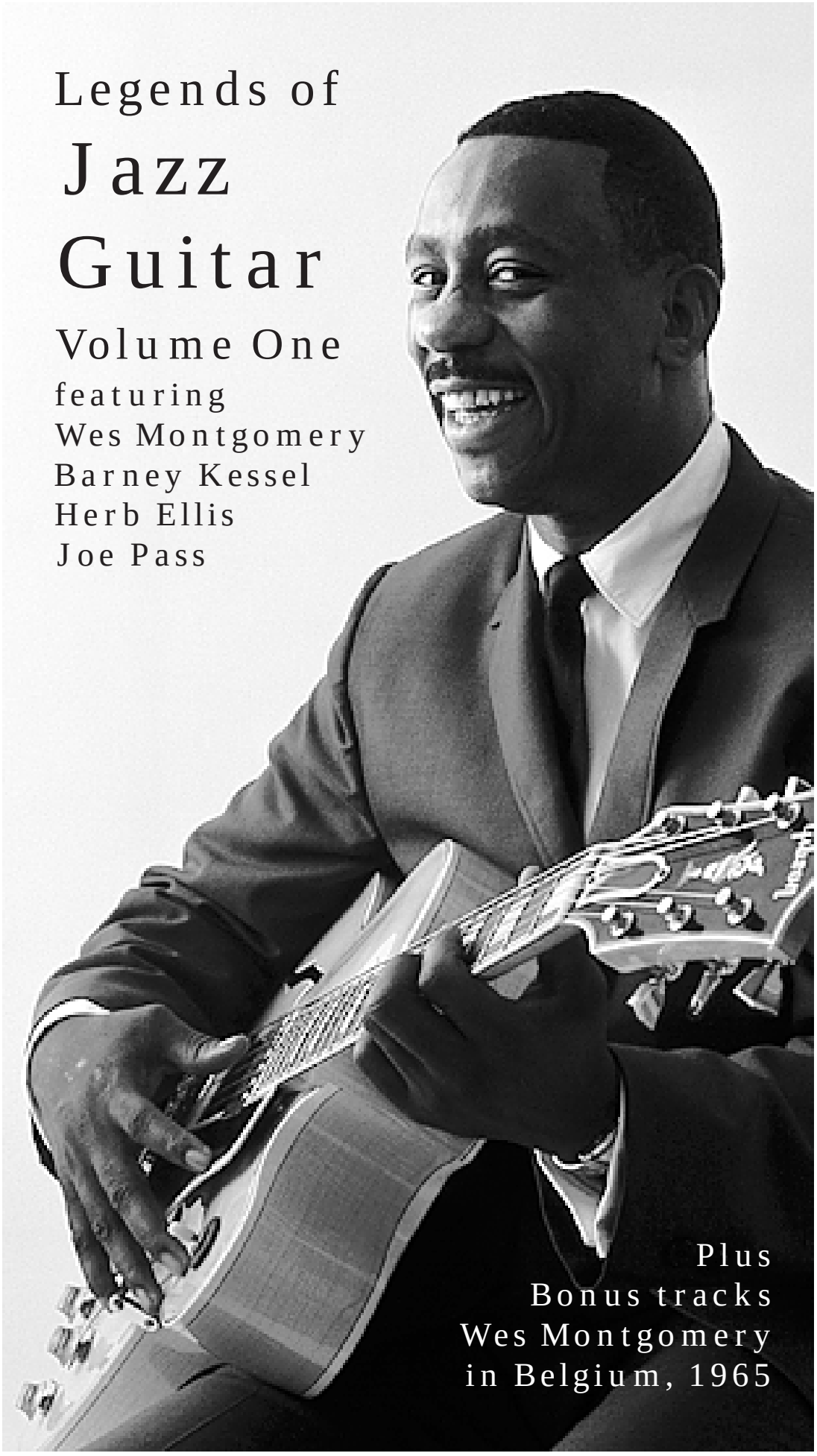
Legends of Jazz Guitar

Volume One

featuring
Wes Montgomery
Barney Kessel
Herb Ellis
Joe Pass



Plus
Bonus tracks
Wes Montgomery
in Belgium, 1965

LEGENDS OF JAZZ GUITAR

VOLUME ONE

by Mark Humphrey

Photo by Duncan Schiedt

Jazz and the guitar started getting seriously chummy about the time the artists in this video were born. Jazz was the sensational new kid on the musical block in the 1920s; the steel-string guitar was itself an ingenue, and no one was too sure what it could do. Brashly, it unseated the banjo in jazz bands and became a cornerstone of the rhythm section. A few outstanding players, foremost among them Eddie Lang, tested the guitar's capabilities as a solo jazz instrument. By the time our four legends were in their teens, the guitar had been amplified to keep apace with the era's brassy bands. The instrument's technical evolution went hand-in-hand with stylistic developments in jazz and popular music. At each turn, imaginative players stepped in to explore new possibilities. By the time they entered their twenties, the four guitarists in our video were ready, willing, and able to put their stamp on jazz history. As this video demonstrates, they continued to do so over subsequent decades.

