

SOME JAZZ GUITARISTS I LOVE

by Garry Lee*

I am inspired to write this essay after reading my friend Ian Muldoon's essay "I'll String Along With You: Some Guitar Players" on Eric Myers's website**. Ian wrote subjectively and chronologically on many outstanding jazz guitarists. However he left out some significant players. Ian is entitled to do so as it was his subjective response to the guitar in jazz, and the jazz he is passionate about. [Having talked and drunk with Ian at 2am in the morning in a rented house in Beechworth whilst attending the Wangaratta Jazz Festival, I can assure the reader Ian is nothing if not passionate on jazz].

So my subjective essay concerns four jazz guitarists Ian did not cover. These four are Kenny Burrell, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass and Grant Green. For different reasons, I love their playing.

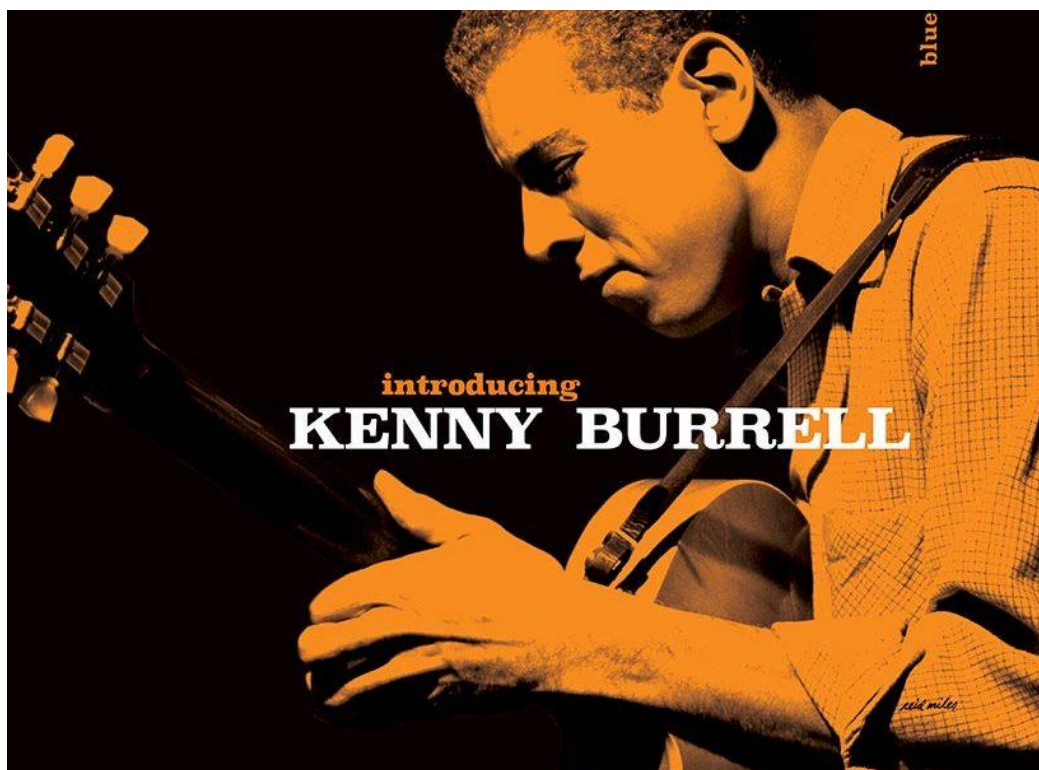


**Garry Lee took up guitar in 1968 and was immediately attracted to jazz guitar. Living in Sydney until 1983, Garry studied with George Golla and jammed with Johnny Nicol. He led bands in Sydney with guitarists frequently guesting. These included Peter Boothman, Ned Sutherland, Graham Cox and Steve Murphy. He is better known as a jazz vibes player, taking up the vibes soon after guitar but has included some guitar on his CDs of mainly original compositions. As an initiative of the WA Jazz Coordination Program, Garry as jazz coordinator co-founded the Jazz Guitar Society of WA in 1989 and contributes a regular article to the Society's bi-monthly online newsletter. Garry continues performing and teaching on both guitar and vibraphone pledging to do so until the money runs out.*

**Ian Muldoon's essay "I'll String Along With You: Some Guitar Players" can be read on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-75>*

I will start with **Kenny Burrell** – KB [born Detroit July 31 1931]. I heard KB almost nightly on Arch McKirdy’s “Music to Midnight” or “Relax With Me”. This program on ABC radio was a major part of my jazz listening education from the late 1960s and into the 1970s continuing with Ian Neil, Ralph Rickman, Jim McLeod and now Mal Stanley [but online]. KB’s recording of *I’m A Fool To Want You* was McKirdy’s theme but at the time I did not realize it was KB.

