Jazz Guitarist Charlie Christian’s Influence on Wes Montgomery’s Improvisational Style

Using Imitation to Develop Innovation

Dr. Shawn Salmon
www.shawnsalmon.com/leeds
LIJEC, March 22, 2013
The Pursuit For Originality

• Paul Berliner writes in his book, *Thinking in Jazz*, that the pursuit of originality is a highly valued goal.
• Originality often corresponds to how well the artist moves through the stages of:

  *Imitation, Assimilation, and Innovation*

• Only a few elite artists actually pass from the imitation stage to innovator.
• Many remain sounding like the artist they choose to model themselves after.

The Need for a Model

“Every musician, until he has mastered himself and his instrument, needs a model…No artist creates in a vacuum, totally isolated from all influences, he must recognize his dependence upon his surroundings and upon his heritage; he must study the styles of accepted masters… Young musicians play records of their favorite musicians in order to absorb techniques and personal expressions… I wore out parts of Charlie Christian recordings.”

- Wes Montgomery from the introduction to the book Wes Montgomery: Jazz Guitar Method (1968)
Wes Montgomery’s Impact on Jazz

• Pat Metheny heard Wes Montgomery’s playing going beyond jazz. It left a “sonic residue that has pervaded all of music, not just jazz.”

• Jazz critic Ralph Gleason wrote that Wes was “the best thing that has happened to the guitar since Charlie Christian.”

• Jim Hall called Wes Montgomery “the rarest of all musicians, an innovator.”

Imitation, Assimilation, Innovation

How Does Imitation-Assimilation Help Creativity?

• Imitation helps artists learn traditions of jazz
• Traditions include stylistic traits like vocabulary, phrasing, tone, articulations, and technique
• Absorb (Assimilate) elusive musical attributes and experience periodic breakthroughs of self-awareness
• Begin to deliberately vary from ideas learned form imitating
• Develop the ability to choose alternatives
• Begin to cultivate the ability to precisely imagine ideas and immediately recreate them
Purpose and Process

- What unique characteristics in Wes Montgomery’s approach to dominant harmony can be traced back to his imitation of Charlie Christian
- Identify similarities in both guitarists’ melodic and harmonic treatment of dominant harmonies (V7, V7/__, ii-V, diminished)
- Compare usage of vocabulary, harmonic approach, and melodic content
- Examine ways Montgomery varied from Christian’s foundation

Five Main Aspects Compared

1. Scale Choices
2. Arpeggio Usage
3. Use of Chromatic Pitches
4. Formulas and Patterns
5. Harmonic Resolutions

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Charlie Christian

- Born, July 29, 1916, raised in Oklahoma City, OK
- Family was all musical, father was a guitarist and blind
- Was playing professionally 1934 age of 18, began experimenting with electric amplification
- 1937 purchased first electric guitar, Gibson ES-150
- August 1939, hired by Benny Goodman. Played and recorded extensively with the Goodman Sextet and some with the big band
- Died of complications with tuberculosis and pneumonia on March 2, 1942 at age of 26
- Total time performing and recording for mass audience was only about 18 months
Wes Montgomery

- Born John Leslie Montgomery, March 6, 1923, Indianapolis, IN
- Musical family, was bought a tenor guitar (4-strings) when he was 12.
- Bought first six-string guitar age of 20 after hearing Christian’s recording of “Solo Flight”
- Began learning Christian solos from recordings was playing solos in Club 440
- 1948-1950 works in the Lionel Hampton Big Band
- 1950-1957 returns to Indianapolis
- Dec. 30, 1957 records with brothers for first official session
- 1959 signs with Riverside, works professionally as guitarist
- 1964-1968 records more commercial music with Verve and A&M Records
- Dies June 15, 1968 of heart attack at the age of 45
Why Did Montgomery Choose Charlie Christian?

- It was Christian’s playing that inspired Montgomery to become a jazz guitarist. He listened to Les Paul and Django Reinhardt, but they were not playing anything new, “just guitar.”