Swing, bebop, and ballads are abundant here, as is the blues. "It's very important to recognize that jazz is a particular *dialect* of music," Barney Kessel wrote in his "Guitar Jour-

nal" (*Guitar Player,* May 1977). "It has its own vernacular, its own values and shadings." That vernacular is spoken here with elegant zest by four legendary artists who helped push the guitar from the back pages to the front cover of the jazz lexicon.

WES MONTGOMERY

"The most modern and hippest guitarist of our time."
— George Benson on Wes Montgomery

Photo by Chuck Stewart

Being modern and hip exacts a price. Montgomery was the first (and one of the few) jazz guitarists to become a star beyond the purview of jazz lovers. His flirtation with pop idioms and audiences was deemed a gross infidelity by his initial (and most ardent) supporters. "He was very unhappy and disturbed by this attitude," recalled his disciple, George Benson. "He died a very sad man." It's tempting to depict Montgomery as a tragic figure, a victim of his own success. There may be something to this view, but the joyous figure seen in this video vividly counters it. Any great talent struck dead by a heart attack at age 43 is, in a sense, tragic. But Montgomery's creative triumphs endure. Critic Marc Gridley hailed him as "probably the best hard bop guitarist." Joe Pass ranked Montgomery in a trinity alongside Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt: "the only three real innovators on the gui-

tar." Montgomery's jazz-pop forays have not diluted his reputation among those who really heard him play, as he does in these 1965 performances on the BBC's *Jazz 625* program. Given Montgomery's enduring impact, it's remarkable that less than a decade elapsed between his 1959 discovery and his death in 1968. With an understatement analogous to his style, Montgomery succinctly said: "I had to play and tell my story."

John Leslie Montgomery's story began in 1925. The Indianapolis native was already grown and married when he fell in love with the guitar in 1943. The reason? It was a recording by a man who had died the previous year, Charlie Christian's "Solo Flight." "That was it for me," Montgomery recalled. "There was no way out. That cat tore everybody's head up...he said so much on records." Christian's records were Montgomery's constant companion for months as he labored over a guitar in hopes of coming close to Christian's sound. "I started off practicing with a plectrum," he recalled. "I did this for about 30 days. Thin I decided to plug in my amplifier and see what I was doing. The sound was too much even for my next-door neighbors. So I took to the back of the house, and began plucking the strings with the fat part of my thumb. This was much quieter. To this technique, I added the trick of playing the melody line in two different registers at the same time — the octave thing."

"The octave thing" would become Montgomery's stylistic signature. "Voicing lines in octaves was not new to jazz guitar," observed Marc Gridley in *Jazz Styles,* "but Montgomery's use of this device did much to popularize the approach." At first, however, Montgomery was just looking for a gig. "A cat hired me for the Club 440," he recalled. "I'd play Charlie Christian's solos, then lay out." Montgomery worked around Indianapolis, occasionally venturing out on the road with a touring band, and earned his first break in 1948 when Lionel Hampton hired him. "He allowed me to keep my amp on during the entire length of the numbers we played," Montgomery recalled, "not just during my solos." Encouraged, Montgomery rose to the occasion: "I began working hard and experimenting with techniques," he recalled, "seeking out the ones that felt good and were most expressive of my thoughts. My explorations continued for quite awhile. My technique improved, developing out of particular playing situations. More and more of *me* passed through my amplifier to those who took time to listen."

Photo by Chuck Stewart

For years, however, listening to Montgomery meant showing up at the Turf Bar or Missile Room in Indianapolis. After a two-year stint with Hampton he settled into a grueling routine which divided his energies between daytime employment at a radio parts factory and nightly gigs. Montgomery had seven children and took his parental responsibilities seriously. "Some musicians might...cut off the rest of the world to concentrate exclusively on their thing," said Montgomery. "What sort of person would I be," he asked rhetorically, "if I'd devoted all my time to the instrument...? There are other things going on, you know." And the grind which kept his family fed also tempered Montgomery the musician: "From all that scuffling," he reflected, "I learned a lot about discipline as an entertainer."

In 1959, Cannonball Adderly heard Montgomery at the Missile Room and called Bill Grauer and Orrin Keepnews of Riverside Records with news of his find. Within a matter of weeks, Montgomery and his Missile Room trio had recorded the material for two Riverside albums, *Boss Guitar* (Riverside RLP 67301) and *'Round Midnight* (Riverside RLP 673099). Acclaim was instantaneous: critics compared Montgomery to John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. *down beat* awarded him its New Star honors in 1960, the same year *Billboard* called Montgomery the "most promising instrumentalist of the year." That promise was fulfilled on further Riverside recordings and a touring schedule which eventually moved Montgomery to San Francisco. "When Wes came on the scene," reflected veteran San Francisco critic Ralph Gleason, "he was so innovative and so powerful that he just swept the other guys away into the studios."

