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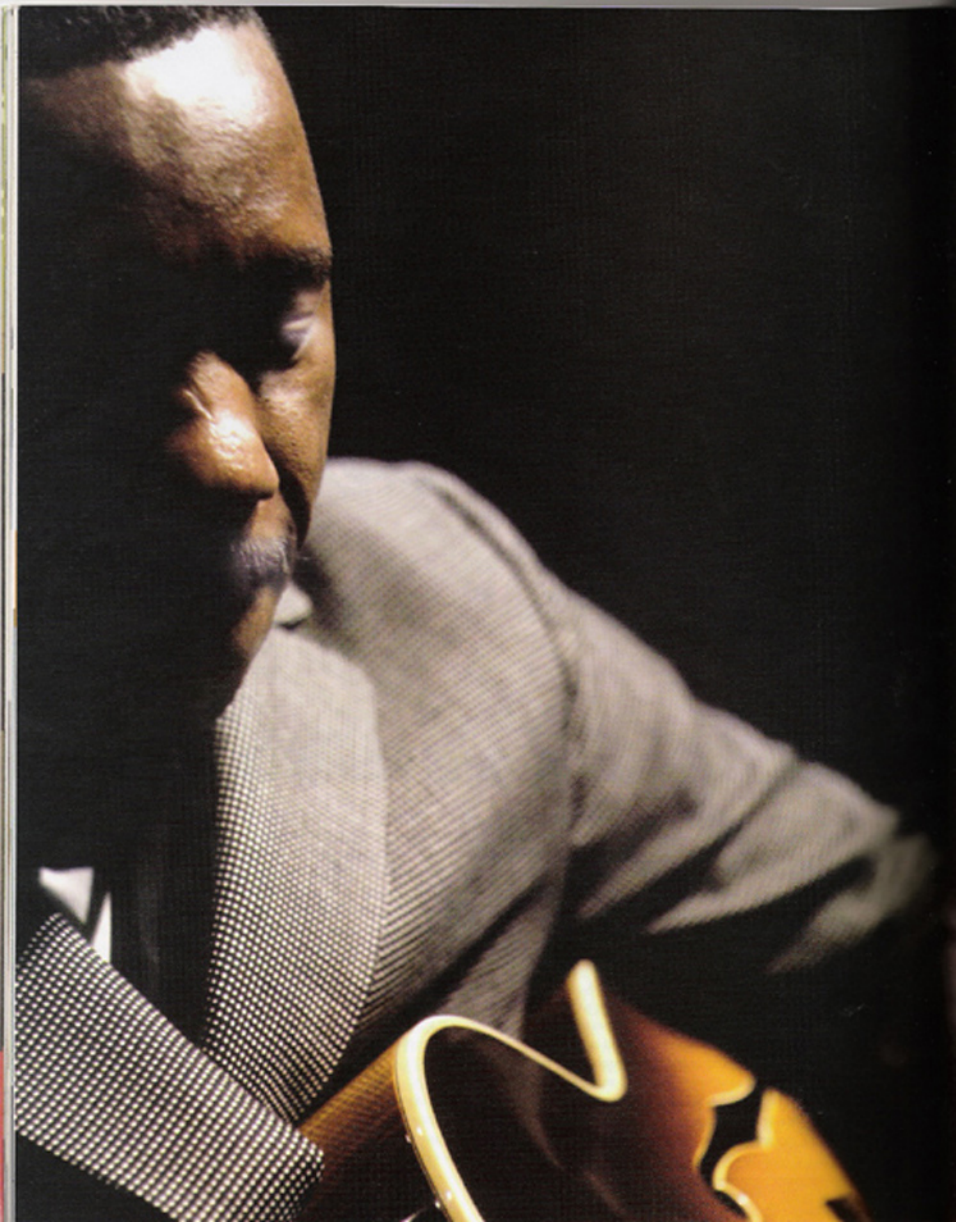


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The Softer Side of Genius

Wes Montgomery's latter recordings are often dismissed as pop pabulum. Not so, says Josef Woodard.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEE TANNER





Wes Montgomery is not only one of the most important guitarists in jazz history, he's also one of the music's most inspired natural talents—whatever the instrument. The flowing solos on his early '60s Riverside recordings feature deep musicality, warm melodies, fearsome chops and a remarkable use of octaves. Instead of a plectrum, Montgomery used his thumb to create a soft attack on his Gibson L-5 without suffering a loss of rhythmic drive, and he's often cited as the most influential jazz guitarist since Charlie Christian.

