

# **The Reception and Impact of Wes Montgomery's Music**

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“Make no mistake, Wes Montgomery is the best thing to happen to the guitar since Charlie Christian.”

This statement by Ralph J. Gleason, one of the most highly respected and most widely read writers on jazz, certainly indicates the magnitude of Montgomery's contribution to the evolution of jazz guitar. However, many jazz critics have been too eager to make such extravagant commentaries of their favorite musicians, often without sound musicological analysis and historical reflection. Although in his writings, Gleason has not really attempted to methodologically establish Montgomery's historical significance and impact, his statement does truthfully depict Montgomery's eminence in jazz guitar history.

Joe Pass once said that, “there have been only three real innovators on the [jazz] guitar- Wes, Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt.”<sup>1</sup> According to the German jazz scholar Joachim E. Berendt, “three musicians were the actual igniters of the sixties guitar explosion, each in a different field of music: Wes Montgomery in jazz, B.B. King in blues, and Jimi Hendrix in rock.”<sup>2</sup> Among the modern guitarists such as Jim Hall, Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, George Benson, Kenny Burrell, Larry Coryell, etc., why has Montgomery's contribution been considered most significant? To answer this question and fully understand its implications, it is important that we first take a brief look at certain developments in jazz history. We will then demonstrate how particularities of Wes' style have impacted most directly on jazz history and musicians.

## Historical Considerations

We must recognize that major developments in jazz history have been directly associated with developments in improvisation. Jazz is fundamentally a performer's and improviser's art form, the basic stylistic and conceptual advances have been determined by its great instrumentalist-improvisers, such as Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, etc.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this list of innovators provides historical evidence that instruments like the trumpet and saxophone were more naturally suited from the outset to the requirements of jazz.

Brass and woodwind instruments have played important roles in the development and evolution of jazz from its inception. The guitar, however, did not become a predominant voice in the genre until

the development of jazz-rock in the late 1960's and early 1970's.<sup>4</sup> Guitarists have had to strive for decades to attune the characteristics of jazz music with their instrument's lack of volume, its unique timbre, and demanding technique. Guitarist Pat Martino made similar comments about the guitar in jazz.

By listening to jazz guitarists, you cannot follow the forefront of the jazz scene. The horns are usually the leaders, and by the time a guitarist gets his chops together to do what the horns are doing, there is something else new. Guitar is always in the shadow.<sup>5</sup>

With the advent of the electric guitar, the instrument was no longer limited by a lack of volume. Nevertheless, it continued to be less responsive than wind instruments because of its staccato attack. On wind instruments tones can be sustained almost indefinitely while sounds produced on the guitar decay very quickly.

In the early days of jazz the guitar superseded the banjo, and was strictly used for accompaniment. Its bright tone had a cutting capacity that enabled the instrument to be sensed and felt, contributing most effectively as a member of the rhythm section. The guitar was immediately accepted as a rhythm instrument, however, its development as a solo instrument was painstakingly slow. Many excellent guitarists emerged and proved that fluid single-line solos similar to those played on wind instruments, could also be played on the guitar. During the late twenties there was Eddie Lang, Lonnie Johnson, and in the mid-1930's, Django Reinhardt, George Van Eps, Eddie Durham, George Barnes, etc. However, it was only when Charlie Christian aroused attention as a member of Benny Goodman's popular groups in the late 1930's, that the electric guitar made a significant impact as a solo instrument.<sup>6</sup> He essentially single-handedly revolutionized guitar playing and charted new territory in terms of technique, harmony, melody, and sound:<sup>7</sup>

Technically, he played his instrument with a virtuosity that seemed incredible to his contemporaries. The electric guitar in his hands became a "horn" comparable to the tenor sax of Lester Young. His playing has been described as "reed style;" he played with the expressiveness of a saxophone. Harmonically, Christian was the first to base his improvisations not on the harmonies of the theme but on passing chords that he placed between the basic harmonies. Melodically, Christian smoothed out the tinny staccato that almost all guitarists prior to him had employed into interconnected lines that radiated some of the atmosphere of Lester Young's phrases. Not surprisingly, Christian had played tenor sax before becoming a guitarist.<sup>8</sup>

