The Jazz Style of Wes Montgomery

Wes Montgomery was one of the greatest jazz guitarists, one of the most recognizable, and one of the most influential.

In this short report, we will take a look at some of the key aspects of his style. A forewarning – some of these ideas may sound abstract and hard to understand in this short report. However, at the end, there will be a link to get more information including videos, which will further illuminate the ideas.

The thing that Wes is most famous for, is his use of octaves. Basically, he used the same octave shape all the time – just the ordinary octave shape that is created by skipping over one string. Of course, the shape changes slightly depending on what string we start on, and will either cover 3 frets or 4 frets.

One important nuance is to play with your thumb, doing downstrokes with the fleshy part of your finger. This will give you that authentic Wes sound.

An exercise you can do is to play a major scale in octaves. Because Wes got a very fluent sound using his octaves, you must also get fluent and practice your scales in octaves. For example, you can start with a G major scale.

Next, try taking some arpeggios, like a G maj7 arpeggio and playing that in octaves.

Next, let's talk about chord substitutions. Wes Montgomery made frequent use of 3 substitional devices, both for single lines, and chordal work.

These can be summarized as follows:

1. The mi7 over a Dom7 (II over I7)
2. The Dom7 over a mi7 (I7 over II)
3. the flat 5 substitution.

All substitutions are based on the common note principle – a substitute chord has
one or more notes in common with the original chord. Substitutes always have different names than the original chord. For example Gmi9 over C7 is a substitution, where C13 over C7 is an extension.

The more notes in common, the more readily the substitute can be used, the downside being that it will sound very similar to the original chord. The fewer the notes the chord has in common, the more careful we need to be. Ideally, those chords with two or three notes in common prove the most practical.

Here's a few specific techniques that Wes used for substitution:

1. Substitute the minor chord a 5th above or 4th below the give Dom7 chord (Gmi7 over C7)
2. Treat the Dom7 as the V of a II-V progression, then substitute the II chord.
3. Extend your Dom7 chords shapes to a 9th, then visualize the extension as part of a minor chord.

The flat-five (tritone) substitution is a standard be-bop device, and Wes incorporated this idea into every aspect of his playing, single-line soloing, comping, octaves, and even his compositions.

The basic principle is that a dominant chord, a flat fifth away from a given dominant chord can be used in its place. This works because both chords have 2 notes in common – the 7th becomes the 3rd and the 3rd becomes the 7th.

What about soloing? To get a characteristic Wes soloing sound, you can use the major scale and the major 7th arpeggio a tone below the Dominant 7 and Minor 7th chords.

Another classic sound is just to change all the Iis to Vs and vice versa. For example, playing G7 over Dmi7 or Dmi7 arpeggio over G7.

A third quintessential Wes soloing sound can be created by using the tritone arpeggio over a dominant chord, or going one step further, playing over the II of the flat 5 substitute.
And finally, another Wes Montgomery trick is to emphasize the 9th and the 11th when soloing over Dom7 and Minor 7 chords.

If you would like to learn more about the Wes Montgomery jazz style, as well as learning some key essentials of jazz guitar, and how to adopt jazz ideas into your blues playing, check out the following link:

www.essentialsofjazz.com/main.php