



greene on montgomery

Exploring Movin' Wes Track by Track

By Ted Greene



I'd like to propose an experiment: Listen to *Movin' Wes* [Verve] one track at a time, and make a few mental notes about what you hear. Then, after each track, come back and read my impressions on this landmark 1964 album—a release that is certainly my choice for essential Wes listening.

It is my gentle request that you turn up the volume a bit so you can really hear Wes' thumb hit the strings—as well as the sometimes explosive, other times liquid-like front end of each note. You'll also fully appreciate the new, fuller tone that he achieved in the studio. Unlike some of his prior albums, on *Movin' Wes* the top strings are no longer thin-sounding or choked off, and the chords are not distorted or muffled.

“Caravan”

For the first time on record, Wes is heard with those fat, honey-toned Gibson P.A.F. humbuckers turned wide open in the space of a truly fine studio. The resulting tone borders on the deliriously great—especially from the beginning of his solo onwards.

“People”

Initially, this quiet cut feels like somewhat of a letdown after the burning excitement of “Caravan.” But about halfway through, a joyful double-time canvas appears for Wes to throw down one of his patented happy-feeling solos. The occasional bubbling bursts of triplets are a hallmark of his style.

His note choices are simply wonderful. For example, notice the three-note repeated figure at the end of his solo. Wes doesn't change the beautifully chosen notes, $G\sharp$, $D\sharp$, and $C\sharp$, as the chord changes from $B13$ to $Emaj7$ because he knows they will sound great over *both* chords. He lowers the notes a half-step when the next chord, $B\flat13$, arrives. Perfect.

As the chords disappear, he plays one of his favorite arpeggio types: a dominant $13\flat9$ ($B\flat13\flat9$ in this case), followed by some extended major chords with George Van Eps-influenced inner voice motion. Still more: a gorgeous-toned $E\flatmaj13$ and, finally, another Wes specialty—his “floating thirds.” Have thirds ever sounded this pretty?

“Movin' Wes—Part I”

Notice how Wes locks in with the rhythm section during his solo—especially during the last half? How about those quick, stuttering octaves? And that chord solo—yow! Beginning with bluesy melodic phrases (and voicings) reminiscent of one of his very favorite guitarists, Kenny Burrell, the chord ideas soon take off into the stratosphere we affectionately call “Montgomeryland.” Only Wes lived there—no one else *could*—and he worked very hard to be able to play like this.

“Moca Flor”

This track features one of the most melodic chord solos we may ever hear. Did you notice that he doesn't solo in single lines or octaves on this one, only in chords? The final five to ten seconds of the solo are classic

Wes, with a wild, pulsing series of ascending $A7\flat9$ chords, each preceded by a similar chord a half-step lower. If you've never heard him play a passage like this before, it can be quite a thrill.

“Matchmaker”

Here's a great jazz waltz feel on a song normally played as a regular waltz. For whatever reason, Wes never fully opens up here. Also, his guitar's volume and tone controls seem to have been turned down a shade or two. Could you tell? But our man with the golden thumb seems to be having a lot of fun anyway. He bounces around the chord changes, adding an $E\sharp$ into the key of $E\flat$ at just the right moments—such as on the VI chord, $C7\flat9$ —where he *knows* it will sound delicious.

“Movin' Wes—Part II”

This chord progression is trickier than it sounds—it's all Dorian-derived except for the beautiful Mixolydian second section. The rhythm is a driving straight-eighths Latin groove—a feel that was virtually nonexistent in the jazz world just one decade before this record was made. Wes tosses off his unique galloping octave figures with deceptive ease, charging ahead in places and laying way behind the beat in others.

“Senza Fine”

With its dreamy modulations from the key of A to F —and a little bit of the key of D —this is a really fine chord progression for Wes to solo over. He eats the chord changes for breakfast in many spots. He gets stuck for one little moment right before the section in D , but, being the great performer he is, the show goes on and he gets off some of his very best phrases.

“Theodora”

This song is a virtual clinic on the art of jazz guitar in a ballad setting. What makes his playing so great on this track? First and foremost: tone. The full, liquid tone is back after being a bit more subdued on the last few tracks. His initial single notes are huge pools of beauty that suspend glimmering in the air. This is the romantic Wes.

Then there are those gorgeous chords—almost dripping wet, and about as beautiful as a guitar can get. It's not that the voicings are unusual; they're common jazz guitar shapes. Wes only knew maybe 70 chords, tops, but he said more with them than anyone else I've ever heard. His touch was perfect; his phrasing expressed as if every single sound he made mattered.

And there's his solo: a non-stop thrill ride where his extraordinarily quick thumb is matched by a mind just raining down notes. And not just any old notes, but really wonderful ones, capped off by those amazing showers at the very end of the cut. After all these years, I still feel it's almost impossible that anyone could be this good. But you heard it yourself—he *was*.

I'll leave you to explore the album's final three tracks on your own. I hope you'll continue to listen to, and study, this album. Studying Wes' music can improve your playing and musicianship in so many ways. ■

Chord chemist Ted Greene is a legendary teacher and the author of several jazz guitar books.