

(Some of) *Ted Greene's Insight about Wes Montgomery*

Physical Technique

- In regards to his left hand, Wes Montgomery never played with a pinky with single-note solos (if not extremely rare). With octave runs Wes fingered it with every other finger (1 and 3 or 2 and 4) because his hands were big enough to cover it.¹
 - His hands were pretty big. His hands could work around/cover 5 frets.
- Wes' right hand was more a strum like sound. He would not simply go across the strings but go down and across aiming more into the sound board. It's rounder with a bigger sound.²
 - His thumb on single notes had a 'flapping' sound when struck harder. It gives a different kind of pop.
 - There is a difference in horizontal and more angled inward thumb picking. When you press more inward and then release (with an arched hand (angled angled down wrist)) you get a new kind of attack. It's fuller in sound (hence why Wes played that way).
 - You do not want to do octaves with two fingers. It may be clearer in pitch, but it loses that percussive sound. Ted described it as a "little drum sound."³
 - Wes could pick fast with his thumb. He could do down and upstrokes. One way to relieve that strain of overdoing it (especially on up tempo tunes) was slurring.
 - Some of Wes' fast chord lines he was known for only used really fast downstrokes.
 - "I'm not 100% convinced, but I tend to think (with octave playing) he's watching the lowest note because his brother's bass thing. Hand is free when he does octaves. For lines he plants the fingertips down; touches the [pick]guard and pushes on it, kind of. But for octaves he lets go of everything. Does backstrokes sometimes. When he wants the real fast thing that he does, he uses the nails – the back of the nails, not the fingers, surprisingly."⁴

¹ Ted explained this in Nick Stasinios' lesson on 8/27/1998.

² Ted went into his most recorded detail about this during the California Vintage Guitar Seminar on 5/18/2003.

³ Excerpts from Mark Levy's lesson from Ted on 10/18/1993.

⁴ Ibid.

- Wes liked the upper 5 strings for chord and octave work. Ted discussed there were three 3 string sets Wes admired. The sets were 5-3, 4-2, and 3-1 respectively. 5-3 and 4-2 were Wes's favorites.



With Ted playing octaves in this image, notice how the wrist has a slight dip to better angle the thumb inward and used the whole arm to get the 'Wes pop' tone.



The two examples above show how Ted positioned his hand when playing single note lines. Notice the thumb angle coming from the wrist on the semi hollow and the hand on the telecaster.

Musical Technique

- Wes was primarily self taught. He had possibly a couple lessons for some tips. But he navigated the neck on his own and found the sounds in his head. Lots of these sounds really sound like a full big band.
 - He played a lot of colors and phrases that sound like parts in a big band. For example, he played a lot of small chords he learned to embellish from listening. This includes adding a 4th to a chord then hitting the chord again with the 4th going down to the 3rd. He later would add to this by doing the same thing with the 9th to the root. (this 11th chord then goes to the ‘smaller’(not extension heavy) dominant 7 chord. He later realized those added tones made new chords (the companion minor) and was able to solo and comp with these added colors.
- Wes’ Major chord qualities were found on I, IV, bVI, and some bII.⁵
 - bII was normally in a lydian context.
- Dominant 7 chords could be played on any of the 12 note degrees. “Overtone dominants work great on everything except for — and they’ll even work on these in exceptional cases, but generally stay away from them on: III, and VII, and be careful on V.”⁶
- Wes always had a secondary chord to bounce off from the main chord. These companion chords helped Wes both solo with other chords and navigate across the neck. This idea was best heard on chord solos. While the shapes changed, Wes would be playing 2 chords across the whole neck (sometimes 3).
- Wes over a dominant 7th chord would commonly play the V companion minor (Ex: On Bb7, Wes would play Fm7) and would take phrases from both chords. In chord solos Wes would normally play numerous inversions of the two chords mixing from one to the other to make ascending and descending lines but maintaining the function/sound.
 - Therefore, the principle is that any Dominant 7th chord has a strong affinity to a Minor 7th chord whose root is a fifth away (And vice versa). You don’t hear the companions as a typical ii-V (or in this case a V to ii). The key is a

⁵ Excerpts from Mark Levy’s lesson from Ted on 10/18/1993.

