

drawings, a few collaged photographs, hand-rendered record-company logos, song lists, artists' names, and related information of the kind that routinely appears on the packaging of commercial recordings. Some of them were even encased in cellophane shrink-wrap, just like mass-produced albums. Most were attributed to someone curiously identified only as "Mingering Mike," portrayed in several cases as a young, dark-skinned man self-styled as a soul superstar à la James Brown, wearing casually hip attire suited to the period when the album covers were made—1968 to 1976, according to the dates handwritten in small numerals on them.

TWO RECORDS AND SIX LABELS
 Mingering Mike
 (b. 1950)
 Washington, D.C.
 c. 1968-1976
 Mixed media
 Dimensions various
 All works collection of Dori Hadar.

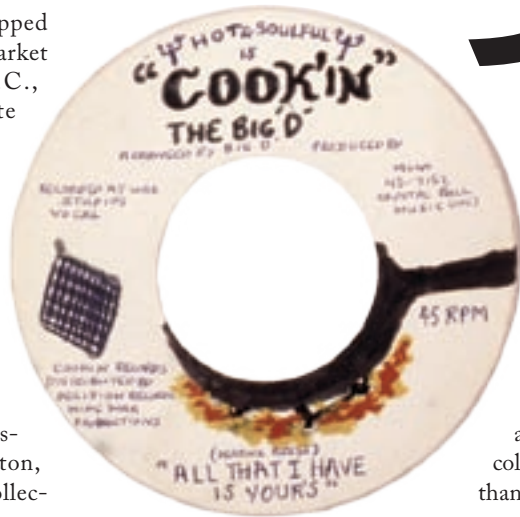
The Advent and Unlikely Reemergence of

Mingering Mike

By Tom Patterson

When Dori Hadar stopped at an outdoor flea market in Washington, D.C., one weekend in late December 2003, he was, as usual, foraging for old vinyl records of the kind he has avidly collected since the early 1990s. What he found on that occasion instead was one of the more unusual and idiosyncratic bodies of work by a contemporary self-taught artist to be uncovered in recent memory.

A 32-year-old criminal investigator who lives in Washington, D.C., Hadar has amassed a collection of more than six thousand albums since he took up his pastime, and like many other collectors, he specializes. His particular interests are old-school funk and rhythm 'n' blues albums from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Previous



experience had revealed this particular flea market, in a predominantly African American neighborhood, to be a good source of such records.

Perusing the stacks of miscellaneous albums displayed there that day, he came across something wholly unanticipated, and unprecedented in his extensive collecting experience: a box of more than thirty homemade record-album covers, many of them containing ersatz records made of blackened, grooved cardboard and encased in handcrafted paper sleeves. The covers were individually designed and embellished, quite painstakingly in some cases, with

Fascinated by these anomalous objects, Hadar examined them for a while, then bought the whole boxful. He promptly photographed them and posted the photos on Soulstrut.com, a website dedicated to the kinds of music he collects. To his amazement, his notice received eight thousand hits in just two days. None of the respondents had any information to convey about Mingering Mike's identity, but all were clearly interested, and some were eager to



offer advice as to the disposition of the material Hadar had so fortuitously come across. One of them, a fellow Washington-area collector named Frank Beylotte, reported that he had found more of Mingering Mike's work at the same flea market and that he had bought about ten fake single records credited to Mingering Mike on that occasion. He told Hadar that he had also come across handwritten correspondence, reel-to-reel tape recordings, and other Mingering Mike material, but he had not purchased any of it. Wasting no time, Hadar returned

after the flea-market discovery. That first encounter was awkward and inconclusive, but it led to subsequent meetings and telephone conversations, during which Mingering Mike filled in the details of his story and formed a friendly partnership with Hadar.