A recent reissue of *Sonokin' at the Half Note* (Verve), a pivotal 1965 album with Wynton Kelly's Trio, has cast Montgomery's greatness into the spotlight once again.

But it's also opened up old debates.

The original version of the 1965 LP had five tracks, though only two were recorded at the Half Note: "No Blues" and "If You Could See Me Now." The other three tracks, deemed unsuitable by producer Creed Taylor, were recut in Rudy Van Gelder's studio

three months later. But the seven other live tracks did make their way to LP eventually, on the 1969 album *Willow Weep for Me*, which came out a year after Montgomery's death—overdubbed with brass and woodwind arrangements by Claus Ogerman.

Naturally, jazz critics howled about Verve's creative decisions and Ogerman's sweet accompaniment.

Meanwhile, *Willow Weep for Me* won that year's jazz Grammy.

The latest edition of *Sonokin' at the Half Note* features six of the seven tracks on *Willow* in stripped-down form. The reissue acts like exhibit A in the standard critical argument depicting Montgomery's work in "before" and "after" terms, jazz versus pop, art versus commerce. The recording is frequently viewed, on simple terms, as the guitarist's last blast of genuine jazz before he boarded the commercial gravy train, under the guidance of Taylor, for a series of lucrative but solo-challenged, pop-centric, radio-friendly albums for Verve and A&M that featured brass and string sections padding Montgomery's octave-warmed sound.

But is it possible that the "sellout" chapter in Wes Montgomery's life has been greatly exaggerated?

Born in 1923 in Indianapolis and based there most of his life, Montgomery had a strange, brilliant and too-brief career, cut short by a fatal heart attack in 1968. He was 45. By the time the guitarist was noticed by the jazz world at large, he was already in his mid-30s.

Montgomery worked as often as he could in Indianapolis clubs to feed his large brood of kids, and his high visibility and inviting intensity made him a local legend. In 1959 producer Orrin Keepnews had a new label, Riverside, and he was looking for talent. Cannonball Adderley urged him to check out an unassuming guitar wizard in the Midwest.

"Prompted by Cannonball's enthusiasm, I flew out to Indianapolis, checked into a hotel and went straight to the place where he was doing his regular evening gig," Keepnews says. "Shortly after that, after a short rest period, we all went on to the Missile Room, which was something like a 2 to 6 a.m. situation. As the sun rose over Indianapolis, we signed a contract." (In honor of the occasion, one of the tunes on the guitarist's Riverside debut, *The Wes Montgomery Trio*, was named "Missile Blues.")

Over the next five years Keepnews guided Montgomery through many recordings. "You have to remember, that was a period in which the normal minimum was for jazz artists to think in terms of two

albums a year," Keepnews says. "With somebody like Wes, it wasn't difficult to get him into the studio. We recorded at least that frequently and probably a bit more."

"In the first year he's working, a couple of records come out and attention is paid to him. All of a sudden, he's the new star on his instrument," the producer says. "His reaction to that was to complain about the fact that he still wasn't working very much or making much money. I said to him specifically, 'Hey Wes, a year ago you were unknown and broke. Now you're a star and broke. That's tremendous progress.'"

"Literally, we were not working to sell records," Keepnews says. "We were working to present the artist in the best possible way and to get the most out of the artist as a performer, as a player. Probably, it would have been a nice idea if we had been a more aggressive sales unit. On the other hand, when Riverside disappeared and he went onto his Verve and A&M associations, quite clearly the goal was to turn him into the biggest seller possible. He was handled like a pop artist."

Financial problems spelled the end of Riverside in 1964, so Montgomery's manager, John Levy, approached Taylor, who had founded Impulse and then gone to work for Verve. Unlike more hard-core jazz-minded producers, Taylor had an ear, and an appetite, for the marketplace.