KB has been one of the most enduring guitarists in the history of jazz. His recording career as a leader commenced in 1956 with the Blue Note release *Introducing Kenny Burrell* with his most recent release coming in 2016 some 60 years later. In fact he recorded with Dizzy Gillespie in the early 1950s. Significantly KB pioneered the guitar/bass/drums line-up in the 1950s/60s therefore often recording without another chordal instrument such as piano or organ.



With such a long career there are so many recordings but I especially enjoy *Kenny Burrell and John Coltrane* [1958], *Midnight Blue* [1963] and *Blues: The Common Ground* [1967/68].

KB was prolific as a sideman recording with an amazing array of jazz and soul/blues legends including Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles, Milt Jackson, Coleman Hawkins, Billie Holiday, Chet Baker, BB King and over 25 albums with Jimmy Smith. [Smith also recorded with other guitarists including Wes Montgomery, Grant Green and George Benson]. I heard KB live with Jimmy Smith in the early 1970s and again in the mid-1980s. I also heard him and met him in Perth with the Philip Morris Super Band in 1990.



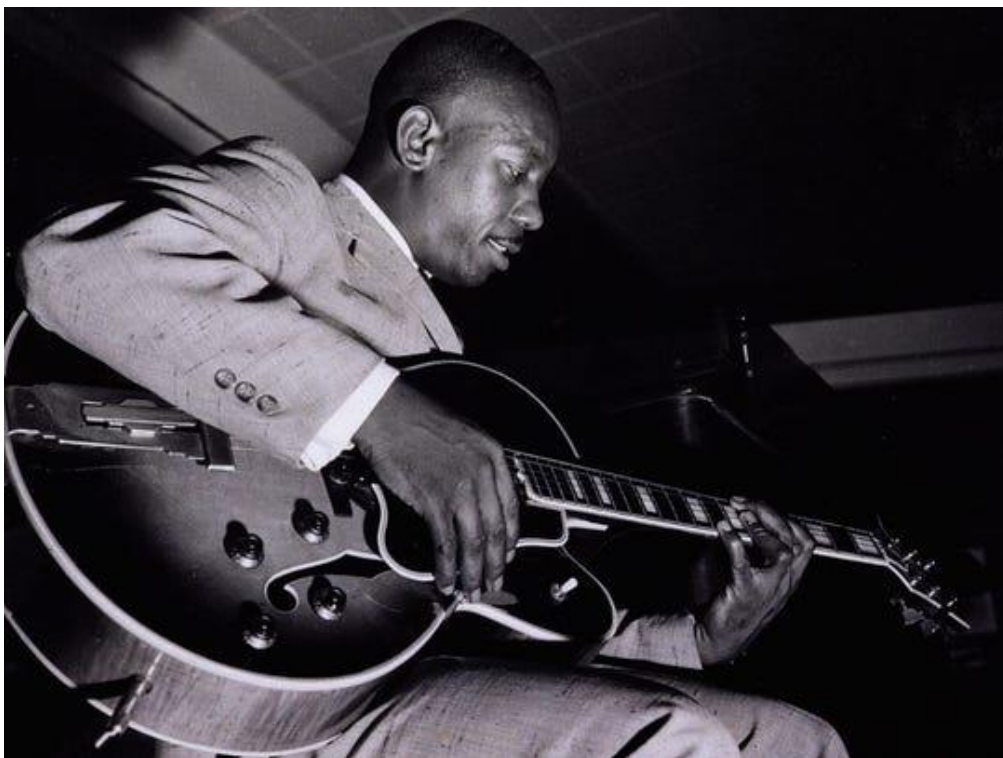
Organist Jimmy Smith & Kenny Burrell: 25 albums together... PHOTO CREDIT FRANCIS WOLFF

KB loved the music of Duke Ellington and from 1978 presented a program at UCLA – “Ellingtonia”. KB was the favourite jazz guitarist of Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and BB King. I always loved the way he could make the changes but the blues were never far away.