When Riverside folded in 1964, Montgomery's talents were enlisted by producer Creed Taylor at the Verve label. There Montgomery's music took a turn which disappointed his jazz fans but which earned him a far broader audience. "He took today's better pop tunes and played them with such jazz feeling and power that he caught the ear of the pop listener by *what* he was playing," wrote Dom Cerulli, "and the imagination of the jazz listener by *how* he was playing what he was playing." Not all jazz listeners were captivated, but Montgomery's version of "Going Out of My Head" claimed the 1966 Grammy for Best Instrumental Jazz Performance.

To his critics, Montgomery said frankly: "Those who criticize me for playing jazz too simply and such are missing the

point. There's a jazz concept to what I'm doing, but I'm playing popular music and it should be regarded as such." Luckily, at least one significant 'pre-pop' performance by Montgomery exists on videotape. Pianist Harold Mabern, bassist Arthur Harper, and drummer Jimmy Lovelace join him in a 1965 performance for the BBC's *Jazz 625* program. "Twisted Blues," a Montgomery composition, gives generous solo space to Mabern and Harper as well as offering a plenitude of Montgomery's signature shimmery, swooping octaves. "Jingles," another Montgomery original, showcases the tightness of this quartet driving through bluesy bop terrain. By contrast, the pop chestnut "Yesterdays" finds its wistful melody swung in a cool way. (A 1933 Jerome Kern tune, "Yesterdays" debuted in the musical *Roberta* in which a young Bob Hope appeared in the stage production.) Montgomery plays it punchy without grandstanding, an art tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin admired in his old jamming partner: "He had a fantastic creative force," Griffin said of Montgomery. "Everything he did in life was rounded out, definitive. No waste of energy or emotions."

Photo by Duncan Schiedt David Baker-Wes Montgomery Sextet,

Photo by Tom Copi

JOE PASS

"By the end of the 1980s, he was the most recorded guitarist in jazz history, and arguably the most gifted."
— Leonard Feather on Joe Pass

He became known for his sensitive accompaniment to the likes of pianists George Shearing and Oscar Peterson and singers Sarah Vaughn and Carmen McRae. He would later share the spotlight with such legends as Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington. A consummate accompanist ("Singers worshipped him," wrote Leonard Feather), Joe Pass really excelled as a soloist. It's in that role we see him on this video.

Born Joseph Anthony Passalaqua in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1929, Pass was a child prodigy on the guitar. Encouraged by a strict father who had him practicing up to six hours a day, Pass was playing in local bands at age 12 in his hometown, Johnstown, Pennsylvania. By the time he was 18 he was on the road with Charlie Barnet's orchestra (Barney Kessel had held the guitar chair in that band prior to Pass). Pass found himself in New York "hanging around the bebop scene" just as that new music was gelling. He was an eager participant in endless jam sessions, but fell prey to a frequent pitfall of the late 1940s jazz scene, heroin.

Pass spent the 1950s in a twilight zone of drug addiction, playing bebop for strippers ("They didn't care what you played, as long as the tempo was right") and wandering from one marginal gig to the next. He served time for possession in Texas and finally straightened himself out in 1961 at California's Synanon Foundation. The 1962 Pacific Jazz release, *Sounds of Synanon,* focused attention on Pass, who earned *down beat's* New Star award in 1963. His subsequent albums as frontman and in the company of the likes of Les McCann and Richard 'Groove' Holmes were augmented by extensive studio session work in the 1960s.

1974's *Virtuoso* album (Pablo 2310 707) was Pass's breakthrough. It showcased the solo style seen in this video. "Years ago," Pass told Jim Ferguson (*Guitar Player,* September 1984), "I played the first part of a set alone because I couldn't find my rhythm section — they were out in the crowd drinking." In time Pass found he had enough material and facility to play an entire set solo, thanks in part to his development of fingerstyle technique. "I always used a pick in the past," he told Ferguson, "but practically everything I do now is fingerstyle."

Photo by Tokao Miyakaku

In a 1986 *Guitar Player* cover feature, “One On One with Joe Pass” (August 1986), Pass elaborated: “My music is based on a fingerstyle approach,” Pass wrote, “which enables you to play things that are very difficult, if not impossible, to do with a pick. By using your fingers, you can play two different parts at the same time, freely switch between single notes and chords, and have more control over the chord voicings.”

We see what Pass means in a 1974 performance of his “Original Blues in G” at Ronnie Scott’s club in London. He invests the blues structure with exceptional harmonic sophistication. Likewise, he lends ample bluesiness to Duke Ellington’s “Do Nothin’ Till You Hear from Me,” a 1975 performance for the BBC. It illustrates Pass’s conviction: “When you’re including bass, melody, and chords all at once, things work best when the melody is your most important consideration. In other words, you should always have a melodic line in mind when moving from chord to chord.”

Few guitarists ever made those moves with such dazzling elegance as Joe Pass. “A lot of guitar players play solos,” observed Pass’s longtime accompanist, guitarist John Pisano, “but for the most part they’re kind of memorized and pretty much worked out with a few variations. But Joe, every night, whatever the tune might be he would do differently. He’d play in different keys; he’d put himself on the spot. I think that was one of the things that people picked up on. You’d be holding your breath saying, ‘How’s he going to get out of this one?’” The guitar lost its master improviser on May 23, 1994.

