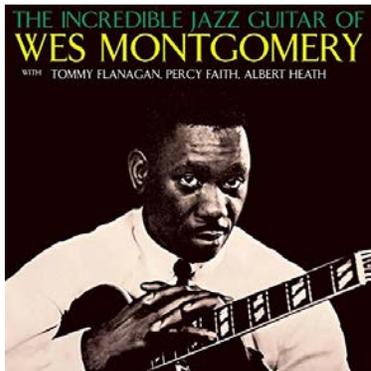


# “The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery” — Wes Montgomery (1960)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

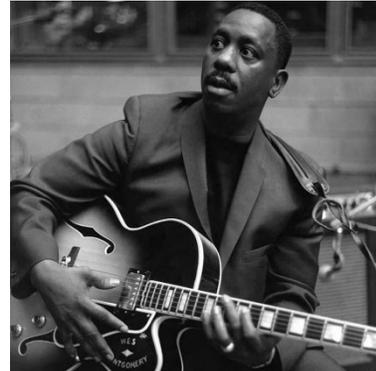
Essay by Maristella Feustle (guest post)\*



*Album cover*



*Original label*



*Wes Montgomery*

“The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery” was the breakthrough recording that brought Wes Montgomery (1923-1968) to the attention of a wider audience and kept him there. Critically acclaimed in the year of its release, with a five-star review by Ira Gitler in “DownBeat” magazine, the album has remained a landmark recording in the history of jazz guitar, and one of timeless artistry. It is noteworthy for its creativity, its impact in securing Montgomery’s place among legendary jazz guitarists, and for its enduring inspiration to musicians and listeners.

Recorded January 28 and 30, 1960 in New York City, at the storied Reeves Sound Studios, the album was one of many Riverside titles which featured Montgomery as a leader or a sideman between 1959 and 1963, and part of several Riverside sessions that included Montgomery that were made during that week. Those sessions resulted in Nat Adderley’s “Work Song” and “The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery,” both of which were produced by Orrin Keepnews. Only months earlier, Nat’s brother, Julian “Cannonball” Adderley had brought Montgomery to Keepnews’ attention after hearing him in Montgomery’s hometown of Indianapolis. While Montgomery’s debut album for Riverside and Keepnews, “The Wes Montgomery Trio” heralded “a dynamic new sound,” it was “The Incredible Jazz Guitar” with which that new sound became a permanent fixture of jazz guitar.

The album itself is a study in versatility, as Montgomery excels equally on up-tempo tunes, blues, ballads, jazz waltz, and medium swing, with the support of Tommy Flanagan on piano, Percy Heath on bass, and Albert Heath on drums. The ensemble and individual tunes offer perfect vehicles for Montgomery’s solo artistry, but the programmatic pacing of the album itself enhances the listening experience. The album opens with Sonny Rollins’ tune “Airegin” at a formidable tempo, which at once establishes Montgomery’s technical expertise and the uniqueness of his soloing in single notes, octaves, and chords. The more relaxed tempo of “D-Natural Blues” allows Montgomery to build the intensity of his solo over a longer arc, and “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” showcases his ballad style.

The impact of pacing with respect to a side of a record may be diminished in the eras of the CD and streaming audio, but “Four on Six” still brings the first half of the album to a strong close. The second half (side, if listening on record) begins with a rousing rendition of one of Montgomery’s best-known tunes, the triple-meter “West Coast Blues.” Dave Brubeck’s “In Your Own Sweet Way,” released on record only a few years earlier, provides another effective platform for Montgomery’s ballad style, especially in the lush chord voicings with which he supports the melody. A contrasting, driving selection follows in “Mister Walker,” along with one more *tour de force* for the “dynamic new sound” in “Gone With the Wind.” Montgomery takes his time building from single notes, to octaves, to chord voicings in a joyful solo that sounds effortless despite its technical demands. The final, ringing chord provides an exclamation point to all that has come before it, and to the album’s proclamation that Wes Montgomery has arrived.

*Maristella Feustle is the Music Special Collections Librarian at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, and serves as the Music Library Association’s alternate member on the National Recording Preservation Board.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.