- Was not interested in jazz guitar until hearing Christian play at the age of 20 (1943)

- “[Christian] said so much on the records I don’t care what instrument a cat played, if he didn’t understand and didn’t feel, and really didn’t get with the things that Charlie Christian was doing, he was a pretty poor musician…[Christian] was so far ahead.” – Wes Montgomery

- Montgomery stated that a guitarist needs someone to help him learn the guitar because “it’s hard to get something on your own.”

- Wes Montgomery could not read music

- Admits that “[he did not] know the chords from seeing their names on paper.” It was only after hearing them that he was able to “get the idea.”


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Scales

Favored arpeggios to scales. Both favored the Mixolydian Mode, but Montgomery used other scales to increase chromatic tension.

- **Christian** favored Mixolydian and often descended from root or ends on the root
- Did not favor ascending the scale

![Musical notation images]

- **Breakfast Feud, chorus 1, m. 7**
- **Shivers, chorus 1, m. 7**
- **Solo Flight, choruses 2, m. 31-33**
- **Honeysuckle Rose, m. 3-4**
- **Guy’s Got to Go, chorus 1, m. 18-19**

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- Did not favor ascending the scale

- **Montgomery** used Mixolydian, but rarely started on the root and would ascend and descend

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**Breakfast Feud, chorus 1, m. 7**

**Shivers, chorus 1, m. 7**

**Solo Flight, chorus 2, m. 31-33**

**West Coast Blues, chorus 1, m. 5-7**

**Missile Blues, chorus 2, m. 20**
Other Scales Used By Wes Montgomery
Melodic, Harmonic Minor, Diminished, Pentatonic

- Looked ways to create greater tension and more altered upper extensions

- Would ascend the scale, but leave one note out

\[ \text{Billie's Bounce, chorus 1, m. 10} \quad \text{Billie's Bounce, chorus 2, m. 21-22} \]

\[ \text{Four on Six, chorus 3, m. 39} \]

- Harmonic Minor

\[ \text{Yesterdays, chorus 1, m. 13-16} \]
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  Used **Altered Scale** (seventh mode of melodic minor)

  **Half-Whole Diminished Scale**

  **Lydian Dominant** (fourth mode of melodic minor)

- Used **Altered Scale** (seventh mode of melodic minor)

  - Billie's Bounce, chorus 1, m. 10
  - Billie's Bounce, chorus 2, m. 21-22
  - Missle Blues, chorus 2, m. 22-23

- Half-Whole Diminished Scale

- Lydian Dominant (fourth mode of melodic minor)

  - Yesterdays, chorus 1, m. 13-16
  - Airegin, chorus 2, m. 66-67
  - D-Natural Blues, chorus 2, m. 17

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Other Scales Used By Wes

Pentatonic and Blues

- Pentatonic scales not as strongly rooted in Christian’s playing. Wes would use a minor pentatonic with added chromatic passing tones (blue notes) natural-3rd and flat-5th regularly.

Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 1-6

Bock to Bock, chorus 2, m. 33-37

Billie's Bounce, chorus 1, m. 1-2

Billie's Bounce, chorus 2, m. 17-19

Billie's Bounce, chorus 1, m 5-7

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Arpeggios

Arpeggios widely used by both Christian and Montgomery
Both share strong resemblances in use of arpeggios.

Charlie Christian

- Arpeggiate up diminished triad or half-diminished seventh chord from the third of the dominant

Seven Come Eleven, chorus 1, m. 22
Solo Flight, chorus 4, m. 73-74
Arpeggios widely used by both Christian and Montgomery. Both share strong resemblances in use of arpeggios.

**Charlie Christian**

- Arpeggiate up diminished triad or half-diminished seventh chord from the third of the dominant

![Seven Come Eleven, chorus 1, m. 22](image1)

![Solo Flight, chorus 4, m. 73-74](image2)

- Favored resolving into the third via half step (7-3 resolution)

![Gone With "What" Wind, chorus 1, m.4-5, Chorus 2, m.17-18](image3)

![Honeysuckle Rose, chorus 1, m.22-23](image4)

- Outlined the ii chord, descending, to lead into 7-3 resolution

![Solo Flight, chorus 2, m. 25-26](image5)

![Benny's Bugle, chorus 1, m. 21](image6)

![Lips Flips, chorus 2, m. 45-46](image7)