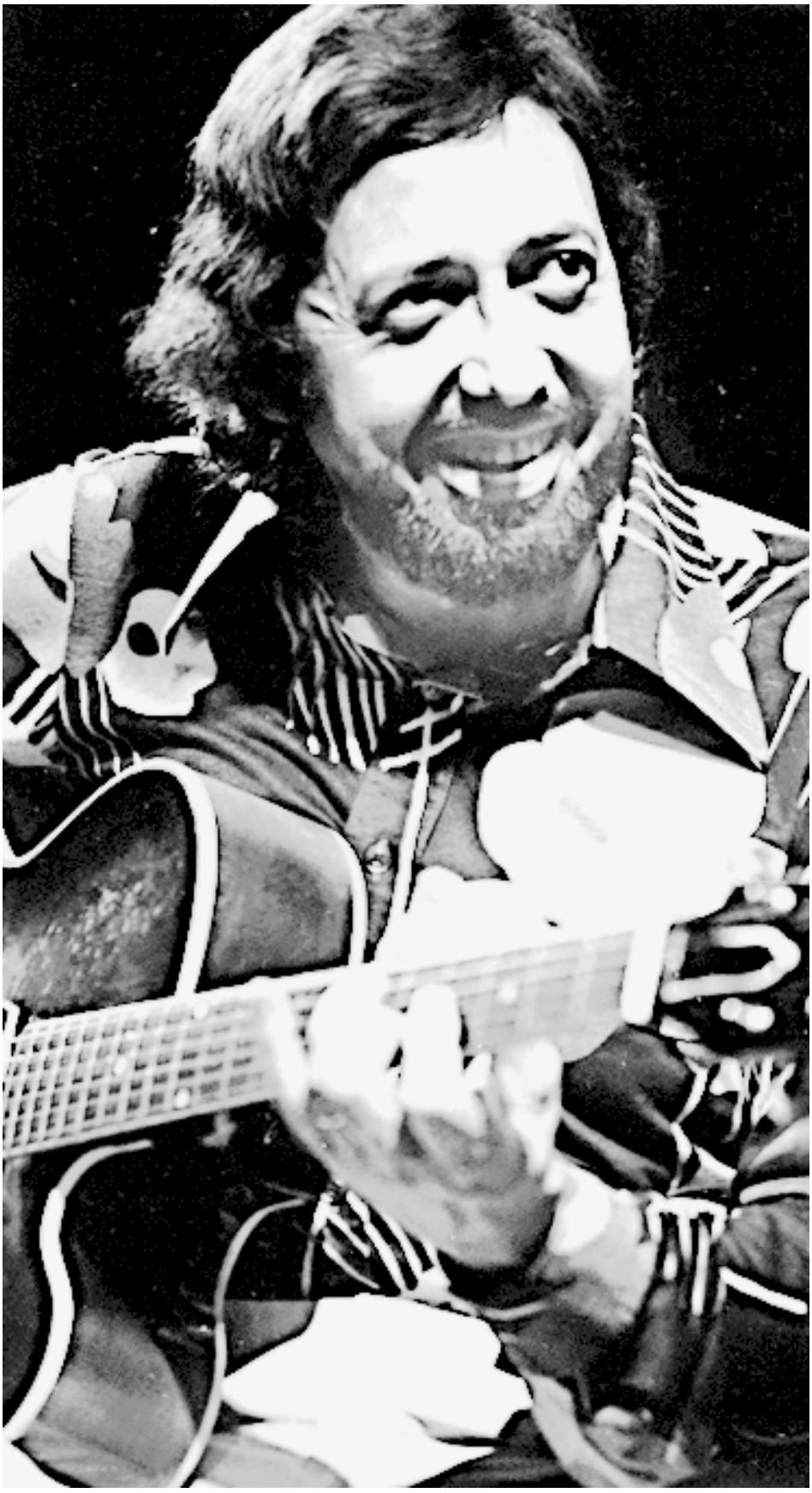


Photo by Tom Copi

BARNEY KESSEL

"Barney Kessel's got a lot of feeling, he's got a good conception of chords in a jazz manner. He's not just standing still at one level." — Wes Montgomery

Barney Kessel never stood still. In 1940, he got to jam with his idol, Charlie Christian. Five years later, he was sitting in with Charlie Parker. The transition from swing to bebop was one Kessel pioneered among jazz guitarists, and he never looked back. "Sometimes people forget that older musicians are still growing, still gaining more experience," Kessel observed in a 1972 *Guitar Player* interview. Kessel's far-ranging experiences have greatly enhanced the world of jazz guitar.

Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma in 1923, Kessel began playing guitar at age 12. "One of my earliest desires," he wrote in a 1974 *Guitar Player* column, "was to transmit what I felt inside to the fingerboard." He was doing it well enough to join a local jazz band at 14: "I was the only white guy," Kessel recalled. "They helped me to understand how to play jazz." That understanding was deeply enhanced by Kessel's meeting Charlie Christian in Oklahoma City: "Charlie told me many things," Kessel wrote in his "Guitar Journal" (*Guitar Player,* February 1977), "such as the importance of *swing* when playing jazz. He said it was important to get some fire going, get an emotion; no matter what else you do, get that feeling."