Taylor had been an admirer of Montgomery's playing, but he didn't necessarily admire the guitarist's presentation up to that point: "I'd been listening to the Riverside recordings and noticing how great he sounded, and how nondescript the context of the environ-

ment that he was playing in was," he says. "Jazz critics have it that you just let an artist like that loose in the studio and it can't be anything except absolutely marvelous. But nobody listened to it—well, not nobody, strictly speaking."

To make people listen, Taylor knew what he had to do: "Even before I was at Verve, even when I started Impulse, I had been totally aware of the fact that you have to get on radio."

Dividing the guitarist's career between his Keepnews and his Taylor recordings has long provided a tidy way to judge his career. But the ways the guitarist's later albums are routinely dismissed are often based more on historical points of view and hearsay rather than modern-day listening and reconsiderations.

Montgomery's first two albums for Verve, 1964's *Movin' Wes* and 1965's *Bluesin'*, set the stage for a series of pop-flavored Montgomery albums to come, including 1965's wildly successful, Grammy-garnering *Goin' Out of My Head*, with Oliver Nelson arrangements.

Smokin' at the Half Note was also made in 1965, but it wasn't, as if so often claimed, his last gasp playing the sort of unadorned jazz that he supposedly did only during the

"That stuff is great. Back then it was like sellout. Today, it's like avant-garde." —Charlie Hunter

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Riverside days. In fact, the much-criticized practice of placing the guitarist among horn-and-string arrangements was first presented on the 1963 Riverside album *Fusion!*, with charts by Jimmy Jones. The Verve albums were merely following up on that idea.

Still, count Keepnews as one of those who isn't in love with Montgomery's post-Riverside recordings. The producer claims the guitarist's Riverside work was "who he was" as an artist. "You heard it," Keepnews says. "The reason I think that he could tear people apart with his playing was because that was who the man was. I don't think there's any question about that."

Keepnews says, "It's a damn shame that there wasn't some middle ground that could have been taken. I just wish there had been an opportunity—either if I'd been able to continue with him or if the people who handled his records thereafter—so have a more middle-of-the-road attitude toward it. It would have been nice if he had done a stepped-up version of what we had been doing. Of course, they didn't totally get away from what we'd been doing. I think it's kind of ironic that the very best that Montgomery did after Riverside was the live date at the Half Note."

In fact, the seeds for *Smokin' at the Half Note* were sown by Keepnews. He first put Montgomery together with pianist Wynnton Kelly's trio, which was also Miles Davis' rhythm section. Joined by tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin, the quintet made *Fall House*, a crackling good live album, recorded in 1962 at Tsuboi's in Berkeley, Calif.

Taylor has a different view of the albums Montgomery did with Keepnews. "Those extended blowing things on Riverside—I'm not criticizing the recordings at all—but they wouldn't take Wes anywhere," he says. "I wouldn't try to do that with Segovia, but here you've



got a melodic improvising giant with an original sound, and all you've had to do was to put him in some kind of a universal context that would communicate with the people. That would mean that radio would recognize that the listeners would like it, and therefore, they played it, even if they might say, 'We don't play jazz.' So the next time Wes comes out with a record, they say 'Oh, it's a Wes Montgomery record, it's not a jazz record per se, so let's listen to it.'

Taylor says Montgomery never voiced any objections to the directions his producer was taking him. "No, not at all. Wes never had any complaints about anything. He was going great guns," Taylor says. "[His manager] John Levy was extremely happy, because Wes' concert fees were just soaring. He hit his commercial stride about the time he died."

The contented attitude Taylor describes Montgomery having toward his latter-day musical turn is disputed by Keepnews. "This is not open to discussion," he says. "Wes was not happy with what he was doing in those ornate settings. That was not what he wanted to be doing, as witness the fact that he never performed in that kind of setting. To the very end, he was out there on the road in a trio or quartet setting. That's how he always heard himself."

