

**Hampton, Jackson, and Burton:  
A Portrait of the Greats of  
Jazz Vibraphone**

**By Jesse Nolan**

# “Bag’s” Groove



## Biography

Milt Jackson was born on January 1st 1923, in Detroit, Michigan, where he started playing guitar at the age of seven, piano at eleven, and then vibraphone in high school. He began his career playing with Clarence Ringo and the George E. Lee Band, and was inspired to play jazz by the swing bands that performed in Detroit, such as Duke Ellington's, Count Basie's orchestras.

When he finished high school, he left Detroit for two years to do his military service. When he returned in 1944, he formed a quartet named "The Four Sharps". In 1945 he was invited to join Dizzy Gillespie's big band rhythm section of John Lewis on the piano, Ray Brown on the bass and Kenny Clarke on the drums. In 1946 he recorded "A Night in Tunisia", "Anthropology" and "Two Bass Hit", with Gillespie's big band. Milt Jackson was the first to adapt bebop lines to the vibraphone. During 1948-1950, he worked with Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Howard McGee, and the Woody Herman orchestra.

In 1951, he recorded with John Lewis, Kenny Clarke and Ray Brown under the name of Milt Jackson Quartet. The following year, they reformed the band under the name of Modern Jazz Quartet [MJQ], with Percy Heath replacing Ray Brown. In 1955, Connie Kay replaced Kenny Clarke, and John Lewis became the musical director of the band. Milt Jackson stayed with the MJQ until 1974, and reformed the band in 1981 with the MJQ's last performance in 1995.

He also worked freelance, and recorded with John Coltrane, Ray Charles, Ray Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Oscar Peterson.

In 1992, he started a series of recordings produced by Quincy Jones, on the label Qwest. One of his last recordings, "Explosive", was recorded with the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra.

Milt Jackson died on October 11, 1999 at the age of 76.

## **Selected Discography**

In The Beginning (OJC 1771) (1947-48)  
Milt Jackson (Blue Note 81509-2) (1948-52)  
MJQ (OJC-125) (1954)  
Milt Jackson (OJC 001) (1955)  
Bags Meets Trane (Atlantic 1553-2) (1959)  
Bags Meets Wes (OJC 240) (1961)  
Invitation (OJC 260) (1962)  
Big Bags (OJC 366) (1962)  
At The Village Gate (OJC 309) (1963)  
For Someone I Love (OJC 404) (1963)  
In A New Setting (Verve 538620-2) (1964)  
The Big Three (OJC 805) (1975)  
Feelings (OJC 448) (1976)  
Montreaux '77 (OJC 375) (1977)  
Soul Fusion (OJC 731) (1977)  
Milt Jackson + Count Basie + The Big Band Vol. 1 (OJC 740) (1978)  
Milt Jackson + Count Basie + The Big Band Vol. 2 (OJC 741) (1978)  
All Too Soon (OJC 450) (1980)  
Night Mist (OJC 827) (1980)  
Ain't But A Few Of Us Left (OJC 785) (1981)  
It Don't Mean A Thing If You Can't Tap Your Foot To It (OJC 601) (1984)

### **JACKSON'S ESSENCE**

#### **With the Modern Jazz Quartet**

"Django" (OJC)  
"Concorde" (OJC)  
"Dedicated to Connie" (Atlantic)  
"Pyramid" (Atlantic)  
"The Last Concert" (Atlantic)

#### **Other recordings**

"Milt Jackson" (Blue Note); includes key material with Thelonious Monk  
"The Jazz Skyline" (Savoy)  
"Jackson's-Ville" (Savoy)  
"Bags Meets Wes" (OJC)  
"At the Village Gate" (OJC)  
"It Don't Mean a Thing If You Can't Tap Your Foot to It" (OJC)  
"The Prophet Speaks" (Qwest)

## Sound

The two traits that perhaps defined Milt Jackson's sound were his vibrato and his fat tone. Growing up as a singer in a church choir, Milt's ears were accustomed to the smooth vibrato created by the human voice. Thus he tried to replicate this sound by turning his motor down to 1/3 of the speed used by Lionel Hampton, creating a slower, smoother, shimmering vibrato. Secondly, Milt had his mallets custom made by Fred Albright to produce his rich tone. Milt mallets had a special core and were wound with precision as to not be too soft, but not too hard. A mass produced model of his mallet is available from Pro-Mark.

