

Movin' Wes: A High Point in Guitar Artistry

Ted Greene, April 28 – May 2, 1998

Wes's Verve label period does not usually get the respect it deserves. Sadly, many of the reasons for this are not consistent with the better side of human nature. But luckily, a patient, fresh listener to the music will quietly put old myths to rest. Speaking of quietly, it is my gentle request that you turn this music up a bit if you're not so inclined already, so that you can really hear Wes's thumb hit the strings, hear the sometimes explosive, other times liquid-like front end of each note, octave and chord that he plays. This serves to help fully appreciate the brand new fuller tone he was being recorded with. And a dazzling tone it is. Punchy yet clear, jabbing yet creamy, full, warm...it was and is a breathtaking thing. The top strings are no longer thin sounding, not rattling nor choked off as on lots of his prior albums; the chords are not distorted nor too heavily muffled anymore—this album is the beginning of the biggest, most beautiful tone Wes Montgomery ever got on record.

What I'd like to propose—and I hope you don't mind—is that we try an experiment. You listen to one track at a time and try to make a few mental notes about what you're hearing and how you feel about it. Then after each track, come back and read my impressions. Usually no harm comes from such a process. Sometimes, even something good may happen. For instance, you may decide that you don't need that big boss L-5 sound after all, instead preferring your sparkly Strat or Tele tone, thereby saving thousands of dollars for a small investment of perhaps less than an hour's listening. Or you might realize that it's time to begin working 169 hours a week to get that L-5 as soon as possible (good for the economy and your doctor). Seriously, maybe you'll enjoy bouncing your thoughts off mine. I hope your budget allows you to buy this CD (Wes's widow and 7 children almost certainly get royalties) or if not, maybe a friend or your local library will provide. But please, do try to hear it if you can. The regular CD version sounds great, and a newly mixed Verve Master Edition is supposedly out now too.

1) **Caravan:** For the first time ever on record, Wes is heard soloing on a burnin' tune with those fat, liquid-toned Gibson P.A.F humbuckers turned wide open and with a truly fine studio's room sound. When combined with Wes's thumb attack, the resulting tone borders on the deliriously great, especially from the beginning of his solo onwards. My impression when hearing this track now is the same as when it first came at me 33 years ago over the radio on while driving to the drag strip with my friends on a Saturday night: Wes Montgomery may well be the most exciting jazz guitarist we'll ever hear (George Benson at his best comes dangerously close. And watch out for Dan Faehnle from Portland, Oregon. Django is in a place all his own, right next to Wes).

Through the decades, it's been very satisfying to play this cut for students, colleagues, friends and other loved ones. Some common reactions have been "Oh, my God!", "I had no idea he was this good", "That's impossible—all that with just his thumb???", "Listen to the *sound!*"—all of these comments accompanied by an array of gurgling, gasping and drooling noises. Also occasionally, uncontrollable laughter, our shared joy over the thought that a human being even conceived of playing our beloved instrument in this way, let alone pulling it off beyond anyone's prior wildest dreams. "Let's hear it again" is another non-surprising thing people have said afterwards, which brings us to the downside of this cut and many others during this period of Wes's life: he wasn't allowed to stretch out and play as many choruses as he and we would've liked to have heard. We are left wanting more, at least, some folks are. But let's stop the grumbling for a moment and try to remember why this situation existed back then (the mid 1960's). A few jazz-oriented recordings, "Watermelon Man" and "Take Five" for instance, had recently racked up pretty huge sales by somehow "crossing over" and gaining airplay on Rock 'n Roll radio stations. It was natural for all the jazz labels to wish for a similar financial success. And airplay was the key (as it usually still is). So the push was on towards the 2-, 3- and almost-never 4-minute cuts, which were the norm of the time.

It wouldn't hurt to recall that the Beatles had arrived in the USA as had the pill; the Hays code (which censored the content of films) as rapidly coming to the end of its reign, and most of the pieces were in place for the biggest youth culture explosion the world had ever seen. The initial phase of this was of course very big very quickly, but when Hollywood, Madison Ave., and Wall Street all jumped on board, forget it (or in New Yorkese, "fo gedda boudit"). Huge doesn't begin to describe the money and power-seeking involved here. And, by the way dear readers, in case you hadn't noticed—about that youth culture dominance—we're still in it. No passing fad—not going away—over 30 years and counting.

So the Rock 'n Roll radio stations had *immense* power in the mid '60s and Wes's label was just hungry to connect him with the kids. They were also aiming at the pop market of adults, this having always been represented on the Rock 'n Roll charts at virtually any given time with at least one hit recording, e.g. "Hello Dolly" was a #1 record right during the Beatles first wave. Which would explain why Wes was also recording quieter pretty things in a less than 4-minute format at this time.

It's easy for all of us who love Wes to wish that Verve had balanced it a little bit and let him stretch out more on at least *some* cuts. But this is the way of the world and always will be as long as people enjoy some of the finer things that money can buy. And Wes had a *lot* of kids to feed.

