



Mingering
Mike

BY DORI HADAR
ART BY MINGERING MIKE



All good record stories begin at dawn in a down-and-dirty flea market with someone on their knees. That's where I was, on a freezing December day in Washington D.C., cursing myself for being out on such a miserable, dreary morning. It was there, hunched over a mass of freshly unloaded boxes, that I found one of the strangest and most remarkable relics of my digging career.

Sifting through old personal belongings is like rummaging through lost hopes and dreams. Old letters, photo albums, a battered croquet set, even the scribbles on a torn book jacket—each contains stories long forgotten, waiting to be retold. The romance of digging, the vicarious thrill of stumbling into a random life (along with finding the elusive funk bomb), is what gets me up at 5 A.M. more times than I care to count.

Usually just a few items are enough to kindle my curiosity, but occasionally I've chanced upon someone's *entire* dream, so vast and detailed that it can be overwhelming. These items, buried in storage for decades, preserved and untouched, are time capsules that reveal intimate snapshots of past lives.

On that morning, what I found first intrigued, then enthralled me. It was a box seemingly full of records, but as I pulled them out, I saw that they weren't records at all. They were *fake* albums—a collection of over three dozen. Each was hand painted and intricately designed, some complete with liner notes, lyrics, imaginary labels, and in some cases,

cardboard records on which the grooves had been painstakingly painted. Some of the covers were even covered in shrink-wrap, which must have been meticulously removed from real albums and pulled onto these homemade ones. Whoever had made these had also gone so far as to write the album titles and call numbers onto the spines.

The first one I pulled out was titled *The Mingering Mike Show – Live from the Howard Theatre*. The quirky cover art (portraits of four different soul groups) was painted on a handmade gatefold sleeve. It had split seams that had been repaired with masking tape, and the back cover stated that it was a June 1969 release. A logo in the bottom right-hand corner indicated that it was on Nation's Capitol [sic] Records.

The inside of the gatefold displayed more drawings of the performers (Mingering Mike, the Monitors, the Colts Band, Mike & the Minutes, the Mailavar Dancers, Miss Linda Landtree, and Miss Lora Little), along with a track listing for what was apparently a double album. The Colts started off the show with an instrumental tune called "Sucked You In," which was followed by the Mailavar Dancers, who, according to the track listing, danced to the tune of James Brown's "I Got the Feeling." Other performances included Miss Lora Little singing "While You're Out Look'n 4 Suga," and Mingering Mike's renditions of "Spinning Wheel," "Murder (In the First Degree)," and "What I Goin' Ta Do."

I pored over the covers for close to an hour, trying to make some sense of them. There was a kung fu soundtrack called *Brother of the Dragon*, a sickle-cell anemia tribute album; *On the Beach with the Sexorcist*, *Mingering Mike's Greatest Hits*, *Fractured Soul*, and many more, including albums by other artists such as the Big D and Joseph War. Together there were almost forty of these “albums,” all authored by “Mingering Mike.” Whatever they were, I knew instinctively that they were special and very personal. That someone had gone to so much trouble to create such a comprehensive discography was amazing. I was baffled. What were these things? Who was Mingering Mike? A real person? A real *musician*? And what the hell does “mingering” mean, anyway?

I kept all of the artwork to myself for another week or so, but the more I examined it, the more fascinated I became. There was just so much to it. Mingering Mike was growing on me, with his personal liner notes, hilarious song titles (e.g., “War Stands for Peas and Hominy” and “It’s a Good Thing Big D & Mingering Mike Weren’t Here or They Both Would Have Been Wasted”), thematic albums, and imaginative artwork. I decided to share some of the covers with the online record-collecting community.

Many were moved by Mike’s work and intrigued by the mystery of the whole thing. Some were even more excited about the stuff than I was. People suggested that I take the artwork to places like the Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore or even the Smithsonian.

One reply was more to the point: A fellow digger here in D.C., Frank Beylotte, wrote that he had seen some similar “records” at the flea market. After reading my post he rushed back and bought fifteen of Mingering Mike’s cardboard 45s, which I had missed the week before. He mentioned in another posting that there were a number of other things there, including boxes of reel-to-reel recordings, 8-tracks, videotapes, and personal letters.

What had started out as curious interest on a website had now become clamorous excitement. The story quickly spread over the Internet, appearing on countless blogs and message boards. A search for Mingering Mike on Google suddenly produced over 200 results.