## The Licks

Playing in the shadow of the legacy of a vibes master like Lionel Hampton is by no means an easy task. But for Milt Jackson, the music left behind by his precursor was simply an inspiration for the great playing that defined a new generation of vibraphonists. Milt Jackson had a style all of his own, different from Lionel Hampton's, but still ringing true to the sound that had been established by his precursors. The following stylistic traits are meant to provide the "essence" of Milt's unique playing, and are by no means representative of his entire style.

### The Dotted Quarter Hemiola - Before It Was "Hip"

Perhaps one of the most interesting of Milt's signature stylistic traits was his use of hemiolas, particularly the dotted quarter note ostinato over 4/4 time. An example of this lick can be found as the opening gesture of Milt's solo on his signature tune "Bag's Groove" on the Miles Davis' record of the same name. In particular note the accents and the strong "blues scale" vibe created by the lick:

**Example 1** – Opening Motive (mm. 1-3) of "Bag's Groove"

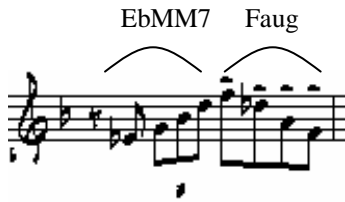


## Chord Outlining

Like the playing of Lionel Hampton and so many other great vibraphonists who came before him, much of Milt's playing is centered around outlining chords. By examining the solo transcription of "Bag's Groove" and the next example this trait becomes all the more obvious.

Here, Milt uses an EbMM7 and an Faug chord in the same bar of F7:

**Example 2a – Chord Outlining (note how the 2 chords are connected by the penultimate F) - measure 4 of “Bag’s Groove”**



Next, Milt employs a simple BbM chord followed by a DbMM7:

**Example 2b - m 9-10 of “Bag’s Groove”**



### **Connecting Phrases Between Choruses**

One of the many geniuses of Milt Jackson’s playing is his ability to seamlessly connect phrases over the boundaries of a chorus. Here, Milt first uses the lower neighbor G# to lead into the outline of a Dmm7 chord which ends on F, the lower neighbor of G which the next idea is based on.

**Example 3 - measures 12-13 of “Bag’s Groove”**



### **The Use of Upper & Lower Neighbor Tones and Enclosure**

Another frequent trait of Milt’s solos is the use of both the upper and lower neighbor tones, sometimes even in succession to enclose the next note. Here, Milt uses Cb and D (the last two notes of mm. 6) to enclose the C (the first note of mm. 7).

**Example 4a - measures 6-7 of “Bag’s Groove”**



In the next example, Milt uses Db and B (the last two notes of mm. 14) to enclose the C (the first note of mm. 15).

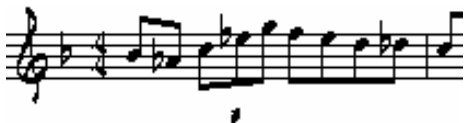
**Example 4b** – measures 14-15 of “Bag’s Groove”



### **Chromatic Leads**

Possibly one of the hippest sounds in jazz is the use of chromatic notes to lead into the next idea. Although not part of the harmonic structure, these chromatic ideas resolve when the destination is reached, resulting in the release of the tension just created. Notice how smoothly Milt leads down (G-F-Eb-D-Db) to the C (the resolve of mm. 6):

**Example 5** – measures 5-6 of “Bag’s Groove”



### **Repetition**

A great soloist always repeats himself to tell the listener his story, and Milt is no exception. This repetition was one of Lionel Hampton’s signature traits, and Milt kept that legacy alive. Note the next two examples from the same solo; they are almost identical:

**Example 6a** – measures 9-10 of “Bag’s Groove”



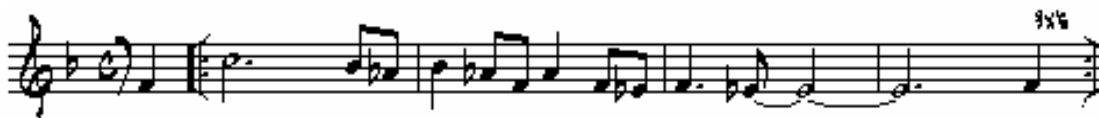
**Example 6b** - measures 21-22 of “Bag’s Groove”



### **Turns**

Finally, Milt Jackson uses plenty of “turns,” gifted to him by Lionel Hampton, to embellish not only his solos, but also the melody of many tunes, including “Bag’s Groove.”