The cover of Burrell's album "Ellington Is Forever": Burrell was Ellington's favourite guitarist...

It is probable that **Wes Montgomery** [born Indianapolis March 6 1923; died June 15 1968] is one of the most influential jazz guitarists of all time. Technically the unusual thing about Wes is that he eschewed the pick for his thumb. This means up strokes and therefore some form of alternate picking – down stroke/up stroke - is very difficult. Jim Hall joked that he once spent a week trying to catch Wes's thumb in a car door. Playing with the thumb does provide a warmer tone and Wes used this to great effect in popularizing the use of octaves in his playing. He recorded pop tunes of the day towards the end of his short life playing them in octaves. These include Beatles' tunes and his successful hit record *Going Out Of My Head*. Typically he was attacked in his lifetime for “selling out” but he had to make a living. He was married with seven children. Unknowingly Wes probably created a new jazz sub-genre – “smooth jazz guitar” – with his relaxed, blues-inflected use of octaves.



Wes Montgomery: probably one of the most influential jazz guitarists of all time...DOWNBEAT ARCHIVES PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Wes hated flying and would travel from gig to gig by car. He composed many tunes in a Latin/rock style playing the melody in octaves and I can imagine these tunes found their genesis as Wes is playing guitar in the back seat of a typical American “yank tank”. Tunes like *Bumping on Sunset, Up and At It, Angel, Goin' on to Detroit, Mellow Mood* and *Road Song* all could have been composed while travelling in a car.

However Wes could burn at any swing tempo as for example on his live recordings with Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb. Tunes like *No Blues, Unit 7*, his own composition *Four on Six* and his incredible take on Trane's *Impressions* show a mastery of single note, octaves and block chord techniques that have never been surpassed. After guesting with John Coltrane at the Monterey Jazz Festival, Trane actually invited Wes to join his band.



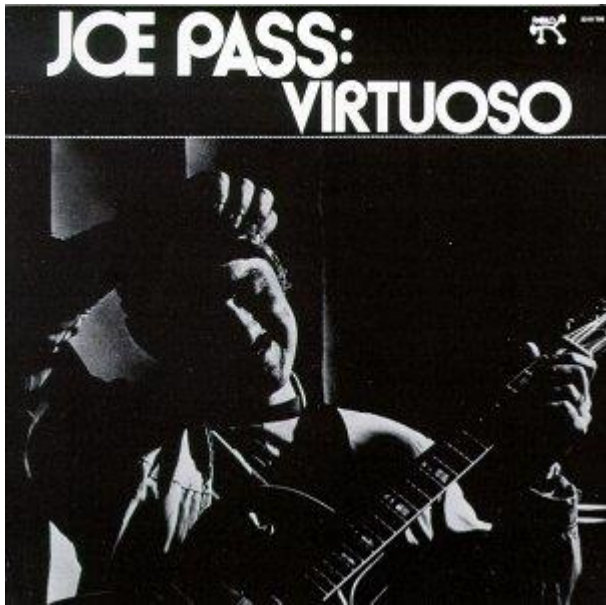
Montgomery & John Coltrane together on stage in 1961: after guesting with John Coltrane at Monterey Jazz Festival, Trane actually invited Wes to join his band...

Wes' first influence was Charlie Christian. He learnt all Christian's solo and went on the road with Lionel Hampton in the late 1940s. However Wes has influenced all jazz guitarists after him including Pat Metheny, John Scofield and Pat Martino who released *Remember: A Tribute to Wes Montgomery* on Blue Note in 2006.



Pat Martino: he released "Remember: A Tribute to Wes Montgomery" on Blue Note in 2006...

Joe Pass [born 13 January 1929; died 23 May 1994] was an incredibly accomplished jazz guitarist who may be best remembered for his solo jazz guitar albums commencing with *Virtuoso* in 1973.

