

MOUNTAINS

Uncovering the origins of Mingus family saga



Word from the Smokies

Aaron Searcy
Columnist

Eric Mingus is intimately familiar with his father's story. For better or worse, it's a story that has followed him throughout his life and shaped his own path as a performing artist.

The story goes something like this: Born in 1922, Charles Mingus Jr. came of age in Los Angeles, where he received training in classical cello and showed early promise as a composer. After pivoting to the upright bass, he embraced the improvisational language of jazz, which carried him through a decades-long career as a revered bandleader and defining figure of American music until his death in 1979.

As for the other Charles Mingus — Charles Mingus Sr., Eric's grandfather — that story is still coming to light. It's also one that Eric has become deeply invested in uncovering after he recently retraced his grandfather's steps back to his childhood home just a few miles north of Cherokee in what is now Great Smoky Mountains National Park. What Eric has learned from the experience has expanded his understanding of his grandfather, his father and perhaps now most importantly, himself.

"I'd always heard about Mingus Mill and this area, but it wasn't exactly a place we felt we had a piece of," explained Eric. "Historically, this was the place my grandfather fled."

Although Eric had learned some broad strokes of his family connection to the Oconaluftee area as a child, park staff and volunteers working through the African American Experiences in the Smokies project have filled in key details about his grandfather's early life. Launched in 2018, the project aims to support new research and share overlooked stories of African American life in and around the Great Smoky Mountains.

"For so long, we only knew one side of the story; we only knew the early white settler side," said Antoine Fletcher, science communicator and lead of the African American Experiences in the Smokies project in the park. "That changed last year when we started to



Eric Mingus speaks at a musical performance at Enloe Slave Cemetery near Mingus Mill in the Smokies. Like his late father, Eric is an accomplished bassist, and his work often confronts social and racial issues in America.

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learn more."

From its earliest years, the park has preserved the historic Mingus Mill in the Oconaluftee area of the park for the benefit of visitor education. The turbine-powered grist mill dates to 1886 and replaced an earlier mill built at the location around 1800 by some of the first white settlers in the area, which remains within the traditional lands of the Cherokee.

New information pieced together from census records, slave schedules, newspaper articles, correspondence, and oral histories have helped to illuminate the lives of enslaved African Americans brought to the area. These records have also offered some clues as to why a young Charles Mingus Sr. may have felt compelled to leave his home in the Smokies at around 14 years of age. Fate had placed him in a particularly precarious position as the child of a white woman named Clarinda Mingus and a Black man named Daniel Mingus — a man formerly enslaved by the white Mingus family. When Charles was 6 years old, Clarinda Mingus married a white man and moved away to start a new family, leaving him in the care of his white grandfather and great-grandparents.

"It's a complicated history," said Eric. "His mother loved him, but he couldn't go with her to her next family. He

couldn't stay."

His father, a skilled craftsman and woodworker, continued to live and work nearby but was not known to have had a relationship with his son. He too married and began a family, eventually changing his last name to West.

In the end, Charles Mingus Sr.'s decision to leave would sweep him into American history and alter its very course. In the early 1890s, he traveled to nearby Knoxville, Tennessee, where he managed to enlist in the segregated U.S. Army despite his young age. After serving an initial stint in the Spanish-American War, Charles reenlisted and spent the remainder of his military career as a member of a Buffalo Soldier regiment stationed throughout the American West. He eventually settled in Los Angeles, where he remained until his death in 1951, more than a decade before his grandson Eric Mingus was born.

On May 23, the National Park Service hosted an unveiling ceremony for two new informational signs that share some of Eric's remarkable family history near Mingus Mill. One sign interprets the history of the nearby Enloe Slave Cemetery, while another explores Eric and Charles Mingus Jr.'s family connection to the Smokies. Eric was invited to attend as a featured guest, returning to the land where his grandfather and great-grandparents once walked.

"It feels like home to me," said Eric. "But I'm not saying home is comfortable. I am very aware of the fact that many of us came here when it was someone else's home."

As part of the event, Eric performed a musical piece inspired by a visit to the former Mingus estate. In the piece, Eric channels the perspective of those like his great-grandfather who lived and worked on the land as enslaved servants.

"They were more than just enslaved," said Fletcher in his remarks at the ceremony. "They were the fabric of Appalachia. When they were here, they had families, they played games, and they had community here."

