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My Life in Comedy

by Bill Crow

I recently saw the notice of the death of Mike Riley, the trombone player who co-authored the song *The Music Goes Round and Round* with trumpeter Ed Farley.

I met Mike in 1951. At that time I was a twenty-three-year-old valve trombone player learning to play the string bass by sitting in at jam sessions on other people's instruments, since I didn't have enough money to buy a bass of my own. I got a call from John Benson Brooks, whom I'd worked with in the Adirondacks the previous summer. Mike had asked John to play piano with him on a few out of town jobs and to find a singing drummer to complete his trio. John knew that I could sing and had once been a drummer of sorts and that I really needed a job. Hungry and ready to do anything, I borrowed Maurice Mark's drums and auditioned for the job.

It seemed easy enough. Mike played vigorous Dixieland trombone and sang a couple of funny songs which John and I accompanied, and I sang a ballad to Mike's satisfaction. He wanted to know if I would be his straight man on a couple of comedy routines, and I said I would. So he hired me.

I had a set of drums at home in Kirkland, Washington, which I'd played in a dance band in the Army. My dad shipped them to me in time for the first gig.

Mike was an amazing old leprechaun. He was built like a tree stump. A long nose erupted sharply between a pair of intensely blue eyes. His red hair had turned gray but he had dyed it a fierce red again. A very high-energy guy, he came at you like a sped-up movie of a Saint Patrick's Day parade. He had been doing comedy in a Dixieland setting for years.

During the late 1920s, Mike and Ed Farley had a band at the Hickory House on 52nd Street in New York. They wrote their big hit by chance. Farley had an antique fluegelhorn with circular tubing that he kept on the bandstand because he liked the way it looked. Showing it to an interested lady one night, he said, "You just blow through here, and the music goes 'round and 'round, and it comes out here." Mike told him he had a song there, and they worked on it together. They played it on a remote radio broadcast from the Hickory House on New Year's Eve 1930. Radios in a large number of American homes were turned on for dance music that night, and thousands, maybe millions, of people heard *The Music Goes 'Round and 'Round*, and loved it.

If you're too young to remember it, the lyric went like this:

Oh you blow through here,
And the Music Goes 'Round and 'Round,
Woh-oh-oh-oh, oh-oh,
And it comes out here.

Then you push the first valve down,
And the Music Goes 'Round and 'Round,
Woh-oh-oh-oh, oh-oh,
And it comes out here.

Now, you push that middle valve down,
And the Music Goes 'Round and 'Round,
Below, below, below,
Beedley-oh-oh-oh,
Listen to the jazz come out!

Now you push the third valve down,
And the Music Goes 'Round and 'Round,
Woh-oh,-oh-oh, oh-oh,
And it comes out here.

The demand for the sheet music during the next month outstripped anything ever published before. Mike said the main reason was the bridge: nobody could remember how many "belows" it had, so they bought the sheet music to learn it.

Riley and Farley did a lot of comedy to entertain their customers and hired sidemen who knew how to be funny. Mike continued the tradition after the partnership was dissolved. He had a very successful tavern in Hollywood during World War II, Mike Riley's Madhouse, where he and his combo played behind the bar. The club featured lots of sight gags and practical jokes. In the men's room was an oil painting of a nude lady, with a hinged wooden fig leaf over her pudenda. If you raised the leaf, red lights flashed outside the door and a siren went off, so everyone at the bar knew what you'd been up to. A similar painting of a male nude hung in the ladies' room.

The Madhouse did so well during the war that Mike and his business partner opened another bar without live music. Then the partners had a falling out, broke up the partnership and divided their assets. Mike decided to open a bigger club out on the Sunset Strip, with a ballroom and dance band in the back and his combo at the front bar. After he'd spent his whole bankroll renting the place and fixing it up, a change was made in the zoning rules and he wasn't allowed to open.

When I met Mike, he was in New York putting together enough jobs to pay off what he owed his agent. We worked in Elmira and Troy, New York, Monessen, Pennsylvania, and a couple of other similar sized towns, a week at a

time. Wanting to keep his expenses down, Mike decided a trio was the smallest unit he could function with.

My salary was $80 a week, with only transportation provided. We lived in cheap rooming houses and carried hotplates in our suitcases so we could cook hamburgers in our rooms. I was saving up to buy an old Kay bass. A bass player in the Bronx was selling it for $75, and had agreed to hold it for me for a $15 deposit. I sent him a few dollars when I could.

We were billed as "Mike Riley and his Musical Maniacs," but John and I weren't much help with the comedy. We kept looking for ways to make the job more musical. Mike was used to having a band full of comedians. With us he had to carry most of the show himself.

"You gotta do comedy if you want to make any money," he told me one night on the bandstand. "Listen, this is a high F!" He jammed his mouthpiece onto his lips and played a loud one. "You think anybody out there cares?"