It was almost overwhelming to view all of the albums in their entirety. There were enough to cover a large wall, and each of them gave a glimpse into a life we could all relate to. Here we had a music lover with dreams of becoming a star, who had strong opinions about the world he lived in (and a great sense of humor), and who documented his most personal thoughts through a medium we all love—records. Mingering Mike had created a vast and fantastic world of his own, and now it had completely enraptured the imagination of everyone who was introduced to it.

Various media outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Fader*, *Spin* magazine, and NPR began to contact Frank and myself, interested in covering the discovery. Filmmakers wanted to document any attempts to track him down, and there was even talk of a motion picture loosely based on Mingering Mike’s life.

After reading Frank’s message, I sped back to the flea

market, ignoring D.C.’s red-light cameras, fearful that what was left of Mingering Mike’s stuff was either sold or trashed by now. But to my relief it was all there, seemingly untouched—correspondence, recordings, pictures, etc. I bought it all. The next step was obvious—to find Mingering Mike, assuming he was still alive nearly thirty years later. Luckily, the letters I found had Mike’s full name on them, and because some of them were sent from a military base, they had his social security number too. When I’m not out canvassing flea markets, I make my living as a criminal investigator, so it wasn’t hard to use what info I had to find Mingering Mike’s most recent address. Frank and I jumped into my car and headed out to find him on a Sunday afternoon.

We pulled into the parking lot of an apartment complex in southeast D.C., just a mile and a half from the flea market where this story began. The entrance to the building was locked and there was no buzzer, so we had to wait for someone to come out before we could get inside. We knocked on the door, and after a minute or two the door cracked open and two eyes peered at us suspiciously.

“Mingering Mike?” I asked, brimming with excitement.

The eyes continued to stare.

“We’re sorry to bother you,” I said. “This might sound kind of strange, but we found your art at the flea market, and we think it’s incredible. We’d love to talk to you about it.”

At the mention of the artwork, the eyes seemed to brighten up. The door opened a bit more, and we could see the man’s face. There was no doubt that this was Mingering Mike—one of the albums had his photograph pasted on the inside.

“Now’s not really a good time,” he said, looking at us apprehensively. We said we’d come back at the same time the next day, but when we did there was no answer. I left a note with my phone number, and a couple of days later Mike called. We agreed to meet at a Denny’s.

