Emily Remler and All That's Jazz

By Neil Nelson
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

PHILADELPHIA—It is raining in Sheephead Bay, a
nicely middle-class neighborhood on the Atlantic Ocean end
of Brooklyn, where, on a sunny day, walking along its
splendid marinas, one could get the funny notion that San
Diego lay just around the bend.

Emily Remler lives here with two guitars, two cats and a
boyfriend, and she likes it a lot because it is an Italian-Jew-
ish area, "so there's great food. I live on cheese omelets,"
she notes, and then she gets a little silly: "I take in a lot of
cholesterol—it's good for sliding up and down the guitar
neck. And the caffeine's good for speed and agility, and the
bagels and cream cheese are good for the creative end of
it."

I complain mildly that in no two photos I have ever seen
of her does she look like the same woman. "Actually," she
says, "I am stunningly beautiful. It's the Jewish-girl syn-
drome—large but not heavy." On this rainy day in Sheep-
head Bay she is wrapped in a bathrobe but I am at a
temporary disadvantage because I am in Philadelphia
talking to her on the telephone.

So much for atmosphere. The 31-year-old Remler is a
breezy bohemian who never played a guitar on more than
one string at a time until she enrolled at the Berklee School
of Music in Boston following graduation from high school at
16 in Englewood Cliffs, N.J. She originally had ambitions to
be a graphic artist, and debated between Berklee and the
Rhode Island School of Design. She says she opted for
Berklee simply because it accepted her.

At Berklee, Remler had her ears opened to jazz for the
first time. "It took me some time to get to like it," but
thanks to the informal tutelage of Chuck Loeb, "a friend
and a good guitar player, a student who could have been a
teacher," she made rapid progress in grounding herself in
the music.

On finishing her formal course of study two years later,
Remler embarked on a singular crash course of her own
concoction.

"I probably was crazy at the time but I didn't know it. I
rented a room in Ship Bottom, New Jersey, for the summer
and practiced jazz for eight hours a day. I didn't mind the
heat because I had an electric fan, and an 18-year-old kid
doesn't really care about that stuff anyway. I was on sort of
a diet, and also gave up smoking, which I took back up
again.

"I transcribed a lot. I listened to John Coltrane and Wes
Montgomery, I played along with tapes. I just did anything
it felt okay to do, and it seemed to produce results. I had
picked up a lot of information at Berklee that hadn't sunk in
yet. I swam a lot too, and I gave a couple of guitar lessons
from notices I tacked up in the supermarket. I tried the
same thing every summer for the next five summers but I
was never able to get back to that kind of intensity again."

The rest of the Emily Remler story is pretty much
fast-forward. She went to New Orleans to be with a
boyfriend and got a great variety of work, ranging from an
R&B group trading as Little Queenie and the Percositar
s to Dick Stabile's orchestra at the Fairmont Hotel. Herb
Ellis came to town and he contacted him for advice on how
to repair her Herb Ellis model guitar. They sat jamming for
hours, and Ellis, roundly impressed, is said to have told her:
"I'm going to make you a star."

That fest took a lot more than seven words—Remler
ultimately tackled both the New York scene and the
patronization that female jazz musicians often face (as
recently as a few weeks ago in Australia, she was confront-
ed daily by the promotional slogan "World's Greatest
Female Guitar Player"). But sure enough, within a month of
Ellis's declaration, she was on a bandstand at the Concord
Jazz Festival, performing with the likes of Charlie Byrd, Tal
Farlow, Barney Kessell and Ellis himself.

Remler observes that there are two sides to the sexual
bias. "It really wasn't long for me till I got recognition—a
woman is noticed quickly and remembered. To me, it's
almost just a matter of quantity. Now I'm better at handling
it, more ready for it."