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Wes Montgomery

- Also favored diminished and half-diminished arpeggiating up from the 3rd of dominant

- Fully diminished seventh arpeggio from the 3rd to accent flat-9th of the chord
Arpeggios

Wes Montgomery

- Also favored diminished and half-diminished arpeggiating up from the 3\textsuperscript{rd} of dominant

- Fully diminished seventh arpeggio from the 3\textsuperscript{rd} to accent flat-9\textsuperscript{th} of the chord

- Would also outline the ii chord and favored 7-3 resolution, Wes favored arpeggiating up the ii chord

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**Wes Montgomery**

- Would play up a major triad based on the third of the minor chord

![Musical notation](image1.png)  
Four On Six, chorus 3, m. 37

![Musical notation](image2.png)  
Missile Blues, chorus 1, m. 8

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Arpeggios

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\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Am7 (CMaj9)} & \quad \text{D7} \\
\text{Abm7 (Gm9)} & \quad \text{Db7}
\end{align*}
\]

Four On Six, chorus 3, m. 37

- Played major 7\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} arpeggio over the ii chord or ii-V progression, built on the flat-3\textsuperscript{rd} of the minor or flat-7\textsuperscript{th} of dominant

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Am7 (CMaj9)} & \quad \text{D7} \\
\text{Abm7 (Gm9)} & \quad \text{Db7}
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\]

Missile Blues, chorus 1, m. 8

Satin Doll, chorus 1, m. 13-14

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Arpeggios

Wes Montgomery

- Played major 7th and 9th arpeggios built off the flat-7th of the dominant (as if a ii chord was present)

Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 21

Bock to Bock, chorus 2, m. 53-54

West Coast Blues, chorus 2, m. 27-32

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Arpeggios

Wes Montgomery

- Played major 7th and 9th arpeggios built off the flat-7th of the dominant (as if a ii chord was present)

- Played the supertonic (ii chord) arpeggio over the V7 chord to create a suspension over the dominant chord

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Use of Chromatic Pitches

Both favored chromatic pitches as passing tones, but Wes also favored chromatic pitches for color tones

Charlie Christian

- Favored use of natural-7th (Dominant Bebop), flat-5th, and flat-9th (♭2) as passing tones, often jumped from the flat-7th to new note

- Flat-7th

  Flying Home, chorus 1, m.17-19

  Solo Flight, chorus 1, m. 15-16
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  Flying Home, chorus 1, m.17-19

- Flat-5th

  Solo Flight, chorus 3, m.37-38

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- Flat-7th
  - Flying Home, chorus 1, m.17-19

- Flat-5th
  - Solo Flight, chorus 3, m 37-38

- Combination
  - Grand Slam, chorus 2, m. 15-19
  - Wholly Cats, chorus 2, m.15-16
  - Solo Flight, chorus 1, m.5-6
Use of Chromatic Pitches

Wes Montgomery

• Would use the natural-7th (Bebop) similarly to Christian, rare that Wes would continue scale past flat-7th

Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 17

Missile Blues, chorus 1, m. 4-5

Missile Blues, chorus 6, m. 70-71

Missile Blues, chorus 1, m. 9-10

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Use of Chromatic Pitches

Wes Montgomery

- Play the dominant bebop over minor 7th chords

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<table>
<thead>
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<th>Bm7</th>
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<th>Dbm7</th>
<th>(Gb7)</th>
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<th>Dm7</th>
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<td>West Coast Blues, chorus 2, m. 37</td>
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Use of Chromatic Pitches

Wes Montgomery

- Play the dominant bebop over minor 7th chords

- Also used $b2$ as a passing tone
Use of Chromatic Pitches

Wes Montgomery

• Play the dominant bebop over minor 7th chords

![Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 27](image)
![West Coast Blues, chorus 2, m. 37](image)

• Also used b2 as a passing tone

![West Coast Blues, chorus 1, m. 8-9](image)
![Billie's Bounce, chorus 23, m. 18](image)

• Also began to use the altered second and other chromatic pitches as the melody

![Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 10](image)
![Airegin, chorus 1, m. 32](image)
![Airegin, chorus 2, m. 44](image)