Berendt's keen observation of Christian's style clearly exhibits what a powerful role the horn had within the jazz tradition. Christian's impact was noteworthy and significant because he had successfully

assimilated basic horn-like idiosyncracies and transferred them onto the guitar. There are many instances in the history of jazz where instrumentalists have assiduously forged new grounds by imitating horn players, and adopting their innovative improvisational approaches. But Christian was the first guitarist to do this comprehensively. Gunther Schuller also makes similar observations about Christian's style: "The novelty of Christian's playing lay in the use of what was to all intents and purposes a "new" instrument, a new "sound," which suddenly had broken into the frontline of melody instruments."<sup>9</sup> Christian had a tone that was very much his own, avoiding any suggestion of the accepted "guitar twanginess."<sup>10</sup> Unlike previous guitarists, he played solos with an engaging overall smoothness and dexterity, using longer phrases starting and finishing in unusual places. His playing was deeply rooted in the blues and pointed towards the road to the modern bop style that was to emerge in the early 1940's.<sup>11</sup> Christian was a primary influence on Wes Montgomery and it was his pioneering hornlike approach to the instrument that first attracted the young Wes. There were many excellent guitarists after Christian who developed sophisticated techniques and musical concepts. However, it was quite obvious that the voluminous and richly expressive sound projected by horn players was far from being replicated by jazz guitarists. The guitar's tone could not as effectively cut through the intense interaction of a buoyant and dynamic bop rhythm section.

Guitarists in the 1950's adopted a warm and clean tone, and transferred to the guitar the ideas of innovative wind players such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and later, Miles Davis and John Coltrane.<sup>12</sup> However, until the arrival of Wes Montgomery, guitarists could not attain the same level of dramatic effectiveness and solo intensity that horn players such as Davis and Coltrane were known for. This brief historical analysis brings us to ask several fundamental questions. What was the essence of Wes Montgomery's contribution to the jazz guitar, and what impact did he have? Why is he considered "the best thing to happen to the guitar since Charlie Christian"?

### Extending The Potential of Jazz Guitar

Wes Montgomery basically extended the potential of jazz guitar playing and the norm was never the same after him.<sup>13</sup> He had recognized and accepted the instrument's subdued tone, unique timbre, and sound limitation. Nonetheless, he ingeniously integrated other dramatic devices and stunning techniques into his performances to produce one of the most exciting guitar styles in the history of jazz. Bill Shoemaker is one of the few critics to fully acknowledge Wes' monumental impact on jazz guitar:

Wes Montgomery did for the guitar what Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker did for their respective instruments- that is, he established a standard of creative excellence that remains unchallenged on its own terms, a standard that can be referred to as it is circumvented.<sup>14</sup>

His unorthodox thumb technique, his previously-unheard-of octaves played at lightning speed, as well as his unusual approach to the fingerboard, all suggest that Wes' primary concern was to play exciting jazz, and guitar was simply the medium he chose:

Throughout his stay at Ronnie Scott's Wes played the language of pure jazz. Guitar clichés were absent from his playing for the simple reason that, as wonderfully as he exploits the guitar- more than anyone else to that- he is not a guitarist, strictly speaking. His prime motivation is that of playing jazz and he chose to apply it from the guitar- unhampered by any notions of the guitar acquired from study or through the ministrations of a teacher. It is perhaps his music-making that is the most remarkable of his facets. So powerful is the creative urge that he thrusts past technical barriers as though they do not exist. The guitar is simply the medium for the music.<sup>15</sup>

Similar comments were made when Montgomery met with a group of guitarists in Europe to discuss his playing. The concluding remark was that he was not strictly a guitar player, but a musician who used the guitar.<sup>16</sup> It was Montgomery's innate desire to express the sounds he heard in his mind that moved him to expand the musical possibilities of the guitar. Single-line melodies, octaves, and chords all had equal improvisational applicability for Wes. He used these instrumental techniques in such a way as to increase dynamics, textural density, rhythmic density, and sound mass.

Up until this point in time, guitarists had mastered and integrated the new bop vocabulary in their performances, but their playing remained essentially restrained and undaring. They were not adept at effectively generating tension and resolution through the manipulation of dynamics, textural, and rhythmic density. Moreover, they had not yet fully explored the sound capacity of the guitar. Montgomery on the other hand, used his phenomenal three-tier technique to increase dramatic effectiveness and extend the sound potential of the instrument. Jazz scholar Lewis Porter also recognized that "In his sincere, unsensational way, he expanded the resources of jazz guitar, and his influence has been acknowledged by many later guitarists, including George Benson and Pat Martino."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it seems that Montgomery had contributed the last technical and sonoric advancements to jazz guitar during a timely and propitious period just before the advent and impact of rock. Jazz critic Leonard Feather indicates that

Montgomery's death roughly coincided with the guitar revolution that saw his instrument take on many new functions.....Many of these developments were due to the impact of rock, for it was rock musicians who enabled the guitar to surpass the piano as the most played, most purchased instrument in contemporary society.<sup>18</sup>

Wes Montgomery, like other mainstream guitarists, did not utilize the electronic gadgetry (fuzz, distortion, overdrive) that was to revolutionize the function and sound of the instrument for the next three decades. He is considered a major innovator because he extended the instrumental possibilities within the realm of the mainstream tradition, without “artificial” alteration of the standard amplified guitar sound.

