



EMILY REMLER

A Jazz Guitarist's Promising Debut

By Arnie Berle

SELDOM DOES A woman venture into what is generally considered the man's realm of jazz guitar. Indeed, most people can only name a handful of famous female guitarists in *any* genre. But at 23 years old, Emily Remler is making inroads not only into jazz guitar (for which she is best known), but also rock, funk, and various fusion styles for studio sessions. Experienced jazz veterans such as Jim Hall, who calls her "just incredible," and Herb Ellis are among her many admirers. In 1978, at the Tenth Anniversary Concord Summer Jazz Festival in Concord, California, she shared the stage with Ellis, Barney Kessel, Cal Collins, Howard Roberts, Tal Farlow, and

Remo Palmier on a venue billed as a Guitar Explosion. She has performed with the "Great Guitars"—Charlie Byrd and Herb Ellis, substituting for Barney Kessel—and has worked with New Orleans' esteemed jazz clarinetist Pete Fountain.

A native of Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Emily started playing folk music at age ten. "My brothers played guitar," she recalls, "so the instrument was around the house, and I started to teach myself to play. I never really practiced—it was mainly for fun." A few years of formal lessons left little impression, and her interest shifted from folk to rock: "First I learned songs like 'Michael [Row The Boat Ashore]' and later got into

some Beatles things, but I hadn't learned how to use a pick, just my fingers, and I never played past the 5th fret until years later. I wouldn't even play in front of people, so working with a band was of no interest. I liked Johnny Winter and would play for hours, working myself into a trance trying to copy his style, and I tried to copy the Rolling Stones. As a matter of fact, I tried to copy everything I heard." Although little more than a hobby at first, playing guitar took on a more important role as Emily was exposed to music theory at boarding school in her teens: "It became a challenge. I always liked challenges."

Upon graduation from high school,

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Emily enrolled at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where she was exposed to the works of jazz guitarists Wes Montgomery, Pat Martino, and Charlie Christian. The influence of that environment was profound: "It seemed that music was the only thing that I could get really interested in. Up until that time, jazz had held no interest for me."

With her Berklee diploma in hand, she moved to New Orleans and became one of the busiest guitarists in town, playing everything from mainstream jazz to contemporary rock. "It turned out to be the best move I could have made," she says, "because I got all my experience down there. There weren't too many guitar players around, and I was one of the few who could read, so I got all the show gigs, and later some jazz and even rhythm & blues gigs." In New Orleans she met Herb Ellis, who invited her to appear at the Concord festival. A contract with Concord Records soon followed, and the result is Emily's first solo album, *The Firefly* [CJ-162], to be released this fall.

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HAS THE FACT that you're a woman had either positive or negative effects on your getting work or being taken seriously as a musician?

Yes, both positive and negative. There have been times when it seemed to help, and that did bother me, but there was such a long period of *not* getting gigs because I'm a woman that it was simply refreshing to get gigs for any reason. Hopefully, I can overcome that aspect by playing well, and people will forget about it. On records no one can see me, so if the music's not good, then I won't get hired consistently. But I do agree that it's definitely something of a novelty, and since there is nothing anyone can do about it I might as well use it to my advantage.

Have people suggested carrying the novelty further, say, by putting together an all-girl band?

Oh, yes, but I have no desire to do that—I'm not interested. In fact, the whole women's thing—I'm not interested at all. Many women are angry and trying to make a political statement, and all I want to do is to play my guitar. The fact that I'm a girl is secondary. It's something I'm hit with as soon as I come off the bandstand, but when I'm up there playing I don't think about what sex I am.

How did you get all the work in New Orleans?

I'm very aggressive, and after getting down there I put out my antennae and started making my connections. After a few months I was working steady. Actually, there wasn't all that much competition. There just weren't too many guitar players when I was down there, and I was one of the few who could read.

Why do you think there were so few guitarists in New Orleans?

It seems like there's a shortage of good guitar players in any small town. A lot of guitarists, as well as other musicians, head for New York and Los Angeles because they're the big competition places. But a lot of guys don't want to leave their home towns; they prefer to stay where they're at. There are some great guitarists in New Orleans, but I was one of the few who could read well. So I got a lot of show work, and from the connections I made doing that, I got other gigs.

What kind of show work were you doing in New Orleans?