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Use of Chromatic Pitches

- **Charlie Christian** did not extensively use the #11, but there are a few examples

  ![Solo Flight, chorus 1, m. 8-10](image1)

- **Wes Montgomery** would use the #11 more in solos and compositions

  ![Four on Six, melody, m. 5-8](image2)

  ![Four on Six, chorus 5, m. 69-72](image3)

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Formulas and Patterns

Christian heavily relied on several patterns in his solos
Two patterns that were very prominent in Christian’s and Montgomery’s playing

- R-b3-3-5 (Second Tonic Formula) mostly favored over tonic chords, as well as over dominant


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Formulas and Patterns

Christian heavily relied on several patterns in his solos.
Two patterns that were very prominent in Christian’s and Montgomery’s playing:

- **R-b3-3-5 (Second Tonic Formula)** mostly favored over tonic chords, as well as over dominant

  ![G7](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
  Gone With "What" Wind, chorus 1, m. 1-4

  ![B♭7](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
  Benny’s Bugle, chorus 1, m. 7-10

- **Wes Montgomery** added or used the formula in new ways. Theme and Variation

  ![E♭m7(♭5)](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
  D-Natural Blues, chorus 2, m. 18-25

  ![B7](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
  Montgomeryland Funk, chorus 3, m.35


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Enclosure

5-4-b3-3 (First Tonic Formula)

- 5-4-b3-3 formula could also be labeled an enclosure. Jerry Coker defines an enclosure as a “linear or melodic device in which an object note is approached by both the upper and lower leading tones.”

- Christian regularly used enclosures to connect phrases and momentarily delay resolutions

![Benny's Bugle, chorus 1, m.1-3](image1)

![Flying Home, chorus 1, m.7-8](image2)

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• Christian would combine 1st and 2nd Formulas

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  ![Bb7](image1)  
  Benny’s Bugle, chorus 1, m.1-3

  ![Eb](image2)  
  Flying Home, chorus 1, m.7-8

- Christian would combine 1st and 2nd Formulas

  ![Bb7](image3)  
  Charlie Christian playing Benny's Bugle, chorus 1, m. 7-10

- Christian’s formula was not set in stone for him

  ![Ab](image4)  
  Shivers, chorus 1, m. 13-14

  ![Bb](image5)  
  Honeysuckle Rose, chorus 1, m.31-32

  ![C7](image6)  
  Six Appeal, chorus 1, m. 7-8

  ![Bb7](image7)  
  Seven Come Eleven, chorus 1, m.23-24

  ![Ab](image8)  
  Chorus 1, m.29-32

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• Wes Montgomery would used both “first” and “second” tonic formulas similarly to Christian’s usage. Often combining the two as Christian modeled

West Coast Blues, chorus 4, m. 72-74
- Wes Montgomery would use both “first” and “second” tonic formulas similarly to Christian’s usage. Often combining the two as Christian modeled.

- Wes Montgomery combines both formulas in conjunction with quoting the melody of “Air Mail Special” in the second chorus of his solo in “Missile Blues”.

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Enclosure

Wes Montgomery

• Montgomery changed Christian’s pattern by one note

• Montgomery’s Enclosure Pattern 5-4-2-b3-3-5

![Musical notation images](Bb7, F7, Dbm7, F#7)

- Montgomeryland Funk, chorus 2, m. 17
- Montgomeryland Funk, chorus 1, m. 3
- Airegin, chorus 1, m. 12

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Enclosure

Wes Montgomery

- Montgomery changed Christian’s pattern by one note

- Montgomery’s Enclosure Pattern 5-4-2-b3-3-5

- Enclose other notes besides the 3rd and use them in extended sequences

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Harmonic Resolutions

Montgomery appears to have been influenced by Christian’s strong usage of resolving by a half-step into the 3rd on a strong beat. (7-3)

Charlie Christian

Benny’s Bugle, chorus 1, m. 21

Outlines ii chord exactly the same

Honeysuckle Rose, chorus 1, m. 23-24

Wes Montgomery

Montgomeryland Funk, chorus 3, m. 28-29

Satin Doll, chorus 1, m. 32

Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 23

Bock to Bock, chorus 1, m. 7

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Wes with Lionel Hampton (1948)