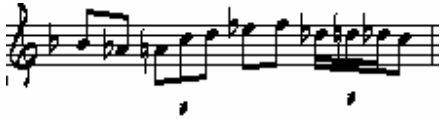
**Example 7a** – Original “Bag’s Groove” Melody



**Example 7b – “Bag’s Groove” Melody w/ Turns**



**Example 8a – Turns in Solo - measure 8 of “Bag’s Groove”**



**Example 8b - measure 10 of “Bag’s Groove”**



# A Contemporary Master



## Biography

Born in 1943 and raised in Indiana, Gary Burton taught himself to play the vibraphone and, at the age of 17, made his recording debut in Nashville, Tennessee, with guitarists Hank Garland and Chet Atkins. Two years later, Burton left his studies at Berklee College of Music to join George Shearing and subsequently Stan Getz, with whom he worked from 1964-1966.

As a member of Getz's quartet, Burton won Down Beat magazine's Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition award in 1965. By the time he left Getz to form his own quartet in 1967, Burton had also recorded three albums under his name for RCA. Borrowing rhythms and sonorities from rock music, while maintaining jazz's emphasis on improvisation and harmonic complexity, Burton's first quartet attracted

large audiences from both sides of the jazz-rock spectrum. Such albums as *Duster and Lofty Fake Anagram* established Burton and his band as progenitors of the jazz fusion phenomenon. Burton's burgeoning popularity was quickly validated by Down Beat magazine, which awarded him its Jazzman of the Year award in 1968. During his subsequent association with the label (1973-1988) the Burton Quartet expanded to include the young Pat Metheny on guitar, and the band began to explore a repertoire of modern compositions. In the '70s, Burton also began to focus on more intimate contexts for his music. His 1971 album **Alone at Last**, a solo vibraphone concert recorded at the 1971 Montreux Jazz Festival, was honored with a Grammy Award. Burton also turned to the rarely heard duo format, recording with bassist Steve Swallow, guitarist Ralph Towner, and most notably with pianist Chick Corea, thus cementing a long personal and professional relationship that has garnered an additional two Grammy Awards.

Also in the '70s, Burton began his career with [Berklee College of Music](#) in Boston. Burton began as a teacher of percussion and improvisation classes at Berklee in 1971. In 1985 he was named Dean of Curriculum. In 1989, he received an honorary doctorate of music from the college, and in 1996, he was appointed Executive Vice President.

Burton began recording for GRP records in the '80s and '90s. In 1990, he paired up again with his former protégé Metheny for *Reunion*, which landed him the top spot on Billboard magazine's jazz chart. Burton is now recording for [Concord Records](#). Departure



## Chordal & Chromatic Runs

One of Gary's most virtuosic tendencies is his ability to play very fast runs that not only make a statement but fit perfectly into the chord structure of a tune.

Here, he simply uses the F natural minor scale over Fm7 (in an F minor blues), but to great outcome!

**Example 2a** – measure 4-5 of “Afro Blue”



Gary also knows how to spice up chordal runs with a bit of chromaticism. The following lick is still F natural minor, but with a few surprises.

**Example 2b** – measure 20-21 of “Afro Blue”



## Chromaticism

Remaining true to the tradition of jazz vibes established by players like Lionel Hampton and Milt Jackson, among many others, Gary employs the use of chromaticism to an extent none of his precursors did. Here, Gary uses a simple F natural minor scale, embellished perfectly with chromatic notes to complete his phrase.

**Example 3a** – measures 11-13 of “Afro Blue”



Again, an F natural minor scale, but with tons of great chromatic notes that give this lick some real character.

**Example 3b** – measures 22-23 of “Afro Blue”



## Connecting Phrases Between Choruses

Finally, Gary is a master at connecting phrases over the boundary of a chorus. Here he uses the chromatic walk-up detailed earlier to connect chorus one and two.

**Example 4a** – measures 11-12 of “Afro Blue”



To end his second chorus, Gary uses an F natural minor scale, embellished with chromatic notes, leading right up to the last measure of the chorus, and the penultimate Ab. He perfectly encloses the F at the downbeat of the third chorus with the E and G (the last two notes of the previous chorus).

