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Emily Remler and All That's Jazz

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PHILADELPHIA—It is raining in Sheepshead Bay, a nice middle-class neighborhood on the Atlantic Ocean end of Brooklyn, where, on a sunny day, walking along its splendid marina, 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-Jewish 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 syndrome—large but not heavy." On this rainy day in Sheepshead 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 I 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 Percolators to Dick Stabile's orchestra at the Fairmont Hotel. Herb Ellis came to town and she 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 feat 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 confronted 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 Kessel 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."