I was inexperienced, but I tried hard to be a satisfactory straight man. I'd watched plenty of burlesque routines at the Palomar theater in Seattle, and I had all the Spike Jones records at home, but Mike would get me into vaudeville routines I didn't know, and sometimes he wouldn't remember how to get out of them. I'd try to think of something funny to do or say, but I learned that Mike hated it if you got the laugh. I was supposed to do straight lines, and he was supposed to get the laughs.

Some of my duties consisted of handling the props in Mike's sight gags. When he sang *I Cried for You*, he put on an oversized pair of glasses frames made from hollow tubing. A hose hung over his shoulder from the right earpiece, and I had to blow a mouthful of water through the hose so that "tears" would come spraying out of the pinholes in the frames of these glasses as he sang. With variations in my input, he could cry different colored tears and sometimes cigarette smoke.

When Mike sang *With the Wind and the Rain in Your Hair*, we put on raincoats and he carried a magician's water jar on his shoulder. Each time he sang the word "wind," he'd blow loudly into the microphone. Each time he sang "rain," he'd upend the water jar and pour what seemed to be its entire contents over his head. The joke came with the repetition of the words. There was always more water in the jar, because a baffle inside it allowed only half the contents to be poured out each time. The amount of water decreased with each pouring, but there was always some left.

Mike's best number was a clown routine. Wearing a wonderfully dilapidated long red circus ringmaster's coat with missing buttons and tarnished gold braid, and a shapeless old hat with a floppy brim, he'd announce that he was going to emulate stripper Sally Rand. Instead of taking his clothes off as he played, however, he would take his trombone apart.

We'd be playing *I Got Rhythm* at a furious pace. On the second chorus Mike would pull the bell apart from the slide, pull the tuning slide off the bell section, hang the three parts together in a funny combination, and continue playing. The tubing wasn't continuous that way, but you could still hear *I Got Rhythm* from this leaky assemblage. Roaring with laughter, Mike would discard the tuning slide and stuff the connecting end of the main slide into the bell section where the tuning slide belonged, so that when he pointed the trombone slide at the floor, the bell pointed at the ceiling. He was able to get a fair sound this way, because there were fewer leaks. As he played with his slide pointed at the floor, John would leap up from the piano and pour a pitcher of water into the trombone's upright bell as it protruded behind Mike's head.

Pretending not to notice, Mike would rest the slide on the floor in an extended position while he removed and discarded the bell section. He would then put the mouthpiece to his lips and blow hard while pulling in the water-filled slide to its closed position. The result was a huge eruption of water from the open side of the slide, right into Mike's face. As John and I continued the frantic accompaniment, Mike would do dripping laughing takes to the audience. Then he'd play the melody again, just on the slide section of his horn, getting a gargling sound because of the water still in it.

Discarding the slide, he'd play the tune on just the mouthpiece. Then he'd attach a long piece of rubber hose to the mouthpiece and, holding the open end of the hose to the microphone, he'd again play the tune. A tiny, silly sound, but still recognizable as *I Got Rhythm*. Then he'd begin spinning the hose slowly over his head as he played, letting a little more of it out with each spin. As the hose got longer the audience could hear the melody coming around and around over their heads.

A storm of laughter would build up as Mike charged around the stage like a madman, shouting and singing and springing his surprises on the audience.

For his final variation, he would discard the mouthpiece and hose and grab the bell section of the trombone, still minus the tuning slide. On the open tube where the tuning slide fit in, there was a small rim. Using it as a mouthpiece, Mike would sound a loud resonant doh-SOL! doh-SOL! like a hunting horn. After all the thin leaky melodies he'd just played on all the other parts of the horn, the effect was Wagnerian.

The horn call always elicited a cry of delight from his audience, and Mike would race among them, shouting, "Didja *hear* that? Didja *hear* that?" And he would bang people lustily on the shoulder with his horn bell. He'd mug and sing and carry on a while longer, but that was essentially the end of the number. It always brought the house down, and was the one number John and I always enjoyed — a classic piece of clowning.

On or off the stand, working or not, Mike kept up a constant stream of terrible one-liners. He'd shout, apropos of nothing:

"It was dinner time in Russia, So-vee-et!" Or:

"Church on fire! Church on fire! Holy smoke!"

"What are those holes in the floor?"

My line: "Those are knot holes."

"That's funny, I could have sworn they were holes!"

He'd poke a finger through his glasses frames from the inside and waggle it at someone while laughing insanely.

He'd shove his chin into his glass of beer and do Santa Claus jokes wearing a beard of foam. He moved at a frantic pace, and he never stopped trying to get a laugh.

Away from the audience, Mike was a mass of contradictions. He moaned constantly to John and me about his financial and family troubles. He suffered terrible guilt because the lovely woman who traveled with him was not his wife. His wife back in California was "a saint" whom he "didn't deserve." His son was in a Jesuit school studying to be a priest, and Mike was always complaining that he didn't deserve "such a wonderful family." He said no one had ever been through as much hell as he had. I'd try to sympathize, but Mike would say, "You can't understand what it's like. You're too young."

