



Eric Marienthal

EQUIPMENT

- Selmer Mark VI alto saxophone, serial #201695
- Selmer Mark VI tenor saxophone, serial #63065
- Yamaha YSS-60 soprano saxophone
- Buffet Clarinet
- Miramatsu flute
- Yamaha WX-7 wind driver synthesizer

by
Kim Richmond

enthusiastic young kid having the time of his life doing what he's always wanted to do (making music), but getting paid to do it! He quite humbly views himself as a learner, a perpetual student. This is a rare trait in one who possesses so much expertise on his instrument, one who often assumes the role (sometimes unconsciously) of a teacher. He has two instructional videos out and is about to release a book of exercises and technical studies.

Eric is no stranger to *Saxophone Journal*. He served as "Artist-in-Residence" with a col-

umn every issue for 1992 and frequently sent in his text from the road while traveling with Chick Corea's Electric Band. He has been on every Electric Band album except the first one, and has been recording and touring as a leader for the GRP recording label. He performs with Lee Ritenour and David Benoit, and also plays the lead alto chair in the GRP All-star Big Band.

Over the years, I've become aware of the tremendous breadth of his talent.

When I looked across the kitchen table that morning I saw a handsome young man, filled with enthusiasm, telling me about his career, his hopes, and plans. Eric Marienthal could fit the description of a teen idol with his chiseled features, warm friendly smile, and unbridled amicability.

Some years ago Eric and I had sat beside each other in various saxophone sections doing gigs and rehearsal

bands here in Los Angeles. We have remained friends during the ensuing years, but seeing each other has become rare with his developing career and resultant travel. He is now a success story, a rising star on the music scene. But no one would know that by the way this young man presents himself. Although there is a certain amount of self-assuredness in his demeanor, it seems evident that Eric Marienthal still considers himself an

I've heard him at times invoke that pop-fusion-funk style and at others a resemblance in his playing to Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis or Dexter Gordon. The latter occurred on a Ray Anthony Orchestra casual we were both on. Most of the music was geared toward the old Glen Miller nostalgia style of dance music. Eric was playing tenor and a shuffle blues tune was opened up where we saxophonists traded choruses and then fours. Eric at that time had just come out with his second pop-jazz-fusion CD and leader Ray Anthony was a bit apprehensive that that's what he might hear out of Eric. But when Eric started his chorus you could have shut your eyes and thought you were listening to a Count Basie band soloist. It was swing and bebop all the way, right in the pocket! Eric was straightforward and open as we discussed some of his current and past activities that morning.

Do you find yourself playing mostly alto or tenor these days? I've known you originally as an alto player.

Surprisingly, I'm playing a lot of tenor. Playing with Lee Ritenour, most of the parts are for tenor with just a few tunes on alto where he's made it optional. But I just returned from a tour with him last week and took only my tenor and flute. Which saxophone I play is dictated by for whom I'm playing. Like with Chick, I usually play only soprano and alto. I played flute at one point, which was fine, but we never played the tune. The very first record of the Electric Band didn't have a saxophone. On tour, I played tenor on the songs we played from that first record. I joined the band for the second record *Light Years*. After that recording was done, we went out on tour, so I had to memorize all the music from *Light Years* plus all the music from the first record, plus other songs that were not on any recent record, like *Spain* and *La Fiesta*. So for my first tour with that band, I had to memorize twenty-five tunes or so. And, as you know, Chick Corea's songs are not exactly the easiest tunes!

Tell me how you came to join Chick Corea's band, which was a big break for you.

I first met Chick in Washington,

D.C., playing some benefit. He was on the bill and I was too, playing with a band led by John Novello. Chick heard me play, and we met. Of course, I'd been studying his music since I was fifteen years old, in high school. I'm a good friend of John Patitucci's, and I remember when Chick first started the Electric Band. I heard it on the radio and I said, "Wow! What an incredible thing for John to be doing." About six months later they were just about to start their second record. I was still playing with John Novello, and we had a gig at a club called, One for L.A. Every Monday night, we played there. I think the gig lasted for four or five months. John kept saying that Chick was going to come and sit in with us sometime. I, being one of Chick Corea's biggest fans, just kept doing the gig even though it paid only about \$25. Sure enough, one night Chick walked in with his wife Gayle Moran, his manager Ron Moss, and about three or four other people. Not only was he there the whole night, but he sat in with us on the second set and played *500 Miles High* and some other of his tunes.

