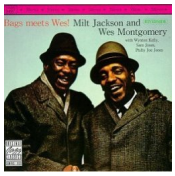
Milt Jackson & Wes Montgomery – Bags Meets Wes (1961)



1. S.K.J. 2. Stablemates 3. Stairway To The Stars (take 3) play *4. Stairway To The Stars (take 2) 5. Blue Roz* play
6. Sam Sack 7. Jingles (take 9) 8. Jingles (take 8) 9. Delilah (take 4) 10. Delilah (take 3)
Personnel: Milt Jackson (vibraphone); Wes Montgomery (guitar); Wynton Kelly (piano); Sam Jones (bass); Philly Joe Jones (drums).

It's unfair to blame Wes Montgomery for the soulless work of those who claim him as an influence; his trademark octave runs became a cash cow for the smooth jazz associated with the piped-in music of doctor's offices and grocery stores. In reality, Montgomery was a much sought-after player by many; even Coltrane played with him for a time. Montgomery gives the impression that playing the guitar requires no less concentration than tying your shoes, fashioning a style admired (and imitated) by many. Milt Jackson, an amateur guitarist himself, reportedly leapt at the chance to play with him on this outing. Jackson seems to enjoy escaping the restrictive confines of the systematic Modern Jazz Quartet for some hard bop workouts, and the rhythm section is filled with perfect choices to achieve this goal. Nothing is taken at a tempo that would quicken the pulse, yet the metallic chime of the vibes is a perfect foil for the snap of Montgomery's guitar. It's surprising, given the title of the album, that the leaders are so generous with the spotlight, giving the rhythm section ample solo space; it would have been nice to hear Montgomery and Jackson really have a go at each other on some of the more spirited numbers. Nevertheless, they turn in a finer version of "Delilah" than Brown and Roach did, and "Stairway to the Stars" is simply beautiful. It's not surprising that the mutual admiration provide an outing that is such a great listen. ---David Rickert, allaboutjazz.com

Milt Jackson was 38 when, in December 1961, he co-led this superb hard-bop date with the distinctive guitarist Wes Montgomery. A jazzman who was as opinionated as he was gifted, Jackson wouldn't hesitate to tell you exactly what he thought of a musician -- so when he praised Montgomery, you knew his praise was genuine. Not surprisingly, the boppers prove to be quite compatible on Bags Meets Wes, which finds them co-leading an all star-quintet that also includes pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Sam Jones, and drummer Philly Joe Jones (who shouldn't be confused with swing drummer Jo Jones). Although Jackson and Montgomery prove what lyrical ballad players they could be on the standard "Stairway to the Stars," ballads aren't a high priority on this album. Instead, the improvisers put more of their energy into the blues -- and the 12-bar format serves them well on "Sam Sack," "Blue Roz," and "S.K.J." Equally strong are hard-swinging versions of Montgomery's "Jingles" and Benny Golson's "Stablemates." Originally released on LP by Riverside in the early 1960s, Bags Meets Wes has been reissued several times over the years. When Fantasy reissued it on CD for the Original Jazz Classics (OJC) series, the label added alternate takes of "Jingles," "Stairway to the Stars," and "Delilah" -- all of which are only slightly inferior to the master takes. Bags Meets Wes has also been reissued as a 24-karat gold audiophile CD by DCC Compact Classics. ---Alex Henderson, allmusic.com

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