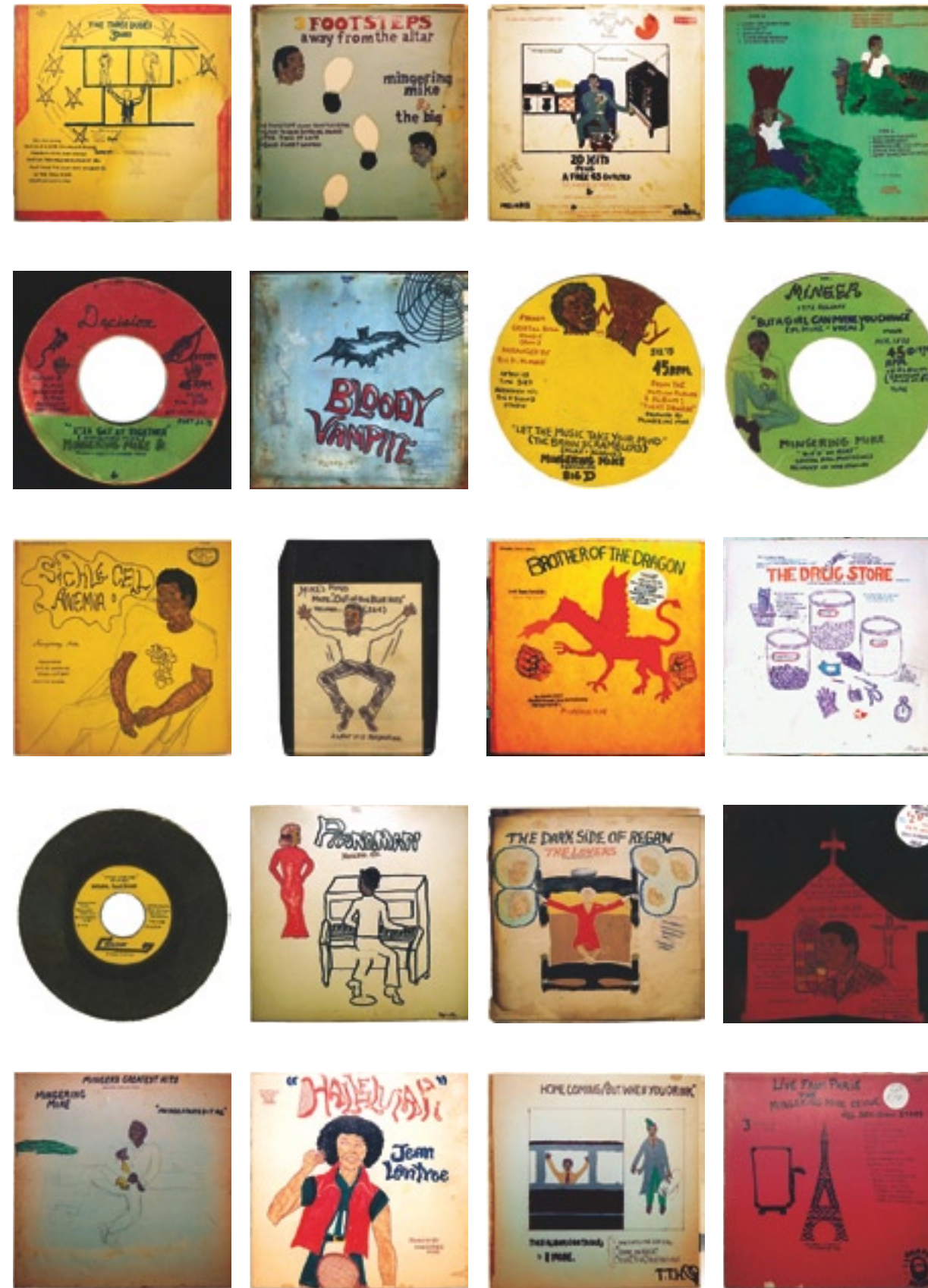
He was sitting at a booth at the far end of the restaurant with his cousin, aka “Joseph War,” one of the artists featured on Mike’s albums. After we introduced ourselves there was a long silence. All this time, combing through lost minutiae, I had imagined people’s lives—and now here I was barging right into one. Even for a P.I. who regularly investigates murder cases, this was uncharted territory.

I had brought printouts of some of Mike’s album covers, and I laid them out on the table. Frank and I began to let loose with all of the questions we had agonized over for the past few days. During the months that followed, Mike answered them all.

The following interview took place at the home of Joseph War, just outside of D.C. in Landover, Maryland.

Dori Hadar: First of all, how’d you lose all of your stuff? There must have been five or six thousand real records, plus your personal belongings, that showed up at the flea market over the course of a couple of weeks. That right there is my worst nightmare!

MINGERING MIKE: Yeah, you said a mouthful there. Well, I didn’t actually know they were missing or going





“HE WOULD DO THE BEATS ON A PHONE BOOK WITH A HAIR COMB; HE HAD THE GOOD BEATS.”



to auction or anything. I went down to my storage unit in December and was going to make a payment a couple of days before Christmas Eve. They were closed, so I tried calling, but they didn't answer. I left a message on their answering machine, and a couple of days later they called me back and said that everything was sold and I no longer had the storage unit, and that I still owed them money.

JOSEPH WAR: So they called you after they already sold everything? They didn't call you before to tell you they were going to do that?

MM: No! And they wouldn't have probably called me if I hadn't called them to check. They used to call periodically and let me know if I was behind in my payments, but after a while they just stopped doing that.

I hope you didn't pay them any more money!

MM: No! No, I was about to go over there and tell 'em, "You *\$%*&%!!"

I can't imagine how you felt when you discovered that it was all gone.

MM: Devastated. Totally devastated.

So you must have been pretty surprised when Frank and I knocked on your door.

MM: Yeah, very.

JW: At first we thought you were the ones that bought the storage unit.

So you didn't know *what* we wanted, huh?

JW: Right, right. He hated you. [laughter]

MM: [pretends to be in a rage] "They take my stuff and then they have the nerve to come around here!!"

Did you think you'd ever see any of your stuff again?

MM: No, I didn't, because after I heard that message that they left me, I was just stunned. The message kept running through my head over and over again: "You no longer have a storage unit with us, *and* you still owe us money." And I had my stuff with them for ten years—I expected better treatment than *that*.