I was the guitarist in the house band at the Fairmont Hotel; our leader was Dick Stabile. He's a saxophonist who used to lead the band for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis when they were performing together. We worked with a lot of people, such as Joel Gray, Robert Goulet, Michele Legrand, Nancy Wilson—all those Vegas-type acts. Whatever act came through, we had to play for it. It was a great experience. In fact, Nancy Wilson asked me to work with her as her accompanist at other places, such as at Avery Fisher Hall in New York.

How long were you in New Orleans?

Three years. I came to love New Orleans, but I felt that I should be in New York if I wanted to get ahead. In New Orleans, the gigs are so easily available that there's not much rehearsal time, and so I never had a chance to hear the tunes I was writing. Guys would come into the gigs late, and they didn't want to rehearse my tunes. In New York, you can always get guys to rehearse during the day.

How important is composing to you?

Actually, I think of myself more as a composer than as a guitarist. I want to be a composer more than anything else; eventually I'd like to write for movies. But right now I'm into guitar, so I'll make the switch later on.

Did you go right to New York after you left New Orleans?

While I was in New Orleans, I met Herb Ellis, and we played together all day. He seemed impressed with me, and got me a gig at the Concord Jazz Festival. It was great being on the same stage as Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel, Remo Palmier, Cal Collins, and Charlie Byrd. After the festival I went back to New Orleans and got a job in a quartet—two guitars, bass, and drums. I remained there for another year before I went to New York.

Did you take any formal lessons with Herb Ellis?

Not really. We just played together, and I learned by playing with him. I did the same thing with Pat Martino and Pat Metheny. I learned a lot from those guys just by playing with them, hanging out with them, and talking with them. I didn't want to learn their licks, the things they figured out for themselves. I just picked up a lot by being around all that energy.

What happened when you got to New

York?

Surprisingly enough, I started getting gigs pretty quickly. I'm nervy. I'd call people up and tell them I was coming down to where they were working, and then I'd sit in. After a while, people would hire me. Of course, the fact that I'm a girl made me stand out more.

What was your first record date?

Well, I was nervy enough to call up [jazz guitarist] John Scofield, and I went to his house to play music with him. John Clayton is a friend of his, and he came over to play bass. John Clayton evidently liked the way I played, because a few weeks later he called me for a record date. [Pianist] Roger Kellaway was also there. It must've been his 80th session, and for me it was the first; I learned a lot from the date. The record was called *It's All In The Family*, by the Clayton Brothers on Concord [CJ-138].

What was the reaction when the album came out?

It got a very good response, with a great review in the *Los Angeles Times* that mentioned me first. I had done many, many demo tapes, but that was actually my first recording date. I think that it was instrumental in getting my own album with Concord. People from the company called me, and I guess they figured that I was ready for my own album, which I was. I'd been practicing a lot and playing a lot.

Did you choose your accompanists for the sessions?

No, but it was no problem. I'd been in a trio with Eddie Gomez on bass and Bob Moses on drums. Carl Jefferson of Concord Records wanted me to work with Jake Hanna on drums, Bob Mays on bass, and Hank Jones on piano. It worked out great, and I got a contract for three more albums.

At Concord's festival you were in some very heavy company—Herb Ellis, Tal Farlow, Barney Kessel, Howard Roberts, and others. Were you nervous?

Well, first of all, the guys are so nice that they make you feel relaxed right away. And don't forget, I had already done a gig with Herb Ellis and Charlie Byrd in the Great Guitars. Barney Kessel is in that group, but he couldn't make this particular date so I was asked to take his place. Well, I made sure I knew my part for the festival. When it came time to play there with Herb, I was very prepared so that I wouldn't be nervous.

How did you go about getting ready for such an important gig?

First I made sure I got there early so that I could go over the music with all my might. When I worked with the Great Guitars, I bought their records and learned all three parts, because I wasn't sure which one I would have to play. For that job I was *really* prepared. I'm a great believer in copying things off of records. I've always done it. It's a great way of developing the ears. First you start off with little bits of solos, and they gradually become whole solos. I've done complete transcriptions like that.

Have you had a naturally good ear for as long as you've been playing, or did it come

from all the copying you did?

It was always pretty good. I never had much trouble hearing things and could do pretty much what I wanted to do. Maybe it's because I was so determined, but I always had the ability to reach for things on the guitar and get them, to play melodies. I'd have my mother just pick tunes and call them out, like "Fiddler On The Roof," and I'd get the notes right.

