

*Wes Montgomery – ‘Round Midnight:
Expressions and Interpretations*

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Background

Wes Montgomery walked into a New York recording studio on October 5, 1959 just two weeks after signing a contract with Riverside Records. It was Montgomery's first session as a leader. He was 36 years old and, although hardly known outside of his hometown of Indianapolis, had already developed a highly unique and fully mature style.

Montgomery would go on to become one of a handful of players to ultimately define the sound of the electric guitar (along with Django, Charlie Christian, and Jimi



Hendrix) and his artistry represented a new peak in the tradition. He quite simply redefined what guitarists knew to be possible with the instrument.

These were not the first Montgomery recordings. He can be heard on a few sides with Lionel Hampton's orchestra from the years 1948-1950, as well as with his brothers' combo, the Mastersounds from the late 1950s – but this occasion marked the beginning of his stint with Riverside Records, and was the launching pad for his later worldwide acclaim. Producer Orrin Keepnews had signed him to Riverside based on the recommendation of Cannonball Adderly, and it was Keepnews who presided at these early sessions.

Montgomery came in with his working trio of Melvin Ryne (Hammond organ) and Paul Parker (drums) ready to lay down tracks for what would become their debut album on Riverside, entitled *Wes Montgomery Trio*. (Keepnews. 1992) One of the first

numbers called that night was Thelonious Monk's classic ballad "Round Midnight." It should be noted that throughout this document I often refer to this recording as a "performance" for the simple reason that at the time (unlike today) records were made by recording the full band live in the studio. Before the advent of multitrack recording the musicians would typically be set up in one room where they all played each tune from beginning to end without the later post-production benefits of overdubbing, punch-ins, or mixing. So this recording is a performance in the true sense of the word.

It is difficult today to imagine the impact Montgomery had not just on guitarists, but on the way that jazz and pop music would sound long into the future. These early recordings helped define sound of the jazz organ combo¹ of the sixties, the soul jazz movement of the nineteen-seventies, and continue to impact today's styles such as acid jazz.

Montgomery would go on to make many recordings in his short career, but in my mind and in the minds of many jazz aficionados, none will ever top these early Riverside dates. In particular, this recording of 'Round Midnight is, I think, unmatched in its immense sensitivity and taste. This performance is suffused with warmth and intelligence, a sense of longing, and a sense of hope. It is, in my opinion, a definitive rendering of Monk's tune, unmatched in its honesty and soulfulness. Most of all it is an unequivocal statement of Montgomery's superb artistry.

This piece is a feature for Montgomery. The organ and drums play a secondary accompaniment role with the organ playing mostly sustained chords and the drummer playing mostly time with brushes on the snare and hi-hat. Accordingly, the transcription and analysis that follow focus on the guitar part only.

Before continuing, I strongly urge the reader to put this document aside and listen to the recording in its entirety. Forget everything you know about music. Turn your intellect off, and allow the music to inhabit your body. I believe you will find that your heart will tell you everything you need to know about this piece. Perhaps Montgomery’s greatest gift is his ability to connect with the listener on a visceral – even spiritual – level. I believe that you will be moved by this recording and if you are not, you had better check to make sure you have a pulse!

Notes on the Transcription

I have chosen to notate this transcription in what might be termed a “double-time feel.” Which is to say that the basic quarter note pulse is notated with twice as many beats as it would be if one were to enforce conformity with the written tune. The result is a form that is 64 bars in length as opposed to the original 32-bar form. For example, the first 8 bars of the tune would look like this:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef, key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and common time (C). The first staff contains four measures with the following chords: Eb, Eb/Db, F-7b5, and Bb7. The second staff contains six measures with the following chords: Eb-7, Ab7, B-7, E7, Bb-7, and Eb7. The notation includes quarter notes, eighth notes, and rests, illustrating a double-time feel where the quarter note pulse is notated with twice as many beats as in the original 32-bar form.

I think this is the best approach for a number of reasons. First, I believe it more accurately reflects the feel of the of the performance which clearly has a strong pulse at approximately 120BPM. (This puts the “true” quarter note at ~60BPM.) Second, it makes the guitar part much easier to notate and read. If the transcription were to be notated at

the “true” quarter note, much of the guitar part would be notated as sixteenth notes. Since this transcription employs the standard jazz notational convention of “swing eighths,” one would need to attempt to convey the idea of “swing sixteenths” which, although not out of the question, would tend to be confusing. Other approaches have been used to transcribe this piece,² but I believe this method results in the greatest clarity and more accurately conveys the feeling of the performance.

