

'SOPHISTICATED'S' LADY GUITARIST

LEONARD FEATHER

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JAZZ

'SOPHISTICATED'S' LADY GUITARIST

By LEONARD FEATHER

This is another in a series of occasional articles on female instrumentalists in the Los Angeles area.

The plectrums are rapidly falling into place for Emily Remler.

A year ago she was an unknown guitarist jobbing around New York. Since then her exceptional talent has taken her to Concord, where she recorded her first solo album for the Concord Jazz label; to Berlin, where she appeared at the annual fall jazz festival; to Hawaii, for a series of jam sessions aboard ship on a jazz cruise; back to New York for a busy schedule of playing and teaching, then recently to Los Angeles to take a chair in the band of Hollywood heavyweights seen on-stage nightly in the musical "Sophisticated Ladies."

She is about half the age of most members of the orchestra, and the only woman, but such achievements are not new to her. When Remler graduated from Boston's Berklee College of Music, she was just 18 and, as she recalls, the men who graduated with her not only were several years older but outnumbered the female graduates by 40 to 1.

She has seen both sides of the picture that confronts a woman instrumentalist making her way in a male-dominated profession. During the three years she spent in New Orleans after her Berklee training, several male bandleaders refused to hire her. "They told me, to my face, that they just wouldn't feel comfortable with a woman around; couldn't tell their jokes or feel relaxed."

"It's only in the past year or two that I've noticed a few people have hired me partly because of the novelty value of having a woman. Well, surely that's a form of compensation I've earned. I still can't forget those occasions when I'd play a bar mitzvah or a wedding and watch the male musicians get panicky the moment I walked in."

"When you're a woman in a situation like that, you have to be constantly proving yourself. I was lucky that in New Orleans the competition was not very stiff; there was a shortage of guitarists who could read music well, so they just had to hire me. Otherwise I'd have had to wait a million years."

Emily Remler came to jazz by a circuitous route. Born in New York, Sept. 18, 1957, raised in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., she began playing folk music. "I was just a regular 9, 10, 11-year-old kid going for folk lessons. I was in a little group with Buddy Hackett's son, but never took it seriously and didn't bother to practice."

From folk, her interests drifted into rock. Beatle sounds held her attention for a time; later she tried to copy Johnny Winter and spent hours listening to Rolling Stones records, but still regarded music as little more than a hobby.

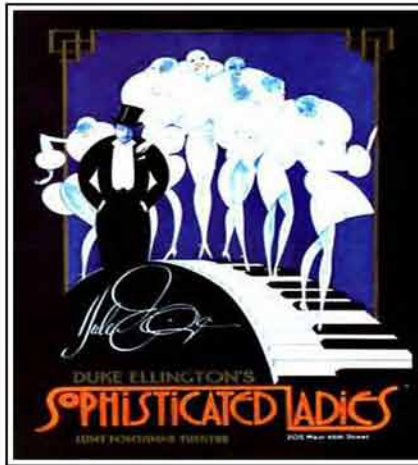
At a boarding school in Massachusetts, she says, "My academics were so awful that it seemed the only alternative was to go to a music school. At least I was interested in music theory, so I went, sort of half-heartedly, to Berklee."

Up to that point she had been only dimly aware of jazz. "I mean, I had heard it all my life, but I'd listen to Miles Davis or John Coltrane and say, 'What is this?' It scared me—I didn't understand it. Nowadays I listen to Coltrane records all the time."

"Berklee really opened up my ears. I heard Charlie Christian's records, and Paul Desmond's things with (Dave) Brubeck. I could sing all of Paul's solos. One friend gave me about a dozen Wes Montgomery records and I just went crazy listening to him."

Remler is often told that her style represents Montgomery's, but in the years since she studied his recordings other influences have turned her head and hands around. "If I imitate another guitarist, that's as far as I'm going to go; but right now I'm listening a lot to Bill Evans and McCoy Tyner. I find that when I'm trying to emulate a pianist, although it can be frustrating at times, the challenge does make me jump a giant step."