⁶ Ibid.

dominant key, not a V or anything in particular. It is very reminiscent of renaissance music.⁷

- Wes had companion V chords for major and minor. While many hear it as a diminished 7th, Wes would actually play the V7b9 of the major or minor chord (Ex: On BbMaj6, play F7b9).⁸
 - For major, a major 7 works but Wes would use a major 6 because that was the color of the time.
 - Minors also could use the companion iim7
- When playing with companion chords, Wes's chord solo ideas would have the tonic go to the companion and then back to the tonic. These lines would be on the same set (top 4 strings) and would be both ascending and descending. Both chords would ascend using inversions.
- In terms of rewriting changes, Wes would do what Ted called 'Body and Soul' changes. On a ii-V progression (with each chord being a full measure), Wes would add a companion dominant chord on the ii. The 'Body and Soul' change would have the V measure have ii for 2 beats and V for the last 2 beats. Therefore, a ii-V becomes ii V/ii - ii V.⁹
 - "Of all the sounds he does, that's to me the most identifiable – other than that "co-minor" thing – as a Wes thing."¹⁰ This V/ii would have a b9 normally as the only extension.
- Wes's favorite song was Portrait of Jennie, a movie with its main theme based off of a work by Claude Debussy. Debussy also was known for a similar companion chord line that wasn't just a chord scale. It was also a couple chords with added chord tones (especially to get common tones) to ascend. Whether he knew or not, Wes was a big Debussy fan.¹¹
- Many people have tried to write about Wes's chord companions as secondary chords outside the key and results in writers overthinking it all. For example, on 'West Coast Blues' there is a section that has the following changes: Eb7- Ebm7 Ab7- Dm7 G7-

⁷ One of the only recorded times Ted made this comparison is in James Santiago's lesson in 1999.

⁸ The companion V7b9 explained in a 1999 lesson to Tony do Rosario.

⁹ Body and Soul changes were compared to Wes in Rosario's lesson

¹⁰ Excerpts from Mark Levy's lesson from Ted on 10/18/1993.

¹¹ Debussy analysis was also in Rosario's lesson.

D_bm7 G_b7. While some can say it's a bunch of ii-Vs outside the key, you can also argue there are some chromatic moving chords in the diatonic framework, The D_m7 to G7 could be iii VI followed by biii bVI (chromatically moving down).

- “It takes time to learn to hear the key center as all being there – as not changing keys. It’s so easy to think, ‘change of key.’ But that would mean that this is really in that key....and it’s not; it’s all in B_b. So, you do better for your ears by thinking: I – bVII – bIII – bVI – bII – I. Which is a take-off on this progression: I – bIII – bVI – bII7 – I.”
- Following that chord progression Wes played: ii- V/ii- ii- V. This is an example of using the companion chord to help move the changes in a better way (this is also an example of ‘Body and Soul’ changes)
- Wes was always playing off arpeggios by making melodies from them. He’s the most “half-step slide guy.” Wes would use chromatic approaches and ideas in his music for a spice. He wouldn’t go so chromatic that you lose the tonal center for a moment. He’s neither a chromatic nor a diatonic player. The tonal center is always there.
- Wes never soloed by thinking of scales. Rather, he thought of upper partials (extensions). The basic triad was boring to him. He put emphasis and prolongation on upper extensions (the 7th and on). Lots of phrases had a collection of triads blended together.¹² With that said, Wes’ minor key songs were very dorian based.
 - Some guitar articles about Wes put a lot of junk in their work about Wes’ chord thinking. Wes never thought of the upper extension chords that were made. He simply heard the sounds and wanted to move away from the basic triad.¹³
 - EX: D-7 would have D-, C, B[°], A- blended together. While one can hear it as a dorian mode, Wes shaped the scale through thirds in order to move and blend chords together. He heard the notes as extensions. The ‘every-other note in the scale’ idea was thought of as a long arpeggio.
 - In order to phrase with blended triads, play in 7th position with your pinky on the root.

¹² This is not only seen in some of Ted’s writings on Wes. It also is explained in Cesar Pineda’s lesson on 1/20/1997

¹³ Ted explained this in Nick Stasinos’ lesson on 8/27/1998.