Although the interior of Mingus Mill is expected to remain temporarily closed to visitors for the next two months for preservation and rehabilitation work, park superintendent Cassius Cash is hopeful the new signs just outside the mill will deepen park visitors' connections to the cultural history that continues to unfold in the Smokies.

"The new signs and the African American Experiences in the Smokies project are so important to tell the untold stories of African American people in the region," said Cash. "This place is common ground for people from all different walks of life to share their experiences and their culture."

As for Eric, understanding more about his grandfather's complex childhood in the Smokies has allowed him to make peace with the contradictions and tensions that he has often felt himself as a man with a diverse racial background.

"Because of my makeup, who I am, I never could shy away from the conflict that I just presented walking in the room — even with my own family," said Eric. "This has helped me to accept all the pieces that I am."

An interview Fletcher conducted with Eric Mingus earlier this year will be shared soon on the park's growing African American Experiences oral histories webpage. To learn more about the project and listen to other oral histories, find the project page at nps.gov/grsm under "Learn About the Park."

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Sports gambling in North Carolina a better bet with likely final votes

Gary D. Robertson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH, N.C. — Legalized sports gambling starting next year in North Carolina now seems a better bet as the state House's top leader said Thursday he expected his chamber would accept alterations to its own proposal made by the Senate.

House Speaker Tim Moore's comment was a turnaround for him from Wednesday, as the Senate initially approved its version of the measure to authorize and regulate betting, and to tax proceeds. The Senate voted for it again on Thursday by a strong bipartisan vote of 37-11.

Moore said Thursday he anticipated the House would formally vote to accept the Senate changes in two recorded votes next week. Should these votes be successful for bill supporters, the final measure would go to Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper for his anticipated signature. Cooper has expressed support for legal sports wagering.

Moore had told reporters Wednesday that the House would likely formally reject the Senate's option. Moore said it was part of a goal of negotiating a compromise with Senate leaders that he

hoped would also permit non-tribal casinos in the state and legalize video gambling machines.

But a chief sponsor of the House proposal, Rep. Jason Saine of Lincoln County, had said Wednesday that he would recommend to his colleague the Senate's version. And Senate leader Phil Berger said he thought it best to finalize the sports gambling measure — which had support from House bill sponsors — before considering other gambling ideas.

On Thursday, Moore attributed his updated parliamentary path on the bill to "me not reading the notes properly on" the legislation, rather than changing his position.

A bipartisan coalition in the House scuttled a sports gambling bill last year. While the chamber voted for its current proposal in March as support for the idea solidified, the margin remained relatively narrow.

The Senate's version includes among other changes legalizing wagers on horse racing and allowing anyone over 21 to bet on sports using cash at sports venues that would offer gambling, and not just through registered accounts online. And while betting could begin next January, the Senate proposal could let regulators

delay the opening until June 2024.

Legal sports gambling in North Carolina is available right now at the state's only three casinos, which are operated by two American Indian tribes.

Berger and Moore, both Republicans, said this week that discussions were still happening about whether to seek legislation authorizing non-tribal casinos in rural or economically disadvantaged areas as jobs and revenue generators.

The idea has gained traction as casinos have opened in Virginia near the North Carolina border. They include a temporary casino that opened barely two weeks ago in Danville, Virginia, roughly 25 miles from where Berger lives in Rockingham County.

"Because the conversations are taking place, we're a lot closer than we've ever been before," Berger said, but "there are still some fairly significant hurdles" to create legislation in the final weeks of the General Assembly's chief work session this year.

Virginia lawmakers in 2020 approved legislation for five casinos to be built around the state if the projects first cleared a voter referendum. Based on that law, casinos have opened in Bristol and Portsmouth in addition to Danville.

And a fourth is moving forward slowly in Norfolk.

Offering casinos on the North Carolina side of the border could be a defensive measure against losing money to Virginia while gaining revenues from visitors from other surrounding states.

Moore lives in Cleveland County, where the Catawba Indian Nation opened a casino in 2021. He said he believes authorizing the creation of "entertainment districts" that offer casinos, restaurant and entertainment could be a game-changer for some regions.

A study by a gambling research group for a North Carolina nonprofit political education organization released this year estimated commercial casinos built in Nash, Anson and Rockingham counties could generate almost \$1.7 billion in gross wagering revenue annually and hundreds of millions in taxes.

It's possible that legislators who grudgingly agreed to approve sports wagering may say no to additional gambling this year. But while legislators debated for years the morality and economics of casinos, "that horse is kind of out of the barn" since tribal casinos opened, Moore said.

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