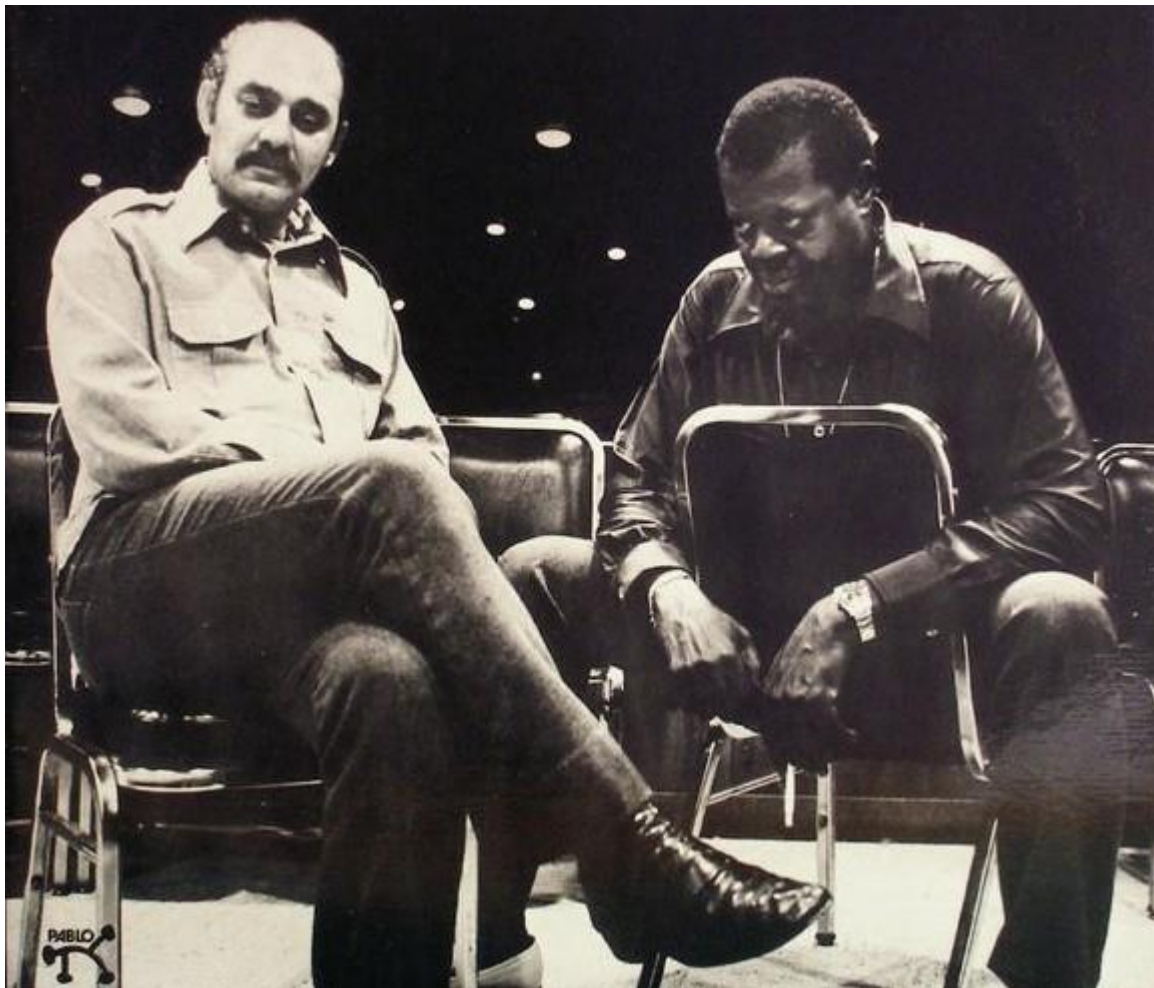


On his last visit to Australia, shortly before he died, he performed in Perth and, with Ian Macgregor [co-founder of Jazz Guitar Society of Western Australia and leading jazz guitar historian], I drove Joe around Perth. He was quite cantankerous but also apologetic. It seems he was in pain most of the time. This trip to Perth coincided with a visit by British jazz guitarist, Martin Taylor, and the two jammed together at WAAPA.