Arranger Don Sebesky, who worked on many of Taylor's productions, tells a different story. "Creed had a vision and a way to do these records. Obviously, he knew that they were great musicians, but it came at a time when these musicians were looking to expand their fan base. Wes would play a club and would get his usual amount of patrons. After these records came out, they were lined up around the

block three times," Sebesky says. "Wes welcomed the opportunity to expand his fan base. He would go into a club and stretch out the way he always did. He didn't hold back when he went into performance. He'd play a lot of things he'd played during his Riverside period."

"They were happy to make more money than they had before," Sebesky says. "Some people castigated them for 'selling out,' but nobody was unhappy about that. Those musicians we did that for were perfectly happy with the arrangement. It worked out pretty well for them."

As Montgomery told the Associated Press in 1968, after his biggest splash of the Taylor era, his recording career had started with a pure focus on jazz values and evolved into something very different. "I began by finding things I liked to do and jazz musicians would understand," he said, but "other people would stare and look with mouth wide open. But I used to feel, this is it; they've got to hear it. I was playing for myself for a long time. It was good music, and I recorded it, but it just went to musicians, no further. Then I started to do more melodic things, and I sold more records because the music was more melodic and simplified. And I began to understand that the public will let you know what they want from you by sales."

But the jazz press wasn't the public, and they routinely criticized the work of arrangers like Sebesky. Sell, Sebesky's philosophical about the way his work was treated. "Well, I was a hired gun," he says. "I was asked to do an album within a specific frame of reference, and that was my job. My job was to accommodate and to amplify and to clarify Creed's intentions and his vision. He was the

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producer. I would have suggestions, obviously, but ideas would spring up and he would have a reason for doing this and that.

"More often than not, it was a marketing way of looking at things," Sebesky says. "Left to my own devices, I probably would have done a lot of things differently. It was a time when he found a formula that worked for him."

Clearly, Montgomery's Taylor-era discography lacks the raw improvisational grit of the Riverside years, but many of the last recordings the guitarist made boast sophistication on many levels, especially in the elegance of the arrangements—which sometimes evinced more of a lush '60s-pop sensibility than a big-band aesthetic—and compact solo statements that gained in economy what they lacked in expansiveness.

Plus, compared to what currently passes for pop-jazz, usually under the smooth-jazz rubric, Montgomery's latter work sounds positively inspired—adventurous even. Guitarist Charlie Hunter says, "That stuff is great, especially when you think about what's going on today. Back then it was like sellout. Today, it's like avant-garde. The reason why guitar players love him is that he was the Man," no matter the musical setting.

Sebesky draws a natural comparison, saying that Taylor's projects were "in those days considered something like smooth jazz, because it brought in people who normally hadn't been jazz fans up to that point and brought them into being jazz fans. It gave them something that came down easy. We didn't really have a formula at the time. The CD 101.9 thing [New York City's chill-out station] is kind of a formula.

You have to conform to certain guidelines in order to get played on that station. I'm not sure that Creed was thinking that way. I think he just wanted to make nice records that people would like to listen to.

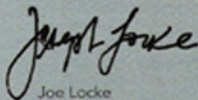
"A lot of purists didn't take kindly to that," Sebesky says, "because they felt that Wes' career, up to that point, had been hard-charging. But Wes was very happy to be doing what we were doing. You have to go by that, as well. That's a pretty good barometer of the way things worked. Nobody went into the studio kicking and screaming, that's for sure. It was a golden time."

Creed Taylor brought Wes Montgomery into the studio in November of 1964—a year after his last Riverside sessions—to create what became the pop-and-jazz album *Movin' With*. On the pop end were tunes like "Matchmaker, Matchmaker" and "People," the latter featuring some fleetingly lovely ballad playing by Montgomery, who at one point hangs out on a single note, a technique later heard in Pat Metheny's stylistic bag. On the jazz side were tasty items like "Caravan" and the Montgomery-penned title tune. The album featured Johnny Pate's arrangements and a new horn-flecked version of the guitarist's classic "West Coast Blues" in a version that is more suave and to the point (clocking in at just over three minutes), with a brief but appetizing octave- and chord-laden solo.