And he'd say, "The only thing that makes it worth it is the laughs. If you can't have laughs, you might as well forget it." If he got bored during the day, he'd get John and me to go into some store with him. He'd have a woman's silk stocking pulled over his head to flatten his nose; the seam looked like a terrible scar across his cheek. With his hat pulled low and his coat collar turned up, he looked like a monster from a horror film. He loved watching the store clerks try not to stare at him as he shopped for ties and gloves.

At work he wanted me to sing one song on every set. I liked singing, but he never let me choose the tune. He'd say, "What do you want to sing, Billy? *If*! Billy's going to sing *If*!" And I'd be stuck with singing a song I couldn't have cared less about. Sometimes he'd announce that same song on two or three consecutive sets. I think he did it out of desperate impatience. He couldn't stand to wait a moment while I chose a song, and *If* was popular that year.

Since so many of his comedy bits resulted in his getting wet one way or another, the prop hat he wore was usually heavy with moisture. It was a bulky hat anyway, one of those rustic Irish wool jobs, and when wet it must have weighed three or four pounds. On a punch line, especially during the routines where I acted as straight man, he loved to whip off this hat and whack me on the arm with it. It was like being clubbed with a sock full of sand. Sometimes when he hit my arm while I was playing, my hand would involuntarily open and drop the drumstick. Nearly every night, I'd plead with him to take it easy with the hat — I was getting bruised. He'd promise to try to remember, but when he got wound up in a fast-paced routine, the hat would come down hard again. I found a way to fend it off, but it was still a drag.

After I sent the last payment on my bass to the guy in the Bronx, I couldn't wait to go home and take possession of it. I gave Mike a week's notice, telling him it was nothing personal but I wanted to go back to New York and be a jazz bass player. Of course he did take it personally and put me through a terrible scene. It was as if I were his son, leaving home.

"I know what's wrong," he said. "It's because I hit you with the hat!"

"No, Mike, really. I just want to play the bass. You need somebody who's good at comedy. I'm just an amateur."

"You're good, Billy. The audience loves you!"

"No, I really want to go back to New York."

"I'll let you do some of the jokes," he offered. "You can get some of the laughs!"

"No, thanks, Mike. Really."

"I tell you what. I'll give you $10 more a week."

"Now I'm mad. If you could afford that, how come you've been telling me you could barely manage $80?"

And so on and on. I finally got out of there, went home to New York and got my bass, and that was the end of my career in comedy, and the last I saw of Mike Riley. I think he went back to California not long after that.

After all these years I find I remember Mike with great fondness. He was an original, a great clown and powerful spirit. I learned a lot about being in front of an audience while working with him. And I certainly learned a lot about taking care of myself.

I hope he's resting peacefully. But still getting the laughs.

— Bill Crow

Emily

She sometimes wears a jump suit on the bandstand. She plays with her eyes shut, rocking back and forth from one foot to the other, the guitar slung on a shoulder strap, her faced tilted up as if she were imploring a god unknown to send her ideas. Other times she sits on a chair with her legs crossed tailor-fashion, seeming to embrace the instrument, like a little girl cuddling a doll. Emily Remler is improbable: white, middle-class, a product of the affluent Englewood Cliffs area of New Jersey, and, at the age of thirty, one of the finest jazz musicians of her generation.

If you know her work only from her Concord albums, excellent as it is, you have not encountered the scope of her playing. The albums are moderately conservative, middle-of-the-road jazz. I was impressed by them as they came onto the market in the course of the last seven years. Then, last fall, in Pittsburgh, I noted that she was playing in a club there and went to hear her. I was unprepared for the sheer strength of her playing. She is an extraordinarily daring player, edging close to the avant-garde, and she swings ferociously. There is also has a deeply lyrical quality to her playing. Royce Campbell, the excellent guitarist from Indianapolis, and I returned to hear her on two more nights. Royce, who like me knew her only from the albums, was as surprised and impressed by her as I was.

The jazz world is a very small one, and there were rumours about her, and I've concluded that it is the best course to face and disposed of them now. The story was out that Emily Remler had fallen victim to what has often seemed — from a time before Charlie Parker — like the endemic curse of the jazz profession. People who had never even met Emily Remler were troubled by the stories about her. Everyone can relax: she is now on the long list of jazz musicians who have beaten the problem.

A three-year marriage to the brilliant Jamaican pianist Monty Alexander ended in 1985. He had tried to help her with her problem, but in the end it was too much for him to handle. They remain close.

That's what she was doing in Pittsburgh, working it all out it away from the familiar haunts, working on the fears and self- doubts that had given rise to the problem in the first place. She was also studying composition at the University of Pittsburgh with Bob Brookmeyer and, after that, with avant-garde composer David Stock.

She was born in Manhattan September 18, 1957, the youngest of three children. Her father is a meat broker, her mother a psychological social worker, both born in Brooklyn. Her sister is a lawyer and her brother, who lives in Washington DC, is in the U.S. diplomatic service. Emily never knew financial insecurity. The legend of the poor boy forging his way to the top in jazz is not entirely without foundation, and Louis Armstrong was its classic embodiment. But quite a large number of jazz musicians, black and white alike, have come from the comfortable middle class. So that part of her story is not as strange as it might seem.

