The Wes Montgomery Sound: Sonoric Individuality in Jazz

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Gunther Schuller gave a talk at Carnegie Recital Hall in December of 1983 that primarily focused on some specific musical aspects of jazz that define and separate it from other musical traditions. He astutely remarked that "the highly individualized sonority aspects- the sounds of jazz, as musicians simply call it- are its most obviously distinguishing and memorable surface features."[1] Schuller clearly delineates the inherent conceptual differences in sound between classical music and jazz, and underscores the intrinsic idea of sonoric individuality which permeates the jazz idiom:

> In classical music a "beautiful" sound is that which is deemed fashionable at a particular time and place- and these fashions do, of course, change from time to time, every three or four generations perhaps. In jazz, on the other hand, there is no such thing as *a* beautiful sound. It is up to the individual to create *his* sound- if it is within his creative capacities to do so- one that will best serve his musical concepts and style. In any case, in jazz the sound, timbre, and sonority are much more at the service of individual self-expression, interlocked intimately with articulation, phrasing, tonguing, slurring, and other such stylistic modifiers and definers.[2]

Wes Montgomery's unique sound is regarded as the most "distinguishing and memorable surface feature" of his improvisational style. Celebrated French guitarist, Christian Escoudé, also recognized this: "Ce qui frappe dans les solos de Wes c'est, nous l'avons dit, le 'son', c'est ce qui le distingue de tous les autres guitaristes."[3] Gunther Schuller also found Wes' basic guitar sound striking because of its "warmth, rich and earthy, unlike certain practitioners who strive for the cold, steely "electronic" sound."[4] Similarly, Adrian Ingram acknowledged that "besides the octaves, the main reason for Wes' enormous popularity was the warm sensual timbre produced by the thumb."[5] Wes Montgomery had achieved what many of the great guitarists had been unable to do- "play in an instantly recognizable way."[6] Throughout this study we will demonstrate how Wes produced, developed and sustained his remarkable sonoric individuality

through various trademark techniques. Montgomery's technique solicits detailed analysis and discussion because, to a large extent, it was this incomparable technique which enabled him to produce his "sound," assert his musical personality, and express everything he had to say.[7] Wes himself acknowledged this:

> I began working hard and experimenting with techniques, seeking out the ones that felt good and were most expressive of my thoughts. My explorations continued for quite a while. My technique improved, developing out of particular playing situations. More and more of *me* passed through my amplifier to those who took the time to listen.[8]

Three Analytical Categories

In our analyses of Montgomery's sound we will consider and apply certain pertinent guidelines proposed by Jan LaRue. According to LaRue, the style-analysis of sound includes observations falling naturally under three headings.[9] We have slightly modified the definitions of the headings, making them more relevant to our particular musical context, that is, the discussion of jazz improvisation. The style-analytical category of sound comprises, 1) *Timbre:* the instrumental color, and tone-quality produced by the improviser, Wes Montgomery. 2) *Dynamics:* the intensity of sound or fluctuation of intensity generated in a solo, and manipulated through different techniques and procedures. 3) *Texture and Fabric:* The arrangement of timbres both at particular moments and in the continuing unfolding of the improvisation.[10] These individual components will be discussed to varying degrees in conjunction with Montgomery's techniques so that we may more fully understand his expressive approach to the element of sound.

Thumb Technique

Jazz guitarists have usually employed a plectrum in the right hand and have subscribed to one of the two generally used methods of picking.[11] Montgomery, however, used the right-hand thumb instead of a plectrum, even though he believed that the pick enabled one to play faster and phrase better. Initially, for about two months, Wes had tried playing with a plectrum but discarded it in favour of the thumb. He did not like the sound quality resulting from the

harder percussive pick attack, he preferred instead, the rounder, warmer, and more supple tone produced by the thumb.[12] In effect, it was the thumb that imbued the Montgomerian sound with its singular timbre. The plectrum also lacked the flexibility and maneuverability of the dynamic range accessible with the thumb, and somehow, Wes felt that the thumb brought him into closer contact with the instrument.[13] Accordingly, Jack Duarte cleverly observed that the thumb technique meant some sacrifice of speed "but it was considered worth the sacrifice in view of the gain in expressive capacity."[14] Despite this, many recordings clearly evidence that Wes had developed incomparable speed and technical agility with the thumb. When asked if he had chosen to play with the thumb, Wes replied that he did not actually select it.