Movin' With sold 100,000 copies soon after its release—by far the biggest seller the guitarist had made to date—thus ensuring continued efforts in the same vein.

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The next release, *Bumpin'*, featured several Montgomery's originals, including the bluesy lazy brood of the title song, the swinging "Tear it Down" and the soul vamp "Just Walkin'." His sweetly lyrical tune "Mi Cosa" can be heard as an impromptu studio outtake, released as the unadorned bonus track called "(Unidentified Solo Guitar)" on the CD reissue of *Guitar on the Go*. On *Bumpin'* it comes padded with silky strings.

At this point, Montgomery experimented briefly with an electronic octave-divider effect on his guitar—a sonic redundancy for a guitarist who dispensed octaves with such surreal ease. *Bumpin'* though careful not to veer too far from its structural design, also features some genuine jazz interplay between Montgomery and pianist Roger Kellaway.

Sebesky came up with a working process on *Bumpin'* to accommodate Montgomery's discomfort with fitting into preconceived arrangements. Taylor says working with the guitarist was a joy, and that "the only uncomfortable thing we ever encountered was when we had a bunch of string players around one time, and Wes was pretending he was reading his part, and he couldn't read. It was after that that we decided that we should record Wes with a small group, a rhythm section or whatever, and if we needed the other elements, we would add it later."

"After that, we just did everybody like that," Sebesky says. "We started recording all the artists with the rhythm sections, and then putting the backgrounds down later. [Sometimes] I would write the arrangement in a general way, and then I would tell [the rhythm unit] kind of where I was going to do stuff later on so they could stay out of the way. But a lot of the times, after hearing them play the basics, I was

let into the creative process. It was back and forth between them and me all the time. It wasn't like I was just telling them what to do. Herbie [Hancock] would play a little lick, and I would key off of that and do a little background part. Sometimes, it was hard to tell what came first."

Taylor and the various arrangers also devised a system of getting ideas across to the guitarist that didn't involve sheet music. "The arranger, whether it was Oliver Nelson or Don Sebesky or whoever, would simply do a Fender Rhodes take of the structure of the arrangement. They'd make a tape of it, along with vocal instructions: "Wes, you play here, *da da da...* and this is going to be brass figures behind you." I would send the tape out to Wes while he was on the road. Of course, he rehearsed in the hotel room all the time. He'd sit there with the headset on and listen to the tape, so when he came back to New York, he was ready to go."

Montgomery's playing always featured an innate sophistication, which is especially striking when his lack of formal study is considered. "He's like Chet Baker," Taylor says, another famous jazzman with a distinct sound and technique despite a lack of training. "He never dwelled on a G minor 7 or whatever. His ear just took him wherever the song was going."

It was Montgomery's third studio album of 1965 that spread his name furthest, and it did so through an unlikely source: the title-track take on the Little Anthony and the Imperials single "Goin' Out of My Head." Taylor had the idea for Montgomery to cover the song because, he says, "I knew [songwriter] Toddy Randazzo, and I really respected his musicality and songwriting ability. If you take away the R&B per-

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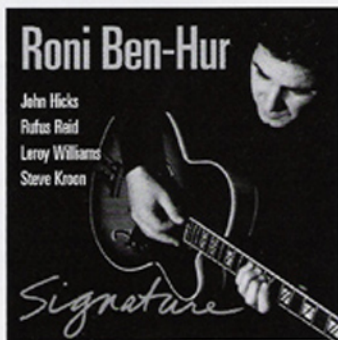
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formance and just look at that song, it's an absolutely marvelous song to improvise on. For that time, it had sophisticated changes and the whole structure was great. I was thinking, 'This would be perfect for Wes Montgomery. But how am I going to overcome the fact that here's Wes and his background? He'd be about the last person to listen to Little Anthony and the Imperials.'

"I can remember to this day when I brought that record to him," Taylor says. "He was actually at the Half Note, in the West Village. He was there with Wynnton Kelly and that group. I brought the record by and said, 'Listen to it. Oliver Nelson is going to write the chart for this, and Oliver can take any kind of a song and mold it into a context that you're going to be very happy with.' So he decided,

'OK, whatever you say,' more or less.

