

# UNSUNG MASTERS OF THE MID-CENTURY

## JAZZ GUITAR

By Dan Smith

A lot of great jazz has been played on guitar, yet this instrument's place in the music's history is kind of like that new friend who suddenly likes your younger sibling or cousin better than you.

The birth of rock 'n' roll was still two decades away when electric amplification and swing music helped guitar replace banjo as a prominent jazz instrument of the late 1930s.

Guitar has played a mostly supporting role in the music starting then and on through the advent of bebop and cool jazz. But soon its

practitioners began to be lured away by the simpler, more popular new genre of rock, where riffy 'guitar heroes' reign supreme.

Of course, that didn't stop gifted pickers like Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, and George Benson from following the brief brilliance of Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt to mid-century jazz innovation and stardom. Like other installments of the Unsung Masters series, however, we are here not to sing the praises of such giants, but of their lesser-known colleagues.

This is not to diminish the musical accomplishments of these ten

guitarists in the slightest. Among our ten are a few conspicuously influential artists with oft-mimicked sound, as well as a few trail-blazers in new forms like free jazz, soul jazz, and acid jazz.

Still, the attraction of new challenges and possibly better pay lured several of these players away from jazz for years at a time. That, or painting signs.

So let's hit it! Time to lay out a few solo lines on ten masters of mid-century guitar.

### RENÉ THOMAS

Thomas was one of Europe's finest guitarists of the '50s and '60s, living in Canada briefly, but never the States, and thus eluding American jazz fans despite some fine, boppish records. His lovely, cool tone won him top guitarist in the *Down Beat* awards of 1965, and sent many listeners scurrying to album notes to see whose guitar was backing artists like Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, and Chet Baker. Two European albums in the mid-'70s sparked hope for overdue recognition, but they were dashed by a fatal seizure in Thomas' 40s, like his Belgian countryman Django.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Guitar Groove*  
(Fresh Sound)



### GRANT GREEN

One of the most recognizable players in jazz or R&B, Green was the house guitarist for Blue Note throughout the early '60s and played on several middling artists' best records. He eschewed chords or fancy picking in his punchy, single-note style, and his roots as a boogie-woogie player are audible in many sessions. As a bandleader, he made singularly stylistic records influenced alternatively by Afro-Cuban rhythms or religious music. The St. Louis native pursued his funky side on later records and hence is considered by some to be the father of acid jazz.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Classic Albums Collection*  
(Enlightenment)



### GEORGE BARNES

Although Charlie Christian defined jazz guitar and helped pave the way for bebop, he was actually preceded on the electrified instrument by this talented swing player. Barnes started playing electric guitar on blues records in 1938 and later contributed it to big pop hits by the Coasters and the Drifters. The Chicago native was at his best, however, playing swing guitar duets with first Carl Kress and then Bucky Pizzarelli. His tone was bright, his phrasing upbeat, even witty, and his influence was broad despite dying at 56 shortly after moving to Concord in the Bay Area.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Guitars Anyone? + 2nd Quartet*  
(Audiophile)



### BILLY BAUER

Bauer must have been one of the least-egotistical great musicians of any genre ever. As a young man he backed Woody Herman, Benny Goodman, and Jack Teagarden with consistently modern soloing and play. Such a talent usually fronts a dozen solo albums or more, but not one who titles his autobiography *Sideman*. He wrote it after basically showing guitarists the way, from bop to cool and free jazz. Although his lone solo album is a revelation, it was in collaborations with visionary Lennie Tristano and bandmate Lee Konitz through which Bauer really blazed trails.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Quartets - Let's Have a Session*  
(Fresh Sound)



### ATTILA ZOLLER

Among Zoller's music colleagues, there must have been a sense he not only could play anything, but do anything. He played numerous instruments before learning guitar, escaped the Iron Curtain by walking from his native Hungary to Austria; invented a guitar pickup and designed his own custom instruments; played Latin jazz with Herbie Mann, bebop with Stan Getz, and blues with Jimi Hendrix; and was among the first bop players to embrace free jazz in 1965. He founded the Vermont Jazz Center and was feted in a tribute album featuring his Hungarian folk-flavored jazz compositions.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Gypsy Cry* (Collectables)

### JIMMY RANEY

Although he became known as the consummate 'cool jazz' guitarist, Raney was equally proficient in various styles of bebop as well as swing jazz. His uncanny ability to play along with and behind horn players had the always-adventurous Stan Getz turning back to him every few years for recording sessions. His tone was quiet and subtle, but with melodic soloing in what became a much-imitated style. The Louisville native led dozens of solo albums over four decades, including with his guitarist son Doug, despite a degenerative condition stealing away most of his hearing.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Complete Recordings 1954-1956*  
(Fresh Sound)



### TAL FARLOW

After Charlie Christian charted the course toward bebop guitar, Farlow led the expedition. Though he started by learning Christian solos in his early 20s, the North Carolinian with the huge hands moved beyond that and became the fastest, most creative of all guitar bopsters. He led ten solo albums with delicate flurries of soft, single-note solos in the '50s, along with backing numerous Red Norvo and Buddy DeFranco records, then reverted to a prior career painting signs for 15 years before returning to jazz for a comeback in 1975.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Three Classic Albums Plus*  
(Avid)



### OSCAR MOORE

A native of Austin, Texas, Moore shares a unique role in jazz history with Lloyd 'Tiny' Grimes because the two guitarists combined respectively with pianists Nat 'King' Cole and Art Tatum to create an early '40s trio sound that, with bass guitar, is probably how most people first experience jazz to this day. After Cole became too big a star, Moore took his melodic, swinging tones to a couple more trios and led ten albums on Tampa and other labels before retiring from music in the early '60s.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Oscar Moore Quartet*  
(V.S.O.P.)



### BILL JENNINGS

When guitar legend BB King calls you one of his favorites, you have made a serious impression on the music world. A versatile guitarist equally at home in jazz, blues, or soul music, the Indianapolis native led a series of quality jazz recordings on the King and Prestige labels in the 1950s, but was most heard on other artists' records, including those by Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and especially Louis Jordan and Willis Jackson. Playing left-handed on guitars strung upside down, he developed a unique style of bluesy phrasing and is sometimes credited as 'the architect of soul jazz.'

**WHERE TO START:**  
*Architect of Soul Jazz*  
(Fresh Sound)



### BILL DE ARANGO

'Buddy' De Arango was a much sought-after session player because his rapid, single-note style paired so well with the fastest of bebop horns, making a big splash on New York's 52nd Street in the late '40s backing records by Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Charlie Ventura, and others. The vagaries of the business apparently frustrated him, so he returned to his native Cleveland in the '60s to run a record store, give guitar lessons, and contribute occasional licks to a little-known rock band that he managed—a tremendous loss for the jazz world.

**WHERE TO START:**  
*3 Swinging Guitar Sessions*  
(Fresh Sound)



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