> That just came accidentally. You see, at the time (1943), after I had accepted the fact that I was going to play with my thumb, it was still for my own amusement. If I had decided to be a professional musician I'd have gone right back to the pick.[15]

Wes began playing guitar for his own personal recreation without any intention of pursuing a professional musical career. He instinctively surrendered to what appeared to be most natural and aesthetically pleasing, without any awareness of the limitations occasioned by an unorthodox right-hand approach.[16]

Jack Duarte wrote about Wes' thumb technique shortly after the guitarist had performed at Ronnie Scott's club in England. Through Duarte's keen observations and analyses, we can better understand how Wes employed this unique and singular technique.

> The famous right-hand thumb is fairly long (it is just as 'curly' as Segovia's) the tip joint is comparatively long and the root of the thumb is farther than average from the hand. Throughout single note passages and in much of his octave and chord work, the fingers are spread (virtually flat) over the scratch plate resting lightly on the edge of the plate on the guitar beyond. They are not riveted in position but they move in a limited way. Single notes receive only downward strokes of the thumb, though chords and octaves are played in both directions- but only when velocity demands it......The action of striking is a curiously mixed one. It bears a superficial resemblance to the classic guitarists' apoyando, the supported stroke, in which the thumb is pushed through so it comes to rest against the next string. The thumb operates with the tip joint in a plane almost parallel to that of the strings, so it is the fleshly side that meets the string rather than the nail.....[17]

Ivor Mairants, who also witnessed a live performance of Wes Montgomery at Ronnie Scott's club, corroborates this description of his right-hand technique.[18] Access to a tape recording of a Wes Montgomery half-hour performance on a British television program ("Jazz 625"), enables one to observe first hand how effortlessly Wes played, using for the most part, only downstrokes of the thumb.[19] The predominant use of downstrokes necessitated large amounts of slurring in both single notes and octaves in order to compensate for the bypassed upstroke. This increased slurring is especially noticeable in fast tempos where downstrokes alone cannot account for the myriad of notes being played. Wes used this slurring issuing from the downstroke technique, as a principal enhancer to jazz phrasing.

> Although he employs a great deal of slurring, both in single notes and octaves, I must reiterate this does not give the slightest *schmaltzy* effect because the finger slur is used only as an essential to jazz phrasing and for no other effect. It sounds more like a *legato* phrase produced on the saxophone as compared to a group of tongued notes.[20]

Because Wes used primarily downstrokes it was essential that his instrument be more sensitive to touch. Guitarist-professor, Ted Dunbar, recalls an incident that may have contributed significantly to the evolution of the Montgomery sound. He recalls accompanying Montgomery to a radio shop, where Wes' amplifier was being modified.

> I don't know what was done,.... but you could just touch the strings and play the instrument without picking with your right hand, making it more sensitive when you did use the right hand. It improved the timing of the sound. Developing your touch improves your timing. You need as much quickness as possible to go on to the next note. This showed the insight he (Wes) had- he saw the instrument and the amp as the same thing.[21]

Observations made by Ivor Mairants[22] corroborated by an examination of the recorded television performance ("Jazz 625"), enables us to fully understand Montgomery's left-hand technique. For single-note runs it appears that Wes does not use his little finger at all. Although most guitarists develop its use, it remains by nature, the weakest finger of the left hand. He employs the little finger exclusively for octave passages, wherein he has a special locked-hand technique that enables the fourth and first fingers to be used on the first and third strings, or on

the second and fourth strings. And the third and first fingers on the third and fifth strings, or fourth and sixth strings.[23] Like all guitarists, for the block-chord passages he used every finger with great facility.

The characteristic timbre, dynamic changes and textural variations associated with the Montgomerian sound, do not derive solely from the thumb technique. Moreover, it is the outcome of a remarkable application of four basic stylistic concepts which Wes assiduously explored and adopted: 1) single-note playing, 2) octave playing, 3) double-octave playing,[24] 4) and block-chord playing.[25] Through each of these techniques Montgomery was able to effectively produce shifting dynamics and varied textural fabrics that enhanced the improvised line.

