

# Wes Montgomery

**John Leslie "Wes" Montgomery** (March 6, 1923 – June 15, 1968) was an American jazz guitarist. Montgomery was known for his unusual technique of plucking the strings with the side of his thumb, and for his extensive use of octaves, which gave him a distinctive sound.

Montgomery often worked with his brothers Buddy (Charles F.) and Monk (William H.) and with organist Melvin Rhyne. His recordings up to 1965 were oriented towards hard bop, soul jazz, and post bop, but around 1965 he began recording more pop-oriented instrumental albums that found mainstream success. His later guitar style influenced jazz fusion and smooth jazz.

## Biography

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Montgomery was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. According to NPR, the nickname "Wes" was a child's abbreviation of his middle name, Leslie. The family was large, and the parents split up early in the lives of the children. Montgomery and his brothers moved to Columbus, Ohio, with their father and attended Champion High School. His older brother Monk dropped out of school to sell coal and ice, gradually saving enough money to buy Wes a four-string tenor guitar from a pawn shop in 1935. Although Montgomery spent many hours playing that guitar, he dismissed its usefulness, saying he had to start over when he got his first six-string several years later.

## Career

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He and his brothers returned to Indianapolis. In 1943 Montgomery found work as a welder and got married. At a dance with his wife, he heard a Charlie Christian record for the first time. This motivated him to buy a six-string guitar the next day. For nearly a year, night and day, he tried to imitate Christian and teach himself the guitar. Although he hadn't intended to become a musician, he felt obligated to learn after buying the guitar. He received no formal instruction and couldn't read music. By the age of twenty he was performing in clubs in Indianapolis at night, copying Christian's solos, while working during the day, first at a milk company. In 1948, when Lionel Hampton was on tour in Indianapolis, he was looking for a guitarist, and after hearing Montgomery play like Christian he hired him.

Montgomery spent two years with the Hampton band. Fear kept him from flying with the rest of the band, so he drove from city to city, town to town, while fellow musicians marveled at his stamina. When arriving at a club, the first thing he did was call home to his wife and family. He was given the opportunity to play with Charles Mingus, Milt Buckner, and Fats Navarro, but not the opportunity he hoped for, and he returned to Indianapolis a better player, though tired and discouraged. He resumed performing at local clubs, this time with the Eddie Higgins Trio and the Roger Jones Quintet, playing with Eddie Higgins, Walter Perkins, and Leroy Vinnegar. He joined his brothers Buddy and Monk and saxophonist Alonzo "Pookie" Johnson in the Johnson/Montgomery Quintet, somewhat in the style of George Shearing. The band auditioned for Arthur Godfrey and recorded sessions with Quincy Jones. After a residency at a club from 1955 to 1957, Montgomery and his brothers went west.

Buddy and Monk Montgomery formed The Mastersounds and signed a contract with Dick Bock at Pacific Jazz. Montgomery joined them for a recording session in 1957 that included Freddie Hubbard. Some of the songs were released by Pacific Jazz on the album *The Montgomery Brothers and Five Others*, while others were issued on *Fingerpickin'* (Pacific Jazz, 1958). The Mastersounds remained in California when Montgomery returned to Indianapolis to work in his trio with organist Melvin Rhyne.

He worked as a welder during the day to support his wife and seven children, then performed at two clubs at night until well into the morning. He was a smoker who had blackouts while trying to maintain this busy schedule. During one performance, the audience included Cannonball Adderley, George Shearing, and Lennie Tristano. Adderley was so impressed by Montgomery's guitar playing that he persuaded Orrin Keepnews to sign him to Riverside. Keepnews was also persuaded by a gushing review written by Gunther Schuller. In New York City Montgomery recorded *A Dynamic New Sound, the Wes Montgomery Trio*, his first album as a leader after twenty years as a musician. In 1960, he recorded *The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery* with Tommy Flanagan, Percy Heath, and Albert Heath.

He joined his brothers in California to perform as the Montgomery Brothers for the Monterey Jazz Festival. The Mastersounds had broken up, and Buddy and Monk had signed with Fantasy and recorded (with Wes) *The Montgomery Brothers*, followed by *Groove Yard*. Montgomery recorded another album as a leader, *So Much Guitar*, then while visiting his brothers had a chance to perform with John Coltrane's group in San Francisco. In 1961, work was getting harder to find. A tour in Canada led to the album *The Montgomery Brothers in Canada*, then the band broke up. Montgomery returned to Indianapolis to work in his trio with Rhyne. Keepnews sent him back to California to record a live album with Johnny Griffin, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and Jimmy Cobb. Their performance became the album *Full House*. This was followed by *Fusion!* (1963), his first instrumental pop album.

After two more organ trio jazz sessions for Riverside Records in 1963 (*Boss Guitar* and *Portrait of Wes*), Montgomery left the label for Verve Records. At Verve, Montgomery began working with producer Creed Taylor, who produced Montgomery for the rest of the guitarist's life. His first Verve release, *Movin' Wes* (1964), was an instrumental pop album arranged by Johnny Pate. It quickly sold more than 100,000 copies and repositioned Montgomery within the recording industry as a crossover artist capable of significant LP sales. At Verve, Montgomery released his last two small-group jazz albums (a 1965 collaboration with Wynton Kelly, and a 1966 collaboration with organist Jimmy Smith), but his main focus was recording contemporary pop hits as instrumentals. Montgomery had notable success with his versions of "California Dreamin'", "Tequila", and "Goin' Out of My Head". After moving to A&M, Montgomery had his biggest radio hit, a version of "Windy", a pop song originally recorded by The Association. Of the ten Wes Montgomery albums that Taylor produced while Montgomery was alive (all recorded for Verve and A&M Records), eight were aimed at the pop market. The success of these albums led to invitations for Montgomery to perform on major U.S. television shows including *The Hollywood Palace* and *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*.

## Death

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Montgomery died of a heart attack on June 15, 1968, while at home in Indianapolis. He was 45 years old.

## Technique

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According to jazz guitar educator Wolf Marshall, Montgomery often approached solos in a three-tiered manner: he would begin the progression with single note lines, derived from scales or modes; after a fitting number of sequences, he would play octaves for a few more sequences, finally culminating with block chords. He used mostly superimposed triads and arpeggios as the main source for his soloing ideas and sounds.

Instead of using a guitar pick, Montgomery plucked the strings with the fleshy part of his thumb, using down strokes for single notes and a combination of up strokes and down strokes for chords and octaves. He developed this technique not for technical reasons but for the benefit of his neighbors and not waking his children. He wanted to still play through an amplifier so he developed his thumb picking style. He worked long hours as a machinist before his music career began and practiced late at night. To keep everyone happy, he played quietly by using his thumb.<sup>[5]</sup> His style smoothly incorporated the guitar into jazz and was studied by many.