And you knew these tunes, right?

Oh yeah, I sure did. So, he was very nice and complimentary after the gig and it was all very exciting. The very next day his manager called up (I'll never forget it as long as I live) and said, "Chick really liked the way you played last night, and it just so happens we're looking for a saxophone player for the current record, and he wants you to be it." I felt like a high school football player being called by the Rams. So I went and did the recording and he asked me to join the band officially.

So, you did the first album and the following tour.

Yeah, Chick never said, "I want you to play alto or tenor on this song or that song." It was always kind of left up to me. Now, on my own records, it's alto and soprano. On all my records, I've only played tenor on one song. And that's because I've always felt that the alto is my voice. It's the instrument I feel most comfortable on.

Well, let's go back a few years to your background. Did you grow up in Califor-

nia?

Yes. I was born in northern California: Sacramento. I grew up in San Mateo.

Did you have any musical interest when you were very young?

Not really. I remember when I was in probably second or third grade, I played the guitar a little bit. I went to guitar classes, and I had sort of an interest, but certainly not the discipline to put a whole lot of work into it. My father, although he was not a musician, was really into music of the forties and fifties. He had Boots Randolph records, he loved Nat "King" Cole and the classic Frank Sinatra.

When we moved to southern California I was in fifth grade, and that was when I started playing the alto saxophone in school. It wasn't until high school that I started picking up clarinet and flute, and then piano in college.

Wasn't it quite a challenge to pick up clarinet and flute later after starting on saxophone, rather than starting on one of those instruments?

Yes, absolutely. I started playing clarinet and flute my freshman year in high school because I needed to play them in stage band. Several numbers had flute and one or two had clarinet, and so I used the school instruments, and took a lesson here or there. I started studying with a player in Orange County, Don Hawkins. Later in high school I studied jazz playing with Warne Marsh. I played in the school orchestra when I was a sophomore or junior. The teacher, needing an oboe player, said to me "Here, if you want to play in the orchestra, why don't you learn to play this." So, I played oboe in the high school orchestra for three years.

How old were you when you got your first saxophone?

When I first started I was ten, and my dad let me play saxophone on the condition that I pay for it myself. He took out the original loan, and I paid it back ten or fifteen dollars a week until it was paid off. It was a Majestic brand alto saxophone. I remember I was about fourteen or fifteen years old when I got my first Mark VI Selmer, the same one I play now, and my dad

made me pay for that one too. This time I had to finance it all by myself. It was only about \$475, a brand new horn, in 1973.

My high school was in Corona Del Mar (Orange County). My parents split up around that same time and my father and I moved to a place in nearby Costa Mesa. At the time, the music department at Corona Del Mar High School, being in a by far wealthier area, had an excellent music department, one of the very best in the country actually. When I showed a real interest in music, my dad, being the great guy that he was, performed some kind of trickery and made it seem like we lived in the district, when actually we didn't. So when a lot of the kids were riding up in their dads' BMWs, I was riding my bike.

My senior year I had my own apartment, but didn't have very much money. When I finished with high school I didn't know what I wanted to do or, if I decided to go to college, where I should go that I could afford. When my father died I got a small amount of money, like \$9,000. At first I went to Orange Coast College and floated around kind of aimlessly, then I got it together and decided to go to Berklee. So, I took that money and was at Berklee for two years. That was late 1977 to 1979. I was going for my performance degree, so I was taking the regular classes and studying with Joe Viola. Also, I was in Herb Pomeroy's band. He taught some great composition classes as well, and I got to study arranging with Mike Gibbs. There were some great teachers there.

Before I went to Berklee, I was always a practicer, but nothing close to what Joe Viola taught me to be. Joe was the first one to really get it through my head that I should set up a daily practice routine for myself. I mention that a lot in my articles: that before you even take the horn out of your case, you should have in mind what you are going to practice. If you have two hours to practice, then set up a two-hour routine for yourself before you get started. If you have eight hours, you set up an eight-hour routine. That way, you are less apt to be distracted and non-focused. It was really Joe who instilled that in me.

