

# Profile:

## Emily Remler

BY A. JAMES LISKA

Nowhere in the story of guitarist Emily Remler's early years is there much evidence of either a natural inclination or dedication to jazz. Yet at age 24, as the pieces of her career fall neatly into place, she is fast becoming something of a jazz phenomenon, attracting the attention of musicians and fans in a variety of musical settings.

A little more than a year ago her name meant little outside of New Orleans, the town to which she had emigrated following a rather undistinguished career at Boston's Berklee School of Music. The Crescent City proved to be a good training ground for Remler; it was there that she finally settled into a musical life, honing her guitar craft as she variously worked a hotel band, stage shows, late-night jazz dates, and a rhythm & blues band. But her status as a big fish in a small pond was reversed by a move to New York City, where she began the struggle for survival as a jobbing guitarist.

The struggle wasn't unbearable though, and her talent, which had already impressed the folks at the Concord Jazz label, took her to Concord for a solo record date, *Firefly*, to Berlin for a jazz festival, to Hawaii for a jazz cruise, to several places with singer Astrud Gilberto, and back to New York for gigs with her own trio (bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Bobby Moses), plus a full schedule of teaching. Most recently she moved to Los Angeles to assume the guitar chair in the pit band of *Sophisticated Ladies*.

"Hey," she says in a matter-of-fact voice whose accent and nasal quality are telling of her New Jersey upbringing, "I'm a mere child. And I haven't settled into my own style, though people say they know me when they hear me." While her talent is undeniable, the matters of age and sex are at least partially responsible for her receiving so much attention as of late.

"My career is moving very quickly, and that whole woman thing has put me out-front and helped me get noticed. But when I'm playing, I forget if I'm a girl or a boy or a cat. It's when I leave the stage that I remember," she says. "It's funny, though, being a woman has worked both for and against me. Some



people like me because of the mere fact that I play. Those are the ones that judge too softly. Then there are those—I've had this happen—who come in and sit right in front of me, cross their arms, and say 'This, I've got to see.' Then there are the people who are prejudiced, and they just sit there and wait for the mistakes. It works to your advantage if you're pretty good, but if you're not good, it works to your disadvantage."

Obviously, things have been working well for Remler, though her being a good player, to hear her tell it, has not always been the case. "When I first went to Berklee in Boston, I was awful. I was so terrible I didn't play in front of my teacher for six months. It wasn't until I moved to New Orleans that I started getting good."

Up to that point, music remained nothing more than a hobby. She had begun playing folk guitar as a nine-year-old, and rock soon became the focus of her musical interests. The Beatles held her attention for a while before she became interested in the Rolling Stones and Johnny Winter. She began copying Winter's blues guitar licks, then those of Jimi Hendrix and, in keeping with her Eastern interests, developed an interest in Indian music, eventually memorizing Ravi Shankar's sitar records.

"I could sing all of the rock parts, and I could sing and clap all those weird Indian rhythms. Well, when I got to Berklee and first heard bebop and swing, it didn't make any sense to me. I got interested in jazz at Berklee, but didn't really do much with the guitar. I learned a lot about harmony, chords, and arranging, though."

At 18 Remler left Berklee and moved to New Orleans with her then-boyfriend, another Berklee graduate and guitarist. "I had really just screwed around at Berklee, but when I got to New Orleans I was forced to get better and better. I played all these show gigs and jazz gigs, and I had 25 students. I was forced to come up to a certain level of playing."

Remler's time in New Orleans was divided between playing shows and looking for other musical outlets, namely jazz. "It was great. There's a modern jazz thing happening down there. It's much hipper than New York because the people want to be a part of it. In New York, it's very serious. In New Orleans everybody jumps up and down. There's an r&b kind of feeling. I sort of stole that rich culture and applied it to my own music. If I had stayed in Boston, I'd be playing *Giant Steps* like a madman—like everybody else."

While in New Orleans, Remler met Herb Ellis, the guitarist responsible for introducing her to the Concord Jazz family. "I had a Herb Ellis model guitar and he was in town. I called him and asked him to fix it. I'm very gutsy. Anyway, he said to come on up and I did and we played all afternoon. Three weeks later I got a ticket to come out to the Concord [California] Festival. And there I was on a 'Great Guitar' bill with Herb, Cal Collins, Barney Kessel, and Tal Farlow—my heroes."

Though a recording contract was not offered right away, her appearance at the festival helped establish her in the mind of Concord Jazz' president Carl Jefferson. Not too long after, and after an appearance on the Clayton Brothers album, Jefferson signed her to a four-record deal. Her first album, *Firefly*, Remler describes as being "pretty straightahead." She is looking forward to her next which will expand her musical goals, including her composing.