Would you also play with correct technique?

When I was a rock player I'd play a lot on one string, and I'd have to reach all over the fingerboard to get the notes. There's a certain advantage to learning to play by ear, which I did. At the beginning it develops this ability to reach for the right notes. Another important thing is being able to turn a mistake into something that works. Usually, if you play a wrong note you can move up a half-step [one fret] and resolve it, make it a right note.

What sort of rock music did you learn?

I used to teach, and I had to learn Led Zeppelin and stuff like that. I had about 25 students in New Orleans, and I put a lot into my teaching, especially when the students were really good. I had to prepare a lot for the ones who wanted to learn solos off of rock records. They always think that the solo is actually a part of the tune. When I used to go see Johnny Winter or the Allman Brothers, I'd get so mad if they didn't play the exact solo they'd played on the record—I thought it was part of the tune too. Well, copying solos off records is a healthy thing for any musician, especially rock players. I don't think they have as much use for theory and harmony as a jazz musician.

But if all they ever do is to take things off of records, how do they ever learn to create their own solos?

Well, that's something that you can't really show someone anyway. I'd give them an assignment and tell them to fill in the spaces, or I'd play along with them and they'd just have to play, and if they couldn't get there—well, it's their problem. Hopefully they have enough talent to be able to figure something out, and if they can't there's not much you can do.

Is your approach to learning jazz different from your approach to rock?

Yes, I have a definite way of looking at jazz. There are two basic scales, the melodic minor and the lydian. They may be applied in certain ways to get you through a lot of situations. Let's say you have a dominant seventh chord moving down a fifth—for example, from *G7* to *C* in the key of *C*—you can play the melodic minor scale a half-step higher than the root of the dominant. In this case the dominant is *G7*, so for that chord you can play the *A^b* melodic minor scale. Now, if the dominant chord does *not* resolve to the tonic chord, then you play the melodic minor scale built from the 5th of the dominant. The 5th of *G* is *D*, so for a *G7* that doesn't resolve to *C*, you play the *D* minor melodic scale. This *D* minor is the II of the

key, which is a very typical thing; it creates that nice minor-major sound.

*Why use the *A^b* melodic minor scale for the *G7* only if it's going to the *C* chord?*

Because it provides all those tension notes, and when it finally resolves to the *C* [the I chord, or tonic], there is a greater sense of tension release. If you just play on the *G7* scale and then change to the *C*, there wouldn't be too much difference. You want that feeling of movement toward the I chord. If the change isn't going to the I, you don't need that tension; there's no demand for the resolution. So with the second alternative of playing the melodic minor scale based on the 5th of the dominant, you get that minor-major sound which is so desirable because of its bluesy feeling.

And you're talking about the melodic minor where the 6th and 7th notes are raised a half-step whether the scale is ascending or descending, what we call the jazz minor scale?

Yes, that's right. [Ed. Note: For further details on the jazz minor scale, see Arnie Berle's column in *Guitar Player's Oct.-Dec. '80 issues.*] You always play off the II chord, and of course you always have to use your ear—and that's my theory. I just believe in a few scales and also the importance of guide tones.

The guide tones are the 3rd and 7th of the chord?

Yes, and they're very important. If you'll notice, in the Joe Pass or Wes Montgomery solos they're always playing around these tones, especially on the first beat of every measure. I would take a blues progression and have the student play guide tones on every first beat and fill in until the next guide tone. Let's say you're playing a *B^b7* to *E^b7*. The guide tone line would be the *D* moving down to the *D^b*. The tune "Tenor Madness" [recorded by various jazz artists] is a perfect example of that guide tone line.

And playing guide tones also helps to establish chords.

Yes, I realized a long time ago that I didn't want to be dependent upon anybody else to play the chords for me. I wanted to be able to play them myself without anybody behind me, so I went down to the shore in New Jersey and locked myself in a room and practiced for eight weeks. I really worked. I'd play chords and then solo in between them. I made sure that I used guide tones and that the changes were very clearly outlined. I do this instead of playing scalewise, which is what so many players do.

Aside from the melodic minor, there was another scale you rely upon quite a bit.