2) **People:** Initially, this quiet cut naturally feels like somewhat of a letdown after the excitement of "Caravan." Initially. But then suddenly about half-way through, a joyful double-time canvas appears for Wes to throw down one of his patented happy-type solos onto, this being another strong part of his musical personality. The occasional bubbling bursts of triplets are a true hallmark of his style, and sound so welcome amidst the jazz 8ths. As seemingly always with this man, his actual note choices themselves are simply wonderful. As an example, notice the little 3-note repeated figure right at the end of his solo. West doesn't change the beautifully chosen notes, G#, D#, and C#, as the chord changes from B13 to Emaj7 because he knows they will sound so great over *both* chords. But as the next chord is Bb13, he simply lowers the notes when *this* chord arrives. Perfect. Then as the chords disappear, he plays one of his favorite mellow arpeggio types—a V13b9 (Bb13b9 in this case)—melting into a chord of the same name; followed by some George Van Eps influenced inner voice motion in major extended chords built on IV, bIII, and bII; still more—a gorgeous-toned Ebmaj13 and then finally, another Wes specialty, "floating 3rds" we might call them. Have 3rds ever sounded this pretty? He sounds like he's up there playing with the birds, floating. The whole sky is his guitar now and there's never been a prettier day. If we could only bathe in this stuff.

3) **Movin' Wes – Part 1:** The snakey intro and strong Latin groove sure get the body going. Did you notice how "locked in" Wes is with the whole rhythm section during his solo, especially the last half or so? What a feel. How about those quick stuttering octaves in a few places? And that chord solo. Yow. Beginning with bluesy melodic phrase (and voicings) highly reminiscent of one of Wes's early influences and very favorite guitarists, Kenny Burrell, the chord ideas fairly soon just take off into the stratosphere we affectionately call Montgomeryland, a land where only Wes lived—no one else *could*, for a very long time. No visitors either. Too much work to get in. Wes worked *very* hard.

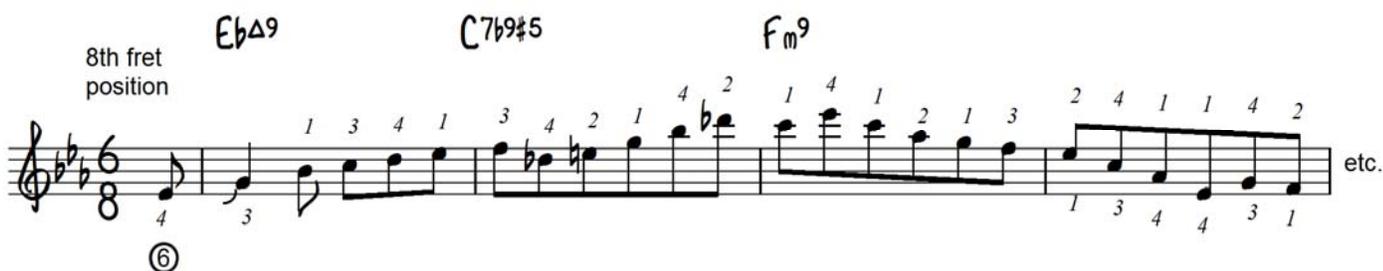
4) **Moca Flor:** I hope you hung in there long enough with this one to hear one of the more melodic chord solos we may ever hear on any instrument in any style of music. Did you notice that he never soloed in single lines or octaves on this one, only in chords? Most of us probably don't miss them here, until maybe the last chorus of the solo where there seems to be a bit of a lessening of the inspiration. But that sly rascal has saved the best for last as the final 5 to 10 seconds of the solo are classic Wes with a wild, pulsing series of ascending A7b9 chords, each prepared with a similar chord one half-step lower. If you've never heard him play a passage like this before, it can be quite a thrill. It still thrills me. You know, once this guy gets in your blood, once you've had the bit of the

thumblebee it's a lifetime thing. Kind of like the werewolf bite, except during the full moon, I still can't play like Wes.

5) **Matchmaker:** A great jazz waltz feel on a song normally played as a regular waltz. Very happy vibe. Yet, for whatever reason, Wes never fully opens up here and also somehow his onboard volume and tone controls both seem to have been turned down a shade or two—could you tell? It is definitely a lighter cut, so... But our man with the golden thumb seems to be having a lot of fun anyway, bouncing around the chord changes, adding an E^b note into the key of Eb at just the right two moments where he knows it will sound delicious:



Please try both sets of fingerings wherever more than one is given. Both are very “Wes” sounding, though his choices would be more spread out due to his huge paws.



For a challenge, try to learn these two phrases and play them along with Wes and the band. You'll hear *where* to put them after you can play them, but this material will be no day at the beach unless you're already deeply into this type of stuff. Wes is just so relaxed in passages like those that he makes it sound easier than it is.

Near the end, his perfectly chosen Ebmaj9 and Bb11 chords cap off a track and performance that while not reaching the dizzying heights he sometimes climbed to, certainly radiate a lot of warmth and joy. Speaking of dizzying heights, if you need to get these from Wes, you *have* to hear the albums “Boss Guitar” and “Smokin’ at the Half Note.” On the excitement meter, Wes passes “spectacular,” sails past “unheard of,” and forges straight through into “musical meteor showers” territory on these two nearly impossibly creative recordings.

