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THE BI-WEEKLY MUSIC MAGAZINE

WES MONTGOMERY: A Guitarist's Organic Problems

HERB ELLIS: 'New Thing' Too Jive for Guitar

MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT: The Folk-Blues Guitarist?

ANNUAL GUITAR ISSUE

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WES MONTGOMERY



Wes Montgomery

"...whatever he does comes alive, the mark of a true artist"

A self-taught master of the jazz guitar, until recently Wes had done all of his playing (except for two years with Lionel Hampton) in and around his native Indianapolis. He didn't cut his first record album until late in 1959.

But the Montgomery sound had long been known and respected among professional musicians. And, once "discovered," the news of this man from Indiana spread to jazz enthusiasts everywhere.

What is the Montgomery sound? It's an exciting quality that makes Montgomery music come alive. It's a terrific swing, the ability to build solos dramatically, to climax after climax. A sense of rightness. A smooth, easy, flowing style. It's the sound of great jazz . . . from a guitar.

Most of all . . . the Montgomery sound is a soft, delicate, exceedingly sensitive kind of music that is created deep within his being. Yes, Wes Montgomery plays a truly incredible jazz guitar. And his guitar is a

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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- 14 Herb Ellis: Enconced in a television studio band, guitarist Ellis tells Associate Editor John Tynan that he is still a jazzman at heart and offers some opinions about the current dearth of young jazz guitarists
- 16 George Van Eps—A Master Guitarist's Reflections and Comments: One of the most respected men in the guitar field, Van Eps reminisces about his beginnings, talks of the present, and offers a bit of advice for the future
- 18 Life With Feather: Noted critic Leonard Feather begins a casual autobiography
- 19 Wes Montgomery—A Guitarist's Problems with Organs: Montgomery tells Associate Editor Ira Gitler how he feels about working with an organ and how he intends to use the blend of his guitar and the electronic instrument to best advantage
- 22 Mississippi John Hurt: Lawrence Cohn relates how the man many consider a primary influence on folk and blues guitarists was recently rediscovered and brought to national attention
- 24 Jazz Basics: Part XI of an exhausting survey of jazz on records.

REVIEWS

- 33 Record Reviews
- 40 Comment on Classics, by Donal J. Henahan
- 41 Blindfold Test: Herb Ellis
- 42 Caught in the Act: Jazz at the Crest • Duke Ellington Solo Recital

DEPARTMENTS

- 6 Chords and Discords
- 10 Strictly Ad Lib: Reports from New York, England, Toronto, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco
- 11 News
- 21 The Bystander, by Martin Williams
- 45 Inner Ear, by Bill Mathieu
- 46 From the Top: Stage-band arrangement reviews, by George Wiskirchen, C.S.C.
- 52 Where and When: A guide to current jazz attractions

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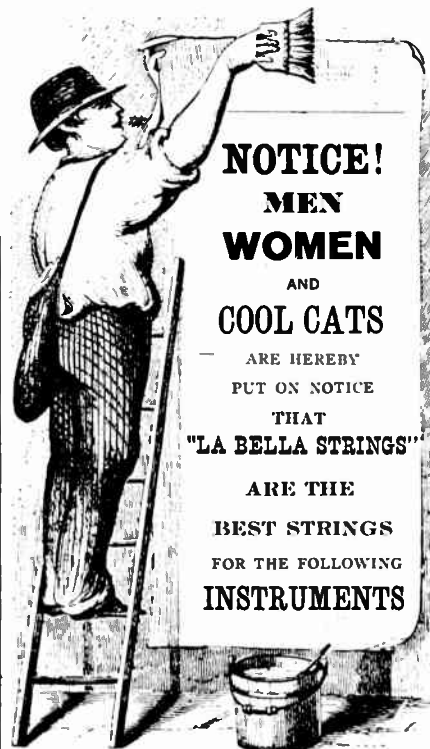
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WES MONTGOMERY

I TOLD MYSELF I was flying to Boston from New York on whim—you know, fly to Boston for dinner, a plutocratic fantasy. But despite my enjoyment of the prime-rib dinner at Durgin-Park (highly recommended), I really was in Boston to interview guitarist Wes Montgomery, who was playing at the Jazz Workshop.

The Workshop is located at the Inner Circle on Boylson St. Operated by affable, soft-spoken Varty Haroutunian, who was the tenor saxophonist with Herb Pomeroy when that trumpeter's band was a staple at the Stable, the club is a long, dim-lit, comfortable, low-ceilinged room, with its bar in the back and its bandstand up front.

As I was greeted and seated by Haroutunian, the Montgomery trio was in the middle of a set. (Bands start early in Boston, because the law calls for clubs to close at 1 a.m. on week nights and midnight on Saturdays.) The Montgomery guitar was supported by Melvin Rhyne's organ and George Brown's drums. This is the group he formed toward the end of 1963 while still in his native Indianapolis, where he had returned when the Montgomery Brothers group broke up in late 1962.

To go back a bit:

Montgomery had emerged from Indianapolis in 1959, after

Organ-ic Problems & Satisfaction/By Ira Gitler

Cannonball Adderley and Gunther Schuller had heard him and did some public raving about his ability. Riverside recorded him that fall in a trio setting and followed that album in January, 1960, with one featuring Montgomery in the company of pianist Tommy Flanagan and bassist Percy and drummer Al Heath. On the strength of his playing on these records, Montgomery placed first in the new-star division of *Down Beat's* 1960 International Jazz Critics Poll—and very nearly won the established-talent section too.

