

# Mingus at the Showplace

By William Matthews

I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen,  
and so I swung into action and wrote a poem,

and it was miserable, for that was how I thought  
poetry worked: you digested experience and shat

literature. It was 1960 at The Showplace, long since  
defunct, on West 4th St., and I sat at the bar,

casting beer money from a thin reel of ones,  
the kid in the city, big ears like a puppy.

And I knew Mingus was a genius. I knew two  
other things, but they were wrong, as it happened.

So I made him look at the poem.  
“There’s a lot of that going around,” he said,

and Sweet Baby Jesus he was right. He laughed  
amiably. He didn’t look as if he thought

bad poems were dangerous, the way some poets do.  
If they were baseball executives they’d plot

to destroy sandlots everywhere so that the game  
could be saved from children. Of course later

that night he fired his pianist in mid-number  
and flurried him from the stand.

“We’ve suffered a diminuendo in personnel,”  
he explained, and the band played on.

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William Matthews was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and attended Yale University and the University of North Carolina. He served as the president of the Poetry Society of America and chair of the Literature Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, taught at many universities, and published ten volumes of poems. In his poetry, Matthews dismisses intense, immediate emotions, choosing instead to write with a classical objectivity and intelligent wit while exploring uses of language and his own relationship to poetry. In "Mingus at the Showplace," Matthews displays his humor and self-awareness as he relates poetry to another of his passions, jazz.

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