She got interested in music through the folk movement, and then rock. What is atypical is that she should have gone on to discover jazz, and then not only entered a field that has severely discriminated against women even while its practitioners have been in the forefront of the demand for racial equality, but became one of its most masterful young players.

Make no mistake about this discrimination in jazz. In her book *American Women in Jazz*, Sally Placksin documents the cases of women of genuine ability who have been driven out of the profession, or at least pressed to pursue it only as a sort of hobby. There have been a number of excellent women jazz players, including Melba Liston, Carol Britto, Patty Bown, Mary Lou Williams, Margie Hyams, Billie Rogers, Patrice Rushen, and more whose names are forgotten because they succumbed to the pressures put on them by the men around them and simply quit, Lester Young's sister among them. The guitarist Mary Osborne told me recently that she doesn't feel that she has suffered from discrimination, but she is the only woman jazz player I have ever heard say that. The fine alto saxophonist Vi Redd told me she has suffered far more discrimination as a woman than she has as a black. Anne Patterson, who plays all the woodwinds from oboe on down, sometimes plays baritone saxophone in the Nat Pierce-Frank Capp Juggernaut band, and leads the all-woman band called Maiden Voyage, can tell you endless tales of discrimination. Marian McPartland says that when she has hired a woman for her trio, such as drummer Dottie Dodgion, male musicians would ask not "How does she play?" but "What does she look like?"

Some years ago, Stan Getz played Donte's in North Hollywood. Playing piano in his group was Joanne Brackeen. She was at the top of her form that night. For some reason the place was full of piano players and, concealing my amusement as best I could, I went from table to table to chat with them about her. Her playing was powerful, propulsive, wildly inventive — anything but the deferential and delicate music women jazz players are assumed to produce. And every one of those pianists was seriously upset by her, genuinely disturbed, including some highly accomplished musicians. So this phenomenon is real. I observed it myself that night in Donte's.

"You're one of those players who don't hold back," I said to Emily. "Jazz is not a holding-back music. Paul Desmond may have played delicately, but he didn't hold back. Bill Evans may have played with great sensitivity, but sensitivity is not an exclusively a female quality."

Emily, who was a musical voice slightly colored by a New York City accent with softly dentalized d's and t's, said, "That's a point I was going to make. Music is sexless. I think everyone has something that is feminine, something that is masculine. I'm very confused about that as it is, now that I have opened myself up to having women as friends for a change, after hanging out with the guys my whole life and wanting to be one of the guys. I'm finding out how incredible women really are. When I see a woman that is good at what she does and is confident and does things with conviction — I guess 'confidence' is the key word here — I just admire her so much. Women inhibit themselves as a product of society, or what their mothers taught them, or whatever it was when you're coming up. Women get the message that they're supposed to get married, have children, that's their function, and that's it. My mother never gave me that message. It was always: Achieve. Do well. Maybe a little too much of that, which I drive myself crazy about. I grew up with this thought that anything I applied myself to, I could do."

Life expectancy at birth in nineteenth-century America was about thirty-five, not much higher than it had been during the Roman Empire. I pointed out to Emily that when a husband and wife had to have ten children in order that two or three might who live to the adult years, there may have been some reason for the division of labor along sexual lines. But that has changed, and given the advancing destruction of our fragile environment by the effluvia of our own excessive population, women are gradually being allowed to do something other than breed.

"I'm not into sitting and crying about it," Emily said. "I'm into *doing*. I never was real bitter about the fact that there are so many bandleaders who have told me face to face that they couldn't hire me because I was a woman, or that there have been so many instances where I wasn't trusted musically, and drummers handled me with kid gloves because they figured my time wasn't strong."

"Yeah, but Emily," I said, "realistically, a lot of guitar players have got flakey time."

Emily said, "It just so happens that I don't. That's something I'd like to talk about — the holding back thing that you mentioned. It seems that a lot of women don't get into the time, really hit it. That's a very big psychological trick. You have to be confident to be into the time like that. You have to know where it is. Herb Ellis said to me once, 'If you don't know, you don't know.' He meant someone who doesn't know that they're off, and that they don't know that they don't swing. And that's a huge subject. There are some people I play with that you can't *not* swing, it's so wonderful."

"It's what Roger Kellaway calls grounded time."

"Grounded time," Emily echoed. "You have to have your innate sense of the time, and you have to believe in yourself that your sense is correct. *Especially* when there's some big burly guy at the other side of the stage who doesn't like the fact that you're there anyway. And he's not going to give you an inch, he's not going to acknowledge that you're correct. You have to believe in yourself. In some ways I have a lot of belief in myself. I just know that women are going to come out more and more with this conviction, as soon as they work on themselves properly. Women can do anything, anyone can do anything. It never did occur to me to stay in one place and bitch about this, about how I wasn't given a chance. I think it gives me more merit — to get really good, so good that it doesn't matter. Okay, it sucks, being in this position. But: get so good that you surpass it.