It turned out that Mingering Mike is an African American man in his fifties who lives alone and juggles two blue-collar jobs in order to make ends meet. He had made his self-designed, self-packaged, fake LPs when he was in his late teens and twenties, but had curtailed these activities thirty years

A firsthand look at the Mingering Mike material confirms its status as a uniquely remarkable body of work that can be categorized in various ways. Its essentially private nature might lead some of its appreciators to call it "outsider art." However, its firm roots in the popular culture of its place and time—namely urban black America and the era of Vietnam, Richard Nixon, and Watergate—lends support to its status as both folk and vernacular art or, simply, contemporary art. Regardless of the terminology applied, the imagery and accompanying words

nasally or—by its more hardcore constituency—intravenously. It was also a time when disproportionately large numbers of young black American men were being jailed (as they still are, in even larger disproportions) or drafted and shipped off to perform military duty in Southeast Asia, too often at the cost of life and limb. All of this is reflected in Mingering Mike's homemade album-cover art, as are other facets of that period in American history.

Record albums had long been familiar commodities in the home-



**THE MINGERING MIKE SHOW:
LIVE FROM THE HOWARD
THEATER (recto and verso)**
1969
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

ago, after the demands of the workday world began to consume much of his time and energy. He valued the material enough to hold on to most of it, but circumstances eventually forced him to place it in storage, along with some of his other belongings, in the early 1990s. A misunderstanding with the storage facility's owner and an unintended delay in Mingering Mike's payment of the monthly fee on his unit prompted the owner to remove and dispose of its contents late in 2003. Soon afterward, most of the previously stored items wound up at the flea market where Hadar found the box of records.



GHETTO PRINCE
(recto and gatefold left)
1972
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

reflect the tenor of a time, in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, when the Black Power movement was ascendant and influential, culturally if not politically. In fashion, it was the era of big Afros, dashikis, aviator shades, and bell-bottoms; in film, it was the moment of superbad, black urban heroes such as Shaft and Superfly; and in music, it was the age of James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." On the illicit-pharmacology front, those years marked a period when mass interest in psychedelics was yielding to the growing popularity of cocaine, ingested

entertainment market by the time these objects were created, but in the late 1960s their packaging underwent an artistic revolution fueled in part by the emergence of Pop Art and the psychedelic aesthetic, not to mention the lavish production budgets that unprecedented profits from record sales allowed. By 1970, the twelve-inch-square cardboard sleeves in which record albums were sold had gained a new status as popular objects of aesthetic contemplation, and it was increasingly commonplace for them to be designed by widely known artists such as Peter Blake, R. Crumb, Mati Klarwein, and Andy Warhol. Gatefold



covers with twice the standard amount of cover art were increasingly common for single LPs as well as two-album sets. The target audience for both the art and the music it was designed to sell was the emerging international youth culture—a fast-growing population of baby-boomer teens and young twentysomethings with disposable income. These young consumers were known to spend extended periods of time during those years not only listening to their favorite records but also contemplating the covers, grooving on the imagery, and sometimes finding all sorts of hidden meanings therein.

In harboring aspirations to musical stardom and envisioning hit records of his own, Mingering Mike was no different from thousands of his peers across racial lines. Many other young people in this country had access to home tape recorders and used them, as he did, to record themselves performing their favorite hit songs or self-penned numbers. Given the popularity of album-cover art in the late 1960s and early '70s, it is entirely possible that at least a few other young Americans of his era went so far as to create packaging for the studio-produced vinyl records they imagined cutting, but no other examples of the practice have yet surfaced.

Included among Mingering Mike's fake discography are soundtracks to imaginary films, records celebrating holidays including the U.S. Bicentennial, and an album billed as having been recorded to benefit victims of sickle-cell anemia. The album covers carry the logos of various imaginary record companies with names such as Decision, Fake, Hypnotic, Puppy Dogg, Ramit, Relations, and Sex. In addition to the Mingering Mike persona, the creator of this material invented other musical acts billed on some of the album covers, such as Audio Andre, the Colts Band, the Freedom Stompers, the Mongoes, the Outsiders, and Rambling Ralph. These groups are occasionally cobilled, as on an album cover for *The Mingering Mike Show: Live from the Howard Theater* (page 52), which visually depicts and lists songs by several of these bands. Two performers sometimes billed as feature

acts or collaborators—Joseph War and Big D—were actually cousins, and Big D sang with Mingering Mike on the latter's homemade reel-to-reel tapes, as did Joseph War on at least one occasion. Their recordings, many of which have survived, consist of spirited vocals typically accompanied