Despite all her training at Berklee, Remler says she remained a reluctant and incompetent guitarist. "I was so bad I wouldn't play in front of my teacher for six months. I never took lessons from people I could have studied with—Pat Metheny, Mick Goodrick, those really



Guitarist Emily Remler in concert with Hank Jones: "I'm not a finished package yet. I'm just a little kid."

wonderful teachers. I was just a real hippie."

Nevertheless, she graduated and decided immediately to take off for New Orleans—a romantic choice, given the city's jazz history, yet hardly the logical one for a young musician on the way up. Why New Orleans, then?

"A very simple answer: At Berklee I met a guy from New Orleans, a wonderful guitar player, and we fell desperately in love. I moved to New Orleans with him and we were together for three years; then the relationship ended—basically because of a competitive situation. See, when we met I was a really terrible guitar player, but as soon as I started to get good, we began scratching each other."

The improvement apparently was swift and effective; before long Remler was one of Crescent City's busiest guitarists. Among other assignments she became a house musician with the late Dick Stabile's orchestra at the Fairmont Hotel.

"Ben Vereen came to town, to work the room for two weeks. I was terrified; I had to read the whole show, but that pressure was like a guardian angel watching over me. I was forced to become a good reader."

From that point it was all onward and upward. Playing for Nancy Wilson at the Fairmont, she was invited to work a Wilson concert at Carnegie Hall. Back in New Orleans, she gigged with a rhythm

and blues band, Little Queenie and the Percolators. In addition to working the hotel six nights a week and playing jazz all night afterward, she built a following as a teacher, acquiring 25 students a week. "I was working around the clock, to save money to move to New York."

When the great guitarist Herb Ellis passed through town, she took her Herb Ellis-model guitar to him. "I was having some trouble with it, so I asked him about it. I also asked for a guitar lesson. Well, I went to his hotel and we played all afternoon. Three weeks later, I got a call from Carl Jefferson asking me to play at his Concord Jazz Festival. That was really something! All these legendary guitarists onstage—Herb Ellis, Barney Kessel, Tal Farlow, Charlie Byrd—and little me."

After another year in New Orleans, the move to New York ensued. By now Remler's talent, coupled with an aggressive personality, enabled her to start picking up work with little difficulty. After making her first record, on a Concord session with the Clayton Brothers, she led her own trio, then played a series of dates with the singer Astrud Gilberto.

"I ran into Herb Ellis again; he said 'I haven't forgotten you,' and soon after, thanks to him, I had my own deal to record as a leader for Concord."

Her present job came about as a result of her teaching prowess. "A student of mine was the young son of Manny Fox, who's one of the producers of 'Sophisticated Ladies.' I taught the boy an arrangement I'd worked out on 'Satin Doll,' which Gregory Hines heard and liked; as a result, I started giving Gregory lessons, too. Then I was invited to come out to Los Angeles and play in the show."

Emily Remler seems to have packed a broad range of activities into her six-year career. For the present, however, she feels the need to sit back, gain a perspective and absorb more experience.

"I'd like to be a sideman for a while. If I have any kind of goal at the moment, it's to hook up with somebody great and have them teach me some more, because I'm not a finished package yet. I'm still a little kid."

The little kid is developing firm ideas of what ought to lie ahead for her. "I'm quite serious about composing; in fact ultimately I'd like to be a movie composer. I think of myself as a writer first and a guitarist second."

"There are some standard tunes I like to play, but I feel that my original compositions have more of myself in them. I mean, why should I play, say, 'Green Dolphin Street' when Joe Pass has been playing it for millions of years and I can never match his level of achievement on it?"

"The only trouble is, I'm writing these tunes that seem to go in an different direction than my playing—more like Pat Metheny or John McLaughlin. Well, I guess I'm not even sure where I'm going yet; but then, I realize I'm only 24, so we'll just have to see what happens." □