Yes, that's the lydian, which I use for the major 7th chord and also for the *m7^b5*. For the *m7^b5* you use the lydian scale up a flatted fifth. For minor chords it's the lydian up a flatted third. So for a *Cmaj7* chord I would play the *C* lydian scale, and for *Cm* I'd use the *E^b*, which is up a flatted third.

In light of all your work with singers, can you offer any advice on accompaniment?

The important thing I've learned is that you shouldn't overpower singers; you must

complement them. They're carrying the melody, they're on top. Don't let your ego get in the way; don't whip out all of your guitar licks that you've been practicing. I think I'm a successful accompanist because I'm sensitive. And if sensitivity is a part of your personality, then that's all you need.

Do most singers give you the chords or a lead sheet, and leave the rest up to you?

Sure. Most chord sheets for guitar are ridiculous anyway, as are a lot of big-band charts, because of the way they give you every chord that the horns are playing, when all you need to play is the basic skeleton of each chord. That's one thing that Herb Ellis really taught me. When a dominant 7th chord is given, all you have to play is just the tritone, because the horns are taking care of the chord's upper-structure tension notes. If you play them too, you'll just get in the way. They need the bottom.

So you stick primarily to the root, 7th, and 3rd of the chord on the sixth, fourth, and third strings?

Yes. The bar chords—those big, fat chords that rock players use—are too big to move around quickly for jazz and uptempo things. But Herb always told me not to play the big chords, and not to play what's on the big-band charts. Play the small chords and the tension will be taken care of by the other instruments.

It also frees up the soloist, because he or she isn't limited harmonically to what you're laying down.

Exactly. Suppose they don't want to play a *b9*th or a *#5^b13[#]11*—it's very restricting. That's why I like to play with trios; I'm able to be more free in what I do.

With all your show experience, have you considered trying to get a show on Broadway?

I've tried, but I think the "woman" thing again keeps me from getting that kind of work. I've sat next to some of the guys on shows and I found the music very easy—no problem with that—but it's very clique-ish. I think that's where the bias against women comes in. It also keeps me from getting into the very big New York club date scene: When they hear I'm a woman, they think all I can play is folk music. The same for the recording and jingle business. They seem prejudiced against women in general. Maybe a factor in my not being hired for studio work is that I came to New York with a reputation as a jazz player. I'm stereotyped as a jazz guitarist, but I play rock and funk and whatever they want. I even have a Les Paul guitar for rock playing.

Have you ever played solo dates?

Yes. I love solo gigs. I've gotten a few, and I know a lot of tunes in chord melody style, such as bossa nova and Bill Evans tunes—I even write some of my own. A long time ago I had to play solo all summer, so I tried to imitate Lenny Breau's style of comping while soloing. So now chords come naturally, because I was forced into it.

Do you have any preference in the type of playing you do now?

Well, I really like so many things that I

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sometimes have to sit down and think about what direction I want to go in. I like playing free and playing with bebop musicians. I also like the George Benson funk-Latin type of thing. A lot of guitarists are into it now, but I like it all.

Do you fingerpick a lot?

Yes, I do. I use the pick for my single-line solos, but I always comp with my fingers—I try to get that [pianist] Bill Evans thing with the moving voices. And I play octaves with my thumb. It's very hard, but I like playing them. A lot of it has to do with strength, and I noticed that when I first started practicing octaves I developed a muscle in my arm. If my strength isn't up on a particular day, then I can't play octaves.

Are you limited in the kinds of chord forms you play by the small size of your hands?

Yes. I still can't play an *F* bar chord at the 1st fret—at least not as clear as a bell. I can get it at any other fret, but not there. I have long fingers for a girl, so I guess it has to do more with strength than with the length of the fingers. Maybe it has to do with being a girl. I have some boy students that can play that chord right away. There are some chords that I'll never be able to play. As a matter of fact, I've got a bump on my pinky from trying to stretch my left hand, and I have managed to stretch it quite a bit more than my right hand.

How did you stretch it?

Just by trying so hard to get those hip chords that I like so much. You really have to stretch for some of those nice sounding chords.

Do you practice often?