So what inspired you to make all of these albums in the first place?

MM: It was the dream of just getting my ideas out there, because a lot of people go around every day with thoughts in their mind that they can't express, and it stays locked up. I didn't want mine to stay locked up. I had to find some kind of way to express myself. So I started doing it like that, with the songs. And after the songs came the albums.

So what does "mingering" mean, anyway?

MM: Well I was trying to come up with a name for myself, and at first I was thinking "Mingling Mike." But that didn't sound right. So then I was in someone's car one day and I saw a sign that said "merging traffic," so I kind of combined "mingling" and "merging" and came up with "mingering." It just had a nice ring to it.

In "Stars in the Eyes of Men," one of your songs recorded on reel-to-reel, you rap about your dreams of being a star. You say, "I dreamed I've been to Paris and Rome, throwin' shows for people. I been everywhere, and I ain't been nowhere. And every year I'm getting a little older... I want a gold record, you know? I wanna do movies, musical movies and stuff, maybe star in 'em." So

there was more to your dream than just the music—you were thinking about movies, too?

MM: [pretends to sob] Hey that's pretty good—I like that! [laughs] Well that was true, I wasn't into sports and stuff like that, and so you know everybody's got that thing that they do that makes them feel kinda whole, and that was something that kind of started bringing me together more and more. And then as years go by and you're still creative, you gotta let that out somehow. And then after that, then you kind of think to yourself, "Gee, what happens when this runs dry?" And you gotta think of some other thing to work on while you're doing what you're still doing now.

So it started off with you writing some songs?

MM: Yeah, four thousand, but who's counting? [laughs]

How many songs did you write before you started making the album covers?

MM: Hmm... Maybe two thousand. But they weren't full songs, they were ideas for songs. And I had ideas for the album covers, too. I just didn't know how to express them at the time.

Wow. So how old were you when you first started actually writing full songs?

MM: Well, I started out when I was a teen. I used to always think of titles, but I could never come up with the words to go with them. I used to go in the bathroom for the good acoustics; it kind of helped me get creative. My family would be like, "Hey what you doin' in there?!" [laughter] But I just couldn't come up with nothing. And then one day something just popped into my head. And then I got myself a tape recorder and started recording myself and listening to it. The beats were kinda stale, but the words were pretty good, and I executed them pretty good, so I said, "Hey, this is pretty good!" I got even more inspired and started coming up with more songs.

Do you remember what that first song you recorded was, and when that was?

MM: Yeah, it must have been in the late '60s or early '70s. "Sitting by the Window." That was the title of the first album I made, too.

For how long did you make the covers? The earliest one, from what I can tell, is 1968, and the last one is from 1976.

MM: I think I must have stopped sometime in the late '70s because I had to sort of give up on my dreams and start focusing on work and making some money.

Did you ever have any artistic training or anything like that?

MM: Nope, none.

I assume that a lot of the themes of your albums related directly to your life and the things going on around you at the time.

MM: Yeah, that's true. *You Know Only What They Tell You* was referring to the government at the time and how they would make the people do things for their own purpose, sending 'em off to war and stuff like that. And most of the time, people didn't know what they were doing it for, they were just being patriotic. They were just going by what the government told them, and it could have been a big lie. So it was kind of like a big puppet force.



One that really stands out to me is *The Two Sides of Minging Mike*, where the cover depicts you as one-half musician, one-half soldier.

MM: Yeah, it's like a person not being in control of their destiny. If you go off to war, you might just become a memory in people's minds. It's traumatic, trying to decide which side is right. Do I go this way or that way?

JW: How did you feel when you were drafted?

MM: Terrible, just terrible. I was like, man, they're trying to throw me up in this mess. They tell you, "Just shut up and keep moving. Do what I say." You don't have any choice anymore.

You reported for duty?

MM: Well, yeah. I went through the induction and all that. But at the ceremony, when they officially declare you a soldier for the United States Army, I wouldn't step forward. I was the only one. So they took me in the back and told me that I wouldn't have to fight, I could just perform for the soldiers since I was into music, that fighting was just a secondary thing. [laughs] Then I went through the whole thing again at some other part of the process, and I wouldn't step forward again. But then they started telling me about the \$10,000 fine and two years in jail. So that made me step forward. So I went to Ft. Lee for training, and from there I was supposed to report to Seattle, Washington.

JW: Did you make it to Seattle?