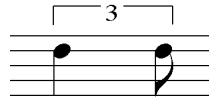
Where the rhythmic feel of the eighth notes is clearly “straight” as opposed to “swing” time, I have tried to note that in the transcription as such, but it must be pointed out that the feel sometimes falls between the cracks. For those unfamiliar with the concept, “swing eighths” is a rhythmic feel where the first of a pair eighth notes is given longer duration than the second (often 2/3 to 1/3 relationship). This approach creates the “swinging” feel often found in jazz music.

“Swing eighths”

written as



played as:



Montgomery plays with a very high degree of rhythmic subtlety – pushing the time at some points, holding back at others – and any attempt to capture that degree of nuance with a tool as crude as Western music notation would produce an unduly complex transcription and ultimately be doomed to failure. Therefore, with the exception of a few relevant expressive elements, necessity dictates that the more subtle shades of inflection,

phrasing, articulation – in short the stuff of true mastery in this performance – is best omitted.

The reader may notice that I have elected to conserve space in the transcription by writing the first two A sections of the form as a repeated passage with first and second endings. I do not believe this to be a significant abridgement of the performance since Montgomery’s rendering of the melody is mostly the same for both passes excepting the last 3 bars (see transcription, bars 9-24 for example).

It was not my intention to create a prescriptive transcription to be used for recreating a similar performance. Jazz has always been an aural tradition. Notation is helpful, but it is only part of the story. The real essence of the music is “off the page” and musical literacy may very well be of secondary importance. Certainly there is no better example of this than Montgomery himself who was totally unable to read written notation, but whose understanding of jazz music was of the highest order.

Performance Technique

An examination of Montgomery’s guitar technique is essential to gaining a fuller appreciation of this performance

because his technique was at the time so unorthodox and revolutionary. His unique approach influences not just the tone quality of the instrument, but also the music itself. Accordingly, some discussion of the mechanics of guitar



technique are in order.

Much of what is unique in Montgomery's technique is doubtless the result of his being "self-taught," which is to say he was without formal training and learned to play via a combination of trial and error, listening to records and observing other players.[need citation] He never received instruction in the "correct" way to play and, as a result, was free to explore which techniques worked best to produce the sound he desired.

The most obvious and oft-noted feature of his approach is his use of the right thumb to strike the strings – specifically the "fleshy part of the lower left side of the thumb near the thumbnail" – while resting the fingers of the right hand lightly on the instrument's top, just below the pickguard.(Garson, Stewart. 1968:4) This produces a very warm, round tone with more body than if a pick were used. The bright, sharp attack characteristic of the pick is absent and instead the notes ring out with a soft attack similar to the envelope of an electric or acoustic bass. It is a generous, intimate sound. This technique also allows the player to breeze over the strings producing very smooth articulation of octaves and chords. The tradeoff is mostly in terms of speed, but Montgomery compensates by playing both up and down strokes with his thumb.³

Montgomery regularly employs two devices that, at the time this recording was made, were not widely used by guitarists. The first of these is his use of lines voiced in parallel octaves. Known as his "heartstrings" sound, it was perhaps the technique that gained him so much acclaim initially. Although other guitarists had used octaves before to get a thicker sound and better projection, Montgomery took it to an entirely new level. He was able to play fast passages, arpeggios, bebop lines – seemingly anything – voiced

in octaves. Audiences as well as other guitarists marveled at his immense fluency and it remains thrilling to hear.

Less widely noted but equally impressive is his way of improvising in the so-called “block chords” style. This involves the harmonization of each melody note with a different chord and is a common device used by pianists to emulate the sound of a big band horn *solis*. No guitarist to my knowledge has ever had Montgomery’s mastery of this technique even to the present.⁴ You’ll notice that Montgomery uses these devices to great effect and the thumb picking technique makes them all the more compelling.

The Composition

‘Round Midnight was written by Thelonious Monk and is likely his most recorded song of all time.(Kelley. 2007)⁵ It was first recorded in 1942 by Cootie Williams’s band, and although Williams did not contribute to the composition, the young Monk agreed to add Williams’s name as co-composer in exchange for the opportunity to have it recorded. (Gourse. 1997:33)

Dizzy Gillespie recorded the tune in 1946 and added an introduction for his big band. (Kelley. 2007) After that time Monk would typically play Gillespie’s introduction and it has since become conventional for jazz musicians to do so. But Montgomery eschews the rather jarring harmonies of Gillespie’s intro for a more consonant, smoother, and looser 8-bar intro:

Montgomery later recorded the tune again with Jimmy Smith backed by a large ensemble for the Verve album *The Further Adventures of Jimmy and Wes*. He also can be seen performing the tune with a quartet on a British television show from 1965. This footage is currently available as *Legends of Jazz Guitar, Vol 2*.