6) **Movin' Wes – Part 2:** A trickier than it sounds sectional chord progression, all Dorian derived except for one, the beautiful IV, Mixolydian 2nd section, and we're treated to Wes playing over a driving straight 8ths groove, a feel that was virtually non-existent for most ears in the Western world even just one decade before this record was made. We hear him tossing off his unique galloping octave figures with deceptive ease, charging hard in places, laying way back behind the beat in such a hip way in others, just out for a stroll with his L-5 and the missus, finding little about this piece to trouble him much. And why should it? He wrote it.

7) **The Phoenix Love Theme (Senza Fine):** His solo here contains some of those almost unprecedented bubbling bursts of happy-go-luckiness that so endeared this man to his fellow musicians, fans, friends and family alike. They all speak of him with glowing words. This track helps us to hear why. What happiness just pours out of his fingers whenever he gets to play over a jazz waltz. And this song has a really fine chord progression for him to solo over, with its dreamy modulations from the key of A to F, with a little bit of the key of D thrown in. He seems to have quite a good time of it just about eating the chord changes for breakfast in many spots. Being human though, even he does get stuck, for one little moment right before the key of D, but then being the great performer he is, the show goes on and he gets off some of his very best phrases when the key of A returns, one particularly groovy one of which is offered for your enjoyment and study:

The musical notation consists of two staves in 12/8 time. The first staff has a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). Above the staff are five chords: E7#9, AΔ9, F#m7, Bm7, and E9. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. The second staff continues with chords AΔ9, F#m7, Bm7, and E7#9. A 'Shift' instruction is placed below the staff. To the right of the second staff is the text 'Fabulous guitar playing, yes?'.

I believe these are Wes's positions and fingerings or very close. How do I know? Ah, that's a long story, better left for another time.

Slow, patient, careful study of many aspects of this little solo within a solo can improve our playing and musicianship in such a good lot of ways. Try it and see. Use a pick if you must. Wes wouldn't mind. His favorite guitar players were almost all pick guys. But the thumb is a very cool thing to develop. Wes even used it on his left hand for certain chords. The thumb king, he truly was.

More Highest Recommended Listening: An even more complete "Smokin' At the Half Note" is available (along with other top level cuts) in a double CD titled "Impressions: The Verve Jazz Sides." Then there's "Love At Jorgie's" done in St. Louis during the early '60s. And finally, "Body and Soul", live in London during Wes' stunning engagement there in 1965. These, along with the aforementioned "Boss Guitar" are the finest Wes I know of. Please try to *really* listen to these if you can. You may not believe what you'll hear.

8) **Theodora:** Two things. 1) There *are* some intonation problems on this cut—hope they didn't deter you because 2) There is breathtaking beautiful and exciting playing from Wes Montgomery throughout here, some of his very finest on the whole album, a virtual clinic on the art of jazz guitar in a ballad setting (segueing to double-time). Why? What did that poet say many years ago, "How do I...count the ways".... I know I've been taking a lot of your time with all my words but please forgive me and allow for some more discussion about this man I admire so much. So what makes his playing so great on this track? You heard it if you've been following our plan, but let me refresh your memory and see if you agree. Tone. The big, full, liquid tone is back after being a bit more subdued on the last few prior tracks. The initial single notes are huge pools of beauty, suspended glimmering in the air. His articulation is simply exquisite. This is the romantic Wes, a man who loved his wife and children. Tell me you can't hear it.

Then there are those gorgeous chords, almost dripping wet, about as beautiful as a guitar can get. And it's not that the voicings are unusual, they're just common jazz guitar ones. He only knew maybe 70 chords, tops. But he said more with them than anyone else I've ever heard, his touch perfect, phrasing as if every single sound he makes matters. Because it does. No matter who's playing.

Then there's his solo. A non-stop thrill ride where his extraordinarily quick thumb is matched by a mind just raining notes down on us; and not just any old notes but really wonderful ones, capped off by those amazing showers at the very end of the cut. Think I'm exaggerating? Try to play along with his solo. Forget it.

After all these years, I'm still left feeling something close to, "It's impossible that anyone could be this good," but there it is, you heard it too patient readers, he *was*. Not only did Wes Montgomery both invent and discover a whole houseful of new ideas on how the guitar itself can be played (!) but also with a musical voice to match, a voice with so much to say that it forced him to spend the thousands of hours of work to develop those ferocious chops to get it all out. Lucky for us. Beyond lucky.

You're on your own for the last three tracks, at least for now, because I've run out of space here. You know, a magazine can only print so many words, of which just a few more about Wes and the last 3 tracks, all of them calling out to us in the language of blueness. Deep shades of blue, jazzblue, a color he paints with so extraordinarily well. Some of his finest thoughts are shared with us here. He was a supremely great musician. I've enjoyed our time together and wish everybody wonderful listening.