Wes Montgomery’s “Three Tiered Approach”: Texture Development in Jazz Guitar Improvisation

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Abstract

This thesis will describe three guitar techniques that Wes Montgomery used regularly in his solos and their textural effect on his improvised work. I will emphasize his approach, considered to be innovative for the period between 1959 and 1970. Montgomery’s specific improvising style has come to be termed the “three tiered approach.” This approach allowed Montgomery to create a highly distinctive and individualized sound. This technique and style forged a new perspective on traditional jazz vocabulary. Using several transcriptions from Montgomery’s recordings, this thesis will examine the three tiers found in his solos: single lines for some choruses, melodic lines with octaves, and melodies harmonized with block chords. I will demonstrate how this approach created sound amplitude, nourished the texture, and increased the energy of Montgomery’s solos.

Purpose of this study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the sonoric individualism of Wes Montgomery through his use of three different techniques on jazz guitar. By analyzing Montgomery’s solo transcriptions, this paper will illustrate his unique approach to the jazz guitar. By perceiving the way he passes through different techniques while increasing texture, it is the hope of the author that other musicians can learn to apply some of these ideas to progressively intensify their solos.
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Method

This thesis is an analysis of seven solos guitarist Wes Montgomery recorded between 1960 and 1967: some transcribed, others analyzed aurally, as hearing some specific phrases is a good way to understand the sound and musical ideas of any soloist. This paper will analyze three main form/growth resources used in Montgomery’s solo work, as well as some rhythmic and melodic information that contributed to the development of each composition. Montgomery’s solos—using one, two or three of the textural techniques—will be compared so that we can perceive the effect of combining these approaches. Most of these musical resources were a major innovation during the 60’s on jazz guitar, and have contributed to identify Montgomery’s sound and style, as well as his legacy in jazz guitar.

Wes Montgomery’s musical background

John Leslie Montgomery was born March 6, 1923 in Indianapolis, Indiana to a musical family. “Wes,” as everyone called him, began to play the guitar at the age of twelve on a tenor guitar that his brother Monk (vibraphonist and piano player) gave him. Apparently he tuned that guitar like a six string guitar due to the fact he got used to the six string guitar tuning really quickly. (Salmon 30) Montgomery stated “I used to play tenor guitar, but it wasn’t really playing. I’ve really gone into the business since I got the six string, which was like starting all over.” (qtd. in De Stefano 33) To support his family Montgomery worked during the day as a welder and played in different jazz clubs during the night. His main influence by far was Charlie Christian, one of the first bebop jazz guitar players who performed with Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk,
Kenny Clark, Benny Goodman among others. Clark recalls that “it was at Minton’s that he first heard the word “bebop” and Christian was the first to use it. He claims that Christian and Gillespie would use it while scat singing ideas to other musicians. He also states that Christian helped him write many original bebop tunes.” (qtd. in Salmon 23) Montgomery transcribed Christian’s music note by note, “He was it for me, and I didn’t look at nobody else for about a year or so…”(De Stefano 34) He admitted in an interview in *Melody Maker* 1960 that he wouldn’t have become a musician if he hadn’t been inspired by Charlie Christian. (Salmon 31) Montgomery played with his thumb for two reasons: 1) He used to practice until late hours in the night so in order not to wake up his neighbors and family he played softer with his thumb 2) He had a warmer tone with his thumb.

At the beginning, Montgomery was hired because he could play Charlie Christian solos note by note, but then he developed his own sound playing single lines, octaves and chords. Joe Pass told an interviewer, “Wes, Django and Charlie Christian form the three influences in jazz history—they’re the players that expanded everyone’s notion of what the guitar can do. And as for Wes, although his single lines were brilliant, his work with octaves and chords really broke new ground.” (Sokolow 3) The first recordings he made were with Lionel Hampton as a sideman, as well as with his brothers Monk and Buddy in a band called *The Mastersounds*. He kept working and playing at jazz clubs in Indiana, until one day Cannonball Adderly heard him and called Orrin Keepnews, producer of Riverside Records, to suggest Montgomery sign with the label. He recorded his first album, *The Wes Montgomery trio*, as a bandleader in October 5th 1959 and then *The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery* in 1960. After that he began working as a full time musician and received recognition in the jazz world thanks to his albums. Montgomery’s
career only went up recording nineteen albums with riverside records between 1959-1964, four with Verve 1964-1966, and three with A&M. This last period, according to Salmon, had more commercial success and less improvisations, “Eventually his solos would simply be a statement of the main melody played in Montgomery’s signature octave style. This fortunately was not the case in Wes Montgomery’s live performances.” (37) Montgomery in live performances continued to play straight ahead jazz and developed his solos as usual. Because Montgomery learned to play aurally, he developed a great ear, but most of the people think he had perfect pitch. Mel Rhyne, organ player on several of Montgomery’s recordings, reported that Montgomery did not read music but “could play almost anything after hearing once—twice at the most and played for hours without repeating himself.” (qtd. in De Stefano 35) Wes Montgomery died of a heart attack on June 15, 1968 at the age of 45 leaving a legacy of innovation on the jazz guitar and great creativity on jazz composition and improvisation that inspired world wide jazz guitar players such as Pat Metheny, George Benson, Jim Hall, and Joe Pass among others.
A) Three approaches of Wes Montgomery to jazz guitar soloing