- While Ted taught using the pinky (finger per fret), Wes would cover the 4 fret spacing with fingers 1-3. Also, Ted would play these blended triad phrases in one position and to learn high to low (descending).
- While the patterns are 3rds and imply the triads written above, remember that Wes did not think of each of those chords. It is all one idea.
 - His blending of triads would be various ascending or descending third patterns including descending triads and back tracking.
 - The dorian minor tunes Wes wrote were different than his co-minor concept as he harmonically pulled the music forward. An example is i to IV7.
- “He’s going to play altered dominants on any degree where it pulls in by a fourth to the next chord.” Some altered sounds he enjoyed included the #5, b5 or #11, #5 with a b9 or #9, and a 4th or 11th.
 - 13b9’s to Wes often involve not playing the root. 13#9 was more a sound big bands use rather than Wes or other guitar players.
- One chord Wes liked to grab, the 7#9 chord, can be built like an altered blues scale having R-#9-3-b7. This means the Blues scale was shrunk having the b3 become looked at as its enharmonic and replacing the perfect intervals with the 3rd. This all is seen as an altered dominant chord that can be tonic in function (which may be strange to some scholars who feel altered chords are only on the V).¹⁴
 - Remember, there are 3 keys in music: Major, Minor, and Blues-Major/Dominant
 - “He doesn’t do that [Ted plays C7#9 and then moves the whole chord form down in half-steps] I don’t ever hear him doing what Kenny Burrell does. Kenny Burrell plays ‘White Christmas’...But I bet you when Wes heard him do that, if he heard that record, he went, ‘Wow, that’s a nice use of that chord!’ He doesn’t seem to play regular old #9’s that much. In fact, most guitar players who play jazz don’t.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ted brought up Wes and the Gypsy scale together in the GIT Seminar on 6/6/1993.

¹⁵ Excerpts from Mark Levy’s lesson from Ted on 10/18/1993.

- But when adding the b2 and b6 from the Gypsy Scale you get a mix becoming a Gypsy Blues Scale (R-b2-#2-3-b6-b7). This is useful on dominant altered chords. You have to play it at the right times in Jazz, like a I7 about to go to a IV7 (esp. on a blues m.4).
 - This scale is almost like what many would call an Altered Dominant scale without the b5. Wes Montgomery actually played phrases based out of the scale over tunes.
- When playing in medium tempos, the jazz eighths are too slow in long cases. Triplets are preferred. Triplets are especially helpful when phrasing with blended triads. Triplets were Wes' favorite rhythmic device.
- When Wes went to play a solo, he felt the rhythms differently. In 6/8 time, Wes would feel in 3 groups of 2 while he would feel 6 in 4/4 (aka cross-rhythms).¹⁶
- Another way to phrase solos like a bop player was the "Stop and Stutter." This phrase is based on the melodic development of Bebop heads. The phrases are broken up by at least an eighth rest and consisting of triplets, swung eighths, and some quarters. Along with this, the stutter can come from some note in a phrase being articulated more as a staccato. Very clear 'stops and stutters' appear on small phrases (about a measure or so long) and frequent rests between them. It can result in starting on different beats of a measure or sequencing small phrases across multiple measures.
 - Listen to Wes' Caravan solo for a lot of "Stop and Stutter" examples.

¹⁶ Ted explained this in Nick Stasinios' lesson on 8/27/1998.

Personal Information

- “And when you read the bio, as a young boy he had a guitar. The myth that he started at 19 is a myth, because he did fool around on the axe from about age 10, 11, whatever. But he just fooled around...”¹⁷
 - Wes also likely was able to learn quickly when he got more serious about the guitar because of his perfect pitch.
- “He was working a gig in the day, and he’d come home and practice after dinner. He might have gotten 5 or 10 [hours of practice] in those day, huh? Because he got awful good in a couple of years. He went out on the road with Lionel Hampton. Did it for a while, about a year. Missed his family, came back... That’s when he started performing Charlie Christian solos, and started to jam after hours.”
- “Then he got a gig working after hours, too, as a musician. So, there’s a long story in the Wes Montgomery biography book about a typical day: how he’d go to work, he’d do the welding. He’d get off at, say, 4:00; he’d come home, take a nap. He’d eat and take a nap, and then go to the second gig. And then he’d come home at 6:00 in the morning and sleep for maybe an hour, and get up and go to work again.”
- Wes was not a drinker, but he did smoke alot. He also was really into coffee. His nicotine and caffeine intake may be the reason why Wes died. With that said, it must’ve given him enough energy to listen to tunes well enough to join in playing after hearing the song once.
- While Wes’ later orchestral type albums were strictly for airplay, there is some sensational Jazz playing there. Creed Taylor wanted records of Wes being sold. It sold over a million copies! It was on the first Jazz albums of its kind to reach that market. As a result, Wes made some good money for his family. Sadly, this may have broken his heart and been the cause of his death. ¹⁸
 - Remember, the Riverside of Wes’ life didn’t make a lot, but Taylor wanted his talents public and listened to. To get people to purchase it, Wes had to cut down the solos. Many people channel Jazz solos out when they listen to it.

¹⁷ Excerpts (including the following quotes) from Mark Levy’s lesson from Ted on 10/18/1993.

¹⁸ Ted explained this in Nick Stasinos’ lesson on 8/27/1998.