

Emily Remler

Emily Remler is something of a rarity — not because, at the age of 29, she has recorded five jazz albums as leader, several more as sideman and worked alongside innumerable jazz greats, but because she is probably the first female guitarist to do so. She spoke to Martin Richards while visiting the 1987 Nice Jazz Festival.

MY INTERVIEW with Emily was refreshing. She enthuses about music in general and jazz in particular, and revels in the sheer joy of being a musician. She is proud of her craft, and concerned about the American jazz musician's poor status and lack of scope.

Luckily, Emily is enormously versatile, and although she favours bebop, she can produce music on demand, regardless of style. After listening to her performances with Richie Cole's group in Nice, one cannot but wonder at the incongruity of Emily playing Dixieland on Bourbon Street with a bunch of New Orleans veterans!

'I was born in New York City on September 18th 1957, which makes me 29 [at time of interview]. As far as getting into music, I've been doing that since I was three,

when my father says I wrote three songs on the piano and, the way he puts it, two of them were great. I studied at Berklee College of Music at 16, graduated at 18 and fell in love with jazz guitar and I've been doing it ever since. Prior to that I pretty much played rock and folk and things like that — the normal progression for guitarists today. I heard Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass and Pat Martino and I haven't really been the same since. I've been making a living at it since I'm about 17 or 18 years old. When I'm playing, I'm happy. When I get off the stage I have to figure out what to do with myself, because I'm really obsessed with music.

'Charlie Christian was the first guitarist I heard. He was an earlier influence than Wes and Joe and to a lesser extent for me,

so was Django Reinhardt. Basically it's been up from there. I heard Mary Osborne once and she sounded really great.

'Since I graduated, I've played with so many people. After I left Berklee I went to New Orleans and played with a rhythm and blues band and a jazz band which included Wynton Marsalis and Bobby McFerrin. I did that six nights a week, in addition to playing the show music in town, since I could read. I played with Robert Gourlay and Nancy Wilson, who hired me later as her personal accompanist, and Michel Legrand and people like that. When I moved to New York I got a job with Astrud Gilberto, and was with her for four years. I also had my own group with Bob Moses and Eddie Gomez. I played with Hank Jones and Billy Cobham. I did two and a half years with Larry Coryell. I've played with Pat Martino, Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel and Charlie Byrd. I used to substitute for those guys if one of them got sick. I've also been Rosemary Clooney's accompanist. I have ideas for my own group and sometimes I can get that done and sometimes I can't. What I'm working on is to try to get that at a more constant pace, to have my own band and travel with it, especially through Europe.

New Orleans roots

'New Orleans is a good place to go back to. The rhythm and blues band was called Little Queenie and the Percolators and they are fairly well known in the States. They're fantastic! Maybe not to the extent of say The Dirty Dozen band that's been appearing here in Nice, but more of a traditional R & B thing. Little Queenie was a singer named Lee Harris. These are just names from New Orleans, but I've gotten so much from musicians who nobody knows about and who choose to stay in their home towns and just play or sing incredible music and never venture out to New York into the hustle and bustle of the music business. They were certainly incredible musicians and in a lot of ways, I feel most of my roots are from New Orleans, 'cos it's such a strong culture there, with rhythm and things like that.

'Wynton [Marsalis] played on occasion with our band and there were some New Orleans musicians. There was a pianist named David Torkenowski whose father was Warner Torkenowski who conducted the symphony. David didn't like that! The bass player was Jim Singleton. Johnny Vidicovitch was an incredible drummer. I hadn't seen him in five years, until the North Sea Festival a few weeks ago. Bobby McFerrin was the singer and there were different horn players. Sometimes it was James Rivers. Different people but we played very free and we basically played anything we wanted. We could do anything we wanted because it didn't matter so much, because we were playing in an



Tim Motion

environment with an oyster bar. We got as many oysters as we wanted and shrimp. We could play as late as we wanted and as long as we wanted. It wasn't restricted and we could have a good time and that atmosphere was really conducive to pure creativity.

'I've just finished playing with Rosemary Clooney. We did the last year and I went to Japan with her and through the States. She's actually one of my favourite singers. We had a full orchestra with strings and horns. She had her own pianist and conductor and we did some small group things. She's one of the few singers that sings the melody straight and you can hear the lyrics. I'd say "oh! that's what Cole Porter meant!". She's just a wonderful person to be with.'