I remember a typical day at school:

take my classes, whatever they were that day, and pretty much be done about four or five in the afternoon; come back, have dinner, and then from six to eight there would be a jam session and I would go and play. Then from eight to midnight I'd practice. My second year I had an apartment closer to the New England Conservatory than to Berklee. At Berklee there are honeycombs of practice rooms that feel like little porta-practice cubicles that you can buy. At the Conservatory, however, they open up all their class rooms for practicing at night. Somehow I got to know the security guard, who just assumed that I was a student there. That was a help.

Within your practice time, what would be your usual routine?

It involved mostly the Marcel Mule etude books. Actually, at the time I would start off with a warm-up exercise that is a chromatic scale where every note comes back to the tonic (like low Bb, B, Bb, C, Bb, C#, Bb, D, etc.). Start on low Bb, do that one twice, then B natural, go all the way up then all the way back down. It takes about fifteen minutes. And then there's a Jean-Marie Londeix book that's only nine pages long. It has these four-note motifs, about fifty per page, that you repeat eight times each. They are technically challenging. That ended up being an hour warm-up. Then I would go into the three Marcel Mule books. I tell you, I almost got addicted to all these books. I didn't do the exact same ones every day, but in a four-hour period I could do the chromatic thing, then the Londeix book and then maybe one of the other books: I'd try to make it all the way through successfully.

I stopped school mostly because I ran out of money. I decided to come back to L.A. and put myself up in a very inexpensive living situation so I wouldn't have to work as much and just practice. So I was getting into practicing eight hours a day easily.

I would transcribe solos and work on them: literally work out the notes and study the phrasing. I loved to study Cannonball Adderley. Cannonball was always very easy because, number one, he played so cleanly. It was very obvious what he was playing so it made it much easier to transcribe,

as opposed to Charlie Parker. Not only was Bird's playing not heard quite so easily, but the earlier recording quality made it harder to get. Now I study a lot of Bob Berg: I love Bob's playing. I love Hank Crawford's playing, and all kinds of guys.

Back when I was in school I certainly felt that the majority of my practice time needed to be on mechanics; because I've always felt that you can study a style until you're blue in the face, but if you aren't proficient enough on your instrument, you're not going to be able to play that style all that well. The better technically you can play your instrument, the better you can cop whatever style you want. And so I always put that first. I try to go against the obvious desire to pick up the horn and have a good old time blowing.

I probably spend the last hour of my practice time on improvising, learning chords and changes, working on transcribed solos, going through a tune. Chick actually has a great thing that he says he and Joe Farrell would do. You play through a song, and first just play the straight voicings of all the chords, not necessarily in time. Then construct a half-note line to the song in tempo; then a quarter-note line through the whole song; then an eighth-note line; then if you are really in good shape, a sixteenth-note line, with as few breaks as possible. That way you have to keep your mind going and really get into the changes. The more notes you play, the more notes you have to pick out of the chord. So, I actually do that a lot.

What's your feeling on the importance of doubling, that is, playing flute and clarinet in addition to saxophone? You haven't had to play your doubles that much with your career activities as they are now, have you?

Well, when I go out on tour, no, I'm not going to play a lot of clarinet, or that much on flute. With Lee Ritenour I did play a lot of flute, and with Benoit I played some flute. I have, over the last three years, spent more time on flute than ever before. And the clarinet: I like the clarinet a lot. If I were to totally let it go, whenever I got any kind of call that involved clarinet I would have to turn it down. There was a call I had for clarinet on a record, I

knew about it in advance, and it was hard music. For that reason, I really try to practice my doubles at least a little bit every other day or so. Like everybody else, my practicing in the morning is determined by the gig in the afternoon or evening.