### Recording Advancements

We must acknowledge that the reception and impact of Montgomery’s style, as well as his broadening of jazz guitar’s potential, would not have been as significant if technological progress in the recording techniques had not transpired. In 1948, while Wes was performing with Lionel Hampton, Columbia introduced the microgroove discs at about the same period that magnetic tape was being distributed for the first time:<sup>19</sup>

The combination meant, quite obviously, that longer performances could be recorded than ever before, and that those performances could be issued as played. The impact in the fifties on jazz was enormous. For the first time, musicians found that they could stretch out on recordings. Immediately, recorded jazz became closer to what musicians were playing in clubs. Sometimes what was played in clubs was recorded: Magnetic tape meant that it was feasible to record live sets wherever the music was played.<sup>20</sup>

This technological development undoubtedly enabled Montgomery’s improvisational style to impact forcefully on jazz and to be appreciated fully. As mentioned earlier, one of Wes’ most significant contribution was that he extended the potential of jazz guitar playing through his three-tier approach to improvisation. This approach- based on the systematic and structured intensification of choruses, or sections of choruses- required that he be allotted a reasonable number of choruses and adequate solo time to fully develop his improvisations. His most impressive solos (*West Coast Blues* - 7:20, *Four on Six* - 6:10, *Blue n’ Boogie* - 9:31, etc.) comprise often more than seven choruses and run over six minutes. It is unlikely that the quintessence of his style could have been faithfully captured and appreciated had the microgroove discs and magnetic tape not been developed.

### Reception: International Recognition and Awards

Wes’ rise to fame and international acclaim occurred shortly after his first recordings on Riverside in 1959. During the next nine years his impact was not only evidenced by the numerous awards he received, but also by the fact that he won so much recognition in print. He was voted *Down Beat’s* New Star Guitarist of 1960, and had won the Established Talent category on his instrument for

five of the following seven years. He had also been voted the *Playboy* poll's all-star guitarist for six consecutive years.<sup>21</sup> At a midwestern jazz festival where he was the feature attraction, Montgomery received front-page coverage- complete with picture in the Kansas City (Mo.) *Times*.<sup>22</sup> Both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines had done profiles of Montgomery and he was the recipient of *Record World* magazine's award as "1967 Jazz Man of the Year."<sup>23</sup> He also received *Billboards* magazine's award for all-time first place LP on its charts (*Goin' Out of My Head*), and the NARAS *Grammy* award for "Best Instrumental Jazz Performance of 1967" (also for *Goin' Out...*).<sup>24</sup> After his recording of *The Incredible Jazz Guitar* album until the time of his death in 1968, Wes was considered "the American Guitarist." "When Wes came on the scene," Ralph Gleason said, "he was so innovative and so powerful that he just swept the other guys away into the studios."<sup>25</sup>

### Montgomery's Sonoric Individualism

Throughout its development and rapid evolution, jazz music has always been based on the "free unfettered expression of the individual."<sup>26</sup> Jazz musicologists consider this to be one of the most radical and most important aspect of the idiom. The way jazz musicians play their instruments with particular regard to the personal aspect of sonority, timbre, and tone color, is a major concern for the performer, historian, and scholar:

...except for the swing or rhythmic characteristics of jazz performance, the highly individualized sonority aspects of jazz- the sounds of jazz, as musicians simply call it- are its most obviously distinguishing and memorable surface features. In fact, it could be successfully argued that in jazz the individualization of timbre is more sharply defined than that of rhythm and swing.<sup>27</sup>