1-Wes Montgomery single lines solo

Montgomery began to play music because he heard Charlie Christian recordings. According to Salmon the first Christian’s solo Wes heard was Solo Flight (30), and for a long period Montgomery transcribed and acquired Cristian’s blues and bebop phrasing. Charlie Christian improvised mostly with single lines imitating the phrasing of a horn and could solo like it, that is why he played in Benny Goodman and his Orchestra or Sextet. There is a clear example of this phrasing in Solo Flight, (Christian, Track 13) where Christian responded to the harmonized riffs of the orchestra with single melodic blues lines. He used a lot of mixolydian scales over dominant with the predominant flat 7th blues sound:

Example 1 (Fox 29):

\[
\begin{align*}
G7 & \rightarrow \text{C} \\
\end{align*}
\]

By using arpeggios, he approximated the resolution of non-chord and chord tones (example 1 bar 3). He also played extensions of the arpeggios of the chords (example 2: 9th of G and 13th of C and G) and mixed major and minor thirds on strong beats (Ex 3 bar 1, 3 and 4):
Example 2 (Fox 28):

Example 3 (Fox 20)

Example 4 (Fox 21)

Here is an example of Christian’s use of extensions in an F minor vamp:

Example 5 (Fox 25)
Wes Montgomery had a lot of this vocabulary as evident in the following. This is an example of his single lines playing where he includes major and minor thirds on strong beats (Ex 6 bar 1, 2 and 3/ Ex 7 bar 2/ Ex 8 bar 1), the flat fifth of the blues scale (Ex 6 bar 2/ Ex 9 bar 4) and the 4th (Ex 6 bar 2/ Ex 8 bar 1) over dominants. The use of extensions 9th, 11th and 13th on dominants (Ex 8 bar 3 and 4):

Example 6 (Kahn 7)

Example 7 (Kahn 8)

Example 8 (Kahn 8)

Example 9 (Kahn 23)
Montgomery also liked to use some tritone chord substitutions within his lines. In “Unit 7,” in his album *Smoking at the Half Note*, instead of playing D7 to resolve to G7, Montgomery uses the notes of Ab7 (Ex 10):

Example 10 (Saood 96)

These are a few examples of Montgomery’s melodic lines that give an idea of his soloing style. He was not just influenced by Charlie Christian, but also by John Coltrane and Charlie Parker. It is outside the scope of this paper to focus too much on the melodic content of his linear solo work since this is an analysis of his textural development while improvising jazz solos.

2-Wes Montgomery lines played in octaves.

Montgomery was the first jazz guitar player to develop a jazz solo in octaves. Playing lines and scales in octaves is difficult because of the fingering position and large leaps required to maintain, or change that position. Gleason states, “Montgomery does ever state when he began playing in octaves, but he recalls that he discovered the technique while tuning his guitar. Octaves were a challenge for Montgomery and he remembers practicing them used to give him headaches.” (qtd. in Salmon 105) The way he used octaves was as fast and melodic as his single lines. Norman Mongan commented, ”What is most remarkable is that the octave-style fingering
never stopped Montgomery from playing essentially what he would play in the single string-
fashion.” (qtd. in De Stefano 110) For playing moderately fast melodies with octaves in the gui-
tar you have to mute a string that will be between the two notes an octave apart. This string is
muted with the same finger you are pressing the lower octave string. The pick or thumb will
stroke the muted string as well as the other two notes and that is what it gives the punchy- per-
cussive effect. Montgomery took that into account and created rhythmic interest in his solos with
what Sokolow called the “percussive octave riff” (6) that was repetition in octaves of unusual
rhythms in straight ahead jazz mainly focusing on fast eighth notes and triplets:

Example 11( Sokolow 6)

from "Tear it Down"

from "Boss City"

Example 12 (Montgomery 95)

He also developed the “sliding octaves” (Sokolow 6) that is another technique particular to his
sound:

Example 13 (Montgomery 36)
Montgomery used octaves not only to create rhythmic motifs but also to develop themes, and create strong melodic lines. Here we have three examples of repetition of complex rhythms grouped in 3 beats over 4 and dotted quarter notes on the solo Impressions on the album Smoking at the Half Note:

Example 14 (Coltrane 6)

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Dm7
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Example 15 (Coltrane 8)

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Example 16 (Coltrane 6)

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These next melodic lines in octaves are a clear example of thematic development beginning on measure 3, the fourth and minor third interval are developed rhythmically and melodically.

Example 17 (Coltrane 7)
Emily Remler according to Salmon said:

“You can copy Wes Montgomery- Just one little thing that he uttered, just one bar or a four bar phrase and it’s such a well developed melody, such a well developed composition, that could base ten million of your own licks, or a whole solo, on that one thing. By using thematic development, you could write forty tunes from that one bar.” (64)

3-Block Chords soloing

Wes Montgomery was also one of the pioneers of chord soloing on the guitar. According to De Stefano he found a way to play melodies harmonized with chords like jazz piano players, but transferred to the guitar. (113) Montgomery played with block chords which are four note voicings played on the first four strings of the guitar. He played heads with chords--what we call now chord melodies-- and like octaves, he developed original rhythmic ideas as well as call and response. In the following examples taken from one of his most famous compositions *West Coast Blues*, Montgomery plays both complex and unusual rhythms as well as call and response:

Example 18 (Kahn 12)
Montgomery used different chord substitutions and played some ballads in small combos with chord melodies, like The *Days of Wine and Roses* on the album Boss Guitar. This thesis is more focused on the dynamic and textural aspects of Montgomery’s solos, so harmonic aspects will not be considered in detail.
B) The use of the “three tiered” approach for texture development in a single solo.

1-Texture in music.

The definition of the term texture in music is taken from Benward and Saker’s *Music in Theory and Practice*. According to the authors “the term *texture* refers to the way the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic materials are woven together in composition.” This paper will use this term for Montgomery’s improvised solos since it has the same elements as any composition. A lot of musicians and music analysts consider jazz improvisation to be the skill to compose in real time. Cahn states that “in jazz improvisation, musical elements like melodic lines, harmonies, rhythms, dynamics, and the interplay with other musicians are all open to the performer’s real time selection.” (25)

Benward and Saker also refer to texture in terms of density and range. Density refers to the number of voices or parts playing at a specific moment of a piece, so more voices (also called layers) give a thick texture and few layers give a thin texture. Benward and Saker also specify that the change of texture can mark the division between different sections or in the ease of Montgomery’s soloing could be termed tiers. (131) In addition, the authors state that “The *range* of a texture is often described as “wide” or “narrow,” depending on the interval between the lowest and the highest tones.” (132)

There are also technical terms for the different types of texture that are widely known in music analysis, and Benward and Saker explain:

- Monophonic texture: when a single melodic line is played with no accompaniment. That melody doubled in octaves or at other interval is considered also monophonic texture. (133) Examples include the *Happy Birthday* song, or Gregorian singing.
Polyphonic texture is when two or more melodic lines move independently or imitating the others. Any fugue or invention by Bach is a clear example of this texture. (133)

Homophonic texture: when a melody has rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. (135) Most of western music has this texture. Popular music like jazz, rock, funk, pop and even a lot of classical music are examples.

Homorhythmic texture: when all parts (melody, harmony and percussion) are doing the same exact rhythm. Hymn or chorales are examples of this texture. (135)

Benward and Saker go on to explain that texture is affected by different elements like the character or number of music lines (parts), the timbre of each instrument that plays them, the harmony, tempo, and rhythm. (137) These parts are categorized by the number and relationship to each other through the labeling of “primary textural elements” (Benward and Sake 137), as follows:

Primary melody (PM), Secondary melody (SM), Parallel supporting melody (PSM), Static support (SS), Harmonic support (HS), Rhythmic support (RS), Harmonic and rhythmic support (HRS). This paper will use this labeling system for analyzing Montgomery’s solos and will illustrate these examples using passages from these solos.