Remler now calls New York her home. ("My boyfriend in New Orleans isn't anymore; now I've got a boyfriend in New York.") Besides her *Sophisticated Ladies* gig in Los Angeles, Remler is soaking up as much of the music of John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner as possible. "They're my heroes now, and I'm trying to copy as much of their music as I can. I started out copying Wes Montgomery and Pat Martino, and now I'm into Coltrane and Tyner. But I'm certainly not settled into my own style, yet. At 24, how could I be?" db

# EMILY REMLER:

## Life After Wes

By Julie Coryell

When Emily Remler appeared at the Concord Jazz Festival in 1978, her career was launched. She immediately established herself as a musician with a new outlook on the electric guitar, as well as a healthy respect for past jazz pioneers. A graduate of Berklee College of Music, she continued to evolve in the years that followed as a member of the New Orleans musical community, where she "played every type of music. I believe God was putting me in these positions to make me learn these things because I learn best under pressure. I've always been put, not by my own choice, but by fate, in these situations to make me learn this style of music. I worked like a dog."

A three-year stint with vocalist Astrid Gilberto followed, as did frequent appearances with guitar greats like Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, and Tal Farlow, who says "She has a great feel—she's so accomplished." These, plus solo concerts as well as teaching clinics, have provided Emily with steady work and the opportunity for continued growth as a player.

Future plans include records with guitarists Martin Taylor and Larry Coryell. A summer tour of Europe with Coryell is now in the making. At 27, Emily Remler has arrived.

**Julie Coryell:** Since your last *down beat* article (May '82), you have continued to grow in popularity with both the critics and fans. Has this resulted in your feeling pressured to live up to the expectations imposed by the media or your audience?

**Emily Remler:** Not at all, because I don't live up to any public expectation of me. I live up to the fact that Wes Montgomery and John Coltrane played the way they did. That's the absolute truth. Serious. I'm trying to live up to my own expectations, which were that at 21 I should be like John Coltrane—and I'm not. So I've got to give myself to 31 now.

**JC:** In what respect are you modeling yourself after John Coltrane? What qualities of his would you like to realize in your playing?

**ER:** To have a totally unique voice like Coltrane had. You hear two notes and you know that it's him. I want a totally unique voice, which I don't have now. People tell me they can recognize me, but I'm derivative. Of course, I have to be. I was not around in '52. I want to have my own voice, which means going through a personal maturity to be able to do that.

**JC:** You're talking about life maturity?

**ER:** Yeah. I think that is what you have to go through—that, plus a spiritual maturity like Coltrane did. I want to be innovative. I've written some things and I think that they are different. I think that they sound unique. Of course I'd love to make a contribution—the contribution that John Coltrane made was tremendous. I'd like to make a contribution like that to jazz guitar.

**JC:** Do you still feel that you are a disciple of Wes [Montgomery]? Do you still feel he's speaking through you?

**ER:** No, I don't feel like that any more. I think that I got out of that crazy stage. I used to keep a picture of Wes. I never met him but I feel like I know him through the music. But



MITCHELL SEIDEL

something happened. When I was 15 I discovered Larry Coryell and John McLaughlin, among other people. And I was also studying Indian music. I didn't like things that were always 32 bars. Of course I couldn't play in 4/4. I couldn't play the guitar very well at all. But I could listen to it and sing along with it. At first, I was headed in that direction—to play unique, you know, avant garde-type music. I went to Berklee College of Music where mainstream was stressed at the time. So I got into that, and I fell in love with Wes. But what really happened was I met Herb Ellis. I got invited to the Concord Jazz Festival with Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel, and it seemed that my future would be secure in that realm. So, I went back to New Orleans and learned real quick how to play that style of music. And this is the truth. I didn't really play it that well before. I couldn't play like Wes. I went back and I figured "Hey, if I'm going to play this type of music from the '50s and early '60s, who do I want to copy?" And the answer was Wes and Coltrane. So I learned real quick how to play that way.

**JC:** How did you do that?

**ER:** I have a method of learning which works for me, which is some transcription—very little. A few bars, things like that. And transcribing melodies that Wes would play that were the essence of what he was doing—a few of his melodies that he would repeat that would sound like him, plus his octaves, of course, which I worked very hard on. Things that were the essence of Wes.