MM: Nooo. When you go to Seattle, the next stop is Cambodia. I just went home. [Mike, along with all conscientious objectors and draft dodgers, was granted general amnesty by Jimmy Carter in 1977.]

Well, now they're talking about possibly reinstating the draft all over again—how do you feel about that? [Before the start of the war in Iraq, New York Rep. Charles Rangel (D) introduced a bill to reinstate the draft (mainly as symbolic protest). But Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld denied a need for a draft, and the bill never made it to the floor. —Ed.]

MM: The same way. But now there's a whole different crop of people out there, and for some people in society, the army would probably be the best thing for them. I guess they might as well get paid for killing people since that's what they're doing out there anyway.

What did you make the albums and records out of?

MM: I couldn't figure out at first how I was gonna make 'em. One day I was walking through the drug store and saw that they had some art board, so I said, yeah, I can use that. So I started out with white art board, but that got a little mundane with the white backgrounds all the time, so I started adding color to the stuff.

The covers are so intricate. You even wrote the titles on the spine and came up with call numbers for each one. How long did it take to make each one?

MM: Well, it depended on my interest at the time. Some might take a week, others could take two or three months. I'd start out with a light drawing and put it away for a while, then I'd come back and work on it some more. It got to be a real good project for me, because it was something to take up my time.

What inspired you to make cardboard records to go

inside of the covers? I can see how making the covers would help to conceptualize your idea for an album, but making a record to go in there kind of takes it to another level.

MM: I used to hang my [real] albums up on the wall, but then when I went to put up my own, they were too flimsy. So I thought about putting old beat up records inside of them and transposing my own labels on top of those, but then that wouldn't work because the bands on the record wouldn't correspond to the number of songs I had. So I decided to make my own.

What was it like making them? Was it a process that you really enjoyed?

MM: It was heavenly! It was a joy being creative like that. Then someone came to me and was like, "Oh, can you make one with me on it?" So I started thinking about what type of songs other people would write and what they would be about, and that took me to things that were completely different from what I would write for myself.

Is that how you came up with all those different personalities, like Joseph War and Audio Andre?

MM: Yeah, like when Joseph War was in Okinawa in the military, he had told me about a girl that he had met there. So I started using my imagination, thinking about how he had traveled around the world and stuff. So I came up with this song called "Saigon Sally" that I based on his own individual experiences. I got so fascinated by it all—I thought, "This is gold, this is diamonds, this is gems!" And that's how I came up with Gems as the name for one of the record labels.

You had so many cool record labels: Decision, Spooky, Ramit, Sex, Puppy Dogg, Hot'n Soulful Cookin', Evil. There must be fifteen different ones! And they all have totally unique designs. I wish they were real and I could put the needle down on one of those things!

MM: Well, you know how a corporation has a team of idea men to come up with all the marketing ideas and stuff like that? Well, I didn't have that—I just had me. So I tried to make it like it was a corporate thing and challenged myself to come up with different ideas. I came up with Spooky after seeing that movie *Love at First Bite* with George Hamilton and Sherman Hemsley from *The Jeffersons*. I thought, "Wouldn't that be good to have a movie about a British vampire that goes to the ghetto...and gets down!" [laughs] I used that on a soundtrack I made called *Bloody Vampire*. And Hot'n Soulful Cookin', that was based off of Junior Walker's album *Home Cooking*, which was one of my favorite albums at the time.

Decision Records must have been your political one. The logo is one hand holding a gun (sometimes it's holding a syringe), the other hand holding a microphone. And then there was Division Records, which was a division of Decision Records!

MM: Yeah, during the Vietnam War I made it a microphone and a gun, but then after people started coming home, it seemed like everyone was into drugs, so I turned the gun into a syringe.

Did you have any artistic influences for the covers, like from different artists? When I first saw them, I thought of Pedro Bell, who did a lot of the hand-drawn Funkadelic covers.



"IF YOU GO OFF TO WAR, YOU MIGHT JUST BECOME A MEMORY."



MM: No, I pretty much went off my own ideas, really.

Out of all the ones we've recovered, can you think of any of your covers that are missing? When Frank and I bought back what was left of your music collection, we discovered over sixty 45 labels that you hadn't yet put onto records. And Joseph War recently brought out about fifteen more albums from his basement. Some of them are water damaged, so I'm wondering if any were completely destroyed or just aren't accounted for.