2-Wes Montgomery’s textures on the guitar.

Montgomery dedicated a lot of effort and practice developing techniques that created different musical textures in his solos. Musical texture is influenced by several factors and the first we are going to analyze is the timbre of the instrument. Montgomery played with his thumb unlike the majority of guitar players that used a plectrum (more popularly know as “pick.”) Montgomery, according to Duarte did not like the sound that the pick produced so he decided to play with his
thumb instead because it gave a warmer sound, “He did not like the sound quality resulting from
the harder percussive pick attack, he preferred instead, the rounder, warmer, and more supple
tone produced by the thumb. In effect it was the thumb that imbued the “Montgomerian” sound
with its singular timbre.” (qtd. in De Stefano 105) The use of the thumb helped Montgomery ac-
quire an individualized sound. According to De Stefano, this yielded more expressiveness and
dynamic range. As a result, Montgomery adopted four basic stylistic concepts: 1-single-note so-
loing 2-octave playing 3-double octave playing 4-block-chord playing. (109) All of these stylistic
concepts contributed to varied textures, dynamics and sonoric intensity making Montgomery’s
solos unique, appealing to his listeners.

In this manner Montgomery achieved different textural densities during his solos or even while
passing from the head in to the solo section of a song.

The first “thin” texture he used was the most common guitaristic approach for soloing: single-
ote note lines. This texture is thin because it contains only one voice or layer of sound. This in refer-
ence to Wes Montgomery’s solo work and not to the accompaniment behind the solos--piano
chords, walking bass lines and swing feel drums-- which will be analyzed later on.

The second approach Montgomery liked to use in his solos to increase texture density, was oc-
tave playing. This technique creates more density and a wider range than a single line because
two notes are played at the same time, exact one octave apart. Some fragments of his solos in-
cluded two note voicings in thirds, but that was not the most recurrent textural technique. Mont-
gomery also played double octave lines. That is two same notes, two octaves apart. This tech-
nique produces wider textural range than octave soloing. Here is an example of Montgomery’s
double octave soloing technique on Bumpin’ on Sunset.
The third approach shows the denser texture that Montgomery used in his solos, formed usually by three or four note voicings producing melodies with their top notes. In the following examples, the block chords give a denser texture because more layers of sound are created. The intervals between the notes of these voicings are less than an octave, but between the lowest and the highest note is typically more than an octave, which produces a wide textural range:

Example 21 (Saood 42)
Example 23 (Rob Chord addict)

The PM (primary melody) of each chord is harmonized sometimes by a PSM (parallel supporting melody) which according to Benward and Saker “are melodies that are similar in contour with a PM or SM. They often maintain a constant interval relationship with the melody they support.”

(138) In the block chord examples in this study, the PM is typically supported by a PSM which is the second voice or alto voice in a four note voicing. Montgomery also uses a great deal of reharmonization (chord substitutions) to create more movement, while at the same time playing coherent melodies with the upper voices. This technique creates tension and release, thereby affecting texture. The relationship between the notes creating different intervals, as well as the rhythms played within the “block chords” affect the homophonic texture creating a more dense and intense section during the solo.
3-Wes Montgomery’s solo sections and growing intensity created by textural changes.

Montgomery used different textural techniques to create “tiers” in his solos. Usually these tiers, or sections, begin at the top of each form and is very clear to the listener. Each successive section usually increased intensity, as well as textural and rhythmic density which progressively created growing dynamics and wider textural range.

_Missile blues_ on the album “The Wes Montgomery Trio” (Track 9) is a clear example of the different sections that result from textural changes. In a 12-bar blues where Montgomery plays the first 3 choruses in single-note lines, then from chorus 4 to 6 he plays with octaves, chorus 7 octaves and block chords, and on chorus 8 and 9 only block chords.