**JC:** You mean his personal vocabulary?

**ER:** His personal vocabulary in the most descriptive way—in a four-bar way, if it can be done. I copied that. I'd write it in music, I'd learn it on the guitar, and it would become a part of my vocabulary. And because I have somewhat of an imagination, I would vary it. Because I believe that my brain is like a computer. You put some data in and you get 500 variations.

But then there are some people who don't have the imagination who will just play Pat Martino lick number this and that. But I start with a Pat Martino lick and then I end up with my own ending to it. So, I copied Pat Martino and Wes Montgomery in that way, and that got me better. Plus playing along with records. Plus working with a metronome. That is the biggest thing—rhythm and time. I don't care how many notes you can play. I don't care if you can play John Coltrane licks note for note. If you are not swinging, I don't care what realm it is. Fusion whatever. If it does not groove, if you cannot move your neck to it no matter if it's an 11/8. I've got a tune in 11/8. I move my neck very well. So, I discovered that about moving a part of my body to get my time better. I was 17 years old. The teacher told me that I had bad time. I rushed like a madman, like most guitarists rush. It's a problem because it's a technical problem. Anyway, I rushed. So, I went home crying. Crying, but I bought a metronome. I worked with the metronome on two and four. This is really important. It's the accent of the high hat in that type of mainstream swing music. And I learned—I practiced with that thing and nothing else behind me. I laid down my own rhythm tracks. Still, when I lay down my own tracks, I use the metronome to make sure that I'm correct. So, what happens is that your time gets so much better, you get so much more sensitive to the waves of time that you can feel rushing and dragging. And it also builds up your confidence that you have the right time. You're in the band and you can say "Here's where it is." I know where it is. Don't tell me where it is—I know where it is. And especially in my case, being a woman, I've got to mention this, that I've had a few situations—let's say with drummers who didn't exactly trust right off the bat that my time would have good conviction to it. So, my time had to be really important so that they could trust me so that they could throw all their stuff at me, and not handle me with kid gloves, like they were scared.

**JC:** As a woman, did you have to work harder to be accepted?

**ER:** I still do. I didn't conquer it. Are you kidding? Now they know that I can play. But I still have to prove myself every single time. The only thing is that I'm not intimidated anymore. There was a time when I came fresh out of Berklee with the competitive frame of mind. I would ask to sit in. "Oh please, can I just play one tune? I won't screw things up." I'll go up there and burn their asses off. That's how I felt then. Now I realize that if you're thinking of that stuff you're not thinking of creativity and all these other things that I'm supposed to be doing in my solos. So I had to can that. I have to rise above it by playing good. You don't get angry, you don't get bitter, you don't get feminist about the thing. You don't try to make a statement for women. You just get so damn good that they'll forget about all that crap.

**JC:** Are you still transcribing guitarists?

**ER:** I'm trying to get myself to transcribe horn players. It took me about an hour to do this Michael Brecker lick (from *Some Skunk Funk*) and I still didn't get it. And I called him up and I left a message on his answering machine that I'm working on your thing and it's killing me. Because he can make it a little flat. He can make his horn a little flat and I can't find the triad.

**JC:** Do you still feel that your main connection, musically speaking, is to mainstream bebop, or do you feel that you're moving in a direction that will now encompass more kinds of music?

**ER:** This is so hard. I just talked about this with Tal [Farlow] last night. I said, "I have a real problem." I listen to Wes and Coltrane—well, early Coltrane, and I love it. But I also love these tunes that I just wrote on my record *Cat Walk*. This is the best thing that I've ever done. And that is not mainstream—it's got Indian influence, African influences. I love Brazilian music—I mean, I get chills from it. I played with Astrid Gilberto for three years. Man, I had a great time. I love the rhythms. I tried to get the essence of that rhythm; they're hard to feel. There's not a whole lot of Americans really playing Brazilian rhythms. You can play the dum-dum-dum-da-da, the Cuban, or something like that. But to really get into how



JULIE CORVELL

### EMILY REMLER'S EQUIPMENT

Emily Remler has been playing a Gibson ES 330 hollow body electric guitar for 10 years. She recently added a Borys hollow body—"For my two musical personalities: the modern me, and the bebop me." She strings both with D'Addarios and uses Fender extra-heavy 1.21 mm. picks ("I used to have a piece of wood, then tupperware"). She owns Musicman and Polytone amps, though also likes and has used a Walter Woods, a Fender Twin, and a Roland Chorus. "I buy amps that I can pick up, 'cause otherwise I have to get strange men from the street to help me take it out of the car."