It is not necessary for a jazz musician to conform to a commonly accepted notion of sound. His criteria for sound are based on expressivity, emotion, and individuality.<sup>28</sup> This is the reason why the jazz connoisseur is able to recognize, after a relatively few measures of music, who the performer is. Accordingly, "the self of the musician is clearly reflected, in the most immediate and direct fashion, in the nonstandardized sound of the great jazz improvisers."<sup>29</sup> This "sonoric individualism" as Schuller calls it, becomes quite apparent even when we listen to great improvisers on a single instrument like the tenor saxophone. Listening to Coleman Hawkins' solo on "*Body and Soul*" (1939), Ben Webster on Ellington's "*Cottontail*" (1940), Lester Young on "*Dickie's Dream*" (1939), Charlie Parker on "*Hallelujah*" (1944), Sonny Rollins on "*Blue 7*" (1957), John Coltrane on "*Alabama*" (1963), and Ornette Coleman on "*Lonely Woman*" (1960), provides us with an historically "dazzling kaleidoscopic variety of sounds, textures, and uses of vibrato."<sup>30</sup>

Montgomery's reception and impact in jazz history was very significant in part because of the high degree of sonoric individuality and distinctiveness he had attained. Renowned French guitarist Christian Escoudé, considers Montgomery to be one of the greatest jazz guitar legends because, not unlike his predecessors Django Reinhardt, Charlie Christian, and Jimmy Raney, he devised a new way of playing.<sup>31</sup> His style differs significantly from theirs in that he conceived an original technique and unprecedented sound: "What is striking in Wes' solos, is his sound. This is what distinguishes him from all other guitarists."<sup>32</sup> Bill Quinn attests that much of Montgomery's success stems from traceable sources, such as the fact that he came along at what Wes calls "the right time" for his sound.<sup>33</sup> This is entirely demonstrated in the fact that when Quinn conducted this interview in 1968, there were already several television commercials using the "dulcet octave guitar sound so pointedly reminiscent of The Thumb," but only one was actually Montgomery's- the rest were guitarists simulating his sound. Fellow guitarist Louis Stewart comments on the impact of Montgomery's unique sound:

Once Wes came by and we jammed for about four hours, and we were very impressed with Wes, who was really playing then. I've heard guys get deeper into the instrument than he did, but he had the sound and nobody was as successful with the instrument as he. He made it easier for me and a whole lot of other cats; he opened the door.<sup>34</sup>

No other guitarist in jazz history had played with the thumb and achieved the warmth, fullness, and roundness of tone that Wes had. The trenchant and dynamic tone he produced with his astonishing octave technique further accented his sonoric individuality and literally altered guitar players' perception of what could be done with this instrument. His unprecedented octave phrasing remains one of the most original and enduring contribution to the jazz guitar.<sup>35</sup> He also transferred onto the guitar the use of block chords that pianists before him had successfully used in their improvisations, making his sound one of the most incredibly distinctive in the history of jazz. Orrin Keepnews states that

while octaves became a signature for him it's often overlooked that he was one of the pioneers of block chords, a pianistic kind of approach to the guitar. I don't know of anyone who played chords in their solos to that extent, so well, and so musically. In my book that is one of his greatest contributions to guitar playing.<sup>36</sup>

### Wes and The Horns

Wes not only assimilated principal elements of Charlie Christian's style early on, but thoroughly extended it through his own personal genius and musical inventiveness. Many have discerned and acknowledged that he was the first jazz guitarist to play with the same intensity and power as wind players. Almost alone, he gave "jazz guitar a new dimension and a new life when horns

were taking the lead.”<sup>37</sup> His playing did not have the looping flow associated with Charlie Christian, but the same fierce, jabbing intensity common to such saxophonists as John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. Mongan stated that Wes “possessed an exceptional combination of soul and lyricism carried along by intense drive, rivaling that of a Rollins or a Coltrane.”<sup>38</sup> This is not altogether surprising when one considers that his musical preferences had gravitated very early, from guitarists to horn players. Guitarist John Scofield states that he saw Montgomery “more as an interpreter of jazz, but on the guitar. He swung as a good horn player; he was saying as much as a horn player.”<sup>39</sup> Because of this, Montgomery was proficient at devising very exciting solo improvisations: “He changed the guitar from an instrument producing a relatively delicate sound to a remarkably strong, full-throated ensemble and solo voice.”<sup>40</sup> In an article for *B.M.G.* magazine, John Duarte also affirmed that what Wes did was “to give the guitar, with his right-handed-thumbed attack, a deep-throated and powerful voice, which spoke timeless jazz, of the fully-developed mainstream kind, with the same eloquence as that of the wind players.”<sup>41</sup>