The art of accompaniment

'It's very important in music that you're comfortable with people, because then you feel much better on the bandstand and can give more of yourself. Most of the time we played from written scores, but with Rosemary it's more that you should learn the songs and be able to do it the way she wants to. Accompaniment is really an art. It is improvisation, except you've got to feed off somebody else's concept of the music and you have to form a cushion for them, so that they can do their thing. That means you have to set your own ego aside and some musicians have a big problem doing that. For some people it's impossible. I think in the last decade the "me" generation has affected the music in that everyone wants to be noticed. You know, it's "listen to me", even to the drummers and bass players when it used to be that all the rhythm players, including guitarists, were accompanists for a sax player or a singer. They would just take their solos, but now everybody wants to improvise at once, which can be difficult. Sometimes it works out but when you're playing behind a singer you should probably keep a low profile. It doesn't make you any less there. It just makes it apparent that you have the ability to put yourself aside and make someone else sound good, which is just as valuable in my book. I really respect all accompanists. Even guitarists who never play single note lines all think they're incredible because they backed-up someone else!'

'Astrud Gilberto is a perfect example of what an accompanist has to do. Actually she gives a pretty free rein and I respect her. I worked with her so long and I had that concept of wanting to make her sound good and didn't want to project myself so much. Also, I was fascinated and still am with Brazilian music. The rhythm and joy in it is just incredible and it started a whole trend in America — samba jazz! Our Latin influenced music usually is from Brazil, although the salsa influence is from Cuba. Egberto Gismonti is one of my favourite musicians from Brazil. He's a great composer and a free spirit. In order to be able to accompany Astrud, I studied the guitar playing of her husband and Carlos Jobim. I needed to learn how to comp musically. They're both favourites of mine and Jobim, of course, is the greatest composer

and writer. You fall in love with Brazilian music. I was so in love with it that I wanted to be Brazilian. I get obsessed with music. I go into one or two year periods where I fall in love with a certain musician or an area of music, and I can't get out of it until it withers away like a romance, then I go into something else. I seem consistently to come back to John Coltrane and Bill Evans no matter what happens. I'm very loyal to those two.

'I'm doing more solo things and I've played a lot of solo guitar. I've just got a job in America at Great University on a recommendation from Joe Pass. That's a great honour. I do a combination of things. I play in the style of Joe, then I do my own stuff. I still can't pinpoint exactly what it is. I write my own music and some of it comes out like folk music, some Latin, African and Indian. I've studied Indian music. My stuff is sort of around the whole spectrum of styles, but I try to incorporate all of that into interesting solo guitar work, which is consistent and rhythmic. I did some arranging at school for big bands, but I haven't done any lately. But then I'm not interested in big bands! I'm interested in quartets and quintet arrangements and I've done plenty of them. I arrange all of my own compositions and I have instruments in mind. I'd love, one day, to study more composition and orchestration. In that context, Leonard Bernstein is my dream musician, besides Egberto Gismonti, that is! It's my dream one day to write for movies. I've probably written about 50 tunes and there's about 150 more fragments of tunes that I carry around with me, which turn whole tunes in their own time, but they won't go on paper until they're up to my standards which are very high. I get a lot of fulfilment out of writing. It doesn't matter if they're only little tunes or what, because I feel that that's really where my interest is.

'Of course, playing is incredible! Improvising is trying to compose whilst you play, which is much harder because you don't have the time to relax and develop it. I tie playing and composing together, but there's nothing as good as the feeling of writing a song and have your band play it and hear people like it. You can feel good for days from that!'

Making records

'I love recording but I'm a real perfectionist. I need a lot of time in the studio which I haven't had for the five recordings I've done. I've done them all in six hour recording sessions, which I think would be OK for someone who is just playing tunes, but when I'm doing my original compositions and being my picky self, I need a little more time. I feel good about my records and particularly about the fourth one I did, which was all original music. The record was called Catwalk and was on Concord as are all the others. I'm looking forward to doing a lot more recording.

'I've always recorded with groups. I never play solo on record, at least not yet. My first record was called Firefly which was one of my tunes. Hank Jones was on piano, Jake Hanna on drums and Bob

Maize on bass. It's a straight ahead record. I chose the tunes I wanted to do. Tunes that have not been done a million times. There's some Horace Silver and some McCoy Tyner and Duke's *In A Sentimental Mood*. All the tunes worked out pretty well.