De Stefano represents this three tiered approach for soloing in the following graphic:

Example 24 (202)

Another example can be find on _Wes Coast Blues_ from the album “The Incredible Jazz Guitar” (Track 5) : single-note lines on choruses 1 to 4, octaves on choruses 5 to 7 and block chords on choruses 8 to 9. Out of the majority of Montgomery’s solos which are divided in three tiered, the rhythmic density has an important roll for growing intensity throughout each section. As we can
see in the following examples, the first four bars of each chorus of each section, has more rhythmic intensity than the last one:

Example 25 (Kahn 7 and 8) single lines chorus 1 and 3:

Example 26 (Kahn 10) octaves chorus 5 and 6:

Example 27 (Kahn 11 and 12) block chords chorus 8 and 9:
In Unit 7 from the album “Smoking at the Half Note” (Montgomery, track 3) the solo structure is as follows: single-note lines on choruses 1 and 2, octaves on chorus 3 and block chords on chorus 4. In Sun Down which is also a blues from the album “California Dreaming” (Track 2) we have single lines on the first 2 choruses then chorus 3 octaves and chorus 4 block chords. Cariba from Montgomery’s album “Full House,” also a blues form, features single lines on choruses 1 to 4, octaves on choruses 5 to 8 and block chords on choruses 9 to 11.

There are many other Montgomery solos that have this three-part structure which is what leads authors like Matt Warnock to use the term “Three Tiered Approach.” Many other Montgomery solos are divided in two sections, which we could call a two tiered approach. Some solos begin in single lines and then octaves, like in Four on Six from the album “Smoking at the Half Note” (Track 4): single lines first 4 choruses and octaves on choruses 5 to 7; or the studio version from the recording “The Incredible Jazz Guitar” (Track 4) that has the same number of choruses with single lines and octaves as the live version. Other solos begin in single lines and jump to block chords like in Bud’s Beaux Arts on the the recording “The Montgomery Brothers in Canada”. On their track the first form AABA is played with single lines and the second is played with chords going into the last A section before the melody. Another example of single lines and block chords is Jingles from the recording “The Wes Montgomery Trio.” (Track 11) Here is a diagram analysis by De Stefano:

Example 28 (204)
Montgomery not only divided his solos using the three tiered approach, but sometimes he would also employ two of these techniques in one long phrase in order to give texture diversity, variations, orchestration or execution a call and response line. Kahn in his analysis of *Unit 7* states,

“He plays small, but crisp phrases in octaves, and then answers them with chordal punctuations. As he's just beginning this portion of the solo, the chordal voicing, a very common Gm7 form, is in the lower register of our instrument. I believe that this was Wes' way of using the guitar as if it were a "big band." So, the octaves might represent the saxophone section, and, at this moment, I would say that the lower Gm7 voicing would be played by the trombones. If he continued in this vein and the chord voicings began to rise in register, they would be come much more like a trumpet section. In short, it was a tremendously orchestral way of using the guitar.” (Wes Montgomery “Unit 7” solo and analysis)
Here are some examples of what Kahn is stating as well as examples of combining single lines with chords:

Example 29 (Ochoa)

Example 30 (chordaddict.com)

Example 31 (Ochoa)

The accompaniment (rhythm section) in most cases supported Montgomery’s textural changes and contributed to the growing intensity. We can hear this intensity created by the rhythm section in recordings like No Blues (Montgomery and Kelly, Track 1) where the band hits the dotted quarter notes with Montgomery’s riff on minute 5:00 or the call and response in min 5:18. In Unit 7 (Montgomery and Kelly, Track 3) the band play the exact same riff that Montgomery is playing and repeating during twelve bars in his solo (min 4:57). Here is the riff with the chords that Montgomery played:

Example 32 (Saoed 13)
We can even find a homorhythmic texture in the solo of *Impressions* (Montgomery and Kelly, Track 11) beginning on min 3:46. The whole band and Montgomery are playing the exact same rhythmic pattern grouped in three beats over the 4/4 meter. The following measures are the chords that Montgomery played on the guitar:

Example 33 (Coltrane 11)
Conclusion

There are many things we can say about Wes Montgomery as an innovator harmonically and melodically and in terms of technique, timbre and texture. His self-taught process to learn the instrument helped Montgomery go as far as possible without barriers. With a lot of dedication and practice he was able to adopt the sound of others instruments finding new techniques on the guitar. His octave work resembled the sound of a tenor saxophone, or his block chord solo improvisation--a technique used exclusively on the piano--permitted him to go a step further on the jazz guitar by creating a unique sound, and lastly, interaction with the band and with the listeners.

Wes Montgomery as we have seen through this study was an architect for designing different textures on the guitar in order to diversify and develop his solos as while incrementing intensity within each section. The order in which he used his three tiered approach for soloing, and the combination of each of this textural techniques on the appropriate moment to finally deliver a climax, create for the listeners a coherent and varied flow of melodic ideas which are full of vitality and authenticity.
Bibliography