LET'S GET "NASTY"
(recto and gatefold left)
1975
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

by makeshift percussion, usually an Afro-comb rhythmically pounded on a bed or a telephone book.

Some of Mingering Mike's album covers center on relatively straightforward portraits—in most cases self-portraits—augmented by boldly lettered album titles and lists of featured song titles. Facial portraits of himself and Big D, both leering lasciviously and sticking out their

tongues, grace the front cover of their duo album *Let's Get "Nasty"* (left), accompanied by the text teaser "Ohio Players Eat Your Hearts Out." Other covers are more elaborate, casting one or more figures in scenes of musical performance, interpersonal exchange, or other activities suggesting broader



narrative contexts. Some of these are hilariously funny. *Minger's Greatest Hits Volume One (1): "Mother Started It All"* (Fig. 1, page 56) is illustrated by an unfinished-looking scene in which the artist is shown relaxing on a broken log and holding on his lap what appears to be a purple-and-yellow penguin wearing a hat and eyeglasses. "In My Corner" (Fig. 2), an album attributed to Rambling Ralph, carries a

cover illustration of a more ordinary domestic scene, in which a man sits in a lounge chair and eats a sandwich while flipping channels on a television set. Small lines of accompanying text advertise the album's contents—"20 Hits / Plus / a Free 45 Entitled [sic] / T.V. Dinners of Mines. / & / 'Eat Now and Eat Later.'"

Some of the cover drawings for Mingering Mike's albums refer directly to controversial social issues of the era. The topic of drug abuse was clearly on his mind when he titled an album *The Drug Store* (Fig. 3) and drew on its cover jars of pills, a hypodermic syringe, and other drug paraphernalia and related accoutrements. And he was obviously thinking about the connections between drug abuse and racism when he created the cover art for Joseph War's solo album *Ghetto Prince* (page 53), with its rectangular cut-out revealing an informal black-and-white photograph of War collaged on the interior gatefold juxtaposed with a drawing of pills, syringes, money, and what appears to be a Ku Klux Klan hood. One of the inscriptions reads, "Once you start, it's hard for you to stop / Once you stop . . . 'Stop.'"

An album cover that probably dates from the Watergate era is illustrated by a scene in which Mingering Mike and Big D wear bell-bottoms and platform shoes as they strike matching proto-disco dance poses on the sidewalk in front of the U.S. presidential residence and underneath the album title "Boogie Down" at the White House (Fig. 4). Lines of smaller text at the bottom identify this as a "Comedy song album / with music & meaning / featuring / the likenesses of / Richard Nixon, Frank Sinatra / Bel-La-La Gossie, Ramblin Ralph / & Suburban Richard." And in a more pointedly critical reflection of the era during which this body of work was created, the cover illustration for Mingering Mike's album "You Know Only What They Tell You" (Fig. 5), billed as the soundtrack for a film of that title, shows a U.S. soldier manipulated by puppet strings to kick a knife from the hands of a Vietcong guerrilla identified by his straw hat and black pajamas. Emblazoned above this scene is a bold red headline

touting “The United States of America Puppet Force,” and imprinted alongside it is an induction date. This is one of several clues among the album-cover drawings and writings that the Vietnam War and the draft were big issues for Mingering Mike at the time, as they were for most draft-eligible men in this country.