Adam Blew His Hat

- Begins by arpeggiating an EbMaj7 over the Cm7 in m.1
- Over the few dominant harmonies Wes seems to favor descending with a scale (m. 2 and 6)
- The flat-2nd on a strong beat in m. 3 as a passing tone
- M. 7 he arpeggiates up an EMaj7 over the F#7-B7
- Anticipates the D7 in m. 8 and plays the b3-3-5 motive, hints at second tonic formula

Video

Adam Blew His Hat, Wes Montgomery with the Lionel Hampton Jazz Orchestra, Recorded July 1, 1948
Wes with Lionel Hampton (1948)

Brant Inn Boogie

- Raised b3-3 in m. 3, 4 and 14 (anticipation)
- Natural 7th as a passing tone in m. 4 (dominant bebop scale) played in descending order
- Surrounds the root m. 7 and 14, surrounds the 7th (C) in m. 17
- Makes strong use of the G minor pentatonic scale (m.9-13), use of rhythmic sequence
- Arpeggiates up at C7 over the D7 (possible V – IV harmonic substitution or suspending the D7)

Video

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Innovation-Reshaping Traditions

• Paul Rinzer writes that jazz traditions are the foundation meant to provide a repository for possibilities yet to be discovered by the improviser.
• Imitation allowed Montgomery to learn the traditions of jazz and jazz guitar.
• Montgomery did not let traditions finalize him as a guitarist.
• Then able to assimilate them with his own insights, personality, and experiences.
• Wes states that as the period of imitation progresses “the beginning player will hear a little difference in his [or her] playing, and that little inspiration is enough to go further.”
• Montgomery’s innovations were “little differences” to the traditions he was assimilating from Christian.
• Small changes lead to more choices for more alternatives and possibilities.
• These alternatives would become new traditions for others to imitate, assimilate, and innovate upon.

Chronological List of Recordings Used for Study

Charlie Christian

• “Seven Come Eleven” with The Benny Goodman Sextet, recorded November 22, 1939
• “Honeysuckle Rose” with The Benny Goodman Orchestra, recorded November 22, 1939
• “Flying Home” with The Benny Goodman Sextet, recorded October 2, 1939
• “Shivers” with The Benny Goodman Sextet, recorded December 20, 1939
• “Gone With ‘What’ Wind” with The Benny Goodman Sextet, recorded February 7, 1940
• “Grand Slam (Boy Meets Goy)” with The Benny Goodman Sextet, recorded April 14, 1940
• “Wholly Cats” with The Benny Goodman Septet, recorded November 7, 1940
• “Benny’s Bugle” with The Benny Goodman Septet, recorded November 7, 1940
• “Breakfast Feud” with The Benny Goodman Septet, recorded January 15, 1941
• “Solo Flight” with The Benny Goodman Orchestra, recorded March 4, 1941
• “Guy’s Got to Go” recorded live at Minton’s Playhouse May 1941
• “Lips Flips” recorded live at Minton’s Playhouse May 1941
Chronological List of Recordings Used for Study

Wes Montgomery

- “Adam Blew His Hat” with The Lionel Hampton Orchestra, recorded July 1, 1948
- “Brant Inn Boogie” with The Lionel Hampton Orchestra, recorded June 21, 1948
- “Bock to Bock” and “Billie’s Bounce” recorded December 30, 1957
  Originally released on the album *The Montgomery Brothers and Five Others* (World Pacific WP 1240).
- “Montgomeryland Funk” recorded April 18, 1958
  Originally released on the album *The Montgomery Brothers- Wes, Buddy, and Monk Montgomery* (Pacific Jazz PJ 17)
- “Missile Blues” and “Satin Doll” recorded October 5, 1959
- “Yesterdays” and “Ecaroh” recorded October 6, 1959
- “Airegin,” “D-Natural Blues,” and “Four on Six” recorded January 26, 1960
  Originally released on the album *The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery* (Riverside OJCCD-036-2).
- “West Coast Blues” recorded January 28
  Originally released on the album *The Incredible Jazz Guitar of Wes Montgomery* (Riverside OJCCD-036-2).
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