### Montgomery’s Impact on Jazz Guitarists

Since its inception jazz musicians have memorized each others solos and favorite clichés giving rise to this distinct musical language we call jazz. All players learn the jazz language through this aural process. Montgomery illustrated this point in the introduction of his guitar method:

Every musician, until he has mastered himself and his instrument, needs a model- that is, until he knows what he wants to say and how he wants to say it, he is necessarily dependent upon established musicians. Since no artist creates in a vacuum, totally isolated from all influences, he must recognize his dependence upon his surroundings and upon his heritage; he must study the styles of accepted masters. In every museum throughout the world you will find aspiring painters patiently copying the masters. Similarly, young musicians play records of their favorite musicians in order to absorb their techniques and personal expressions. For example, when I first started to play, I wore out parts of Charlie Christian’s recordings.<sup>42</sup>

Because this aural process is such an integral part of the jazz idiom, Montgomery’s recordings inevitably exerted a significant influence on guitar players of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Many modern guitarists valued and praised Montgomery’s improvisational skills, recognizing the importance of studying his improvisations. Guitarist Larry Coryell candidly acknowledged Wes’ colossal impact on guitar players of his generation:

A lot of us [guitarists] have gone back and re-examined the importance of Wes Montgomery in our formation and our roots. I’m harkening back to a lot of that and it sounds good now,

whereas when I was concentrating on the fusion thing in the middle '70's I just didn't have time to hone the basic improvisational skills that came from Wes Montgomery, that school. ...It has nothing to do with how many records you sell, how many people come to hear a concert, it's a concern with honing the basic improvisational skills and working over the materials that people like Wes Montgomery were making such great inroads with in the '50's and early '60's.<sup>43</sup>

The list of guitarists that have to some degree, been influenced or affected by Montgomery's improvisational style, is much too long to be systematically considered and analyzed here. However, in the evaluation of Wes' historical importance there are certain objective measures that must be consulted, and they come mostly from the musicians.<sup>44</sup> Jazz scholar Lewis Porter endorses this view and posits that, "When thousands of musicians say that Coleman's or Coltrane's music changed their lives, we have a measure of historical importance."<sup>45</sup>

Montgomery gave the jazz guitar a much needed boost in the 1960's and thereafter, a new wave of outstanding jazz guitarists began emulating the guitar style and techniques which he had originated.<sup>46</sup> The most important of these were, George Benson, Pat Martino, Emily Remler, Larry Coryell, Steve Khan and Pat Metheny. In a 1974 interview for *Guitar Player* magazine, George Benson candidly told Robert Yelin that he had been influenced by Wes Montgomery, and like many other guitarists, had especially succumbed to his distinctive octave technique: "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't influenced by Wes Montgomery's sound when I play octaves."<sup>47</sup> Len Lyons observes that Benson had a warm, clean, melodic execution similar to Montgomery's and had absorbed some of his fluency and mellow tone.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, after Wes' early death in 1968, Benson was an obvious candidate for Creed Taylor, the producer of Montgomery's records after Riverside folded. Taylor anticipated that Benson's guitar sound, so similar at that time to Montgomery's jazz style, would achieve the same popular success.<sup>49</sup>

Pat Martino's album, *The Visit!*, was inspired and dedicated to Wes Montgomery. Martino had very high esteem for Montgomery and they eventually developed a strong bond of friendship during the mid-1960's, despite a twenty year disparity in age: "Whenever they were working in the same town they would get together at one or the other's hotel and play. Work. Jam, learn, teach, experiment, dig each other."<sup>50</sup> Martino has a unique and personal sound characterized by a forceful, clearly articulated attack and long streams of uninterrupted eighth notes. He also employs carefully constructed riffs and mellow sounding octaves reminiscent of Wes. On *Road Song*,<sup>51</sup> Martino "creates a memorable musical portrait of Wes with uncanny accuracy"<sup>52</sup> by beginning his improvisation with single-note lines and closing with an exciting octave chorus. Martino, like Wes, exploits the lower and middle register of the instrument producing a deep, warm, and mellow sound:

The most obvious characteristic in Pat Martino's playing is his preference for the bass notes of the guitar- a tendency away from the metallic or electrified coldness which has been so dominant in the last decade. Pat gets a sound that makes use of the wood in the instrument, with a resulting mellowness that colors his interpretation of every theme, at every tempo.<sup>53</sup>