Shortly after his encounter with Christian, Kessel left Oklahoma and worked briefly in the upper Midwest before settling in California in 1942. Steady employment followed in a succession of big bands, including those of Artie Shaw, Charlie Barnet, and Benny Goodman. Kessel appeared with Lester Young in the 1944 film short, *Jammin' the Blues,* and two years later played on a Charlie Parker date for Dial Records. His initiation into bebop had begun.

Frequent calls to Hollywood's studios to accompany such singers as Sinatra and Billie Holiday were balanced by performances in a remarkable trio: Kessel, pianist Oscar Peterson and bassist Ray Brown. Recalling this threesome, guitarist Jimmy Stewart wrote: "Barney's solo was absolutely magnificent. He played with the rhythmic magic and imagination of Christian's playing, and his notes and phrasing were similar to that of the finest alto saxophonist of that period, Charlie Parker."

1953's *Easy Like* (Contemporary C3511) was the beginning of Kessel's lengthy recording career as leader. Despite a

Photo by Tom Copi

heavy schedule of session work, he was probably the most visible jazz guitarist of the 1950s, judging by his frequent *down beat* poll wins, and his performances in this video show him playing at the peak of his powers two decades later. "Basie's Blues" (from a 1973 Swedish television program) cooks, while the Kessel original, "A Slow Burn," sizzles. His partner in this 1979 Iowa Public Television performance, Herb Ellis, obviously shares Kessel's grounding in bop and swing: "I'm a direct descendant of the Charlie Christian school," Ellis declared in an interview with Arnie Berle (*Guitar Player,* April 1978). "With Barney, we're both from the same background, so when we play together we may wind up playing the same things. It's unreal; we start out playing lines that are parallel or counter or crossing, and we'll wind up playing the same phrase almost."

The feeling and "good conception of chords" Wes Montgomery praised is amply evident in Kessel's solo performance of John Mandel's "The Shadow of Your Smile." Beautifully phrased, the performance gives meaning to Kessel's assertion, "I sing through my guitar."

HERB ELLIS

"He was the best guitar player in Texas... Always, Herb could play the blues." — Gene Roland on Herb Ellis, a classmate at North Texas State College, circa 1940.

Photo by Tom Copi

Herbert Mitchell Ellis has had a career which closely parallels that of his friend, Barney Kessel. Born in McKinney, Texas, in 1921, Ellis was about ten when he started playing guitar. He was already an accomplished player by the time he went to college at North Texas State, but he wasn't yet a jazz player. "When Herb came to school," fellow North Texas State alum Gene Roland recalled, "he was a hillbilly guitarist. But when he got listening to Charlie Christian's records with the Goodman Sextet, he seemed transformed overnight into a jazz player."

Ellis graduated in 1941 and headed for Kansas City, where he went to work with Glen Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra. "I started to get some writeups in *down beat* and *Metronome*," Ellis recalled. "Then Jimmy Dorsey made me an offer." Ellis's guitar was an important feature of such Dorsey band hits as "Perdido" and "J.D.'s Jump." "Big band work had a lot of effect on me," said Ellis, "especially rhythm-wise. At that time, you had to mainly play rhythm. However, in Jimmy's band I played a lot of solos and a lot of lines with the different sections, which was quite unusual at the time."

After his Dorsey days, Ellis spent four years in a trio called the Soft Winds — piano, guitar, and bass trios were all the rage in the late '40s. Pianist Oscar Peterson sometimes sat in, and when Barney Kessel left Peterson's trio in 1953, Ellis took his place. "I had no trouble backing him up," Ellis recalled to Arnie Berle, "But those really fast tempos were hard, and I realized that if I were to remain with Oscar I'd better get my act together. So I practiced a lot of scales and things to build up my speed." In *The History of the Guitar in Jazz* (Oak Publications, New York, 1983), Norman Mongan contrasted the contributions of Kessel and Ellis to Peterson's trio: "Whereas Kessel's amplified work had been criticized for its overpowering loudness, Ellis's work was light but powerful, blending tightly with Ray Brown's magnificent bass work... The team of Ellis and Brown was probably the hardest swinging rhythm pair on the jazz scene during the 1950s."

Late in 1958, Ellis parted company with Peterson and spent a year in the quartet accompanying Ella Fitzgerald. In the 1960s, Ellis did some recordings as frontman — the Verve album, *Nothing but the Blues*, met with raves — but most of his time was spent in Hollywood studios recording everything from jingles to soundtracks. He was also featured in studio bands of the era's variety-talk shows hosted by Steve Allen, Regis Philbin, Della Reese, and Merv Griffin. Ellis has characterized the life of the studio musician as "99% boredom, 1% absolute terror."