Structure

‘Round Midnight is a standard 32-bar, AABA form. Because of the extremely slow tempo at which this performance is taken, the “head” (song form) is played only twice (known as two “choruses” in jazz parlance). An 8-bar intro and 9-bar coda⁶ are added. The resulting form looks like this:

Intro || A | A | B | A || A | A | B | A || Coda

We can also look at the form considering where the guitar plays the melody and where the part is improvised. Although much falls into a gray area between the two, I’m using the following standard convention to describe the guitar part: If the material consists of a statement of the written tune more or less intact, this is referred to as “melody,” whereas if the part is primarily improvised, this is referred to as a “solo”:

Intro (single line – 8 bars)
 First chorus
 A melody (single line – 16 bars)
 A melody (single line – 16 bars)
 B guitar solo (octaves – 16 bars)
 A melody (single line – 16 bars)
 Second chorus
 A guitar solo (octaves – 16 bars)
 A guitar solo (octaves – 16 bars)
 B guitar solo (block chords – 16 bars)
 A melody (single line – 16 bars)
 Coda (single line – 9 bars)

After the introduction (bars 1-8), the guitar states the melody of the first two A sections (bars 9-29 in the transcription). Instead of playing the written melody over the bridge however (bars 30-45), Montgomery improvises over the bridge changes, returning to the melody for the last A section to complete the first chorus at bar 61 of the transcription. For the second chorus, he solos from the top of the form through the bridge (bars 62-109), and returns to the melody at the last A section of the second chorus (bar 110).

It's difficult to say whether the guitar line in the intro and coda are "improvised" or "precomposed." Certainly the chord changes would have been previously agreed upon. Most likely the guitar line is improvised, but since there is no way to determine that definitively, I have refrained from making such a designation for those parts of the form.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of this recording and one of the reasons I consider it to be definitive within the Montgomery canon is that, in spite of the fact that it is Montgomery's first session as leader, we see that his style is already fully formed and mature. The unique approach that Montgomery originated (and which became his

trademark) of building the intensity of a performance by following single line passages with octaves and then with block chords is clearly in evidence here.

As you listen to the recording, notice the very logical and effective use of this technique to build excitement throughout the performance. The melody is initially stated simply – an unharmonized single line. We then get a taste of what’s to come when Montgomery improvises over the bridge of the first chorus with octaves, returning to the single-line technique to close out the chorus. He then launches into an octave-voiced solo over the two A sections of the second chorus. The climax is reached in the bridge of the second chorus which he takes using his breathtaking block chord technique. The melody is then restated as a single line, bringing the listener “home.” It’s a thrilling display not just of prodigious technique, but also of immense taste and maturity.

Melodic Embellishment

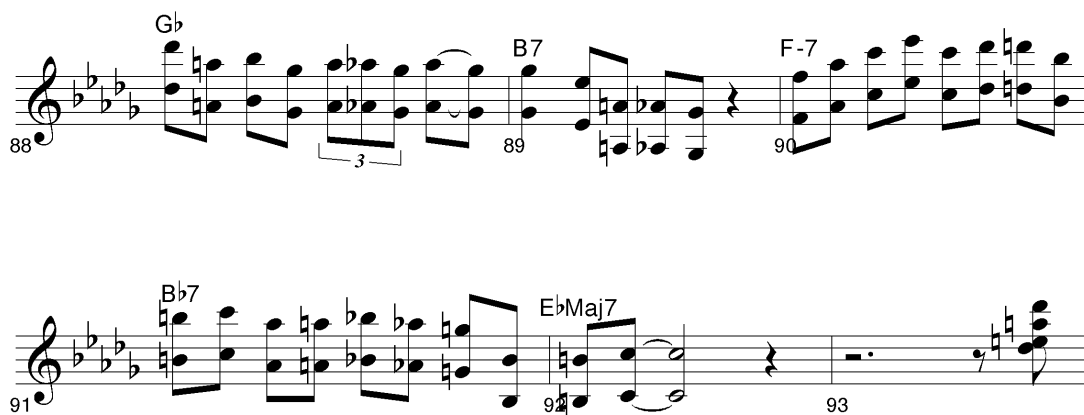
Although most jazz transcription and analysis tends to concentrate on the improvised solo, I consider the manner in which the melody is rendered in this performance to be equally interesting. Montgomery has a distinctive way of playing the melody which is clearly intentional. This is apparent because he uses many of the same devices each time he states the melody. For example, he approaches Db on the third beat of the tenth bar of the A section with a distinctly vocal-sounding descending slur:



Also noteworthy is the bebop motive that he uses to approach the C natural on the first beat of the sixth bar of the A section:



This device would become a characteristic of his way of playing this tune.⁷ A real knock-out punch comes, when at the end of the second A section in the second (solo) chorus, he expands this motive into a complete phrase to close out the octave-voiced section before launching into the bridge (bars 90-92):



If that's not genius, I don't know what is.