Guitarist Emily Remler was in the 1980's, one of the best-known female jazz instrumentalists of the younger generation. During her formative years at Berklee College, Remler had decided she wanted to play exactly like Montgomery: "I was so loyal, I rejected all other approaches.....For a few years I became obsessed, I had Wes' picture hanging on my wall- I wanted him to play through me."<sup>54</sup> Steve Khan, guitarist and author of *The Wes Montgomery Guitar Folio*, also recognizes that Wes Montgomery became the total inspiration for what he was trying to do:

It was my yearning to know his music inside out that started me on transcribing his compositions and many of his great solos. ....For me, it was an honor to have my name associated in this way with my idol's. To paraphrase my good friend and fellow guitarist, John Abercrombie, Wes Montgomery and his music embody a quality and integrity that transcends the physical part of playing the instrument itself and enters an area that is much more satisfying, both intellectually and emotionally.<sup>55</sup>

In 1964 at the age of seventeen, Steve Khan was working as a rock-and-roll drummer who bought one of Wes' albums because the guitar on the cover resembled a Gibson model used by B.B. King. Khan recounts his first experience listening to a Montgomery solo, which unexpectedly changed his whole musical direction:

I'll never forget sitting on the floor with the volume turned way up and being blown away by Wes' interpretation of Duke Ellington's classic "Caravan." That experience literally changed my whole life by opening me up to the world of improvised instrumental music, otherwise known as jazz. I still owned a set of drums, so hearing Grady Tate on that recording was at the same time both uplifting and the final blow to any hopes of becoming a drummer. From that point on I sought out any record by Wes and anything that had Grady as the drummer, thus starting a chain reaction that led to an overwhelming number of great jazz names: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Bill Evans, Jim Hall, Grant Green, Oliver Nelson.....It was an incredible period of listening and exploring, and out of all this, at the age of twenty, came the decision to try my hardest to become a jazz guitarist. Wes Montgomery, the man and his music, became the total inspiration for what I was attempting to do.<sup>56</sup>

The tremendous impact of Wes' improvisational style on a whole generation of developing jazz guitarists is unmistakably clear and is compellingly documented in oral histories and transcribed interviews. Guitarist Kevin Eubanks posits that Wes has probably been a stronger influence on modern guitar than anyone else:

You can't deny that the guitar never would have happened without Charlie Christian- at least not in the way that it did. But as far as modern players are concerned, especially from the sixties when everything seemed to catch up with itself and solidify into modern-day jazz, Wes would have to be the most influential figure in the history of jazz guitar. Every instrument seems to have a prophet, like Coltrane was to tenor- we're talking modern stuff, ..... But Wes seemed to lay the guitar out like Bird [Parker] did on alto. Certain people seem to be able to show the symmetry of the instrument and a relaxed way of playing. If you want to study the essentials of jazz guitar, all the fundamental great things are in Wes Montgomery.<sup>57</sup>

### Montgomery and the Jazz Canon

In his insightful and penetrating article on cultural dialogics and jazz, eminent scholar Gary Tomlinson acknowledges that the "classic" recordings in Martin Williams's *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*- used in jazz appreciation classes all over the country- "have come to function in precisely the same way as the classics of the European musical canons.....They have come to stand as exemplars of timeless aesthetic value..."<sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> Tomlinson questions the whole intrinsic value of both European and jazz canons because they have been constructed "in a given time and place according to particular formative rules and limiting contingencies."<sup>60</sup> However, the immediate purpose here is not to evaluate the jazz canon nor to argue Tomlinson's position, but to demonstrate that a jazz canon undoubtedly exists and is universally recognized by scholars at large. Moreover, we want to see if Montgomery's impact was perceived to be significant enough to warrant him a privileged position in the canon.

*The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* alluded to earlier, is a widely used beginning library intended as an introduction and an interpretation of approximately seven decades of recorded jazz. The major figures, their accomplishments, and their effect are also discussed in a companion booklet. Williams candidly admits that many worthy figures and groups are left out, and others perhaps are not ideally represented. However, he does hope these recordings offer a balanced view: "balanced in the sense that major figures are given major attention, and balanced under the conviction that once the contributions of such figures are appreciated, the work of their worthy, sometimes distinctive followers will also be clear."<sup>61</sup>

