

Forrest Balman

Professor Carlson

April 12 2016

Mus 23

Wes Montgomery: Redefining Jazz Guitar

In response to an interview with Jazz Journal, a periodical that follows the lives and works of the present, Joe Pass, a prominent Jazz guitarist who said, “Wes Montgomery. There really hasn’t been anything new since then. There have really only been three real innovators on the guitar - Wes, Charlie Christian, and Django Reinhardt” (Jazz Journal). Few guitarists in the entire history of Jazz music have played as much of an impactful role than Wes Montgomery. With his eclectic style, and unique take on the instrument that provided a fresh outlook on Jazz guitar as a whole, Montgomery’s heyday is still regarded as the most influential and innovative period in Jazz guitar since the era of Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt. With twenty-six solo albums, and fourteen collaborative works, Montgomery remains one of the most recorded Jazz guitarists in the history of the genre. With a name benounced to Jazz enthusiasts, and aspiring guitarists alike, Wes Montgomery’s technical proficiency is legendary and the musical mark his works have made on Jazz will remain classic and timeless examples of masterfully exquisite guitar work.

John Leslie Montgomery was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on March 23rd 1923. Being brought up in a family with musical talent, Montgomery fell into the order of a musical lifestyle rather quickly. Wes had two brothers, who were also musically inclined. Monk, who played the bass, and Buddy, who played the piano. Of the three, Wes showed the most natural talent with

his instrument. At the time, Wes played the four string tenor guitar. Although comparable to the modern guitar in sound and range of pitch, the four string tenor guitar differs from the standard contemporary guitar in number of strings, and tuning system. It wasn't until the age of 20 that Montgomery would pick up his first six string guitar that would become what he is most known for today. In terms of his own influence, Montgomery drew inspiration from, namely, two prolific guitar players of the jazz era.

The first of them was Charlie Christian. Christian is often regarded as the first influential electric guitar player. Hailing from Oklahoma City, Christian packed a tremendous punch into his unique and revolutionary virtuosic style of playing. Although a key musician in the Jazz genre, Christian's technique, sound, and mechanical prowess would be idolized and imitated by guitarists outside of the Jazz tradition. Christian's rise to popularity as a guitarist was by means of performance in Benny Goodman, the nationally acclaimed "King of Swing's," ensemble. Prior to Christian's contributions to Jazz, the guitar served mainly as a harmonic instrument with not as significant of a lead role in comparison to the trumpet or saxophone. This was namely due to the fact that the acoustic strings could not compete with the sheer volume of the brass and reed instruments of the standard ensemble (*Jazz Musician, Charlie Christian* Duke.edu). One of Christian's biggest contributions, in terms of style, that is evident in Montgomery's playing is the use of solos that utilize a single note to outline the harmonic structure of a piece. According to Jeff Aarons, Jazz Guitar Online columnist, "Christian was was one of the first jazz guitarists to creatively execute fluid single note lines that defined the melodic harmonic points and extended harmonies" (*Charlie Christian, Aarons*). Prior to Christian's incorporation of electric guitar into the Jazz band ensemble, single note riffs and solos were drowned out by the volume of the band.

Christian was also one of the first innovators of bebop, which Montgomery helped to truly refine in his own career as a guitarist.

The second, but equally noteworthy, influence of Wes Montgomery's style is Django Reinhardt. Born Jean-Baptiste Reinhardt in Liberchies, Belgium, in 1910, Reinhardt was born into the nomadic gypsy lifestyle. Having had experience with other instruments, namely the violin and the banjo, at age 13, Reinhardt became exposed to the guitar. Reinhardt, one of the most influential guitar players of all time, became synonymous with the style Gypsy Jazz. Obviously, having drawn influences from the emerging Jazz craze of the United States of the late twenties and early thirties, Reinhardt began to implement techniques and stylistic characteristics of the Roma Gypsy music he had grown accustomed to in his own life. Unfortunately, early in his career, Reinhardt was part of a tragic accident that resulted in the crippling of his third and fourth fingers. Making guitar playing seemingly impossible for the average musician, Reinhardt had to adapt to his new set of circumstances and create a fingering system that allow him to play runs using his two stronger fingers (*Django Reinhardt Bio.com*). Perhaps the technique that appears most prevalent in Montgomery's sound that was inspired by Reinhardt is the use of unique and extended harmonies. Reinhardt, out of necessity, had to voice chords in an efficient enough way in order to accommodate his weaker fingers. Reinhardt had to play harmony that utilized a unique dissonance that did not resemble any sound in the Jazz tradition up until his contribution. Aaron writes, "Django employed **chords** that were not used at that time. He was able to finger just about any chord voicing he needed using his two curled in fingers to fret notes on the upper two strings B and E, while his two healthy fingers handled the mid and bass strings. Unused strings were often muted" (*Django Reinhardt, Aarons*). These chords gave a unique

chromatic twist on the extended harmonies of popular Jazz. Reinhardt, to this day, remains the most influential European Jazz musician, and contributed many innovations that allowed guitarists, such as Wes Montgomery to pioneer their unique sounds.