Another melodic feature I find interesting is the manner in which Montgomery approaches the melody of the bridge (B section) of the first chorus. He paraphrases the first half (8 bars) of the written melody, and then basically improvises over the last 8 bars (bars 30-45). He uses this technique at the close of each A section as well. After stating the melody, he finishes with a short improvisation. Here's one example:

16 $B\flat-7$ $E\flat 7$ $A\flat-7$ $D\flat 7$

17 18

19 $G\flat Maj 7$ $B 7$ $F\sharp-7$

20 21

22 $B 7$ $F\sharp 7$ $B\flat 7$

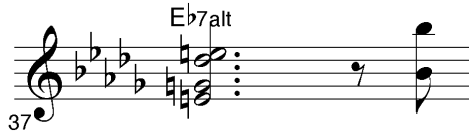
23 24

Harmonic Features

One of the aspects of Montgomery’s playing that I find consistently fascinating is his very sophisticated harmonic approach. This is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that the man did not read music. But he clearly heard everything and his harmonic concept is very much in line with his contemporaries. Although he doesn’t really play “outside” in this performance (i.e., outside the written harmony), he makes frequent use of upper structure harmony, sometimes referred to as polyharmony. This technique involves the superimposition of one chord upon another to enhance the richness of the harmony. For example, one might play a G major triad over a C major triad – in effect extending the C triad with the major 7 (B) and the ninth (D). For example at the end of the of the second and third A sections he uses this technique, playing a G major or dominant chord over $B\flat 7$ (bars 26-27 and bars 58-59, respectively):

58 59 60 $E\flat Maj 7$

Another example occurs in the first B section (bar 37) where he plays an A7 dominant chord over Eb7:



He also uses this very modern quartal harmonic figure in the sixth bar of the coda (bar 129):



Another harmonic feature of note is Montgomery, *et al*'s reharmonization of the tune's chord changes. If one compares the changes in the transcription (Appendix A) with the tune's original chord progression (Appendix B), some degree of harmonic departure is apparent. For example, the original changes for the first 8 bars of the bridge (if written in double-time feel) would be:

|| C-7b5 | F7 | Bb7 | Bb7 | C-7b5 | F7 | Bb7 | Bb7 ||

whereas Montgomery plays:

|| F#-7 | B7 | F-7 | Bb7 | F#-7 | B7 | F-7 | Eb7 ||

Conclusion

There is much that can be said about this performance – far more than would be practical to capture in a brief examination such as this. There are so many levels on which this recording can be explored, such as phrasing, placement of accents, dynamics,

etc., and each would doubtless yield untold rewards. I have merely tried to point out a few features of the piece that I find most interesting or significant and that I hope will enhance the listening experience.

I would suggest that, like all great interpreters of the jazz tradition, in going off the page, Montgomery finds new truths in the music; new ways of hearing familiar soundscapes. He overturns previously hidden corners of Monk's imagination and, in the process, shares with us a statement that is at once deeply personal and eternally universal.

NOTES

¹The organ combo was first popularized by the early recordings of organist Jimmy Smith. It is a small group format consisting of Hammond organ, guitar, drums, sometimes sax. The organist carries the bass line with the left hand or by "kicking pedals" or both.

² Notably Fred Sokolow's 1968 transcription which frames the entire performance in 12/8 meter.

³Although not really apparent in this recording which has few fast passages, Montgomery could play with tremendous velocity on up-tempo numbers.

⁴ It is interesting to note that the origination of this technique among pianists is usually attributed to Milt Buckner with whom Montgomery played in Lionel Hampton's band.

⁵ Monk's manager, Harry Colomby, believed that Monk may have written the tune when he was only 19 years old. (Gourse. 1997:15)

⁶Sometimes called an "outro" by jazz musicians.

⁷Montgomery also uses this melodic device on the later recording with Jimmy Smith, as well as the British television show.

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