The revised version of the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (1987) comprises a total of ninety-five musical selections representing some of the most acclaimed recordings in jazz history. It is not our aim to evaluate or dispute the historical merit of these recordings, nor to try to analyze Williams' inclusion of certain selections, or the exclusion of others. However, this important collection does enable us to briefly assess and view the general historical impact of guitarists on the jazz canon. Out of ninety-five selections only four tracks are allocated to guitar players. This is not surprising since we have already established that instruments like trumpet and saxophone were more "naturally suited

from the outset to the requirements of jazz”.<sup>62</sup> One of the selections *Dinah*, by the Quintette of The Hot Club of France, features the renowned Belgian-born gypsy guitarist, Django Reinhardt. He gained an international reputation from 1934 to 1939 and was the first foreign musician to exert a major influence on American jazzmen.<sup>63</sup> Two other selections, *I Found a New Baby* and *Breakfast Feud* feature Charlie Christian with the Benny Goodman sextet in 1940-41, when he “opened up the world of electric guitar to countless players who were to follow in his footsteps.”<sup>64</sup> Of the many outstanding modern guitarists, only Wes Montgomery had the privilege to be featured on the Smithsonian collection. His impact is perceived as being significant enough to grant him the sole inclusion among guitar modernists on this collection. His nine-chorus improvisation on *West Coast Blues*, “ranks alongside Django Reinhardt’s *Nuages* or Christian’s *Solo Flight*, as a milestone in jazz guitar playing.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, *West Coast Blues* proceeded to become a jazz standard finding its place in the jazz repertory of tunes. It was also to be selected for inclusion in the highly-touted Jamey Aebersold play-a-long series.<sup>66</sup> Aebersold has issued volume sixty-two- a play-a-long entirely dedicated to Wes Montgomery jazz standards.

### Historical Demarcation

Montgomery’s impact on the history of jazz guitar is all the more accentuated because he is often seen as a historical demarcation between Charlie Christian and contemporary guitarists. In one of the most brilliant and complete assessments of the history of the guitar in jazz, Norman Mongan alludes to this demarcation by saying that “Wes’ shining example became a rallying point for new carriers of the flame and the new leaders began consolidating the ground that had been gained by Montgomery.”<sup>67</sup> Although Mongan is exceedingly thorough in his study of the many other outstanding guitarists that were contemporaries of Wes, he quite evidently underscores Montgomery’s contribution and impact in his writings. In his discussion of numerous contemporary guitarists Mongan accentuates Wes’ historical importance by referring to these as “guitarists of the post-Montgomery period.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, in his book *My Fifty Fretting Years*, Ivor Mairants implies this historical demarcation in one of his chapters on modern jazz guitarists entitled, “The Wes Montgomery Era- Before and After.”<sup>69</sup> These statements clearly suggest that Montgomery had set and secured the standards of excellence during a particular period of time in the history of the jazz guitar.

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<sup>1</sup> James Sallis, *The Guitar Players: One Instrument and Its Masters in American Music* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim E. Berendt, *The Jazz Book: From Ragtime to Fusion*, 6th ed (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), 310.

<sup>3</sup> Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968),

<sup>4</sup> Jim Ferguson, “Guitar” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, ed. Barry Kernfeld, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan Press Limited, 1988), 1:459.