MM: Yeah, one of them was *Getting in the Christmas Spirit with Mike*. I really liked that one. There's a couple others, but I can't think of them right now.

You made your own music, too. Tell me about how all of that went down.

MM: I did the recordings with Big D., Joseph War's nephew. He would do the beats on a phone book with a hair comb; he had the good beats. He was a terrific singer, too.

You guys actually sang the music, so did you ultimately plan on having a band to play what you were singing?

MM: Yeah, I knew how I wanted everything to sound and everything like that.

So this wasn't just to pass the time, you really did want to have a music career.

MM: Yeah, that was my dream.

Did you guys ever perform anywhere?

MM: Yeah, but we'd only go to those places where they couldn't tell the difference. [laughs] Or where they couldn't boo us or anything. So we played shows at hospitals and children's homes and things like that. We'd sing and dance, and we had a magician there. It was really a well put together show. We didn't have a band or nothing like that, it was more us singing to recorded music, like karaoke.

Did you ever have a plan to go into a studio and cut a real record?

MM: I thought about it, but then I had to concentrate on work, so that kinda killed it before I could do that. I did send some of my reel-to-reels to U.S. Recordings, which I just found out is still in business in Virginia, and had some 45 acetates made up. It cost \$2.99 to have a single one made. It was cool to be able to listen to myself on a record like that. I put my own labels on those, too. I think I made nine or ten of those.

Did you ever show your Mingering Mike albums to anyone, or play your music for them?

MM: Only for the family—until they got tired of it!

[to Joseph War] **You promoted a nightly event at a club in town, right? Didn't Mike do posters for the shows there? Who played at them?**

JW: Yeah, it was a social club called the Wolfpack that we had at a club called the Psychedelic Room. Mike did the posters. It was pretty good; a lot of people would come by. We had a different band there every week. Trouble Funk and Experience Unlimited played there, and a bunch of others, too.

Who was your main musical influence?

MM: Well, everybody, really. But James Brown was a real strong influence on me.

The *Live at the Howard Theatre* album looks just like a James Brown revue with all of the different acts.

MM: Yeah, that's what inspired it, because when you went to a James Brown show, it was a *real show*. I'd stand in line for hours at a time at the Howard Theatre just to get that ticket and everything, because it was such an exciting time.

Are you still buying records?

MM: Yeah, it's a bit of nostalgia for me. It's like trying to restore something that was lost long ago. I buy CDs too, but there's something about the golden age of records. Like, if I were to come out with stuff now, I'd want to put it out on 45.

Now that there's all this interest in your art and music, have you thought about picking it up again? You did do a new drawing for the website—what was that like?

MM: It was exciting. I had given up on all of that, and then all of a sudden here I am starting to do it again.

Well, I for one am anxiously awaiting the release of the double picture disc album for *The Return of Mingering Mike*!

MM: I had thought of doing an album like that—*The Return of the Magnificent Mingering*, like the old movie *The Return of the Magnificent Seven*, and it would have me riding in on a horse.

Oh man, you gotta make that one! I know of at least a couple of people that are interested in commissioning some work for their album covers. Would you be interested in that?

MM: Yes I would, it would be a wonderful thing, but I just wonder when I'd have the time to do something like that. I'd need some time to sit down and mellow out and think of something without always looking at my watch, because I work so much. [Mike works two night-shift jobs.]

So what do you think about this whole experience? Did you ever think that your music or art would ever see the light of day, or that people would be so into it?

MM: It's really surprising to me...it's like old pictures of yourself. I'm not embarrassed or anything, but it's kind of like those pictures you have of yourself dressed all wild in the '70s, and then you look at them now and say, "Look how funny I was!" [laughs] But this is kind of the reverse, and it's really nice. It really makes me feel good.

What would you like to see happen next?

MM: Well, that's kind of hard to say, because I work so much and don't have much time to myself to think about it. But if I could still do something as an entertainer, or see some of the stuff I had done and the thoughts that I had that someone actually agreed with or related to, that would be like forming a new kind of unity. ●

Mingering Mike, Joseph War, Frank Beylotte, and DORI HADAR continue to meet on a regular basis in an effort to thoroughly document all of Mike's artwork and musical recordings. A touring exhibit is in the basic planning stages, as is a book containing reproductions of all of his work.

To see more of Mike's art and to keep apprised of the latest updates, check out www.mingeringmike.com.