Wes Montgomery, in his relatively short life, contributed several wonderful and noteworthy works. Montgomery's recording career started with his two brothers, Monk and Buddy. Despite not giving the critical acclaim that his later albums would eventually yield, his early recording career at Riverside records allowed him to get his foot in the door as far as a recording contract is concerned. After parting ways, musically, with his two brothers, Montgomery began recording some of his more reputable works. During his time at Riverside records, Montgomery recorded: *Fingerpickin'*, *Far Wes* (Which modern guitarist, Eric Johnson, wrote an homage to matching the title of the album "Far Wes"), and *The incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery* (Gleason "Wes Montgomery). It was at this point that Montgomery's work was able to be distributed to Jazz and guitar enthusiast communities outside of the Indiana-sphere. Montgomery continued to record and release over a dozen more singles with Riverside records before eventually switching over to another, more reputable recording label for Jazz at the time, Verve Records. Montgomery took his playing in an entirely different direction when recording at Verve Records. Not only did he begin to take popular songs of the time and arrange them to be Jazz masterpieces, but he did so with his unique and eclectic guitar technique and style (*The Unmistakable Jazz Guitar* NPR.org). While at Verve Montgomery release many noteworthy records, including *Movin' Wes*, *California Dreamin'*, *Tequila*, and *Willow Weep for Me*. His music began to deviate from the Bebop tradition, in a sense, because of his music's newfound pop tunefulness, taking a page from the books of his pop contemporaries Aretha

Franklin and The Mamas and the Papas. Nevertheless, Montgomery's iconic style prevailed throughout all of his recording endeavors, showcasing his unique and, in modern context, inspirational technique and prowess on the guitar.

Arguably more important than the contributions he made to standard Jazz repertoire, Montgomery's contributions to Jazz guitar technique and style have inspired many guitarists in and out of the Jazz tradition. The first massive contribution to guitar playing style that Montgomery made was his thumb-playing technique. Because utilizing the entirety of one's hand was the norm of Jazz plucking at the time, Montgomery opted to use the side of his thumb to strike the strings (Jazz.com "Wes Montgomery"). Despite being technically impractical in some contexts, the impact this change made on guitar wasn't to how guitar players approach hitting the strings, but rather the sound that the guitar creates. If you listen to Montgomery's predecessors, the guitar, as an instrument that takes solos, utilizes a tone that has a characteristic, almost banjo-esque twang (*The Softer Side of Genius*, Woodard). This is, perhaps, due to the fact that amplification technology at the time wasn't strong enough for the guitar to ring out loud enough to overpower the rest of the ensemble. However, spanning into the 1960's and 1970's, the dominance of the guitar in Rock music had led to an improvement in amplification, allowing for guitarists to be far more methodical in choosing their tone. Montgomery's classic deep and subtle, almost muted tone, comes from a combination of neck pickup and thumb playing. This sound is what most modern jazz guitarists aim for.

Another, and probably his most influential contribution to jazz music as a whole is Montgomery's signature octave style of playing melodies. Montgomery's approach to the guitar followed in the footsteps of bebop greats such as Charlie Parker and Charlie Christian, however

in writing and arranging melodies in the bebop style, Montgomery found that playing the note and the octave directly above creates a unique and dynamic sound (“The King of Octaves” Warren Sirota). Montgomery’s octave style of arranging melodies was a tremendous development in the guitar playing community. Taking a melody and playing it over two octaves in compliance with his unique tone created a sort of atmospheric quality to his playing. It was as if he was accompanying his own playing at the same time. Playing with the added octave is something heard in countless works since its origination in Montgomery’s own practicing. This style has become a necessity of the modern guitar player’s repertoire because of Montgomery’s contribution to guitar.

There is no doubt that Montgomery continues to be one of the most revered guitar players in history. His contributions to not only Jazz, but technical guitar as well have been passed on to new guitar players several generations after his passing. Wes Montgomery was an important guitar player in terms of the Jazz tradition timeline. If one were to examine Montgomery’s predecessor’s, Christian and Reinhardt, one would see that, despite their contributions being great, Jazz guitar would be relatively stagnant if it weren’t for Montgomery’s influence on the overall style. Montgomery gave Jazz guitar the cool and nuanced sound that it lacked when played by the greats of the 1920’s. Montgomery helped usher jazz guitar into the modern era with style and finesse, and without him, perhaps Jazz guitar would still remain sounding like that of the 1920’s.

Works Cited

- Bowden, Dan. *Wes Montgomery, the Early Years*. S.l.: Mel Bay Pubns, 1997. Print.
- "Charlie Christian." *Jazz Guitar Online: Free Jazz Guitar Lessons, Tabs, Chords & Charts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "Charlie Christian--Jazz Musician." *Charlie Christian--Jazz Musician*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2016.
- "Django Reinhardt." *Bio.com*. A&E Networks Television, n.d. Web. 17 May 2016.
- "Django Reinhardt." *Jazz Guitar Online: Free Jazz Guitar Lessons, Tabs, Chords & Charts*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- Gleason, John. "Wes Montgomery." *Nxtbook.com*. Guitar Player Magazine, n.d. Web.
- "In The Beginning." *Wesmontgomery.com*. N.p., n.d. Web.
- "The Chronicles of Oklahoma." *Chronicles of Oklahoma*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "The Once-Thriving Jazz Scene Of ... Indianapolis?" *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame + Museum." *Charlie Christian Biography*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "Welcome to Jazz.com." *Montgomery, Wes (John Leslie) – Jazz.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "Wes Montgomery - The King of Octaves." *Wes Montgomery, The King of Octaves. How to Achieve the Sound of Wes Montgomery*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 May 2016.
- "Wes Montgomery: 'The Unmistakable Jazz Guitar'" *NPR*. NPR, n.d. Web. 17 May 2016.

Woodard, Josef. "Jazz Articles: Wes Montgomery: The Softer Side of Genius - By Josef

Woodard - Jazz Articles." *Jazz Articles: Wes Montgomery: The Softer Side of Genius - By*

Josef Woodard - Jazz Articles. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2016.