I did a lot of practicing before my recent record, but now I can relax a little. I do play every day, but I wouldn't call that actual practice. It's just playing. One thing I've really learned is that you can only get something out of it when you really have the urge. When you feel good, and you feel like playing, that's when you gain the most from practicing. You can't force yourself to do scales and arpeggios. It won't do a thing for you if you don't feel it. One thing that helps me is to practice in my head. I can do that on a plane or anywhere. I actually visualize the fingerboard, and all the notes on it. I then visualize positions and intervals, and I think of shapes and designs. I get as much out of that as I can by actually practicing on the guitar. But I must emphasize that it's only true for me; I wouldn't tell anybody else not to practice.

Who are your current favorite guitarists?

I still love Wes Montgomery, Pat Martino, Pat Metheny, Joe Pass, and of course Herb Ellis.

When you were into rock, whose music did you like?

Johnny Winter and Jimi Hendrix. I was crazy about them. I wasn't good enough to play like them—especially Hendrix—because I only played with one finger in those

days. How much could I do? But I loved everything they did, and I could sing everything they played note-for-note. That's why I knew I'd become a musician. I could sing the whole solo by [sitarist] Ravi Shankar from his album *Concert For Bangladesh* [Apple (dist. by Capitol), STCX 3385]. I knew the entire raga note-for-note.

You must have an exceptionally good musical memory.

Yes, but I also listened to it 43 times. So I really knew it. As a matter of fact, when I was very young I went to a music camp where an Indian teacher forced us to sing ragas. That's why I could always relate to Indian music. It's also the reason why I love John McLaughlin and his Mahavishnu Orchestra. I was getting into odd time signatures, but when I went to Berklee, I lost all that.

That's when you got more into Wes Montgomery and players like that?

Yes, it was a whole new thing.

What was it about the style of, say, Charlie Christian that hooked you and caused such a significant change in your musical interests?

I could hear Charlie Christian. At Berklee I just couldn't hear John Coltrane or Miles Davis. They were both very scary, and it all sounded very foreign. In the position I'm in now I can understand how some people can't hear jazz. Some of it just seemed to be a bunch of notes without any meaning, just sounds. But I listened to [saxophonist] Paul Desmond with Dave Brubeck, and in

Desmond and Charlie Christian I could hear what they were doing, the motifs, definite melodies.

Have you been as concerned with equipment as you've been with musical styles?

Well, my first guitar was a Gibson ES-330, and I recently went back to playing on that same instrument. I tried others, like a copy of a Gibson ES-175, but it was too fat and restricted my right arm in such a way that my picking, which is my strongest point, would get tired. The 330 has a nice thin body, so I don't have that problem.

What kind of strings do you use on your Gibson?

Right now, I'm an endorsee for D'Addario strings, so I use them. I like the Half-Rounds, but I'm not very fussy about the gauges. I use .011s for the top, but for the rest of the strings I don't care what they are.

When you were down in New Orleans, starting to play professionally, what kind of guitar did you use?

I bought myself an Ibanez George Benson GB-10, which is sort of like a little 175. It was good because it was thin enough, but I found that it was good only if you wanted to sound like George Benson. The top strings were very chinky and trebly. The low strings were warm and bassy, but they didn't sustain at all. It got a very percussive sound, like the way George plays. It was perfect for me in some ways, but I wanted a guitar that I could use for rock work, and it was terrible for that. I recently bought a new Japanese classical

guitar called a Korocosci. I got it because I do a lot of work with Astrud Gilberto, and she does a lot of bossa nova tunes. So the classical guitar is a necessity. I used to borrow one every time I worked with her, but because we were going into the Brecker Brothers' club, Seventh Ave. South, I wanted a new guitar for the job.

What kind of amp do you use?

I have a Polytone amp, which is kind of like a Fender Twin Reverb, except the Twin is much too heavy for me. I can't pick one up, so I use the Polytone. I'd much rather use a tube amp, though.

As one of the few young women in the jazz field, do you have any suggestions or advice for other young women who want to go into jazz?

The first thing is to not get discouraged or bitter about some of the reactions you might get. Just keep playing with conviction, because at first you're going to have to prove yourself every time you play. Try to be the greatest player you can be. There will be many times when you won't get hired, or when you do get the job, the guys will look at you with faces that show panic, because they think that you're going to play folk music and screw everything up while they're trying to play jazz. You have to stay cool; be nice to everybody and you can do more for yourself by playing well. Be confident in yourself. Just realize that the music is everything, and it has nothing to do with politics or the women's liberation movement. ■