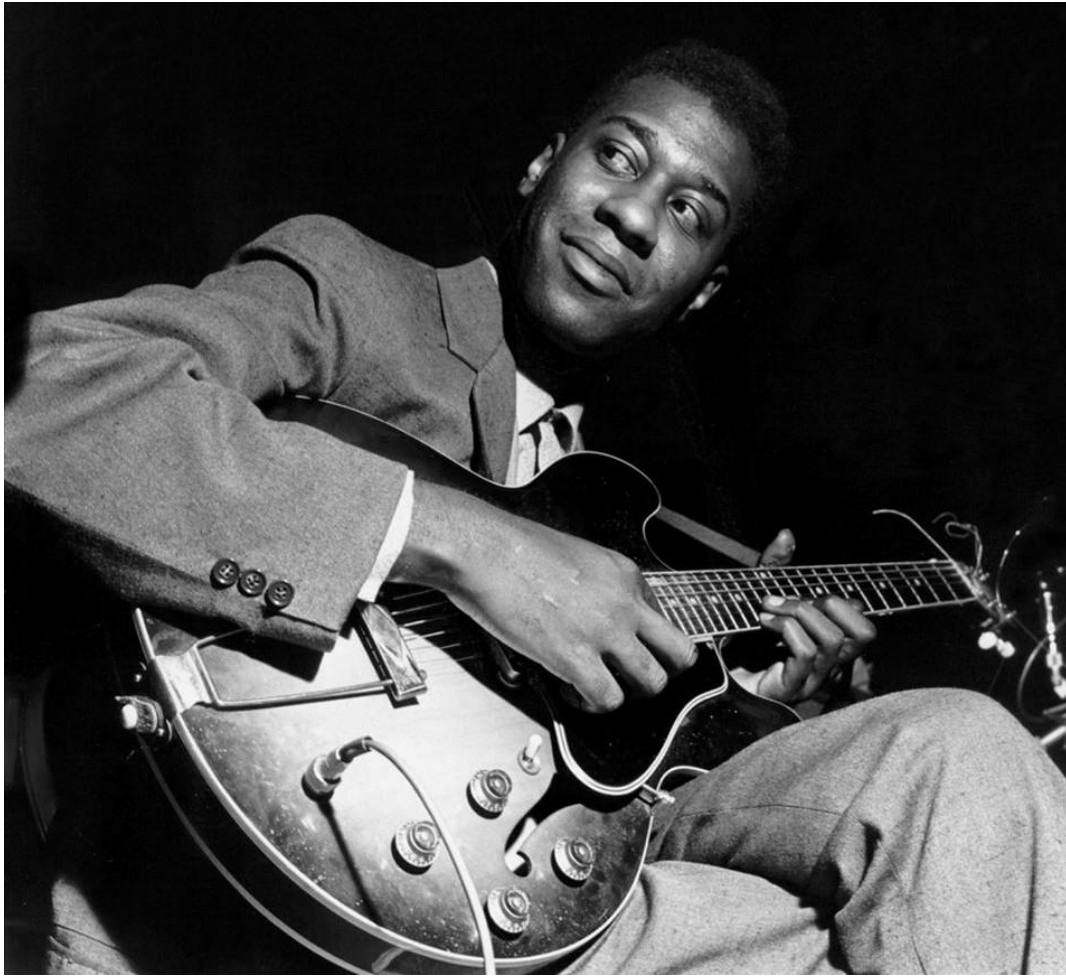
Martin Taylor (left) and Joe Pass on stage together in 1992... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Joe recorded many duo albums with Ella Fitzgerald, bassist Niels-Henning Orsted Pederson and fellow guitarists, Herb Ellis and John Pisano. He also recorded 16 albums with the great Oscar Peterson and I recall attending a concert in the 1970s at Sydney Opera House where they performed as a duo. *The Big 3* is a trio album led by Milt Jackson with Ray Brown and Joe, and the album *Quadrant* is this trio plus drummer Mickey Roker. These albums show Pass at his best playing in a blues-inflected, bebop, mainly single-note style in the company of musicians who defined this idiom.



Joe Pass (left) and Oscar Peterson: they recorded 16 albums together...

“Odd as it seems, **Grant Green** [born 6 June 1935; died 31 January 1979] is simultaneously one of the most and least celebrated guitarists in jazz history” wrote David Adler in *JazzTimes* 1 August 2018. There is no doubt Green is the least known of my four favourites. I first heard Grant on an album as a sideman to tenor saxophonist, Jimmy Forrest, called *Black Forrest* in the early 1970s. His sound, touch, feel for the blues and hard swinging converted me immediately. Like Wes [who died aged 45], Grant only lived for 43 years. Like Wes he came to prominence in the early 1960s after moving to New York from his native St Louis. However unlike Wes who arrived aged in his late 30s, Grant was aged in his mid-20s and therefore of



*Grant Green: he only lived for 43 years, like Wes Montgomery, who died at 45...
PHOTO CREDIT FRANCIS WOLFF, COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS*

similar age to many other significant players emerging in the early 1960s. Green came to the attention of Blue Note and in the three years – 1961/62/63 – played as a sideman on a massive 51 recordings. Between 1960 and 1965 he also recorded 22 albums as a leader. However many of these were not released until after Green's death and then to CD as the cost of CD manufacture was far less than for vinyl. Grant Green recorded with an array of the leading players of the 1960s including Lee Morgan, Joe Henderson, Hank Mobley, Bobby Hutcherson, McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, Sonny Clark, Elvin Jones and Billy Higgins as all were part of the Blue Note stable.