### EMILY REMLER SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

<b>as a leader</b>		<b>with the Clayton Brothers</b>	
<i>CAT WALK</i> —Concord Jazz 265		<i>IT'S ALL IN THE FAMILY</i> —Concord Jazz	
<i>TRANSITIONS</i> —Concord Jazz 236			138
<i>TAKE TWO</i> —Concord Jazz 195		<b>with Ray Brown</b>	
<i>FIREFLY</i> —Concord Jazz 162		<i>SOULAR ENERGY</i> —Concord Jazz 268	

they do it, to their culture and their frame of mind, where they are coming from, is amazing. I love the Brazilian—the way they do not do a 32-bar format. A lot of them seem to be more free about that. Especially Egberto Gismonti. I love Egberto. Romantic. The language of Portuguese is romantic. Because music is relative to speech, the language lends itself to beautiful phrasing. It's romantic music. It's happy music. It makes you move.

**JC:** Do you feel that you may be incorporating more classical influences into your music?

**ER:** I use my fingers a lot. Everyone thinks I have classical training, which I don't. I took one classical lesson at Berklee, and we spent the whole time deciding how I was supposed to sit. That was too much authority for me. I do listen to a lot of Debussy and I hope some of it will sink in.

**JC:** In terms of how you taught yourself to become a better player, do you feel that the work that you did on your own was more significant than what you got out of Berklee?

**ER:** Berklee is instrumental because I was a total beginner. I came out not playing that great, but with a lot of knowledge of chords and theory. I would say that Berklee was good for me in theory and harmony and ear training. It was excellent. Then I had to take it from there, because no one can play your guitar for you. I partied a lot at Berklee. There were 50 men to every woman. You bring out a cigarette and you get 10 lights. You're in the lunchroom—you pick up a piece of food and it drops off your fork, you look up and there are 10 guys looking at you. It was incredible. It was fun. So, I didn't concentrate that hard. I was a child. I went to Berklee at 16.

**JC:** You teach clinics and privately. What's your approach?

**ER:** I'm a great believer in too much will not sink in. For instance, four bars of someone's solo will sink in, but two whole choruses will not. I'm sort of proud of my teaching abilities

because people come to me from other teachers who have given them enough material for their whole life, and they can't play the blues. So I work on blues first. I work on the little things. Four bars, 16 bars, the time. That's how I absorbed things so that's how I think that other people must absorb them.

**JC:** Do you use specific books?

**ER:** Never used a book in my life, as a teacher. I feel like I have the ability to discern what that person needs to work on the most first, and we go on from there. If their rhythm is bad, we work on their rhythm. If the rhythm is good then we'll start on theory. And I use theory from Berklee—what I remember, and what I've discovered myself in these years of playing. Little tricks. I want to see my students be able to get better. Psychiatrists keep people in their office sick for years. I want to see my students go out and play. I want to feel good about that.

**JC:** In Pat Metheny's recent interview for *db* (Jan. '85), he talks about the new technology and that he's been using the Synclavier and it's unlimited in the sense that it's up to your imagination as to what you can get out of it. He also says that a whole new breed of musicians will emerge using new technology. What is your response to that?

**ER:** Let me tell you first that in my aptitude test in high school I scored 98 and 99 in verbal usage and spelling, 35 in technical reading. Mechanical reasoning—I'm a moron. I plug the guitar into the amp and it's a big deal. When I get one of those pedals—chorus, flanger, digital delay—I fool with it all night long. For me, maybe one day I will learn how to use that. I respect and envy Pat because he took the time to learn that stuff, and how can you compete with the beautiful sounds that you can get out of those machines? I mean, sounds like the sun coming up, for God's sake. Can I get the sun coming up with one note? That is the question. In a way, I guess I have to also respect the fact that the earlier players who I do love didn't use that and still got their own voice. I think there is too much emphasis in some of the schools on some of that technology, without the foundation and expression of natural humor.

**JC:** What do you mean by natural humor? You said Wes had humor.

**ER:** He cracks me up. I was listening to Wes with my parents, laughing hysterically. Because I can hear him quoting things. That's obvious humor. When someone quotes a little song, you laugh. But other things; just the way he did an ingenious turnaround. Came around the bend like that. Raised up to a climax—just like life. Joe Pass gets himself into hairy situations. He takes risks and then gets himself out of it. And I have to laugh about that. People's ease. Oscar Peterson's ease. His touch is so tickle-y it makes me laugh. There's a lot of humor missing, I think, from some of the younger players today. It's very serious stuff. And at the same time I love Pat Martino, who's somber and dark. But I guess that I like both things. I like some kind of emotion. Whether it be somber and dark and morose, or humorous and light and funny and clever. I'm laughing at Wes' cleverness. If I go to see somebody play and they play a 15-minute solo, I think to myself "Wow." They must have been great because he played that long and he didn't quote the usual clichés and this and that. But I didn't feel a damn thing. He didn't take me anywhere. I started thinking about the check, or something. I want to be taken someplace. Bill Evans made me cry. I want to feel some emotion. Maybe that is old fashioned, I don't know.