Before he acquired the Mingering Mike archive, Dori Hadar had no expertise or special interest in visual art, but he was culturally savvy enough to have recognized that these handmade, one-of-a-kind objects were likely to interest specialists in that field as much as or perhaps more than they would appeal to pop-music fans. He also felt that they would be most likely to find an audience among folk art aficionados. With these thoughts in mind, he

the work and an opportunity to meet and talk with Hadar, who traveled to North Carolina for the opening reception. Accompanying him was none other than Mingering Mike himself, who had agreed to attend the show’s opening reception on the condition that he be allowed to remain on the sidelines and go without formal introduction. Evidently publicity-shy, Mingering Mike has consistently declined to reveal his identity. But when attentive members of the reception audience figured out who he was and approached him with compliments on his work, he didn’t seem to mind the attention in the least.

In our discussions, both in person and on the telephone, Mingering Mike spoke straightforwardly about his motivations for creating this body

of a “merging traffic” sign prompted him to combine the words *mingling* and *merging*, which in his mind yielded “mingering”—a word that he coined simply because he thought it “had a nice ring to it.”

Although he has shunned personal publicity, Mingering Mike is not personally shy. On the contrary, he struck me as a man possessed of a healthy self-confidence and great pride in his youthful work, if still somewhat surprised at the extent of the public response to it. He said that when he learned that it had all been sold along with his other stored belongings, he had been devastated and had resigned himself to never again seeing these artifacts of his younger years. He said he’d been astonished to learn later that they’d been saved, and he seemed

Fig. 1
MINGERS GREATEST HITS
VOLUME ONE (1): “MOTHER
STARTED IT ALL”
c. 1968–1976
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 2
“IN MY CORNER”
c. 1968–1976
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 3
THE DRUG STORE
1972
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 4
“BOOGIE DOWN”
AT THE WHITE HOUSE
1975
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 5
“YOU KNOW ONLY WHAT
THEY TELL YOU”
1973
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 6
THE TWO SIDES
OF MINGERING MIKE
c. 1968–1976
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 7
“AS HIGH AS THE SKY”
c. 1968–1976
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

Fig. 8
GET TIN TO THE ROOTS
OF ALL EVILS
1971
Mixed media
12½ × 12½"

absent without leave, returning to Washington, D.C. Once back in familiar environs, he remained officially underground for the next seven years, until President Jimmy Carter granted a general amnesty to nonviolent Vietnam-era military deserters and draft resisters in 1977.

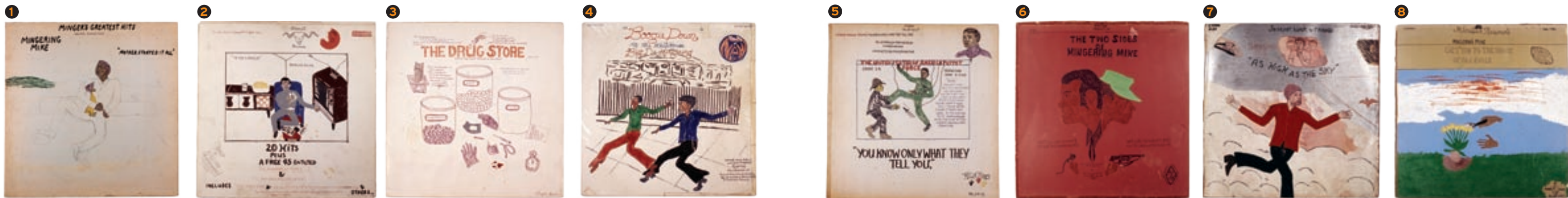
During those years, Mingering Mike was faced on a daily basis with the consequences of his refusal to serve in a war that he neither believed in nor understood. Something of the feelings he experienced at the time are reflected in the two-headed self-portrait he drew for the cover of *The Two Sides of Mingering Mike* (Fig. 6), in which one half wears the shirt, tie, and long sideburns of a hip musician of the early 1970s, hand reaching for a microphone, and the other, with hair

the better part of a decade—plenty of time for anyone in such circumstances to develop the instincts of an outlaw or fugitive. Even though it has been nearly thirty years since he and thousands of other Americans were granted amnesty for having made such tough choices, it’s easy to see how the post-9/11 political climate might have stirred up and reinforced those instincts.