"During the session, some of which was live and some overdubbed, I walked over to Wes—I have a photograph of it: I'm whispering in his ear, 'Wes, remember we agreed that you'd play the melody in octaves.' Of course, the jazz critics would never let go of it. I corrupted this artistic diamond in the rough or whatever and made him do all this tapestry stuff."

Goin' Out of My Head garnered a Grammy and immediate airplay friendliness and sales that, by now, have crept up to around a million. Commercial firepower and Grammy-winning accessibility notwithstanding, it's a classic big-band album, with smart charts by Nelson and stolen moments of Montgomery's guitar grandeur and romantic

truth scattered throughout. The title track that made so much commercial and critical noise is all of 2:12 in duration, but the album also features plenty of jazz fiber, including the Montgomery originals "Boss City," "Twisted Blues," with a hip and spidery single-line solo, and "Naptown Blues," which is suave but also has a nerby swagger, ending on a brash, dissonant chord.

The guitarist then cut the lightly Latin album *Teguila*—the only album he ever made without a keyboardist—with string arrangements by Claus Ogerman and featuring the talents of bassist Ron Carter, drummer Grady Tate and conguero Ray Barreto. It's an airy, melodious record, with the standout track being the gently brooding Montgomery original "Bumpin' on Sunset," which features him playing double octaves—the same note played in three octaves.

Montgomery, no doubt emboldened by the cachet of success in his commercial ventures, recorded blowing albums in September 1966, with organist Jimmy Smith: *The Dynamic Duo* and *Further Adventures of Jimmy and Montgomery*. These sessions were one way to satisfy his jazz urges, which he was also able to engage, in some measure, on gigs so long as he fed his newly configured audiences the hits they craved.

Though his commercial prospects were brightening by the day, Montgomery reserved some of his greatest admiration for instrumentalists other than guitarists, especially jazz musicians who were busy pushing the envelope rather than riding a commercial groove. In a "Blindfold Test" in *Dawn Beat* with Leonard Feather in 1967, Montgomery paid polite respects to the various guitarists Feather played for him, including George Benson, Howard Roberts, Joe Pass, Gabor Szabo and Grant Green.

Feather finally asked him, "Can you think of any albums you'd give five stars to?"

Montgomery replied "...that's pretty weird—can't think of any five-star records! Oh, this new thing by Miles, *Miles Smiles*, Now that's a beauti-

Continued on page 138

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WES MONTGOMERY

(continued from page 47)

ful thing. He's beginning to change his things all the time, but he hasn't gone all out, and Wayne Shorter's playing a little different. It's nice. Joe Henderson's got a thing I think would be five stars, too. I think it's *Made for Joe*—he and McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones and Richard Davis."

Montgomery's choices reveal that he had his ear trained toward the day's challenging sounds—not veering all the way to the avant-garde but certainly separate from the commercially oriented middle ground he was then locked into. At one point, Montgomery did some West Coast dates with John Coltrane's group, and he was even offered an invitation to join Trane's band. "John was among the people very impressed with Wes," Keepnews says. But the guitarist declined Coltrane's invitations, partly due to his insecurity about playing with the saxophonist, whom he revered. (Montgomery plays a beautiful version of Coltrane's "Impressions" on the expanded *Sonnet* at the Half Note.)

Just as that "Blindfold Test" came out in June of '67, Montgomery was riding a wave of three Sebesky-arranged albums that lean heavily on pop: 1966's *California Dreaming*, '67's *Down Here on the Ground* and *A Day in the Life*—the best-selling jazz LP of 1967. Yet *Down Here on the Ground* is one of the finest (if least popular) of the more romantic Taylor-era recordings.