Octaves, Dynamics, Sonoric Intensity

Wes' octave technique became the most salient and recognizable feature of his style. The technique was actually over-emphasized by observers and critics probably because Wes was the first to employ it with such speed, fluidity, and effortlessness. Complete choruses and melody statements played entirely in octaves were considered impossible on the guitar before Montgomery played them.[26] What is most remarkable is that the octave-style fingering never stopped Montgomery from playing essentially what he would play in a single-string fashion.[27] Esteemed guitarist, Jim Hall, observed that Montgomery was like "the first runner to break the four-minute mile. All the guys who came after him would possibly be able to play those ferocious octaves, and get that great feeling with the thumb- but you knew he left the old guys behind."[28] Gunther Schuller's remarks are also quite indicative of the impact of Wes' octave technique at the time:

> ...Impossible to play octaves, a device which he did not originate but which he certainly imprinted on the consciousness of listeners everywhere. He perfected the style because, as a self-taught musician, he didn't know it was supposed to be unachievable.[29]

The use of the octave technique in itself was not unprecedented- Django Reinhardt had used it as early as 1935.[30] Wes' impact lay in the fact that he developed an entirely new approach to guitar playing by developing and extending the possibilities of the technique. Not unlike a few of his predecessors, he did use octaves to obtain greater volume and for the thickening of texture and dynamics. More importantly, his concept was unique in that he developed octave soloing to the point where he could easily sustain long improvised eighth-note lines for entire choruses, therein creating interest, adding unfailing dramatic effectiveness and tension, and maintaining continuous intensity throughout. This remarkable sonoric intensity which Wes progressively developed throughout his solos was clearly, an integral aspect of his sound. James Sallis posited that "it was the *intensity* of his music one responded to, the power and personality of it."[31] Montgomery's octave playing was intrinsically compelling, expressive, and retained the inflections normally reserved for single-note lines. Duarte noticed that with both the octaves, as well as single notes, "the intensity of feeling is obvious in the dynamics normally lacking in the up-tempo playing of others."[32] Noted jazz critic Valerie Wilmer observed Wes' concern for augmenting dynamics: "....he has an excellent sense of dynamics too. He'll get into a number and build and build and build, biting his lip as he concentrates."[33] Octaves also served to complete the formal design which characterized the content of many of his solos. This formal design consisted of three segments in ascending scale of intensity:

> The first part consists of a single line, primarily melodic ideas at a moderate dynamic; the second part is conceived entirely in "impossible to play" octaves; while the third section continues yet another level, in even "impossibler" block chords, bringing the solo dynamically and in terms of rhythmic density to its ultimate climax- at which point I guarantee the listener will be limp.[34]

This formal design adopted by Wes had deep roots in his own musical philosophy, and essentially empowered him to attain an unprecedented level of sonoric intensity and individuality in the jazz guitar world. As is suggested by the Schuller quotation, Wes' strong disposition for variety, contrast and diversity in his improvisational style gave roots to his basic three-tier technique, as well as the resulting Montgomerian sound associated with it. It is the

outcome of his fundamental philosophical premise, "diversity of approach". He worked hard to develop this three-tier approach, for he was critically aware of the need for form, variety, and intensity in improvisation:[35]

> My aim is to move from one vein to the other without any trouble. Like, if you're going to take a melody or a counterpoint or a unison line with another instrument, do that, then maybe drop out at a certain point, then maybe next time you'll play phrases and chords, or maybe you'll take an octave or something. That way you'll have a lot of variation there. The only difference is if you can control each of them. Still, the biggest thing to me is keeping a feeling, regardless [of] what you play. So many cats lose their feeling at various times, not through the whole tune, but at various times, and it causes them to have to build up and drop down, and you can feel it.[36]

Montgomery's criticism of "hav[ing] to build up and drop down" and his major concern for "keeping a feeling," clearly reveal his penchant for establishing and maintaining a progressively increasing textural sonoric intensity, and dynamic level throughout his improvisations. Furthermore, his ideal of continual variation is clearly suggested here. It is exhibited in some of the more extended choruses that have been captured on records, but which "Wes played hour after hour at live gigs".[37]

Block Chords

Montgomery employed block chords as the final technique in his three-tier approach to improvisation. Needless to say, this technique effectively amplified the textural fabric of the improvised line to its maximum, each chord moving swiftly down and up over the entire fingerboard. During this stage of the improvisation the improvised line becomes a richly harmonized, dense and colorful sonoric invention, which impacts forcefully upon the listener: "Listening to his solos is like teetering continually at the edge of a brink. His playing at its peak becomes unbearingly exciting, to the point where one feels unable to muster sufficient physical endurance to outlast it."[38]