**JC:** Larry Coryell said in a *db* interview (May '84), "Until I was willing to take risks and make mistakes, I wasn't going to make any progress and it was hard to shed my perfectionist tendencies." Would you classify yourself as a perfectionist?

**ER:** First of all, he's older than me, so maybe it's something that I'll get to. I know that if I expect perfection out of every solo, out of every record, I'm going to get very disappointed. I quit art because of that. I was an artist. I did sculpting and drawings. It was a choice of whether I could go to Berklee College of Music or Rhode Island School of Design. I had to make that choice. I was so frustrated with art. I couldn't get it

the way that I wanted it. Music, at least you get more chances and a little more time and have the companionship of the other musicians. Other musicians make me play better.

**JC:** If you had to define what the elements or the components of a great solo were, what would you say?

**ER:** This is something that I'm working on. You know how things in life build up tension and release? Okay. Now I think that I can do tension-and-release on a small scale, let's say in a four-bar phrase. But to think on a longer scale, like from the beginning of my solo to the end to make a thematic statement, to develop it, to come to a climax and come to a natural downfall—that's a good solo. With those elements of happiness, sadness, moroseness.

**JC:** How do you compose?

**ER:** I come up with a fragment of something, out of nowhere. On a gig. It might be playing, usually with friends. "Wow, listen to that." And I get very dedicated. That's what Steve Swallow says. The exact words. "I'm dedicated to my fragments." And I know what he means. They eventually become songs. It's almost like I wake up with the rest of the song.

You know what my dream is? My dream is to write for movies, like John Williams. That is the ultimate, because he is making millions of people feel a certain way at the exact second that he wants them to. Now, it's not manipulation that I want. It's the joy of being able to do it. It's ingenious. My hero of all time is Leonard Bernstein. More than Wes, more than Coltrane.

**JC:** Why?

**ER:** Because if it wasn't for *West Side Story*, I wouldn't be playing music. The music drove me crazy. I sang all the background parts. Besides that, another piece he wrote, *The Age Of Anxiety*, was very instrumental in me getting to love Leonard Bernstein the way that I do. I respect everything that he does. I saw him on television teaching a class in the most ingenious way. If I could switch with somebody right now, just for a couple of days, it would be Leonard.

**JC:** Let's talk about your last record, *Cat Walk*.

**ER:** First of all, I became, I guess, more of a leader in the way that this record has the guitar much more prominent than the *Transitions* record with the same group. It's more guitar-oriented. I got a better sound on the guitar. I don't sound so muffled and introverted. I sound out. I'm out there. People would come to see me in concert and say that I sound nothing like my records. So, on this record I finally got to express five years' worth of my own tunes, and I love Carl Jefferson for it, because he trusted me, he likes my songs. They are not exactly mainstream. I don't know what the categories are. The Concord label gave me a total free hand with this. I'm very satisfied with that company because of that.

On *Transitions* there is no piano, which means that I'm in control of all the harmony, which I like very much—the sparseness, to play over the chord changes of something as difficult as *Transitions*, which goes through three different time signatures, with no chords to push me to anything. But I had Eddie Gomez and Bob Moses. And I would say things to Bob, "Maybe I should get a piano player," or "Maybe I should get another guitar player." And Bob said, "We'll comp for you." He did. But on *Cat Walk* I have these tunes that I wanted some pushing behind me. And I didn't trust anybody to be able to do it the way that I wanted it done, so I double-tracked, because I had to improvise a few times over a written track that was already recorded so I couldn't get interplay within the group. Therefore, what I did was memorize the rhythm tracks as well, and it's rising and falling down and I went with it. It turned out very well. It was my first experience with overdubbing, which is a big thing for me, with all the studio stuff and electronics going on.

We should call it *This Is Me, Emily, Cat Walk* because the other ones were: *This Is How Much I Love Wes*, that was the first one. The second one was *This Is How Much I Love Don Thompson And Terry Clarke*. The third one was *Half Me And Half This Is How Much I Love Wes*. Now, this is Me. db