Down Here on the Ground takes its title from the Lalo Schifrin tune heard in *The Cincinnati Kid*, and the LP closes with a lushly orchestrated take on Schifrin's romantic movie theme song "The Fox," over which Montgomery's octaves sound heaven-sent. The set showcases the guitarist's melodic instincts in an agreeable way on "Georgia on My Mind," "I Say a Little Prayer for You" and the chilling, poignant "When I Look in Your Eyes," with its brief solo choral interludes. Montgomery's own "Up and At It" is a snazzy little vamp, and "Goin' on to Denoit," with its simple, inspired melody combined with the guitarist's customary twists tucked into the seamless flow, should be a standard. The album also features two members of the very band involved in *Miles Smiles*: pianist Herbie Hancock and bassist Ron Carter.

In that 1968 interview with the Associated Press, Montgomery talks about his

success, then at its pinnacle. He said that when *Goin' Out of My Head* became such a hit, "I got scared, I wanted the doots open, but you got to be careful because the next album can close them.... My direction before was hard jazz. But it began to dawn on me that I might understand what I'm doing, but if I can't project to the point where I can communicate, it doesn't mean anything.

"Since everybody has to survive, economics forced musicians out of jazz," Montgomery said. "And what is playing music for anyway? People to enjoy themselves. That is my direction now. But I still don't have a commercial mind for picking tunes. *A Day in the Life*' wouldn't have crossed my mind at all. I let somebody else think of the commercial tunes, and I try to adapt myself to the material they pick and get inside of it.

"I always panic at every record I do," he said. "I walk in the studio—the material is ready and everybody is ready. The lights go on and I start playing. I don't have confidence in the material, myself or anything. The first two sets I'm not geared up. Then the last two or three, everything begins to come right.

"The secret of recording is, if in two minutes and 45 seconds with a tune, you can get into it, identify yourself, put some guts into it and get out, you've got something."

Many photographs of Wes Montgomery find him with a cigarette. Ironically, one of his most infamous LP covers is that of *A Day in the Life*, a decidedly unglamorous, close-up view of an ashtray with snubbed butts. The image suggests, at least through contemporary eyes, fatalistic self-destruction, keeping in tune with the sullen existential bent of the Beatles' title tune.



"I tell you, Philip Morris must not have been happy," Taylor says. "It was totally

unromantic in its message. It was a feeling that went with the title. It could have been 'Don't Smoke in Bed' or 'The Blues Get Me Upset When I'm Upset Anyway.' The typical movie storyline where the guy is grinding out cigarette after cigarette was the idea for the cover of *A Day in the Life*. Obviously, it had nothing to do with health or anything else. I thought it was just a great Pete Turner photograph. I didn't have anything particular in mind. Pete Turner was just shooting whatever he found interesting, and we'd review his portfolio from time to time. That's the way we got all of those photos.

Montgomery's last album, *Road Song*, is another Sebesky-arranged date that was heavy on the pop, with sweet but by-the-book versions of "Yesterday," "Greenleaves," "Hy Me to the Moon" and "Scarborough Fair."

"That last album cover is another beautiful Pete Turner photo—a 22 millimeter shot of a white fence that goes down the road," Taylor says. "It turned out it was Wes' road song—of course, nobody expected anything like that. It was kind of ironic."

Road Song was another hit, but Montgomery didn't live long enough to enjoy it. On June 15, 1968, he died of a heart attack at his home on West 44th Street. He passed in the arms of his wife, Serene. (A ballad named after her appears on *Road Song*.)

A crowd of 2,400 showed up at the memorial service at the Puritan Baptist Church in Indianapolis. In the crowd were Cannonball Adderley and the entire Montgomery family. His children—daughters Charlene Grayson, Sharon, Sandra, Frances and Tooi and sons John L. Jr. and Robert—and Serene were joined by sister Lena and his ever present brothers and frequent musical collaborators, Buddy and Monk, who served as pallbearers.

Montgomery's body was taken to the New Crown Cemetery, where you can find his headstone by the row of graves close to a sign reading "Montgomery Rd." It is set apart from the other headstones by its warm, reddish tint and the prominent image of a Gibson L-5 guitar, the defining feature of his life.

The *Indianapolis Star* report on the funeral commented, "The thoughts of many of the friends there could almost be read on their faces. He'll be remembered to them and many more as a hard worker, an honest man, a rare individual both as a performer and a man with no pretensions about his accomplishments..." **JT**