**Example 4b** – measures 20-25 of “Afro Blue”



# “Hamp’s Boogie Woogie”



## Biography

There is some confusion about the year of Lionel Hampton's birth, which has sometimes been given as 1908. Around 1916 he moved with his family to Chicago, where he began his career playing drums in various lesser bands. In the late 1920s he was based in Culver City, California, where he worked in clubs and took part in several recording sessions (1930) with Louis Armstrong, who encouraged him to take up vibraphone. Hampton soon became the leading jazz performer on this instrument, and achieved wide recognition through his many film appearances with Les Hite's band. After playing informally with Benny Goodman in 1936 he began to work in Goodman's small ensembles, with which he performed and recorded regularly until 1940; as a result he became one of the most celebrated figures of the swing period, and his resounding success allowed his to form his own big band in 1940.

This group, which at times has included musicians of the stature of Cat Anderson, Illinois Jacquet, Clifford Brown, and Quincy Jones, has been one of the most long-lived and consistently popular large ensembles in jazz. From the 1950s Hampton undertook numerous "goodwill" tours to Europe, Japan, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere, and made a large number of television appearances, attracting a huge and enthusiastic international following.

Hampton performed in the Royal Festival Hall, London, in 1957, and played at the White House for President Carter in 1978; during the same year he formed his own record label, Who's Who in Jazz, to issue mainstream recordings. In the mid 1980s his band continued to draw capacity crowds throughout the world. Hampton was honored as alumnus of the year by the University of Southern California in 1983.

Hampton was not the first jazz musician to take up vibraphone (Red Norvo had preceded him in the late 1920s), but it was he who gave the instrument an identity in jazz, applying a wide range of attacks and generating remarkable swing on an instrument otherwise known for its bland, disembodied sound. Undoubtedly his best work was done with the Goodman Quartet from 1936-1940, when he revealed a fine ear for small-ensemble improvisation and an unrestrained, ebullient manner as a soloist. The big band format was probably better suited to the display of his flamboyant personality and flair for showmanship, but after a few early successes, especially the riff tunes *Flying Home*, *Down Home Jump*, and *Hey Bab-Ba-Rebop*, the group was too often content to repeat former triumphs for its many admirers. Hampton has at times also appeared as a singer, played drums with enormous vitality, and performed with curious success as a pianist, using only two fingers in the manner of vibraphone mallets.

## Discography

See the attached discography.

## Sound

Lionel Hampton's signature sound comes from his hard sticks, which he used to cut above a big band, his swinging feel, and his intense, fast vibrato, which would influence countless vibraphonists to come.

## The Licks

One of the original "Bad Boys" of jazz vibes, Lionel Hampton defined the sound with his swinging licks and harmonic style. The following examples are drawn from his solo on "Always" from the album "Lionel Hampton Plays Love Songs" with the Oscar Peterson Trio.

### The Triad

Coming from the "old school" of jazz musicians, Lionel's playing was centered heavily around the triad and its embellishments. Here he uses FM, Gm, and Am to create a hip phrase. Also note the natural, and not flatted, 7<sup>th</sup>.

Example 1 – Opening motive of "Always"



## Sequences

An idea that many players have abandoned is the use of sequences. This hip sound can be harnessed only when a player has a refined sense of the harmonies over which he is soloing. Lionel Hampton was such a player and he used sequences in some very cool ways. Here, again is his opening motive of the solo, which uses a rising sequence.

Example 2a – Opening motive of “Always”



These next few bars represent two sequences. First, the sequence with the turns starting on the last beat of measure 8 and then the rising CM scale sequence.

Example 2b – measures 8-10 of “Always”



Finally, Lionel uses this last sequence of 7<sup>th</sup> chords (beginning on the last note of the measure 14) to close out his first chorus.

Example 2c – measures 15-16 of “Always”



## Turns

One of the oldest jazz stylistic traits is the use of turns, and Lionel Hampton was no exception. In this example he uses them as a sequence.

Example 3 – measures 8-9 of “Always”



## Ahhh...Major Scales

Where would the language of music be without tonal scales? Lionel, being from the “old school” was brought up on these scales and uses them often in his solos. Here he sequences the C major scale.