In 1961 his brothers, bassist Monk and vibist-pianist Buddy, who had been working in a quartet called the Mastersounds, joined forces with Wes to form the Montgomery Brothers Quartet. Using a variety of drummers, the group enjoyed a fair amount of success for a while but finally had to throw in the towel, and Wes went back to his home town.

IN BETWEEN SETS in Boston, he talked of this time spent in Indianapolis. "During that standstill period—it was about nine or 10 months—I didn't know which direction to go. The Montgomery Brothers really wanted to make it, but it didn't pay off for us. We really enjoyed working together, but sometimes you can't make things work—so we just accepted that. When I went back home, I didn't have any specific plans, but I knew I just couldn't sit."

In March, 1963, Montgomery came to New York City and recorded two albums—*Fusion*, in which he was backed by strings, and *Boss Guitar*, in guitar-organ-drums format. Rhyne, who also was on Montgomery's first album, came with him, and they added Jimmy Cobb in New York to complete the trio.

Later in the year, back in Indianapolis, Montgomery worked four weeks at a club called the Hubbub with Rhyne and George Brown. Brown, originally from Grand Rapids, Mich., is an energetic young drummer whose playing, in certain ways, is reminiscent of Elvin Jones.

"I had a feeling about the instrumentation, that it could be a *sound*," Montgomery said. "That's why I worked on it, to try to get it in that direction. And I was very satisfied with the direction, because I think it's a little different. A lot of places we go, when they see the organ coming in, they're expecting rock and roll, but after they hear us play they like it."

Brown seems always listening, and Rhyne does not use a high-decibel approach. The trio gets a blend that can be a warming blanket of sound. Montgomery's playing is very relaxed with Rhyne; it is no different than it would be with a piano and bass in place of the organ. "He doesn't hog it," Montgomery said of Rhyne. "His conception is like a piano player's—a piano player's touch."

(Rhyne was—and is—a pianist. At one point in the evening, he reached over and played the nearby piano with his right hand while continuing to chord with his left on the organ.)

Montgomery continued on the subject of organ:

"It is an instrument that you can open up on, and you don't hear nobody. Melvin is not overbearing. I couldn't play with an organist who played it real full and heavy. Because I play with my thumb, the sound is softer—it's a softer sound.

"And volume can't make that difference. The louder you turn it, it still has a felt [fabric] kind of sound. It won't penetrate, anyway. The kind of guitar player that plays with the usual organist would almost have to play with a pick in order to cut through. I couldn't make it like that anyway."

THE CURRENT Wes Montgomery Trio had been out on the road for about six or seven months when I saw the group in Boston. The three men had been in New York at the Half Note and Count Basie's and then had played engagements in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Detroit, Buffalo, and Rochester, before going to Boston. One of the problems encountered during traveling is the care and transportation of the organ.

"You need muscles with organ, and this is on *every* job," Montgomery said. "You know, taking it in and bringing it out."

From city to city, the organ travels in a trailer. When it comes to moving it, the whole group pitches in. "It's a co-operative thing. Melvin and George would rather do it because they don't think I can make it. They don't think I'm qualified," said the stocky, muscular Montgomery, and then he laughed.

The road presents another problem that relates, although less directly, to the organ. "I've been trying to find time to rehearse the group," Montgomery said. "I like for the group to get into things. It's hard rehearsing a group like that on the road, because when we move the organ in, it's stable. So say we open up on a Monday night, and we say we'll have a rehearsal Tuesday. So we go down to the club early, in the afternoon—maybe they open up at 11 or 12. It hasn't failed yet—when we go in, there's nobody there, but the minute we get the instruments out and start into a tune, they start floating in, two and three, and then they'll sit at the bar and have a couple of beers—you know, afternoon beers—and they can't have the jukebox on, so we draw their attention, and they come up and start asking for requests. And you just can't play like that."

What if a club isn't open during the day?

"We haven't played any like that," he answered. "Either they're open in the afternoon or they're not open at all. Or the proprietor is on the other side of town, and you have to go through some changes to get down there. That really hurts. If you want to rent a studio, they overcharge you."

How about the men wanting to relax in the afternoon?

"But that's not the biggest problem," Montgomery said. "We've had the right attitude, but. . ."

IT WAS OPENING night and Montgomery was worried about how the group sounded out front. I had taped a couple of numbers just to see if my recorder was running all right, and I played these back for him. The balance was good, but on the stand it didn't sound that way to him, he said.

"To me, guitar cuts through—it carries more than organ," Montgomery said. "But organ has got more guts. Over-all, two electric instruments like that—I dig that. It's normal and natural to hear a quartet like piano, bass, drums, and guitar. That's automatic. But it's only really automatic to hear the kind of thing I'm talking about with organ, and I do happen to hear that type of thing."

"What are the group's immediate plans?" I asked.

"We expect to be off before opening at the Half Note," Montgomery replied. "I don't know whether the cats want to go home or go to New York. The organ has to be transported. If Melvin wants to go home, then we almost have to go home, because the organ has to go somewhere. I've got to drop it off *somewhere*. And you can't drop it off in the Half Note before time. And you can't leave it in the trailer, just sitting on the street."

"It's like having a fourth person in the group," I offered.

"Really," Montgomery agreed, "oooh, a heavy one though—overweight." **ED**