Montgomery's predilection for block chord improvisation actually stemmed from his observations of piano players, who under the instigation of Milt Buckner, were the first to

implement the technique in jazz soloing.[39] Wes' sound as pertaining to texture and fabric at this stage of the improvisation was unique indeed, because he sought to expand the limits of the instrument, attempting to duplicate a technique normally employed on another instrument. His highly individual sound was also in part, the outcome of this committed search to expand the technical possibilities of the instrument. This is discernible in an interview where Ralph Gleason asked Montgomery what he wanted to do with the guitar, and where he wanted to go with it in terms of development, Wes assuredly replied, "I've thought about it, but I'm so limited. Like playing octaves was just a coincidence. And it's still such a challenge, like chord versions, block chords like cats play on the piano. There's a lot of things that can be done with it,..."[40] Montgomery felt that using a single approach to improvisation was constraining and much more was possible on this instrument.

In his comping style Wes would, at times, try to emulate the rich and buoyant sound of the big bands. In the liner notes of *Groove Brothers,* guitarist Steve Khan described Wes' comping style,

> ...as having a big band in his hands: his low-register full chord voicings could punctuate like trombones; at times he'd riff in octaves in a way that resembled unison sax lines; and he could build to three- and four-note middle- and upper-register voicings like a trumpet section.[41]

Khan's observations illustrate once again, Wes' predilection for diversity even while comping behind other instruments. According to Ted Dunbar, Montgomery created this particular sound because he had played and internalized the music of the big bands in the 1940's: "You had to know the music inside-out to be able to play it off the top of your head. That's what Wes did."[42]

<u>Concluding Remarks</u>

The idea of sonoric individuality which so forcefully permeates the jazz idiom is nowhere more implicit than in Wes Montgomery's style. Through the adoption of the thumb technique Montgomery developed one of the most unique instrumental timbre and recognizable

sound in the history of jazz guitar. His astute manipulation of elements such as dynamics, sonoric intensity, and textural fabric through his three-tier approach, was a major characterizing aspect of his sound. This stemmed from his ideal of diversity of approach, or continual variation, which is also observable in his comping style.

The sonoric intensity that Wes generated and which became a most distinguishable surface feature of his style, is developed gradually in extended improvisations through balanced and well-thought-of transitions from single-notes, to octave passages, to block chords. Moreover, polyrhythmic and cross-rhythmic effects are often utilized with block chords in the later stages of a solo to augment the intensity further. Montgomery also promotes diversity and variety in the form by introducing new elements (single-lines, octaves, octaves and chords, block chords, call-and-response-patterns, varied rhythmic and polyrhythmic approaches, etc.) throughout individual choruses or sub-sections of choruses.

Wes Montgomery's "sonoric individualism" as Schuller calls it, is a powerful example of the way jazz musicians play their instruments with particular regard to the personal aspect of sonority, timbre and tone color.

Endnotes

[1] Gunther Schuller, Musings, The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller: A Collection of His Writings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 26-27.
[2] Ibid., 32.
[3] Christian Escoudé, "Wes Montgomery", Jazz Hot, no. 283, mai (1972), 34.
[4] Gunther Schuller, "Wes Montgomery," Jazz Review, Vol.3, no.8 Sept-Oct. (1960), 27.
[5] Adrian Ingram, Wes Montgomery (Gateshead: Ashley Mark Publishing Co., 1985), 49.
[6] Ivor Mairants, My Fifty Fretting Years (Gateshead: Ashley Mark Publishing Co., 1980), 202.
[7] Ibid.
[8] James Sallis, The Guitar Players: One Instrument and Its Masters in American Music (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982), 215.
[9] Jan LaRue, Guidelines For Style Analysis (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 24-28.
[10] This category is also relevant since Montgomery often utilized a three-tier approach when soloing (single-notes, octaves, block chords) creating changes in textures within the improvised line.