Ellis began stepping into the spotlight more frequently in the 1970s, both as a soloist and in tandem with such other guitar masters as Joe Pass, Barney Kessel, and Charlie Byrd. His 1986 performances here with bassist Dave Maslow reflect an artist still vigorous and vital at age 65. His gorgeous treatment of Richard Rogers' "It Might as Well Be Spring" illustrates Ellis's conviction: "As long as you keep the melody clean, you can do a lot with the harmony underneath to make it really pretty, intriguing, and different." Duke Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" lets Ellis vent his bluesy side with some punchy licks, while rippling bursts of notes fall around "Sweet Georgia Brown," the Ben Bernie-Maceo Pinkard chestnut. His duet with Kessel, "A Slow Burn," offers a driving study in stylistic similarities and contrasting personalities. "When Barney and I work together," Ellis told Arnie Berle, "we're playing background for each other; we try to make it swing, and we try to vary the tonal color. We might just comp a little

bit and leave the bass line implied, or comp and then play a little bass line... It works, and that way you're varying the tonal colors. Just keep it cooking."

Photo by Duncan Schiedt

The Bonus Tracks
WES MONTGOMERY

1923-1968

by Adrian Ingram

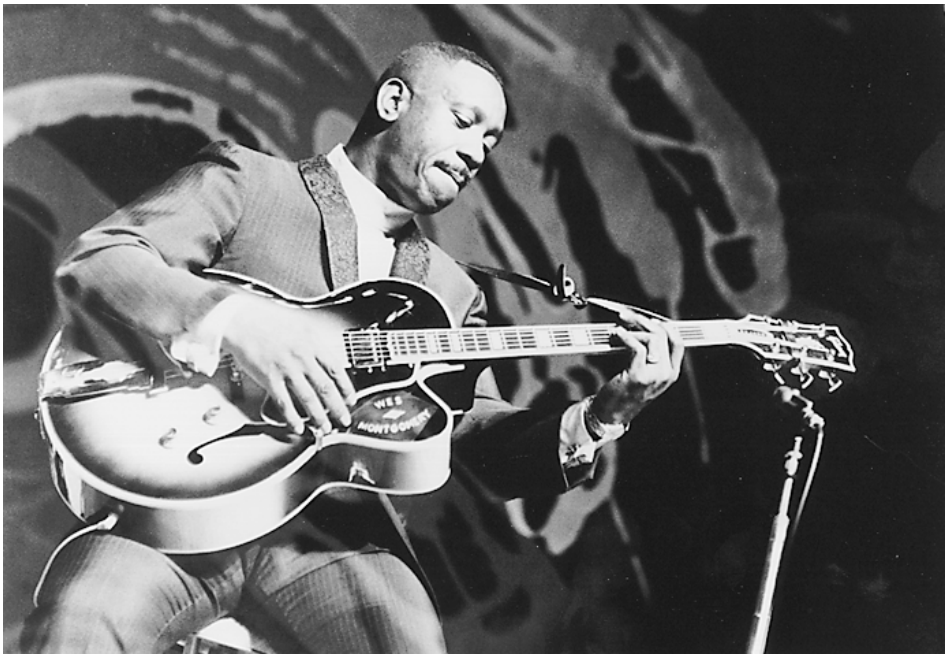


Photo courtesy of Fantasy Records

Of the handful of players who defined the art and characteristics of modern jazz guitar, three names continually recur: Django Reinhardt, Charlie Christian and Wes Montgomery. While it would be overly simplistic to suggest that these players alone shaped the course and destiny of the guitar in jazz, they have been, and continue to be, the overriding, pervasive, influences of the genre.

Regardless of the fickle trends and fashions, which are so much an integral part of popular music in the late 20th century, Montgomery's popularity shows no sign of diminution. His recordings are universally revered and remain constantly in the catalog. Highly regarded by musicians and listeners alike, Montgomery's music continues to reach new audiences. Its subtle blend of sophistication, and simplistic inevitability, captivates, motivates and inspires each new generation of guitar players. As with all great jazz players, his music is timeless, transcending vogue and anachronism with a vibrancy which remains as relevant today as when it was first conceived.

Many critics, and jazz historians, would have us believe that Montgomery was such a huge natural talent that it took little effort for him to develop into the musical giant he even-

tually became. While no one would deny his obvious and precosiously apparent musical gifts, his fully-fledged mature style was not formed without recourse to the usual rounds of dues-paying, disappointment and sheer hard work. Neither did he begin playing the guitar at the age of 19 and by the following week was hired by a passing club-owner, on the strength of being able to replicate all of Charlie Christian's recorded solos! Nothing could be further from the truth. Monk, Wes's elder brother, who was a proficient bass player by his late teens, gave an 11 year old Wes a four string "tenor" guitar to fool around with. Monk later recalled that he was actually playing very well by the time he was 12 or 13. Although Wes did not purchase a regular, six string, guitar until he was 19 or 20, he had already mastered basic four string chord shapes, hand co-ordination and, perhaps more importantly, further developed an already acute "musical ear".