'The second record basically was with Jim Hall's rhythm section which is Don Thompson and Terry Clark; the older rhythm section that he used to play trio with. We had James Williams on piano and that one is pretty much the same way although we used a few more of my originals. I used more of my own material on each successive record date. You can use your imagination as to why that is.

'The third one was starting already to get more like my music and that was with Eddie Gomez, Bob Moses and a fantastic trumpet player named John D'Earth who chooses to live in Virginia which is probably why he is not well known. There are so many like him who are just amazing but who also want to do other things. This third record has a lot of my songs plus a great Duke Ellington tune called *Searching*. I took a lot of pains to find songs which are more obscure.

'The fourth record, Catwalk, is my pride and joy. It's all originals. Tunes which people had been hearing over a five-year period and asking me why I didn't record them. I was playing those tunes live, but recording standards, because seemingly the originals went over best with audiences. I feel it's the way I write the melodies. They are singable catchy type things and they have some substance to them, so my fourth record was a showcase for that and it went over very well.

'The fifth record was as a result of my musical relationship with Larry Coryell, and we called it Together. It's a digital recording, guitar duo, and it's all that we had been playing live so I think we did it pretty well. The best thing about this record is that the transition from myself to Larry or Larry to myself is virtually undetectable. I mean we didn't skip a beat as we went from one to the other, soloing and switching off and arrangements. I thought it was very smooth. Our styles are so different, but somehow we came together. It was a nice record and a nice experience and I'll probably be doing another one in a little while.

'I've just finished two other records. One with Rosemary Clooney and another on Concord with the pianist John Coliani. My first recording was with the Clayton Brothers. I was 19 years old. I've been on a few recording dates around New York with folk you probably wouldn't have heard of. I was on a date under Ray Brown's name; Ray and Gene Harris and Red Holloway. I was on a record called Solar Energy and did another with an all female group called Deuce in New York. I got to play a lot on that one. That's about it as far as I can remember.'

Versatility

'What style of musician do I see myself as? That's a hard question for me because I like so many types of jazz, let alone other types of music. I'd say I've got a very

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strong bop root and some rhythm and blues. Wes Montgomery type music. I don't even know what you'd call that. Soul? Bebop? Mostly I'd say I'm influenced by the post-bebop era — that's what they called it at school. What was going on in the sixties. The development of progressive jazz. What McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock and John Coltrane were doing. I love that whole era. Joe Henderson was one of my favourites. That's what I suppose I really like to do. However, there are so many other things I like, which have influenced me. I love the music of Pat Metheny. There are so many different types that I end up being hard to categorise. I mean for my own self to categorise. I'd say I'm pretty mainstream in that I don't play beep, toot, toot, crazy screaming music, but I do like different time signatures which sort of pushes me into the fusion bag, I suppose. I'm very confused about this because the categories seem to be for the benefit of other people so that they can set you in a certain place and know which record they ought to put you on. To me, a musician should be versatile and able to play every different style to their best ability and that's what I've always tried to do. So there's a lot of different things I like. I guess you could definitely call me a jazz guitar player, and not a rock guitar player.

I've played so many different forms of music that it's unbelievable. I lived in New Orleans for three years and I played Dixieland, right on Bourbon Street, from 1.00 to 6.00am. I was the only white person in the band and the only person under 65 years old! I've played cajun music, and I've played enough weddings and anniversary parties to be able to play all different styles of junk. The only thing I detest is country music and that's because coming from New York City, I don't have a lot of cowboy roots. I love Indian music and I've played it. I've played bluegrass and I've played some classical music and some punk rock. I was in a band and they put pink spray on my hair and bought the clothes for me! That was sort of fun but you see I had to tune up everybody in the band before we could play and that was getting to be a drag. We should have stayed out of tune and it would have been more effective! I was getting tired of the limiting rhythms and chords. I need things to go some place. I need improvisation and open invitations to spontaneous music, to feel good. I need time. You know when everything is rehearsed and practised it's fine for group

pride but it's not fine for my creative self.

'Basically my career has been a pot pourri of things. At Berklee I didn't play with anybody, but since I've played with so many people. The most important thing I've been doing all these years is with my own group. I've been with Eddie Gomez and Bob Moses for several years and we want to do more with that group. I've played so many one-night affairs, one-week affairs, one-tour affairs. I was in a Broadway show. I've played with a lot of name people like Marshall Royal and Snooky Young. It's like being a freelance journalist.

