

When Wes Montgomery had become a famous musician--selling millions of records, copping all the charts, winning all the awards--he often candidly remarked to reporters, "You should've heard me when I was really playing."

He may have meant like on this album (though he had no idea these tracks had been preserved for posterity). For here Wes' playing is perfection itself, perhaps because of the exceptional audience ambiance. And long after folks have forgotten most of this recent pop hits, the world will remember how Wes wrung--and swung--every essence of emotion out of *Willow Weep For Me*.

For reasons best known to the composer-lyricist, Ann Ronell (who also wrote the antithetical *Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Wolf?*), the title song of this album was originally dedicated to George Gershwin -- that other musician who came up the hard way, gave the world a great gift, and died too young.

Most people don't know about this dedication: it's a fact that has evidently escaped the Gershwin biographers and even the trivia collectors. Musicians do discuss it (they've seen it on the sheet music at some time or other and it stuck.) But I doubt whether Wes Montgomery had Gershwin on his mind that summer evening when he and Wynton went through the tune. His playing is too happy. If there were any tears flowing from this *Willow*, they were tears of joy from all present at the joyful meeting of one of the world's great guitarists and the powerful piano trio of Wynton Kelly.

Certainly, no one there in the summer of '65 dreamed that three years later Wes would be gone. At the age of 43.

In the summer of '68, shortly after Wes' death, Verve Records discovered these previously unreleased tapes. Like Wes and Wynton's album, *Smokin' At The Half Note* (V6-8633), these

seven selections were recorded during their brief booking together at a famous jazz--and jazzman's--hangout in Greenwich Village.

The Half Note is one of the last remaining landmarks of a legendary era. A real "jazz joint": a room where people come to hear jazz, and actually *listen*.

For a buck, you can have a beer at the bar while you listen to Zoot and Al. Gary McFarland's probably sitting on the next stool, with Blossom and Mingus and maybe even Mathis scattered at the tables. On any evening, several "names" will stop by. And occasionally, Carmen or Chris will step up and sing a set.

The point is, when Wes and Wynton sat down and dug in, they knew they were playing for *their* people. And they *played*--perhaps heavier than you've ever heard them.

In addition to the tremendously touching title tune, these are all memorable, magnificent performances of the kind of music Wes loved best.

A Portrait of Jennie (which, like *Gone With The Wind* and *Wives and Lovers*, is not from the movie of the same name) is especially exciting in that it was completely spontaneous and unrehearsed. A customer at the club requested the song, Wes and Wynton both knew it, so they blew it. The result is one of the rare recordings of this beautiful ballad, and a supreme testament to that much-talked-about *thumb* of Wes Montgomery.

Here you'll hear that mellow sound, with the melody in octaves, that was later to become Wes' trademark. And you'll hear something more, something Wes (presumably assisted by a more commercially-minded A&R man) subsequently dropped from his

style.

Wes was an explorer. He liked to experiment with the electronic effects available on the amplified guitar. The sound on *Jennie*, for example, is very “vibes” and at times Wes’ octaves sound like the whole Shearing quintet on a good day. As you go through the album, you’ll notice other “strange” sounds coming from Wes’ corner. On *Impressions* (if the changes sound familiar, try Miles’ title *So What?*) there’s something that sounds like a sax. Zoot sitting in? No, that’s Wes again. Try getting that tone plucking the strings with a plectrum.

On *Oh! You Crazy Moon*, Wes achieves a startling wide reverb that would be considered avant-garde even on today’s “progressive rock” records. And on *Misty*, we hear really rare Montgomery; almost unamplified, playing a single-note chorus before he finally slides into those famous octaves; a bit of humor on the last bridge (oh why did jazz have to lose its wit?); and a closing cadenza that would make most of the current guitarists turn green.

Now, about the horns.

No, they were not hidden there at the Half Note, squeezed in between the washroom and the weed machine. They were added later, and Wes’ fans will welcome the additions.

Wes’ himself used to complain that he felt a little constricted with all his arrangements written out. But this record remedies that: Wes work came first, free as the wind. With Wynton, Paul and Jimmy just playing for all they’re worth. Nothing written. Moreover, the horn charts were totally derived from what they’re doing. The orchestrations are merely an enlargement of what four guys laid down three years ago in that musty room.

Of course the purists will still protest--at least *prior* to listening.

We direct their attention to the aforementioned album (same quartet, same summer) and to the three tracks on this album untouched by Gross Gimmickry. On *Surrey With The Fringe On Top*, *Four On Six* (a Wes original) and especially on *Impressions* you'll get all of Wes and Wynton winging it that you can take. These are priceless performances that should make any purist proud to own this collection.

When I was in the Army, I used to spend my weekends at a club in Indianapolis where Wes had worked back in the '40s. Most of the musicians who had played with him were still there. They had watched his career closely, seen him become a "star." And they had listened to his records all along the line.

They were not impressed.

"Man, if you want to hear Wes, you should have heard him right here. Behind that bar. When he was *really* playing."

They'll think twice about that now. When they hear this album. Wes never played better in his life than he did during his days at the Half Note. Behind that bar. With his friends. Like back home at the 440 Club.

Wes Montgomery, like Gershwin, gave the world a great gift. There will never be another guitarist like him. But young men will continue to try as long as his music is made available as something to study and strive toward. In albums like this, made the way Wes would have made it if he were still with us.

Wes Montgomery is dead.
Long live Wes Montgomery.

--*Richard Lamb*