Charlie Christian was his initial inspiration to begin a serious study of the fully-fledged six string guitar. It was during a local dance, where Wes had Taken his newly wed wife (Serene), that the strains of the Benny Goodman band, with Charlie Christian, made an indelible impression on him. Shortly afterwards, he recklessly spent a hard earned, and much needed $350 on an electric guitar and amplifier. Wes gradually grew more and more obsessed with the instrument, and in particular with Charlie Christian's ability to play long streams of eighth notes like a saxophone or trumpet.

Serene recalled that Wes would often get together with his bassist brother Monk, and play right through the night, without even wanting to go to bed. In fact it was Serene's continued complaints, about the volume levels from Wes' amplifier, that eventually led to his abandonment of the pick.

He told Bill Quinn, in a 1968 Downbeat interview, that "the sound was too much, even for my neighbours, so I took to a back room in the house and began plucking the strings with the fat part of my thumb. This was much quieter". Indeed, Wes related this same story so often during his career, that it appears to be of sound providence. Much of his staggeringly virtuosic thumb technique can be attributed to the fact that he made this decision relatively early on. Once the decision had been made, he was able to develop a proficiency with this unusual technique over a period of two decades.

By the mid-1940s, Wes was playing regularly at an Indianapolis Night Club called CLUB 440, where he apparently cul-

tivated a good rapport with the other musicians, and perhaps more importantly, began to learn about the chord progressions and structure of “standard” tunes. As he improved, Montgomery spent several short spells on the road, with bands like the Brownskin Models, Snookum Russell and Four Jacks And A King. It wasn’t until 1948, however, that his first big break and indicator of things to come, occured. On the morning of May 15th, Wes auditioned for vibes player/bandleader, Lional Hampton, on the same evening, he left home for a two year stint on the road with the Hampton band. There had been no prior warning of this prestigious gig and his young wife , Serene, was shocked to find him leaving home with suitcase and guitar in hand.

The recordings that Montgomery made whilst he was with Hampton reveal how much he was still under the spell of Charlie Christian. The fact that he played such a similar role with Hampton as Christian had done with Goodman, must have strengthened his resolve to be a jazz musician despite the hard work, disappointment and financial insecurity. On top of the gruelling routine, drudgery of travel and haphazard

Photo by Duncan Schiedt David Baker-Wes Montgomery Sextet

eating schedules, Montgomery had a mortal fear of flying and would drive unimaginable distances between gigs. Understandably, for the above reasons and more, he found that he profoundly disliked everything about life on the road. Finding such protracted spells away from home (and his growing young family) increasingly unpalatable, Montgomery left the Hampton band in 1950, and resigned himself to a full-time career as an arc-welder and a part-time career as a jazz guitarist.

As word got around that Wes was back in town, however, he soon found himself even busier than ever, working regular gigs with the Montgomery Johnson Quartet, as well as with his brothers Monk and pianist/vibes player Buddy. He also worked with several pick-up bands, comprising of top local musicians such as David Baker, Eddie Higgins, Leroy Vinegar and Mel Rhyne. By the mid-fifties Montgomery was holding down a day job, at a car battery plant and a 9.00 pm till 2.00 am nightly gig at the Turf Bar. Whenever there were after-hours jam sessions, at venues like the Missile Room, Hub Hub or Club 10, he would be there also, making the most of the opportunity to stretch out, uncompromisingly, withthe modern lines and harmonic concepts he was beginning to develop.

Wes's musical tastes had moved away from the George Shearing Quintet, who the Montgomery Brothers had initially imitated, towards the more experimental musics of Miles Davis, Horace Silver and John Coltrane. He was also beginning to compose, the evidence of which could be heard to good effect on *MONTGOMERYLAND (1958/9)* which contained no less than five of his original tunes.

During the late 1950s Wes again spent some time away from home, this time to work and record with his brothers in L A. Between 1957 and 1959, his by now mature style had been showcased on no less than five Pacific Jazz albums. On the last of these, *A GOOD GIT TOGETHER*, where he was a sideman for vocalist Jon Hendricks, it was another sideman on the session who proactively lifted Montgomery's career to a higher plateau. That sideman was alto saxophonist, Cannonball Adderley, who was enjoying great success, both as a leader in his own right, and with the iconoclastic Miles Davis Quintet. Cannonball had heard about Wes from various sources, prior to hearing his organ trio on a late night session at the Missile Room. Completely overwhelmed that such a huge talent should exist in near obscurity, Cannonball became Wes' chief publicist and mentor. Within a week, he had con-

vinced Orrin Keepnews, of Riverside Records, to fly down from New York to Indianapolis, where he could see this undiscovered jazz giant for himself. Needless to say, Montgomery was signed on the spot, and his place in the pantheon of jazz guarantied. Between 1959 and 1963, he recorded 12 superlative albums as leader, or co-leader, and a further 3 as a sideman with Nat Adderley, Harold Land and Cannonball Adderley. These Riverside/Fantasy recordings constituted a legacy which was to irreconcilably change the future of jazz guitar.

