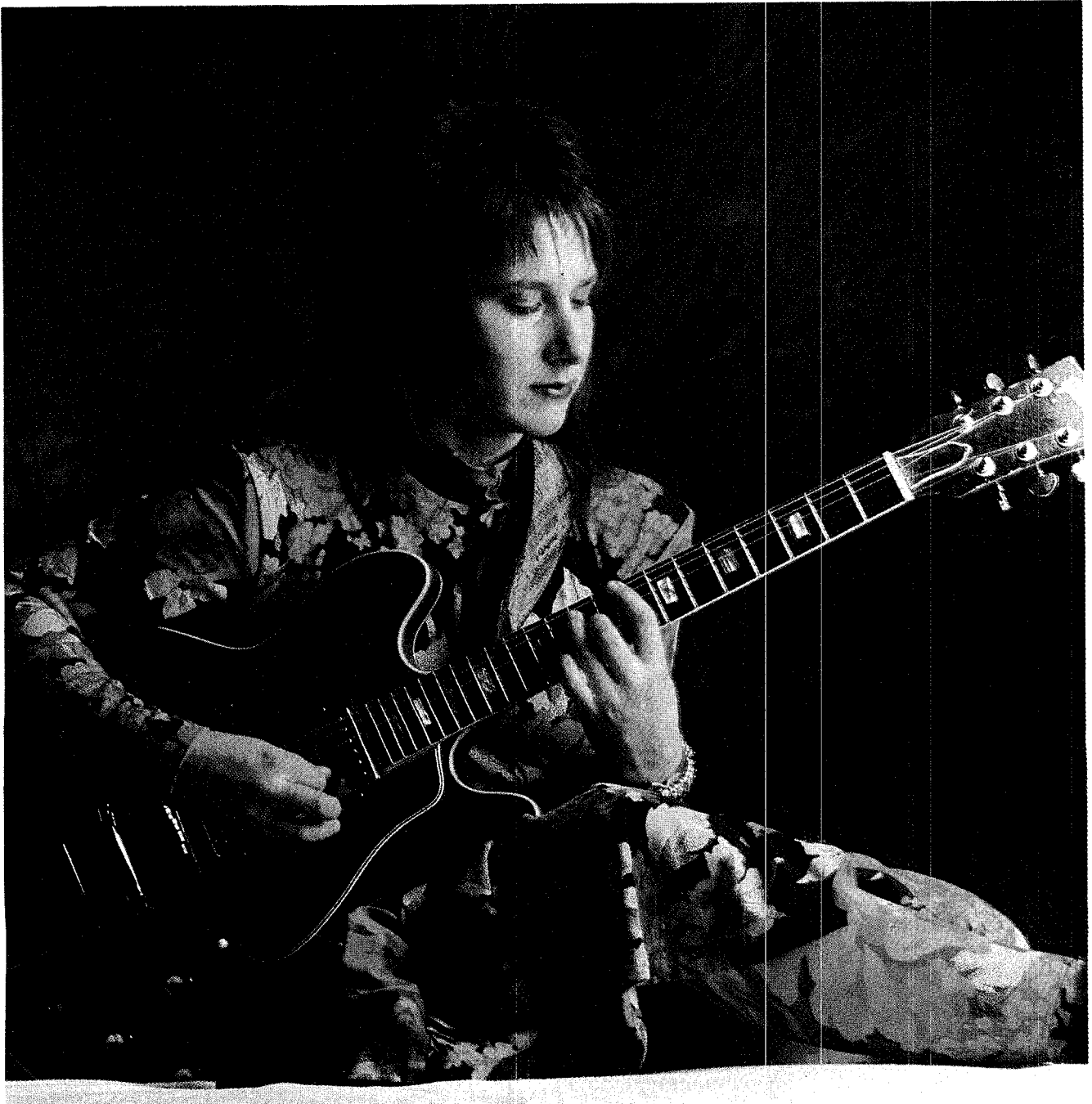


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PHOTO BY JOJI SAWA

First Impressions

Emily Remler talks about music and the struggle of substance over image.