"It's not going to hurt you to be a great player. That's what I wanted to be anyway. If that's part of the motivation, fine. But it's not part of the motivation any more. It was when I first started at Berklee. I'll show these *guys*!"

And she did. Emily was graduated from the Berklee College of Music in 1975, when she was eighteen. She insists that she still played very badly at that time. "I had a boyfriend, a guitarist from New Orleans. The plan was that I would move down to New Orleans. On my way to New Orleans, I stopped at Long Beach Island on the shore in New Jersey, and rented a room, and proceeded to quit smoking cigarettes, and learn to play. In that two months, I lost twenty-five pounds. I was just on a discipline trip. I could have been a Spartan! I want to do that again! I know I'm capable of it. Will power is not the question. I have a tremendous amount of will power.

"After that I went down to New Orleans. I still wasn't very good, but I had a lot of ideas. The boyfriend, Steve Masakowski, was an incredible guitarist, and still is, and still lives in New Orleans. He's a monster. The competitive atmosphere was still there, because I'd hear him practicing through the wall. I started to play all the shows at the Blue Room of the Fairmont hotel, all the Vegas acts, Joel Grey, Ben Vereen, Robert Goulet, Nancy Wilson. I got a gig with her. Besides that, I was doing bebop gigs, Dixieland, and traditional New Orleans stuff. I had this thing, which I still have, to *do it right*. Don't sit and put this type of music down until you can do it as good as the best person who does it. For instance, I can't play country music like Roy Clarke. Not that I would want to. But I have no right to say that is invalid music. I like bluegrass a lot. And I'm into the Irish music that it comes from. I'm not, thank God, one of these snobby jazz musicians who put down everything except jazz.

"The reason I am so eclectic is that I get such satisfaction out of doing different types of music that sometimes I'm not sure what my true stuff is. I have confidence that the more I work on myself as a person, the more that the music is going to open up. I'll notice progress in sounding like my own voice and in my satisfaction in music by doing other things than practicing or playing. By figuring out things that have been bothering me for years, that clutter me up and make me have limits, and make me worried. Clearing me out of all sorts of things. For example, when you have a resentment against someone, let's say in the band, it clouds your ability to be creative, to be happy that evening. Sometimes you can turn it into so much anger that you can get into a weird I-don't-care stage, and sometimes you play good then. But if you work on those things, you can clear them out to get to your own voice. It's occurred to me in the last few years, it's not even the notes and the chords so much any more, it's the person. I never said more than two words to Bill Evans, I talked to him once, but I *know* what he was like. I know it. I'm positive. I never met Wes Montgomery, but I knew what he was like before I asked every person who ever knew him. I knew what Joe Pass was like. He is exactly like he plays. Things come out in the playing. If the person has intelligence, and humor, and creativity, or is introverted."

"I know an outstanding exception, though," I said, and Emily said, "If you mean . . . " And she named a man the beauty of whose playing and perversity of whose personality has always presented an irresoluble contradiction to other musicians. We both laughed hugely. "Actually," she said, "I've watched him over the years, and he's changed. There's a lot of good inside."

"The relationship of personality to playing is very strong in jazz," I said. "Jazz musicians, generally, even talk the way they play. They sing like they play."

"Yeah, I can see that, that they play the way they talk." Then she said, "What was Coltrane like?"

"Soft and gentle. A very sweet man. I liked him a lot. Tell me, how did you get from folk music to jazz, from Englewood Cliffs to Berklee in Boston?"

"During the Black Panther movement, we were bussed to the Englewood high school instead of the nearest one. We grew up with Italian and Jewish kids. I hadn't been exposed to black people. I was already listening to a lot of blues music. I just wanted to be friends. They didn't want to be friends with us. They beat us up, they stole our money, they burned white girls' hair — I had very long hair. It was very frightening. For that and a few other reasons, I cut school constantly. I just wasn't into it. I was into having parties and being a hippy, a very young hippy. So I was sent away to boarding school, but it was a hippy boarding school, an experimental school where you could do anything you wanted. It closed after the year I was there.

"During boarding school, I played folk music. I listened to rock music, Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles. I was about fifteen years old when I came to dream that I wanted to be a blues player, so I listened to B.B. King and Johnny Winter and all these people. I played my brother's Gibson ES 330, which I still play today. I have a few other guitars, but I keep coming back to that one. I played with my fingers, I did all sorts of strange things, but now I realize I was always working on my music. I was always singing along with things. I would sing along with Ravi Shankar's music for Bangla Desh, this whole raga piece, I could sing it from beginning to end. Weird stuff that my friends couldn't do. I had a weird ear. There was something different between the way they listened to music and the way I did. I

remember we were listening to the Rolling Stones, which I loved. I was singing the saxophone solos and the guitar solos, I wasn't with the lyrics. I started playing some of the guitar things, the very repetitive rock things where they stay on three chords forever. I'd get off on that. I'd sit in my room, discovering that was a way of leaving the planet. I loved that. Until this day, I've found that that's the best way for me to practice — just jamming. I realized when I was about twenty-one that I knew how to get better. There are a lot of people who study who don't feel they know how to get better. I was just out of Berklee, and it came to, 'Why don't I practice what I'm going to play?' From then on, I'd tape myself playing some backgrounds for the songs I was going to record. I put the metronome on to make sure I'm right. And then play over it. I still do it to this day. I'm getting a four-track for my bedroom."

