WEEK OF JULY 6, 1968

THE AFRO-AMERICAN

MAGAZINE SECTION

KING OF THE JAZZ GUITAR

HE COULDN'T READ MUSIC

WES MONTGOMERY

Charlie Christian has been called "The father of the jazz guitar." He introduced the electric guitar as a solo instrument during the early 1940's while playing with the famed Benny Goodman sextet of that period.

Christian's contribution to the jazz scene has never been questioned nor his unique playing style which helped to form the Bop Idiom.

His music inspired many aspiring guitarists. Some of whom were destined to become greater than he in later years. One of them was to become the best jazz guitarist of this decade, Wes Montgomery.

Now Wes Montgomery is dead.

21 years

He died of a heart attack at age 45.

Like hundreds of musicians Wes Montgomery spent almost his entire musical life in obscurity. He began playing the guitar 21 years before winning his first major award for his playing.

The beautiful playing of Charlie Christian captivated Montgomery when he was 19 and already a husband and father; he had gotten his academic schooling in Columbus, Ohio; but had never had a music lesson.

$350

So knowing nothing more about music than that he liked the sound of Charlie Christian's guitar, Wes Montgomery saved $350 and bought his first electric guitar.

He was determined to learn to " . . . play like Charlie Christian." It may be just as well that Montgomery had had no formal training as what Christian was playing had never been taught anyway.

Prior to Christian the guitar was nothing more than a supportive instrument confined to cording but he broke the barrier and used it as a single-note solo instrument.

8 Months

Montgomery studied the sound diligently. He bought every record Christian could be heard on and memorized every single note. He strummed away his lunch hours at work and at home he plunked away into the wee hours.

He learned fast and just eight months after buying the guitar he was booked to work at the 440 Club in Indianapolis.

Since Christian was the only precedent there was no limit to what could be done with the guitar as a solo instrument. Wes Montgomery was determined to do everything possible.

After four years of playing in Indianapolis he was hired by Lionel Hampton to tour with his band. For two years Montgomery crisscrossed the country with the Hampton aggregation but then grew homesick and returned to his family.

Callouses

Several years were to pass before Wes Montgomery would take up the guitar professionally again. He hadn't become famous while with Hampton. Outside of his home town he was virtually unknown.

A few critics who followed big bands were inclined to mention that Hampton had a curious guitarist who played the electric guitar without the aid of a pick. The result being that the tips of Wes Montgomery's playing fingers were heavily calloused.

When Montgomery returned to jazz it was 1959.

His brothers Buddy and Monk were out in San Francisco putting together an outfit called the "Mastersounds".

Mastersounds

Wes joined them and though there was no great financial success they became popular in and around San Francisco.

The Mastersounds made a few recordings. One of them was an album which included the standard "On Green Dolphin Street".

It was this performance which introduced the genius of Wes Montgomery to jazz buffs throughout the land.

His delicate handling of the melody and effortless control of the octaves so fascinated Julian Cannonball Adderley that the famed saxophonist raved of the fine guitarist for days.

The sound of Wes Montgomery had cut a tiny niche for itself in the granite of fame but still several years would pass before it would become large enough to notice.

Grammy

It was 1966. Wes Montgomery had recorded an album titled "Going Out Of My Head" and he was suddenly large enough to notice.

He won the Grammy Award for this album. It was the best instrument jazz performance of the year.

Success had touched Wes Montgomery. Critics raved about the "new sensation" and within six months he had bookings for a solid 12 months in TV, nightclub and show appearances.

No. 1

His subsequent recordings of "California Dreaming" and "Windy" were phenomenal hits both outsold his first big hit.

At his death his album "A Day In The Life" was still number one on the Billboard chart of best selling jazz albums. It has been there 37 consecutive weeks and sold more than 250,000 copies.

THE BROTHERS

Born in Indianapolis on March 6, 1923, Wes Montgomery was one of three brothers. The other two being Buddy and Monk. The Montgomery Brothers were three of the famed Wes Montgomery Quintet. What would ordinarily be a handicap served as an asset for Wes Montgomery: he became one of the world's great musicians while not being able to read a single note of music.

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COMING SOON: THE SOUL SCHOOL

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