Emily Remler

by Leslie Gourse

Perhaps to counteract the rigors of frequent travel and work, decided this year to live in Sheephead Bay, Brooklyn, a sleepy fishing village (a rarity, of course, in New York City). It has a big, safe place on the water; the air smells like the sea. And I can go to the beach and look for medical supplies.

The ambiance helps her maintain her equilibrium — a priority for her, she has learned. During her early years of stardom on the road, she ate too much, persevered and addicted to food. She had since shed 20 pounds of baby fat by developing sensible eating habits and swimming every day. Some of her cues came from Larry Coryell. As they traveled the globe, including 10 European tours a year, she noticed that he swallowed a fluid of vitamins and jogged every day. "The jazz musician in the dark room — that image is gone," she says. "I'm proud of her new healthiness, apparent in her fresh good looks."

She's the first in her family to become a musician. Her father is a businessman, her mother a housewife; her brother is a diplomat in Washington, D.C.; and her sister a lawyer and language teacher in N.Y. Her brother played guitar as an amateur; Emily taught herself to play on his Gibson ES 335. (She still uses it, though not exclusively.) And from her hometown, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., a quiet suburb (even though Dizzy, who lives nearby, sometimes drives by fast through it), Emily had to find her way in uncharted territory — the music world.

She is known for her popular records and personal appearances, which attracted an audience quickly; in the early 1960s, pianist Monte Alexander hired her to play with his group. "His articulateness attracted me to his music," she recalls. "Perhaps I'm a true Virgo. I like things very neat." She and Alexander married in those days, and for two-and-a-half years they traveled, sometimes together, sometimes separately for long stretches. "I'll meet you in Paris" was a usual gambit between them. She also recalls: "It was hard to be married and on the road. We had haphazard meetings. We had to get used to each other again." Divorced for about four years now, they are just good friends, albeit good ones, she says. And musical strengths left their marks on her: she thinks.

Her twenties were a decade of turmoil and maturation. "I was introspective, because I was young, eager to please, and scared. I've been through a lot of experiences now. And each year I've become more sure that I belong on the stage. And I play with more conviction, with no apologies. I love audiences and musicians, and I can relax. I'm very assertive in the studio now. The record is a product that will show where you're at. And I have to stand up for what I think will sound good." Her last two albums are unquestionably her best. And the next to last, Together, a duo with Larry Coryell, is so different from East to West that they almost defy comparison. But on East to West, she's the leader, not the partner, and the only guitar voice. So you can easily hear how clearly and subtly she asserts her mastery. And she and Coryell virtually emanate from each other's lines, a collaboration that few musicians in groups ever achieve, unless they play together for years.

As she begins her thirties — the decade when she analyzes, you find out what you want to do, after learning how to imitate others, she has put aside an earlier dream to compose film scores. She is studying composition. But she hasn't had time to stop studying and look for a film project to sit with at home. And she doesn't want to, since she is in love with performing now: "I'm at the point in my career where all I need is an airport."
each succeeding record, her abilities ripened. And the fleetness and rich, round tones of her early work seem almost a blurry understatement compared with her current lean, spare articulation and improvisational ease. Her own compositions often bear the hallmarks of her generation’s intensity. But she pursues a course in the mainstream. Her tribute to Wes Montgomery on her new record shows her devotion to the soulful, improvisational genius at the heart of contemporary jazz guitar playing. And she has deepened and sophisticated her playing rather than diversified or experimented with styles and technology. She loves it when reviewers call her “smooth.” “Remler was subtle but strong”: that review of her recent appearance at the Monterey Jazz Festival is her favorite.

And she feels that she’s living the good life now. She has left behind Pittsburgh, surprisingly enough her—residence for a year-and-a-half after her Manhattan apartment went co-op. Though she had friends in Pittsburgh, “a pretty city,” she says she missed the Museum of Modern Art—a serious lack for a woman who wears a Calder tee shirt these days, and who had enough talent to consider a painter’s career at one time. Further-

more, in Pittsburgh, she couldn’t put together a group of wonderful musicians easily. For the Blue Note in October, she arranged to lead pianist Fred Hersch, the engaging bassist Lynn Seaton who can sing in unison, and drummer Terry Clarke, with whom she has recorded. And she has been able to organize a group with Lincoln Goines on electric bass and Jeff Hirschfield on drums in New York—“the only place where so many good musicians live a few blocks from one another.”

She has the company of her best friend, trombonist Jay Ashby, who plays with Claudio Roditi and others. And she has bought a new Volkswagen Fox. Practical enough to feel proud of that and distressed about the theft of a $300 stereo system from her car, she’s not particularly dazzled by the financial rewards of her career. They vary from year to year anyway, she says. And: “If someone like Elvin Jones asked me to play with him, I’d be very happy even if he didn’t pay me very much. I’m totally happy when I’m learning from a good musician. I want to get better myself. I don’t think that you ever reach the point where you say; ‘I’m here’ and stop trying to get better. I suppose I could call Elvin Jones and say, ‘Hey, I know your brother’.”