve Frightened and His Nightmares, 1974, marker and pen on cardboard. Record single, "I'll get it together" by Mingering Mike, 1972, gold paint, marker, pen, paper on cardboard. Record single, "T.V. Dinner of Mines" by Rambling Ralph, 1972, acrylic paint, paper, marker, and pen on cardboard.

MM: Mm-hmm.

EM: So what about the process behind how you made these? You went into great detail on every cover—record labels, special stickers with bonus tracks...

MM: I wanted everything my own. I wanted an original—not something that's already out there. When you're original, it strikes peoples' interest a little more. Everybody sounds the same, and there's nothing interesting about them. So that's the concept I put toward the albums and everything too.

EM: What kind of materials did you use to make them?

MM: Well, that's what I was stumped on at first...then I went down to CVS—back then it was People's—and in the art section there, I saw colorful cardboard. I said yeah, I could use that. Then I just took it from there and I had to trace an original album so I could see the exact size of it, then I said I need a shrink wrap. I had albums I didn't care too much about so I'd take the shrink wrap off and stick them on the ones I had. And then it was flimsy, so I needed a record to go in it. So I thought of just cutting out a cardboard of the record. Then I said well shucks,

EM: Can you tell us anything about what was going on in your life during the time that you were making all these recordings and album covers—*Sickle Cell Anemia*, for example?

MM: Back then, I called myself the Silent Observer, so that's all I was doing, just sucking in things and writing it down later on... You know how sometimes you'd be watching TV, you might not be paying attention, then all of a sudden something grabs you, or an article in the paper or something. So they were talking about sickle cell, saying it happened to every one in ten.

Joseph War: Didn't your sister have sickle cell?

MM: My mother did. So I thought nobody's saying anything about stuff like that, let's see what I can do with that. So I just wrote up a song and then thought of the album.

EM: What about *The Two Sides of Minging Mike*? That's about internal conflict?

MM: That was like, yeah, conflict and everybody had this forced upon them when they opened up that letter that said 'Greetings...'

JW: '...from Uncle Sam.'

MM: Yeah. You know, and then your life, you figured it was ruined, since you have to go in the service there. So it's like a person seeing both sides of the track and deciding which side they want to go to. That's how I came up with the concept of Division Records, because I had one hand reaching for a gun, and the other is reaching for a microphone. Then I had a little title on there: which one would you choose?

EM: It seems like the Vietnam War affected a lot of these albums/recordings.

MM: It was everything, everything around me that affected me. I wasn't a politician or anything. I couldn't get on TV and tell people about this or take interest in this or that...so I just figured I would just put it in my words.

EM: What did you try to do to put the work out there? Did you contact any record labels, send demos...?

MM: Yeah, I did that one time. In the back of magazines they had a little advertising section, and in the back it said "we'll put your lyrics to music" for \$39.99. I said, I might try it out. Then I said no, no, I know what I'll do. I'll write the most craziest dumb-

est song I can think of and see if they'll tell me if it's good or bad. So when I did send it off to them, they said, "This is the most fantastic thing we ever heard in our life. We want your song! Send us more money and we'll get musicians and singers and..." I said uh-huh, OK. So I left it alone after that. But then it was still eatin' at me so then I was looking in the yellow pages and they had a local musician that could put your lyrics to piano music. I said let me try that guy. And that was only 20 bucks, so it looked real professional with the lyrics and the music. I said boy this would be fantastic but I can't read it.

EM: How long has it been since you have made any kind of drawing or album cover?

MM: Oh shucks...probably when I put everything in storage, that was about the end of that. I always had thoughts of it, but I ain't got too much time.

EM: Why did you put all the stuff in storage?

MM: Well, I was in the process of moving, and I had to put the stuff somewhere. I put it in the storage there, and I was working and you know, just paying it...ten years of paying it, so that shows some kind of dedication. I probably would have had it out this year if things went OK, but they didn't. But this is a nice little consolation prize.

EM: Now there are plans in the works for publicly displaying the artwork?

Dori Hadar: It's all in the very basic planning stages right now. But definitely a book and probably a traveling show in galleries or museums...And the music, also...I think a CD could go along with the book. There are some real interesting possibilities with the music. [To MM] You know what you want them to sound like, and I think maybe you could direct a band to play your songs. How amazing would that be if you actually now had a chance to take some



• Dori Hadar and Frank Beylotte, 2004. Photo: Erica Magrey

of those songs and actually complete them?

EM: Did you ever expect to achieve fame in this manner, and at this point?

MM: No way, no way. But it could be a blessing in disguise. I've got this lady friend and she said, well, I know that's terrible about the storage unit, but maybe there will be a silver lining. I said, how the hell is there going to be a silver lining?! All that stuff, ten years of stuff I got stolen, and all you can talk about is a silver lining?

EM: What do you see in the future, a few years down the road for *Minging Mike*?

MM: I would like to see a whole bunch in the future. I just don't want to get all swell-headed and everything. I'd be saying to people, if you don't have a garage, I can't get [my head] in there!

Go to www.mingingmike.com to send fan mail and check for updates. To see the full transcript of this interview, see www.swingsetmagazine.com.