'The Broadway show was Sophisticated Ladies and I played it in Los Angeles. It was in '82 or '83 and there were 30-odd musicians, including Lawrence Brown, Lloyd Mares, Carl Schroeder, Snooky Young and Marshall Royal. There was another great tenor player named Herman Riley, that people might not know.

'For the future, I want to play my own music with my own band and travel with the same people. I think there's a lot to be said for that now that I've been a freelance for all these years. I'd rather have people who I know me and who are acquainted with how I play and then we can go from there. For instance, Bill Evans always played with the same trio and I think that's conducive to really great ESP type improvisation which is a joyful experience. John Coltrane is another who always played with the same group. Unfortunately in the jazz world, that's a very hard thing to do because usually everyone is freelancing so to get these people together and paid enough, and to transport them around, all four of them, is a lot more difficult than just transporting yourself and playing with local musicians. That's not the worst experience because in most major cities in and around the States and in Europe, there are some very competent people and you learn from them as you go, but I think I prefer having my own guys in my own band, playing my own music, like Pat Metheny does. I don't think I'd ever use the same degree of electronics. My music is not like his, but that concept of just having a solid group as a foundation and good people to work with, a good agency and things like that, is attractive. That's what I'm doing. I'm going about achieving that goal. I've just signed with the same agency that handles Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Jordan and a lot of other really great people. I've hooked up with them and I've finally got myself a manager who looks at my career a lot differently from how I've ever looked at it. I've been freelancing and taking things that come along if I feel like it, whatever it is, and with no thought in mind of progress and career moves, just because I want to learn from every situation. But at 29, I think now I'm ready to be more focussed and to learn the business a little better. I need help with that, because I'm so concentrated on the music. That's all I'm really supposed to do according to my manager. He can take care of the rest and I trust him. He's Tony Bennett's son, Danny and I went to high school with him. He manages his father and I'm very happy with the relationship I have with him.

Jazz in America

'The jazz scene in America offers enough work but I'd say the appreciation is not like we have in Europe or in Japan. There are always exceptions, but basically in America, jazz is taken for granted. There are so many reasons for that. It's because its origin is American and I think the mentality of the average American is to listen to music and not to have to listen too hard. Jazz seems to be a music that you have to listen to for a while to get some knowledge of it. It's a whole culture you have to almost study to understand. For example, there's a lot of joy in listening to the radio and knowing who it is who's playing or taking a solo. If you don't study jazz then you will never know that and not get part of that joy. On the whole, judging by the recording business and performances, it's country music and rock music which is the most attractive, with pop and R & B to a lesser extent. To me it's light and superficial and boring. Musically I don't get satisfied by country music. It doesn't go very far. But the average guy who works hard all day just wants to go out and dance. He doesn't want to sit and listen and analyse and be appreciative. He just wants to have a good time so I think that's one of the situations that makes jazz on a low totem pole in America. The nature of jazz coming up as it did in low smoky drinking clubs, along with the whole myth of the tragic jazz musician and a music liked by a low part of society is just not true.

'I was watching Herbie Hancock, Buster Williams and Al Foster at the North Sea Festival a few days ago and I thought how wonderful they are as musicians. I'm so conditioned to jazz being on a low scale in America and the thought that we don't deserve appreciation, that watching these guys I thought they were being arrogant in responding to the audience appreciation. Then I thought they have a right to be noticed, for God's sake, they're all geniuses. Creative, great musicians, but in America we are conditioned to feel that we are at a lower level than classical or pop musicians. You know, "well I didn't get much money but we had a good time". A rock musician wouldn't stand for that sort of thing. It's only recently that I've seen some jazz musicians turning around and taking a respect and pride in themselves. Of course, there were people like Duke Ellington who always had that pride. The band dressed in tuxedos every night, and why not? This music is great music and we've nothing to be ashamed of because we're not in the top ten pop charts. If we don't continue this great legacy, no one else will, so we deserve attention. We deserve appreciation and to get paid well. It's funny how we have to leave our own country to realise this and that's sad. But I think art in general is more appreciated in Europe. Art and culture and doing things with some pride in your work.'

Four records led by Emily Remler:

- Firefly (Concord CJ 162)
- Take Two (Concord CJ 195)
- Transitions (Concord CJ 236)
- Catwalk (Concord CJ 265)