"Schubert used to play guitar in bed," I said.

"I do that!" she said. "I used to *sleep* with my guitar. I'll just sit in my room and play a phrase over and over until I feel comfortable. And if I can't do something, I stop the tape and do it twenty times until I *am* comfortable."

"If you started out playing folk and rock things, when did you get beyond the phase of the grips and begin to see scales *across* the fingerboard?"

"That didn't happen till I was at Berklee."

"I've watched your hands work," I said. "You think a little as if you were playing a keyboard instrument."

"That really makes me happy that you can hear that. I think like a keyboard so much that sometimes I think it's bad. With me, I don't know about anybody else, if I can't hear the phrase, I won't be able to execute for anything. I play everything that I can sing or can hear, and I always was that way, and always will be. There are many people who play by rote. I don't look at the neck because I don't relate to patterns. I hear, I hear. I've tried to do guitaristic licks, and I screw them up. Even ones that I could get easily. Because I don't hear them right there in the music. George Benson said to me, 'You're great when you're playing what you believe in.' I cannot force myself to do what other people want me to do. It's very confusing, it's the way we're taught as we're growing up — that you do things the way that's acceptable to do, in so many aspects of life. You don't jump on cafe tables and yell. And all of a sudden, with what we've chosen to do in the arts, you're supposed to do what you really feel like doing. You live in a double life. You still don't jump on cafe tables and yell, but in your work you are supposed to do what you feel. So it's very common for musicians to be eccentric, and not conform. Because they can't just all of a sudden change. If I were to conform to the masses, I would have been a rock-and-roll guitarist, wearing silver suits." She laughed at herself. "Instead of red jump suits. I could have been very successful and rich doing that.

"In New Orleans, I learned to play. By the time I got back to New York, I was pretty good. I met Herb Ellis in New Orleans, and he recommended me for the Concord Festival, where I got to play with Ray Brown. I was twenty. Carl Jefferson told me that he was going to sign me. I thought, 'This is it, my future is set.'

"They wanted me to be straight ahead. Since I want to do everything well, I decided that I would write tunes that were more like standards, learn a lot of standards, learn how to play within the limitations of jazz tonal progressions, get my chops up in bebop. I needed a guide. And the people that I liked in those limits, straight-ahead mainstream bebop, were Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass and people like that. I pretty much copied them. I learned a new Wes Montgomery tune every day. I copied his phrasing. Above all, I copied his timing. He was unbelievable. But I didn't hear from Concord for a while, and I proceeded to move to New York, and I got a gig with Nancy Wilson. I also worked with Astrud Gilberto, and in Washington DC I ran into Herb Ellis again. I was a better player by then, and I got a contract with Concord."

"Back to that position of the transition from playing in that folk way, how did you do that? Through a teacher?"

"I never took a guitar lesson in my life, not really. I noticed that people who do things well do them with a minimum of effort. I learned basic scales and melody patterns so that I could vary in that vertical way. I decided, 'Why move up and down?' I watched people, I watched myself in the mirror. I did scales and arpeggios, but I started right away doing melodies and finding the ways that other guitar players did them. You can, if you get good at transcribing, find from the timbre which string they're using. So I copied Pat Martino's way of doing things. He's a master of the instrument, his technique is astounding, you can count on him doing everything in the most logical way. And maybe I copied some of his fingerings, due to transcription. There's a lot of illogical stuff that I do, though. I have to play everything that I hear, and there sometimes isn't time to work it out, and there's a lot of reaching for stuff in ridiculous positions that, I realize if I review it later, I could have done some other way. But I just have to get it somehow, and my will to get it is stronger than my knowledge of the guitar.

"For instance, I play solo guitar and try to back myself up with chords, like Lenny Breau did. But I do not have Lenny Breau's knowledge of the guitar."

"You do know," I said, "that Lenny was a totally intuitive player. He played entirely be ear, he'd had no formal training, and no knowledge of formal theory."

"We're talking about two different kinds of knowledge."

"Of course. His knowledge of the instrument itself was enormous."

"I agree. And I don't know the instrument the way he did. The thing I do best is . . . " She laughed. "I'm *resourceful*. I'm a good hustler on the guitar."

"You're downgrading yourself. I've *watched* you."

"No. I'll *hustle* the phrase that I want. I'll work until I get it. It's the same thing I use to win at pool and pingpong without being the greatest pool or pingpong player. When I call on myself to put extra energy into a tune or a phrase, it's from the thing that makes me win at pingpong. It's just a will to do something."

"Now. We're onto a characteristic that is not generally considered feminine. Overt will. And throughout his-

tory, women's will has been suppressed and thus driven underground. Sometimes, when it isn't destroyed, it becomes devious. In order to get around men, many women will lie if necessary to get their way. Women are supposed to be submissive, but they have as much will as any man. They just hide it."