So, I'd say it's definitely necessary for my career. In all honesty and hindsight, I would like to have concentrated more on my doubles than I did. And I think just now I'm learning their importance and spending more time. But now, with limited time, I'm finding that harder to do. Also, you adapt easier to things when you're younger. But the basic thing necessary for young people to realize is that the more versatile you are, the more opportunity you have to work. Who's to say where your career is going to end up? Just set yourself up. You know: play piano, play your doubles, play jazz, play classical music. If you're a saxophone player, don't limit yourself to one saxophone. Make sure you play all the saxes, that you have good instruments. And that way you'll always be making a good impression. I certainly learned that.

In a city like L.A., if, when anybody calls you, you can do it whether it's a jazz recording, a show where you play a lot of doubles, or a contemporary thing, a TV theme, for instance. If you can do them all well, then you're going to keep getting called by a heck of a lot more people. Ask any one of the two hundred or three hundred incredible tenor players in New York who can only play jazz; who don't play doubles and aren't expert readers. Most of them are great unemployed tenor players! The lure of playing is sometimes one thing, what you hear on the radio or records, but what the real meat and potatoes of the business is, that's another thing, and you have to prepare yourself.

When you came back to L.A., where did you live?

When I returned, I rented a room in a boarding house for a short time. Then I went on the road with Al Hirt for seven months on tenor. It was that big band he had in 1980. Sol Gubin was on drums, Larry Lunetta on trumpet, Tom Warrington on bass, Larry Cavelli on tenor, Brian Mitchell on alto.

I was twenty or twenty-one, so I was having a blast. When I came back from that, I got an apartment in West L.A.

How did you start getting work calls when you returned to town?

Well, I started with a day job. I was delivering tax returns for some company starting at six in the morning. I was really practicing hard, and of course the important thing is whenever you do any gig, try to make the best impression you can. So I'd do that every time I would get called for any kind of gig, no matter how big or small. I started playing with Roger Neumann's band and that led to other gigs: I started playing with (drummer) Les DeMerle, and guys from that group started hiring me for some things. It all sort of blossoms: you make one connection and one thing leads to another. You're on a

jingle session and, for instance, the person who plays guitar on the jingle wants you to play on his record. Then that record comes out, then three guys hear you and they want you to play on their record. Then that record comes out and one of the engineers sends the tape to a producer and suddenly you're on the guy's TV show.

Slowly but surely I started doing some session work, at first few and far between, with a couple of guys who did some jingles; not so many record-type dates, but a lot of live gigs. For about three years the work escalated gradually up until the time I started with Chick. But it's funny, when I am in town between tours with Chick, my in-town work seems to have improved from the way it was before. So, having

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Voices of the Heart

Round Trip

Cross Roads

Oasis

One Touch

Street Dance

With Chick Corea Electric Band

Light Years

Eye of the Beholder

Inside Out

Beneath the Mask

Paint the World

With GRP Superlive

Live in Japan

With GRP All-star Big Band

GRP All-star Big Band

GRP All-star Big Band Live in Japan

All Blues

With Dave Grusin

The Gershwin Connection

With John Patitucci

On the Corner

With Dave Weckl

Master Plan

Heads Up

With Don Grusin

The Raven

Zephyr

With David Benoit

Every Step of the Way

Urban Daydreams

Inner Motion

Shaken Not Stirred

The Best of David Benoit

INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEOS

Modern Sax

Play Saxophone, Day One

some sort of connection with a big name, at least in playing circles, has a lot to do with it. That's how I started playing with Lee Ritenour and David Benoit. Then when I started putting out my own records, that helped too.

When did you start with Chick Corea?

He called me in '86, the first tour was in '87.

How did you start to record your own albums?

Well, after I did the first album (*Light Years*) with Chick, GRP's Larry Rosen simply called me and told me they wanted to sign me as a solo act. So it was a very easy thing. I then submitted some tunes that I had written and things I already had on tape. And Larry indicated that this was not an audition type of thing; that they really wanted me and just wanted to get

an idea of what I would do outside of the group with Chick.

Chick Corea produced my first record. Now, my first three albums did OK but I never really had any interest from anybody about my going out on the road to promote them. The main reason is that most of the time I was on the road with Chick or Dave Benoit, or with something Dave Grusin had put together. We were actually promoting my albums as well as theirs. With Chick we even played one of the tunes from my first record. I mean, here we are playing these big theaters, with me standing out in front of this great band playing one of my tunes! And a picture of my album was on all the concert posters. In a way, it was much better than me going out on the road on my

own. Plus we were out six, seven months of the year. So it was a lot of promotion.