by Andrew Taylor

It may look like a nice Jewish girl from New Jersey," Emily Remler told *People* magazine in 1982, "but inside I'm a 50-year-old, heavysset black man with a big thumb, like Wes Montgomery." Audiences have often gotten the wrong impression when first seeing Emily Remler. She is a woman jazz guitarist in an industry dominated by men. She first found success as a youngster among timeworn talents. In short, she doesn't look like what some would expect from a major jazz talent.

At first, Remler struggled with these constrictive preconceptions. Now she's learned to let her fingers do the talking. And that usually does the trick.

Like it or not, however, Emily Remler is a nice girl from New Jersey—born in New York City on September 18, 1957, and raised in Englewood Cliffs. Although her family was "nonmusical," Remler always had a fascination with sounds and structure of music. She taught herself to play folk guitar at age 9. Through the music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Winter, and Jimi Hendrix, she was drawn into rock styles. At each step, Remler learned by absorption. She soaks in the techniques and "feel" of the musicians and music she admires, and emerges with a broader voice of her own.

In 1974, at age 16, Remler entered Berklee and her eyes were opened to jazz. The music of Paul Desmond, Pat Martino, Pat Metheny, and especially Wes Montgomery opened a new world for her. She began absorbing the styles of the jazz masters and transcribing their riffs.

"She had a lot of enthusiasm and asked a lot of questions," remembers Guitar Department Assistant Chairman Larry Baione, Remler's teacher at Berklee. "She was willing to play with anyone so she could learn."

At age 18, Remler moved to New Orleans where she had her first taste of professional life—playing gigs in clubs, venues, and music halls, and teaching 25 guitar students. Her aggressive approach to getting and keeping jobs made those early years busy ones, and helped her get her break in 1978. She met and played for Herb Ellis who was impressed enough to get her into that year's Concord Jazz Festival. At 21, Remler was playing on a bill with Ellis, Cal Collins, Barney Kessel, and Tal Farlow.

Eleven years later, Remler has five albums on Concord Records to her credit, including her 1981 debut, *Firefly*, and 1988's *East to Wes*. She also has extensive performing experience with the likes of Larry Coryell, Eddie Gomez, and Astrud Gilberto.

This October, Remler will be honored with Berklee's Distinguished Alumni Award for her dedication to the betterment of jazz, and her positive influence on the music industry and on hopeful music students. In 1990, Remler will continue that dedication with a new album—incorporating more of her crossover leanings—and a national tour.

Emily Remler has come a long way since her early days at Berklee. But she plans to take her "nice-girl-from-New-Jersey" face as far as she can go.

What was your goal when you left Berklee in 1976?

My last year at Berklee, I had a dream to get a gig at a club and play standards all night long. That was it. Since then my goals have gone much higher. I reached that goal as a result of the experience I got on the stage. And the information I got at Berklee was very helpful.

What was it that raised your sights?

First of all, I achieved that goal within the first year after leaving Berklee. Then I got a record contract, so things go up. You want to make the best record you can make. Then you want to play with this or that great musician. Recently, I've had a goal to play with McCoy Tyner. Now that dream is coming true. In February, I'm opening for McCoy with my band and we're going to play together. That's something I thought would never happen.

Do you get the same joy from music today as you did back then, or do you take a different angle now?

I have to work very hard that it's not a different angle. It can turn into your livelihood, and your business. You can lose a lot of that innocent, pure motivation to be a great musician.

If you start writing a song, and you're writing it to please "them," whoever "they" are, it's kind of weird. I have not lost that. I'm still very much into learning and jamming. I'm working on Mick Goodrick's [67] new book, trying to get better. I have to keep going. I don't want to stagnate.

How do you avoid the pull of writing or playing to please other people?