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- <sup>5</sup> Norman Mongan, The History of The Guitar in Jazz, (New York: Oak Publications, 1983), 181. Excerpted from an original interview by Mike Cuscuna, in Down Beat (June, 1968).
- <sup>6</sup> Ferguson, op. cit., 460.
- <sup>7</sup> Berendt, op. cit., 303.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 307.
- <sup>9</sup> Gunther Schuller, The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 571.
- <sup>10</sup> Rudi Blesh, Combo USA (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1971), 163.
- <sup>11</sup> Mongan, op. cit., 93.
- <sup>12</sup> Ferguson, op. cit., 461.
- <sup>13</sup> Steve Khan, The Wes Montgomery Guitar Folio (Fort Lauderdale: Gopam Enterprises, Inc., 1978), 2. This comment was made by guitarist, Jim Hall.
- <sup>14</sup> Bill Shoemaker, "Birth of The Modern Guitar," Downbeat, May (1993), 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Jack Duarte, "Wes Montgomery," BMG Magazine, July (1965).
- <sup>16</sup> Jim Bosa, Radio interview with Wes Montgomery in Los Angeles. Issued on Wes Montgomery, Live at Jorgie's and More, Vol. 2. VGM-0008.
- <sup>17</sup> Lewis Porter, "Wes Montgomery," in The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, ed. Barry Kernfeld, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Press Limited, 1988), 2:125.
- <sup>18</sup> Sallis, op. cit., 218.
- <sup>19</sup> Lewis Porter and Micheal Ullman, Jazz: From Its Origins to the Present (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1993), 236.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Bill Quinn, "The Thumb's Up or What the View is Like from the Top," Down Beat, vol.35, no.13 (1968), 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Sallis, op. cit., 218.
- <sup>26</sup> Gunther Schuller, Musings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>28</sup> Berendt, op. cit., 149.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>30</sup> Schuller, op. cit., 32.
- <sup>31</sup> Christain Escoudé, "Wes Montgomery," Jazz Hot, No 283, (May 1972), 34.
- <sup>32</sup> Escoudé, Ibid., 34.
- <sup>33</sup> Quinn, op. cit., 18.
- <sup>34</sup> Mongan, op. cit., 184-185. Excerpted from an original interview by M. Cullaz, in Jazz Hot (February, 1969).
- <sup>35</sup> Escoudé, op. cit., 34.
- <sup>36</sup> Orrin Keepnews, companion booklet, Wes Montgomery: The Complete Riverside Recordings, 22.
- <sup>37</sup> John F. Szwed, liner notes to Round Midnight, Riverside 637009.
- <sup>38</sup> Mongan, op. cit., 171.
- <sup>39</sup> John Scofield, quoted in companion booklet, Wes Montgomery: The Complete Riverside Recordings, 1992.
- <sup>40</sup> Burt Korall, liner notes to Tequila, Verve V6-8653.
- <sup>41</sup> Jack Duarte, "Wes Montgomery," B.M.G. Magazine, Aug (1968), 343.
- <sup>42</sup> Lee Garson and Jimmy Stewart, Wes Montgomery Jazz Guitar Method (New York: Robbins Music Corporation, 1968), 5.
- <sup>43</sup> W. Royal Stokes, The Jazz Scene (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 230-231.
- <sup>44</sup> Lewis Porter, "Guidelines for Jazz Research," Council for Research in Music Education, No. 95 (winter 1987), 7.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7
- <sup>46</sup> Maurice J. Summerfield, The Jazz Guitar: Its Evolution and Its Players (Milwaukee: Ashley Mark Publishing Co., 1978), 20.
- <sup>47</sup> Robert Yelin, "George Benson" in Jazz Guitarists: Collected Interviews from Guitar Player Magazine (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1975), 21.
- <sup>48</sup> Len Lyon, The 101 Best Jazz Albums: A History of Jazz on Records (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 359.
- <sup>49</sup> Summerfield, op. cit., 49. "Creed Taylor's choice was to prove right, but the popular success he had hoped for Benson did not actually happen until 1976 when Benson's Wamer Brother's record 'Breezin' even surpassed the record sales that Wes Montgomery had ever achieved."
- <sup>50</sup> Gary Giddins, liner notes to Pat Martino/Footprints, Muse 5096.
- <sup>51</sup> On Martino's Footprints album. The composition is by Wes Montgomery.

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- <sup>52</sup> Giddins, *op. cit.*
- <sup>53</sup> Christopher Peters, liner notes to Pat Martino/El Hombre, Prestige 7513.
- <sup>54</sup> Adrian Ingram, Wes Montgomery (Gateshead: Ashley Mark Publishing Co., 1985), 64.
- <sup>55</sup> Steve Khan, liner notes to Groove Brothers, Milestone M-47051.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> Kevin Eubanks, quoted in companion booklet, Wes Montgomery: The Complete Riverside Recordings, 14.
- <sup>58</sup> Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," Black Music Research Journal, vol. 11 no.2 (Fall 1991), 246.
- <sup>59</sup> Krin Gabbard, "The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences," Annual Review of Jazz Studies 6, (1993), 74-75. Gabbard adds that "a disproportionate amount of jazz scholarship is and has been devoted to finding the most effective means for identifying and exalting favored artists."
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 246.
- <sup>61</sup> Martin Williams, in companion booklet to The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz, rev. ed. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 5.
- <sup>62</sup> Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 459.
- <sup>63</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*, 110. Reinhardt also recorded with visiting American musicians, including Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, and Dicky Wells. He is still highly regarded today for his passionate, romantic playing, which continues to influence young musicians.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 94.
- <sup>65</sup> Ingram, *op. cit.*, 24.
- <sup>66</sup> Jamey Aebersold, Groovin High, vol 43, Play-A-Long Book and CD Set, JA 1265D, 1988.
- <sup>67</sup> Mongan, *op. cit.*, 173.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., 191.
- <sup>69</sup> Ivor Mairants, My Fifty Fretting Years (Gateshead, England: Ashley Mark Publishing Co.,1980), 197-216.