"You're right! I like that. It's something I am admiring more and more in women: will. I don't know. All I know is that the more I be like I'm supposed to be, the more I be like me, the better I get at music. I believe I have a tremendously strong will. I don't know what masculine or feminine is. I can tell you that I like the way dresses look, but I can't wear them onstage because I can't sit with my legs crossed all night. I don't deny that I'm a woman. And people say stuff about this, and have been doing it for years. Why don't you wear something more feminine, something flowing? It's just that I don't want a dress swaying when I move. The rest of the time, I like to be stylish, I like a lot of modern things. I'm split between two things. I love flowing, very sophisticated, very simple dresses. I don't like flowery or lacy things. I love dresses. But I love baggy pants too."

"Balzac used to wear a monk's robe to write in. I wish I could find one."

"That's a great idea. It's strictly a matter of comfort. I don't identify masculine or feminine by what you wear. But *people* do. And how can you change millions of people?"

"I think it already is changing. Ever since Marlene Dietrich wore a pair of slacks in a movie. Look at the Scottish kilt, and the traditional old battle dress of Greek soldiers. Now, about this self-destructive business . . . "

"We've noticed," she said, "how people of great creative talent often have a dark side that wants to destroy it and themselves. I'd say that the biggest fear for an artist is that if they stop destroying themselves, they won't have that other, good side. It's very easy to see the good side when you're doing bad. It's the one pure light that you have. You get to be afraid of a balance, of mediocrity, you get to be afraid that you won't get these brainstorms. How much more precious is it to succeed coming out of the gutter than it is to be comfortable and balanced and healthy. It's the misconception, but I have a feeling that a lot of musicians have problems with this — a feeling that they will not be able to create unless there's havoc and chaos."

"Well, my old friend Robert Offergeld put it this way: He said, 'Confronted with order, the artist will create disorder. Confronted with disorder, he will create order.' All creative people are perpetually trying to shake up the pick-up sticks: Let me create chaos so that I can create something out of it. Let's see if I can do that trick again."

Emily laughed. "So then, maybe I really should clean my apartment! Maybe if it was totally orderly, I could write better."

"No. That's not the point. When I am writing heavily, the room becomes a disaster area. And when I am through, I have to clean it up, because I can't go into the next phase of disorder without having cleared away the disorder from before. The artist needs raw clay to make the statue. If the only piece of clay I have is the statue I just made, which already bores me, then I will tear it apart to have the clay to make the next one. The *process* interests the artist more than the result, though he has to sell the result to make a living."

"So what's you're saying," Emily said, "is that this is totally normal. That's something to think about. I've been trying to get rid of it, and it hadn't occurred to me that maybe it's needed."

"Well there's a balance to be found, to be sure. Freud said that art is created by people circuitously communicating what they have to but are for one reason or another blocked from communicating by direct means. I think that's the gist of what he said on this point. But he also said — Freud being a lot less dogmatic than many of the Freudians — that there were mysteries about the artistic process that psychology and psychoanalysis would probably never solve. I do know that many artists consider their neuroses are part of their talent, and cling to them. And sometimes they may be right. I know that depression goes with the creative process, and most psychiatrists know it too, and there assuredly is a manic quality about the compulsion to create art."

"What my therapist says is, Why am I a creating this guilt and pain to create?"

"Nobody wants unhappiness. If you can get rid of it, get rid of it. On the other hand, if you get a good tune out of your guilt, play it. I wrote a nice lyric out of the memory of the guilt I felt over a girl I knew. The artist is just that selfish and just that ruthless. It's like William Faulkner's comment in his Nobel acceptance speech, which shocked everybody. He said that the *Ode on a Grecian* urn was worth any number of little old ladies."

Emily giggled. "It's unbelievable, isn't it? After Monty and I were divorced I played great for a while on that pain. I really did. I also tried to destroy myself as fast as I could.

"You know, I had a strange experience in Michigan about ten years ago. As you might imagine, I've had a lot of requests to play with all-female groups. And when I was twenty-one, some very good musicians had this band and asked me to do a gig in Michigan, good money and just one set. I was going to get out of New York for a couple of days and be in the Michigan lake country. It was a very enlightening experience. It was eight thousand gay women. They have a different language to desex the language. Woman, singular, is womon. Women, plural, is womyn, for example.

"It's one thing to accept that sort of thing, but it is quite another to be in the severe minority. I felt weird. But there were some things I really loved about it. There was no bullshitting. There was no manipulating with charm. It didn't matter what you wore, whether you combed your hair even. People were taken for what they were, not what they looked like. And the view on beauty was a lot different than Hugh Hefner's standard.

"I was with one of the girls in the band. A woman we would consider fat walked by and I heard a girl say, 'Isn't she beautiful?' Look, I personally know women who stick their fingers down their throats to try to lose ten pounds. And there are a hell of a lot of schoolgirls developing complexes about being thin. I had that problem.

