

SHERYL BAILEY

BY MICHAEL ROSS

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRANDON MCCHESENEY

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE SHERYL BAILEY HAS HONED her reputation as a smoking post-bop ax slinger in the crucible of New York City clubs such as Smalls and the 55 Bar. As serious as she is about jazz, though, it was more popular music that drew her to the instrument initially. "I come from a family of musicians who all played great classical piano, so I decided that I wanted to play guitar," she recalls. "It was a combination of being rebellious and wanting to play rock music—the music that I was really into."

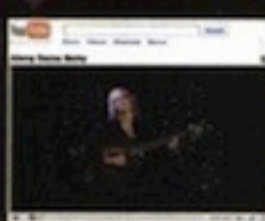
Bailey's early teens saw her sneaking into bars to play blues and classic rock, but before she reached her 20s she caught the jazz bug. Studying privately and at Berklee in Boston, she eventually reconciled the two forms. "When I lived in Baltimore I used to work with fusion guys like Dennis Chambers, and, having just come out of Berklee, my focus was on players like Mike Stern and John Abercrombie.

The fusion thing was a natural way to join my rock playing with jazz harmonies," she explains.

Upon moving to New York, Bailey shifted towards a more straight-ahead concept in her music. "I think it was about getting back into the roots of the music. There is a vulnerability to playing straight ahead for a guitarist," she says. "There is nothing to hide behind,

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and it was a challenge to make music with just the instrument plugged into the amp." The amp in question is a JazzKat PhatKat 1x12" combo, while her current guitar is a custom version of the McCurdy Mercury. "It was designed for me by Rick McCurdy in New York, and is proportioned to my size," says the diminutive Bailey. "I just tell people that it is a pygmy ES-335."

Though the screaming distortion of her fusion days is, for the most part, behind her, the machine-gun rapidity of Bailey's playing will pleasure even the most rabid fan of that athletic genre. "People are always asking me about my picking," she says. "I use the 'George Benson' technique, where the pick is pointed up and coming at about 2 o'clock across the strings [for a full explanation of her method check out the June 1999 *GP* article in her press kit at sherylbailey.com], but for me that is not the issue—it is about the relaxation principle. I used to play with my hand at a more traditional angle, and I could

still play fast. The thing that unifies the two is relaxing into the pocket.

"I always say to my students that you can name any great virtuoso on any instrument—whether it is Vladimir Horowitz, Yngwie Malmsteen, or Wes Montgomery—and what they all have in common is they are completely relaxed when playing. If you can find that place at any tempo you can do anything you want—you can fly! It's all about finding the dance in the music. The whole relaxation principle revolves around that: you put the time in your body. If you are standing up, you send the tension down your legs so you can keep your shoulders and your arms really loose and relaxed."

To develop this state of relaxation in herself and her students, Bailey uses an exercise that is practiced away from the instrument. "I tell students to use a metronome and make a Tai Chi-type circle with their hand to the tempo for one-bar, two-bar, or four-bar phrases. You can actually see the physical

space that the tempo takes up," she says. "You will have a small circle, a medium circle, and a big circle that you make with your arm. Once you see that circle, try to internalize it into your body. It is really just an exercise to feel the *physicality* of the tempo." This might seem somewhat esoteric, but her cleanly executed, break-neck runs on record and in person make it hard to dispute the results.

Though her attack is as authoritative as any in the business, Bailey does not assault the guitar. "The faster I play the lighter I touch the instrument," she explains. "Jaco would crank his amp up loud and play with a feather touch, and that's how he could play so fast." Bailey eschews Pastorious' often room-shaking volume, however. "I keep my amp just loud enough so that I can have a range of dynamics," she says. "You want to develop dynamics so that everything isn't the same level all the time."

Bailey's massive talent and technique

would ordinarily make the gender issue completely irrelevant. Bringing it to the fore at this time is her current record, *A New Promise* [MCG Jazz], a tribute to another female jazz guitarist—the late Emily Remler. "Maybe a couple of years ago I wouldn't have been comfortable enough with myself to do this record," Bailey admits. "I have always tried to not call attention to the fact that I am a woman guitarist. But now that I have been out there proving myself I felt comfortable doing it."

Having to prove herself in this way is just one of the ties that Bailey felt with Remler. "There is this whole Pittsburgh connection: I'm from there originally, and she was living there, so when I came home from my first or second semester at Berklee I took a lesson with her. I still use everything she showed me in that lesson—she was a great teacher. She showed me a Pat Martino exercise for improving my alternate picking, and explained how to play over rhythm changes using the minor/major seventh chord arpeggio a half-step above the dominant. Like if you were in C major, you would use an *A^b m/maj7* arpeggio over the *G7*."

The tribute concept was encouraged by another Pittsburgher, executive producer and rhythm guitarist Marty Ashby. Ashby had already convinced Bailey to make the record backed by a 16-piece big band. "I had played with a big band in college, but not like this: featuring the guitar, with the arrangements all written to accompany the guitar," she says. "It involved a lot of faith in Marty, who just said, 'This guy's going to arrange your music,' and I'm like, 'Okay,'" she laughs.

"This guy" was saxophonist Mike Tomaro, who arranged the Bailey originals from recordings of her trio. The guitarist hadn't heard the arrangements before recording them over two days in the studio. In a way, her lack of familiarity made it more like the spontaneity of responding to a trio or quartet. "On 'Lament,' the first chorus is just bass and drums, and then the horns are comping for me on the second chorus. I really didn't know what was going to happen until we played it. I was sort of winging it and thinking, 'Oh, that



sounds nice behind me."

Tomaro's arrangements are supportive, exciting, and occasionally startling. On Remler's tune, "East To Wes," there is a section that sounds like Bailey playing a synth-guitar. "It's trombone, soprano saxophone, and guitar. It's Emily's solo. Mike transcribed it and we learned it and played it," she reveals. "Originally it was written for the whole sax section to play, but it was too much so it got paired back to the just the three of us."

The record—including tricky stunts like the aforementioned group solo—was all done in real time with no overdubs. "Everything is live," says Bailey. "We did two takes of everything and that was it. My philosophy for doing jazz records is to let it be. I'm sure there are tons of notes in there I would love to have edited out but didn't."

A comfortable studio environment eased the pressure of performing. "I was in the room with the big band. My amp, the bass, and drums were in isolation booths and I had headphones. I think the key to it was that the headphone mix was good. That recording captures two days of pure joy—having a big band comping behind me."

Anyone who has seen Bailey play, whether with bassist Richard Bona, sax man Gary Thomas, or with her organ trio, knows that joy is a major element in the guitarist's music: the terpsichorean movement of her fingers on the heavy top/light bottom roundwound strings of her instrument, and the smile that plays across her face as she deftly navigates complex changes help translate that pleasure to the listener. The joy was tempered, though, during her research for this record. "The journey involved going to the "All Things Emily" website where I learned how painful it was back in the '80s, having to deal with being the only woman jazz guitarist on the scene.

"It's 20 years now since Emily died. When I've mentioned the project to some people they go, 'Who's Emily Remler' and that's really wrong. I hope the record will bring attention to her work for people who don't know it, and that people who did know and love her will feel that it is a fitting tribute." ■

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