I think by now, at 32, I have somewhat of a personal voice. Because I have so many years of experience, I think it sounds like me no matter what I do. I'm hoping that's the truth. If I have a funk rhythm section behind me, I'd want it to still sound like me, and I wouldn't change the way I play. Even the more mainstream stuff I'm working on right now, it still sounds like me.

It's just like writing. It's like the way you're going to write this article. Maybe when you first started writing you could copy someone else's style completely. But after writing a while, your writing will always have some of you in it.



PHOTO BY JOJI SAWA

Remler at a Berklee Visiting Artist seminar: "Musicians are really turning into good businessmen. And it's about time."

You've emulated a lot of guitarists, but the result has always sounded like you.

I think that happens naturally. I never took a Wes Montgomery solo and played it note for note. I tried to get more of his feeling.

When I was at Berklee, the thing was to sound like Pat Martino. So we all tried to sound like Pat Martino. I couldn't stand the people who were afraid of sounding too much like Pat Martino and George Benson. I said to myself, "Look, I'll get as good as Pat Martino, then I'll change my style." It just seemed ridiculous for a person who couldn't play that well to be worrying about it.

I believe that you were going to consciously imitate somebody, or you were going to *unconsciously* imitate somebody. Either way, you get a lot from another person. Then you take it into yourself and interpret it another way. For me, it's been happening that way since day one. Things have been done before. It's all interpretation and sound.

When you go on stage or into a studio, are you there to please the audience or to please yourself?

It's really both. What I like to do the best is lose myself—to get my head out of the way. I try to be some kind of channel. I know this sounds esoteric. But I try to get the thinking out of the way.

You have said before that you try to “get rid of the jury in your head.” What does that do for you?

Every time I can do it, which is maybe 75 percent of the time now, it's great. I have better timing, and I sound so much better.

It would be different if the condemning jury worked. If you played a few bars and the jury said, “You stink, you're terrible,” and that egged you on to play better, that would be great. But it doesn't, it makes you play worse.

So if you can get those judgments out of your mind, you can be freer and play much better. And if you're going to play bebop, you don't have time for all that thinking. It's almost like driving a race car. How much can you think when you're driving?

Does that tie into not having to prove yourself?

Yeah. I feel like that very little nowadays.

Did you feel that way when you started out?

Tremendously so. Especially when I was at school. It's just natural that when kids are at school that they're going to be competitive. Plus the fact that I was a girl. So I got this “I'm gonna show these guys” attitude—which wasn't really conducive to creative playing.

I just wanted to be accepted as a jazz guitarist. But that can drive you crazy. Because you never *do* get the approval—at least not completely. You can get the approval of all your peers and one guy will say you can't play and you're shattered.

So I consciously tried to put that type of feeling out of my mind. By the time I got to be about 21 years old, that feeling was gone.

Do you connect your own personal growth with musical growth?

Absolutely. And I see it with other people, too. That's the process. That's why so many people consider being a jazz musician as learning from life experiences. When you grow up, your music grows up too.

That part doesn't even have much to do with practicing. It's just a new attitude. You realize that on this solo you could play seven notes as opposed to 700 and still say the same thing.

Have you ever felt your music suffered because of an attitude?

The music is going to suffer if the motivation is to compete with others, and if I'm only playing get people's approval. It's going to suffer if I'm not that great health-wise; or if I'm worried about four million things. But if I keep myself fairly healthy and try to play with a motivation to play great and feel good, it seems to work out. That's the original motivation anyway.

It seems like much of the music industry has turned from a self-destructive to a self-preserving attitude.

It's unbelievable. I saw it start with Pat Metheny when I was at Berklee. He was the first one that affected me by being a young, healthy jazz musician—and by having a positive attitude instead of a dark, self-destructive attitude. It seems like a lot more musicians are like that now. You go on tours and people have their vitamins and run in the morning.