The late 1960s became a problematic time for jazz. British pop music spearheaded by The Beatles [Green recorded their *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* in 1965], a young black audience increasingly attracted to Motown and soul music leading to Miles Davis going electric, was creating uncertainty for the future of jazz. Wes Montgomery's commercial recordings showed a possible way forward – record pop tunes but play jazz in live performance. So when Wes died in mid-1968, it is possible the younger Grant Green thought he might continue this path. However an even younger guitarist, **George Benson**, took over Wes's mantle. Ironically Grant Green, as well as Wes Montgomery, were the main influences on George Benson [born 1943]. Green did go on to record albums with Latin rock beats and for jazz guitarists they are

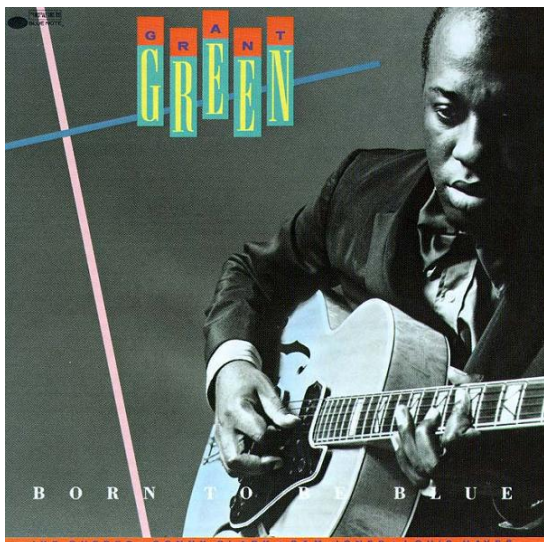
interesting. However the production that went into the Benson CTI albums from the late 1960s until 1975 were hard to beat. Even in Sydney I was able to buy GB's albums as they were released. Of course Benson switched to Warner Brothers in 1976, released the album *Breezin'*, singing the Leon Russell tune *This Masquerade* that was played worldwide on commercial radio and became a huge pop star.



George Benson: he switched to Warner Brothers in 1976, released the album "Breezin'", singing the Leon Russell tune "This Masquerade" that was played worldwide on commercial radio and became a huge pop star...

For me as a jazz guitar teacher I have always believed Grant Green's playing is a kind of blueprint for single note improvisation. Earlier this year one of my students – Yr12 doing ATAR Jazz – performed an assessment in front of tenor saxophonist Troy Roberts [back in Perth from New York due to covid-19]. Troy noted, with approval, that my student used a few Grant Green licks. My student told me later that he had not listened to a great deal of Green – more Wes and Pass. I said that I have listened to Grant so the student was probably reflecting Grant secondhand. I urged him to immerse himself in GG's playing and I would recommend this for any beginner jazz guitarist. The two B Flat blues, *Miss Anne's Tempo* [from *Grant's First Stand* 1999]

and *Cool Blues* [from *Born to Be Blue* 1962] are indicative of the template GG provides for the blues.



As we know these days it is possible to see amazing footage of jazz musicians on YouTube. It is a savage indictment on the US that most footage of Wes Montgomery and Grant Green comes from TV appearances or concerts filmed in Europe, especially England, France and Holland. The 1960s BBC series *Jazz 625* yields an excellent Wes Montgomery performance [with Howard Mabern on piano who died last year]. From both England and France there is footage of performances by Barney Kessel with Kenny Burrell and Grant Green. These are excellent for comparing and contrasting the three different jazz guitar stylists.

The influence of my four favourites on today's contemporary guitarists is universal from James Muller to JC Styllés to Steve Brien to Peter Bernstein to Dave Stryker to Rodney Jones to Dan Wilson [and many, many others]. The legacy of Kenny Burrell, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass and Grant Green lives on.

For jazz guitarists of any level it is worth noting that Wolf Marshall has published transcriptions [including CDs] of KB, Wes, Joe and GG.