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[11] Cedric West, "Wes Montgomery: Cedric West Writes on The Man Who Does 'The Impossible,' " Crescendo International, May (1963), 30. According to West these methods include (a) The Johnny Smith style, in which the pick is held firmly while the thumb, forefinger and wrist of the right hand are held slightly rigid, requiring the cross motion swing for picking to originate at the elbow. This method gives a sure way to alternate picking across the strings, but can generate a tendency to play 'tight' and mechanically. (b) The Chuck Wayne/Jimmy Raney style, where the pick is held looser and is controlled entirely by the forefinger and thumb of the right hand, producing a faster and gentler sounding articulation. However, this method is not as effective for playing arpeggios or cross picking.
[12] Jack Duarte, "Wes Montgomery," B.M.G. July (1962), 307-308.
[13] Ingram, op. cit., 49.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "Guitar Discussion Featuring Wes Montgomery, Jack Duarte, Ike Isaacs and Cedric West," Crescendo International, May (1965), 28-30.
[16] Cedric West, op. cit., May (1963). Cedric West recognizes the difficulty of playing with the thumb and feels that Wes is an example of a " 'natural' who stumbled on a freak right-hand approach and was lucky enough to overcome its shortcomings."
[17] Jack Duarte, "Wes Montgomery," B.M.G., June (1965).
[18] Ivor Mairants, "Wes Montgomery," B.M.G., Vol. LXII no.721, May (1965), 249-250. "He strikes in a downward direction so that his thumb rests against the next highest string, similar to an apoyando thumb stroke on the Spanish guitar. The remainder of his right hand usually rests across the pick guard. At times he also uses upstrokes, particularly when playing chords in triplets or semiquaver rhythms."
[19] "Wes Montgomery." Hosted by Humphrey Lyttelton. "Jazz 625" (TV program). England, n.d. Although the date of this program was not available, we can infer from various comments made by Lyttelton in between tunes that this television show was first recorded and aired in the mid-sixties.
[20] Mairants, op. cit., 250. According to Mairants, "Schmaltz literally means "animal fat".... In music, schmaltz may be termed the syrupy top coat with which players of lower calibre hope to cover the emptiness of their musical offerings."
[21] Bill Shoemaker, "The Birth of the Modern Guitar: Wes Montgomery," Downbeat, Vol. 60, no.5, May (1993), 23.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] In this particular technique the two strings being sounded are two octaves apart. In the left hand this technique is applied on the sixth and first strings, since these are the two strings that most easily encompass the double octave. The index finger of the left hand is used on the sixth string, and the third or second finger is employed on the first string. The right hand plucks the individual strings simultaneously with the thumb and the first or second finger. Wes uses this octave technique infrequently.
[25] Lee Garson and Jimmy Stewart, Wes Montgomery Jazz Guitar Method (New York: Robbins Music Corporation, 1968), 18. Pages six, ten, and thirteen contain photographic illustrations of the aforementioned techniques.
[26] Ingram, op. cit., 46.
[27] Norman Mongan, The History of The Guitar in Jazz (New York: Oak Publications, 1983), 167.
[28] Shoemaker, op.cit., 23.
[29] Quoted in Ingram, 46.

[30] Ingram, op.cit., 47. For his Hot Club de France recording of *Djangology* (for eight bars) and the Stephane Grappelli's Hot Four (Decca F-5824) recordings of *China Boy* (for 16 bars).
[31] Sallis, op.cit., 215.
[32] Jack Duarte, "Wes Montgomery," B.M.G., August (1962), 339-340.
[33] Valerie, Wilmer, "Wes Montgomery Talks To Valerie Wilmer," Jazz Monthly, Vol.11, no.3 May (1965), 25.
[34] Gunther Schuller, "Indiana Renaissance," Jazz Review, Vol.2, no.8 Sept. (1959), 50. For a "classic" example of this three-tier formal approach refer to *West Coast Blues*.
[35] Ingram, op.cit., 47.
[36] Ralph J. Gleason, "Wes Montgomery," in Jazz Guitarists: Collected Interviews From Guitar Player Magazine (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1975), 76.
[37] Sallis, op.cit., 220.
[38] Schuller, op. cit., 49.
[39] Other jazz pianists who have popularized this technique include Lennie Tristano, George Shearing, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans.
[40] Ralph Gleason, "Wes Montgomery," Jazz & Blues, Vol.3, no.7 Oct (1973), 8-9.
[41] Steve Khan, liner notes to Wes Montgomery: Groove Brothers, Milestone, M-47051.
[42] Shoemaker, op. cit., 22.