That's the thing now. You don't get hired if you're all messed up on drugs or alcohol. It's much more the style to be healthy and know business and know what you're talking about and treat yourself well. Musicians are really turning into good businessmen. And it's about time.

Are there other reasons the scene has turned around?

I think the music has become more positive. I don't think you can say that the '50s stuff was negative and Pat Metheny stuff is positive. But you can't be dark and self-destructive and play pretty, positive music. You can't do that with bebop either—at least I can't.

How have your own views of music and the music industry changed over the years?

In the last three or four years, I've opened myself up to look at it as a business, which is what it is, and to learn a little more about it. I still don't know very much, but I know a lot more than I used to know. I was a typical musician just wanting to play and not wanting to be bothered with the details—but then resenting things when I would get screwed or when I wasn't treated the way I thought I should be treated. I wouldn't even ask how much a gig payed and then resent it when it was too little. That's a very typical “old school” thing. I've been working on just being able to say what I think I need.

Do you think that business can overshadow the music?

It can very much. It helps to keep in mind that they can't make the record without you. You're just as important as the managers, record promoters, and those type of people. The idea I used to have was that, “Oh, you're doing me such a big favor to allow me to play for you.” But that's not the way it is. It's the other way around.

Mick Goodrick [’67] is my hero with this thing. He's self-sufficient. He's fine when he's practicing in his room. And he never entered the rat race, desperately trying to get publicity, record contract, etc. He just kept playing and working on his music, and now he's got a great gig with Jack DeJohnette. He just kept doing what he was doing, and people would seek him out.

Do you still have dreams of scoring for films?

I do. I'm not doing anything to reach that goal, right now. To do that, I would have to go back to school. When I was at Berklee, I took the performance route. If I could do it over again, I would take the arranging route, or composition. Since I never took any composition courses, I'm pretty moronic as far as that stuff is concerned. I think I have a good sense of composition. But I would need to go back to school if I were to do movie scores.

What is it about film scoring that appeals to you?

I think it's the most incredible medium for expressing emotion. To make millions of people feel a certain way at a certain second is just amazing to me.

I go to movies and listen to the music, and think how ingenious it was that that guy put *that* chord and *that* voicing right *there* so that we would all be scared—or we would all be anticipating something, or be happy, or be some other thing he wants us to be. It's really amazing to be so in control of music that you can say, "This chord will make them happy."

Can you get the same effect with a recording?

Yes, but coupled with a visual it's even more powerful. I think *West Side Story*, for example, was the most powerful show of music and visual. I'm still in love with *West Side Story*.

In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of jazz?

I have to say improvisation. Jazz is the only music left that you can do any sort of improvisation on. I hope they don't want to take that away. A lot of things these days are planned and sound great and are neat. I do it myself. But I still leave big sections for improvisation because that's where I have my fun. That's the basis of jazz.

Is improvisation losing ground in today's jazz?

As music is getting less "sloppy," there's less improvisation. We all want it to be neat. We all want it to sound perfect, with no mistakes. And there goes the improvisation, unless you're a robot.

I've just tried to play well. I play fairly "neatly" anyway. On the projects I'm doing now, I'm trying to get everything neat—as opposed to my other records which got sloppy sometimes. I'm trying to get it nice and neat so I can live with it too, because I'm a perfectionist.

Do you have any goals for musical growth?

I've always come up to what's in front of me. That's the way I grow. I got a gig with a rhythm & blues band when I lived in New Orleans and I had to grow to that. Then I had to grow to play Broadway shows. Then I got a record contract and I had to grow up to each record.

Looking to the future, I would like to write for movies. And I would like to be able to write more 20th-century classical type stuff. I would like to do what Lyle Mays does. He writes for movies; he writes incredible arrangements; he writes songs; he performs; he does everything.

And, to tell you the truth, I would really like to take time off and go back to school. I've been working pretty steadily since I was 18 years old without a break. I've earned one.

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