One of the first Riverside albums to obtain "classic" status: *THE INCREDIBLE JAZZ GUITAR OF WES MONTGOMERY (Riverside OJCCD-026),* contained four of Wes' original tunes, two of which *(4 on 6 and West Coast Blues)* soon became jazz standards. Mongtomery generally included one or two of his own tunes on albums and live performances. The *Jazz Prisma* broadcast, recorded on the enclosed video, is typical of his programming; which might include a standard show tune *(Here's That Rainy Day),* a jazz standard (John Coltrane's *Impressions*) and two originals (*Jingles and Twisted Blues*). Wes was always a perfectionist, not only in his playing, but also with presentation, repertoire and appearance. David Baker once remarked that, back in the Indianapolis period (1950-59), Wes had been a stickler for rehearsals and would run through passages ad infinitum until he achieved the required results. The splendidly refined and polished ensemble work, between Montgomery's guitar, Mabern's piano and the rhythm section, on the Prisma performance is evidence of this meticulous approach which is especially evident in the imaginative arrangements of *Twisted Blues* and *Here's That Rainy Day.*

Jazz Prisma was recorded in Belgium, during the group's successful 1965 European tour, which also took in Germany, France and England. By this time, Riverside records had run into difficulties and Wes had signed with Verve Records, under the auspices of Creed Taylor. It was Taylor, with extensive experience of best-selling jazz musicians, who put Montgomery into musical settings which appealed to a wider audience. He told Mike Hennessey, in a *Jazz Journal* interview, that from the outset he decided to record Montgomery "in a culturally acceptable context."

Taylor's culturally acceptable contexts meant big-bands, strings and contemporary "pop" tunes. As a result, albums like *GOIN OUT OF MY HEAD (1965), TEQUILA (1966)* and

Photo by Duncan Schiedt

CALIFORNIA DREAMING (1966) sold in huge quantities, compared to the Riverside recordings. This increased success gave Wes a commercial viability, and he became a headliner at Jazz Festivals as well as a featured artist on TV shows such as the *Jazz 625 (England)*, *Jazz Prisma (Belgium)* and *The Hollywood Palace, Steve Allen* and *Mike Douglas Shows (USA).*

Collectively, these broadcasts show Montgomery at the height of his powers. The profound inevitability of his single-lines, amazing fluidity of octave technique and sophistication of harmonic concept, meld together into a music which is virtually perfect yet at the same time never contrived. We are

hearing the results of a 25 year process, but those results sound so fresh and natural that it is easy to overlook their cost.

Wes Montgomery had paid his dues, as many if not more than the next person, but tragically, just as he was about to reap the fruits of his labor, he died from a heart attack at his Indianapolis home on June 15th l968.

In the three decades which have passed since Mongtomery's untimely death, his influence upon other jazz guitarists remains undiminished. Many characteristics of his style have permeated popular music across all of its diverse strands. On a more concrete level there have been awards, scholarships and countless tributes in his name. Indianapolis honoured him by renaming a 34 acre municipal park - WES MONTGOMERY PARK, as well as a Wes Montgomery swimming pool and permanent display of memorabilia (Guitar, gold discs, trophies and Awards) in the Indianapolis Childrens' museum.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the man, however, is the reverence in which he is held by other jazz musicians and in the continued popularity of his recorded legacy. The *Jazz Prisma* session, shown on this video, is affirmation of Montgomery's status as a jazz great. He was, however, much more than a great jazz guitarist and composer, for his music transcended the instrument and the mechanics of technical accomplishment. Although the guitar was his vehicle, modern jazz was his medium, and in that medium he was as important a voice as the other illustrious names that shaped the music. Important video footage, such as that seem in the *Prisma* session, can only further enhance the reputation of this already legendary performer.

1. WES MONTGOMERY
   Twisted Blues *(1965)*
2. JOE PASS
   Original Blues In G *(1974)*
3. BARNEY KESSEL
   Basie's Blues *(1973)*
4. HERB ELLIS
   Medley: It Might As Well Be Spring & Things Ain't What They Used To Be *(1986)*
5. WES MONTGOMERY
   Jingles *(1965)*
6. HERB ELLIS & BARNEY KESSEL
   A Slow Burn *(1979)*
7. JOE PASS
   Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me *(1976)*
8. BARNEY KESSEL
   The Shadow Of Your Smile *(1973)*
9. WES MONTGOMERY
   Yesterdays *(1965)*
10. HERB ELLIS
    Sweet Georgia Brown *(1986)*

Bonus tracks

Wes Montgomery, Belgium *(1965)*

11. Impressions
12. Twisted Blues
13. Here's That Rainy Day
14. Jingles
15. The Boy Next Door

Since first meeting in the 1920s, neither jazz nor the guitar have ever been the same. This swinging celebration of that union presents four Legends Of Jazz Guitar: Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Barney Kessel and Herb Ellis.

"Of all the ways to improvise," says Barney Kessel, "the most stimulating and de-manding is jazz." The four artists here demonstrate stunning command of the fingerboard alongside inspired explorations of standards, blues and ballads. Explosive cascades of notes as well as languid pools of music pour from these maestros' imaginations and fingers. "The object for me," said Joe Pass, "is to play music, to communicate, not to show hard things or fast things." While guitarists will note plenty that's hard and fast in this DVD, somehow these masters make even the impossible appear effortless. That's class.

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