Whatever Mingering Mike’s reasons for wanting to keep his identity under wraps, as his work becomes more widely known, there will probably be increasing pressure on him to reveal who he is. Aside from this pressure, Mingering Mike must be feeling some degree of urgency to capitalize on the emerging interest in his creative endeavors by making more work

Mike’s work, but Hadar said he feels certain that there will be more such shows and that the cardboard record player will be included, with one of the cardboard disks cued up on its turntable, poised and ready to play the soulful sounds of the artist formerly—and now once again—known as Mingering Mike. ★

Tom Patterson is an independent writer, critic, and curator, and the author of several books on contemporary folk art and artists, including St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Jargon Society, 1987), and Howard Finster, Stranger from Another World (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989). His latest curatorial project was “Homegrown and Handmade,” an exhibition of more than two hundred



showed the work to Jane Livingston, a veteran scholar of modern and contemporary art and the former curator for Washington’s Corcoran Gallery of Art (where in 1982 she co-organized the influential exhibition “Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980”), and to George Hemphill, the owner of a commercial art gallery in Washington. These art-world contacts soon led him to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA), a nationally recognized nonprofit gallery in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where Mingering Mike’s work was given its first formal exhibition, in early 2005.

The show at SECCA gave several hundred viewers, including this author, an extended firsthand look at

of work, explaining that it was an outgrowth of his songwriting efforts and aspirations. Recalling his late teens as a time of musical inspiration, he said, “Music just popped into my head, and I would let it come out.” He was so prolific in those years, by his account, that he sketched out the basics for several thousand songs, a few hundred of which made it onto his reel-to-reel recordings. When he listened to the tunes afterward, he said, “I liked what I heard, so I decided to take it a step further and make my own covers for them.”

Where did the name Mingering Mike come from? He said that first he thought to call himself Mingling Mike, but he didn’t quite like the sound of that moniker. Then, he said, the sight

happy with the subsequent turns of events in connection with them.

So why the aversion to being more public about his identity? The available evidence, in the form of comments he has made about his past, suggests that his avoidance of personal publicity is a tendency conditioned by pivotal life experiences during the time period spanned by his record albums. Although clearly uncomfortable in discussing the details, he has recounted that in 1970 he was drafted and inducted into the Army, whereupon he underwent basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. He was then ordered to report to Seattle, he recalls, and he assumed that from there he would be sent to combat duty in Southeast Asia. Instead, he went

cropped close and an army-green cap, has a hand reaching for a weapon. These feelings are also reflected in his logo design for his Decision record label, which, too, features a pair of hands—one reaching for a gun, the other for a microphone. (In some variations, the hand not grabbing at the microphone is going for a hypodermic syringe, positing a choice between singing and intravenous drug use.)

Perhaps the fact that the United States is now involved in an overseas war whose opponents have been labeled unpatriotic has given Mingering Mike an unpleasantly close-to-home sense of déjà vu. His post-induction choice to desert from military service rendered him a marked man for

in the same vein, or at least something related to it. When I asked him about this, he acknowledged that he had indeed been thinking about a return to his creative activities. More recently, I learned in a phone conversation with Hadar that Mingering Mike has a new work in progress—and not another fake album packaged with his cover drawings, as might be expected. Instead, according to Hadar, Mingering Mike is working on making a portable record player like those popularized in the late 1960s and early ’70s, with a pair of detachable, hinged speakers that fold in for carrying and out for operation—all fabricated of cardboard.

At this writing, there are no plans for subsequent shows of Mingering

works of contemporary Southern folk art from the collection of Barry and Allen Huffman, at the Hickory Museum of Art, in Hickory, North Carolina, in 2005.

Mingering Mike, by Dori Hadar, will be published by Princeton Architectural Press in early 2007. For more information on Mingering Mike, visit www.mingeringmike.com.