"There is a psychiatrist here in Pittsburgh who says

that the people with the lowest self-esteem are the ones with the most gifts. This psychiatrist says that ninety-nine percent of the problems he deals with, even to psychosis, are based on distorted self-perception, low self-esteem. I was raised to think that if I was thin, people would like me more. And the truth is that I'm not built that way. My body has a tendency to be a certain weight, but I have not accepted it my whole life. To me, I seem overweight. It was very interesting at that gay thing in Michigan to see that they don't have that perception, they canned all that. I'll tell you something else: there are a lot of women in this world who are using drugs to stay thin. They're killing themselves, their bodies, their souls, their minds, to be fifteen pounds lighter and please American society."

"What else has it done to you, being a woman in the jazz world, and a nonconformist in a conformist society?"

"Well, some musicians didn't trust me to be able to comp, which I love to do, and I feel I'm very good at it. If they want to play up the woman thing, women are trained to nurture people, make people feel good. I comp well. I can put my ego aside, as opposed to some other people who comp so loud and pushy, 'Look-at-me.' I know how to comp to make someone else sound good. I *love* to do it. It gets me out of myself. But I've ended up being a leader, more than a side man. Even at nineteen years old, the minute I could play a blues, they used to push me out front, because of the novelty. So I feel a little deprived. I wish someone would take me under their wing and teach me further, because that's how I get better, playing with great musicians. At this point now, I am ready to be a leader."

"You may be in the position," I said, "of having no choice but to be a quote star. I think Bill Evans passed beyond the possibility of being a side man."

"Yeah, but he was a side man with Miles. Do you think Miles would hire *me*?

"I wouldn't be surprised if he would."

"If I played with Miles, I would have to play some rock-and-roll and I wouldn't want to. But that's a matter of taste.

"I hear a lot of music that fuses rock and jazz together. And I find myself listening to Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. I'd rather heard the traditional rock-and-roll.

"The thing that makes me play with conviction is the same thing that makes me swim extra laps in the pool. It's from your gut. But I don't play from I'll show this guy. I notice that anybody who wants to cut anybody is not playing in the creative vein, and is not going to reach the peaks I want to reach. It's about letting go of yourself and becoming a channel — of love and God. That's what I believe. You can't do that by saying 'I'm going to show them this or that.' If I want to become a channel for God,which you can consider to be a lot of different things, you have to get rid of stuff, and be free."

I said, "I have to go and do my work in a cave, silently."

"That happens to me. I tune out as a protection. I tuned out for years as a protection."

"Well, look at Bix Beiderbecke, at Charlie Parker, there are all sorts of people who put up a chemical shield."

"Sure, because that makes you not care if the guy in the front row doesn't like you. That's why anger sometimes works, you can play better because you don't care. But it all comes down — I'm hoping this will take care of it — to feeling okay about yourself, that you deserve to be there, that you have something valid to say, that you have a lot of love to give, and you have a gift, and you have a right to be up there, and if somebody doesn't like it, that's his loss. That's the attitude I want. This guy can't make me or break me, this musician telling me I play too this or too that is not valid — it's what I feel. If I could get to that, I'd like to achieve it. I'm getting a little of it now.

"I was with a group in Europe last summer. Some drummers lack a little subtlety or they just prefer music that's loud and raucous. The feeling of aggression and speed is more what they're interested in. This isn't all drummers. This drummer said to me and what a lot of drummers have said to me, and that I *bought* and accepted, 'You gotta play louder, I can't hear you, you've gotta play harder. My favorite guitarists are Hendrix and McLaughlin, you oughta play more like them.' And I thought, 'Okay, I'll turn up my amp tonight and I'll play more rock and roll.' And then I stopped and said to myself, 'I can't believe I'm buying this package for the thousandth time.' And you see it's easier for him to tell me what to do because I'm a woman, and more important, it's easier for me to *take* it. And for the first time, I said back to him, 'Why don't *you* start listening to where I'm at? Why don't you come up to my level? Why don't you learn how to be romantic and subtle a little bit.

"I couldn't believe I stood up for myself like that. So it's getting better, and the better it gets the better I'll be as a musician and the better I'll feel about that guy who doesn't like me.

"You should be a woman for a while and then you'd see. It's a hell of a lot different than you think."

Some time in the course of those days in Pittsburgh I asked Emily if she planned to stay there. No, she said. When she felt she was ready, she planned to move back to New York.

A month or so ago a pianist friend called me. He mentioned in the course of the conversation, that he had joined Alcoholics Anonymous. "I never knew you had a problem with that," I said.

"It was mostly on the job," he said.

Somehow Emily Remler's name came up. He had never met her, and yet he said, in a voice soft with concern, "How is she doing?" And you knew exactly what he meant.

So I called her number in Pittsburgh. I was given a referral number, the area code being that of Brooklyn. I called it. After a year and a half in Pittsburgh, she was indeed back in home terrain, living near Sheepshead Bay.

She had just completed a new album for Concord with Hank Jones. She was full of plans and the enthusiasm in her voice told me the answer to the question before I asked it. "How are you doing?" I said.

"I'm doing just fine," she said.