It wasn't until my fourth record, which did much better, that I really put my own band together. That first band was a quartet with Art Rodriguez on drums, Greg Karukas on keyboards and bassist Alan Deremo. Then I added guitar (Pat Kelley has done it, also Ricardo Silvera). The first tour was about a three and one-half week tour of the U.S. It worked out fine. There's a lot involved in putting a tour together, but we went out with an RV. Besides us four musicians, there were two roadies who made their money from the sale of concessions, selling records, tapes and printed tee-shirts. The roadies ended up making more money than we did. I bore all the expenses, so I'm sure I lost a couple thousand dollars easily.

The following year, I did another tour of the U.S., same configuration. I went to Hong Kong as well and played my music with a band over there. Also a short tour of South America with musicians from down there.

How did you manage to find musicians in these countries that could play your music?

Well in Asia, there's a wonderful record company representative there, Clarence Chang, who has helped me tremendously. He put the band together for me and I faxed the music over a month in advance. Of course he had all the records.

I was going to Japan and Taiwan with Chick Corea's Electric Band, and Mr. Chang put together a promotional tour for me. Chick's band came home and I went on to Hong Kong. That was the first time I'd been to Asia on my own. We did three nights in Hong Kong and played at the Malaysia Jazz Festival in Kuala Lumpur (in four different locations: the festival was like a week long). While there, we did all kinds of promotion because that music was becoming very popular over there.

That really helped spark a good situation for me that's going on now. For this newest record I went back to Asia: Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong (where I shot a video). Last January, I went to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Phillipines, then returned to the U.S. for a six-week domestic tour. Later, there was a joint tour with Benoit back to Asia again. This past summer I went to a few different countries in Europe with my own band.

With all of this traveling and not being with your family, how do you feel about that?

Well, it's tricky. My wife Lee Ann and I have been together for fourteen years. When we were married I was doing casuals and whatever I could to stay alive. The progression has been really good and she's been very supportive and understanding. We both realize you have to take the work when it's there, no doubt about it, and we're both very thankful for the way things have come about. My kids are kind of used to it. My little girl Katie is eight and Robert is six. For this newest record, in fact, I wrote a song called *Kid Stuff*, and it's dedicated to them. When I'm on the road for long periods of time, it's just a nightmare as far as missing the kids and my wife, and vice versa. So I tried to make a vow not to go out for such long periods for that very reason. Last year alone I was in forty different countries. Since I'm working when I'm in town too, I ideally would like to travel less and be home more.

Eric, do you find more enthusiasm about your recorded music when you play it live on tour away from the Los Angeles area?

Oh, yes, without a doubt. L.A. and New York are so saturated. On any given night, you can hear many groups and several well-known people. You can go to one of several pop concerts or classical concerts. You have so much to choose from that people are spoiled, whereas in any other city in the country, any show in town becomes a much bigger deal because there's much less going on. If you're in Topeka, Kansas, for instance, you're going to have a lot less choices than if you were in New York City. And that is magnified three times, at least, when you go to a foreign country. When we go down to South America it's a big deal. I mean, with Chick Corea, even, I think we sold out only one show of several at the Coach House (in Orange county south of Los Angeles), and that's only 350 people. We went to Buenos Aires and sold out two nights in a 4000-seat theater. We could have easily done two more. Now, sure, that was with Chick, but even on my level, when you go out of the country, if your records are known at all, people really want to come out because they don't get the opportunity every day like we do here.

How do you view your music related to the art form and style? I know you are capable of playing many differing styles.

Well, I like playing a lot of different styles of music. I like playing straight-ahead jazz an awful lot and my regular Wednesday night gig at the Studio Cafe in Balboa is a chance to play bebop and kind of a "boys-night-out." My latest records are definitely contemporary instrumental pop music, but hopefully with a little bit of a difference.

Do you have any views about the present direction of jazz and improvisational music? Do you see a direction at all?

I see things as branching out. There are two different ways of looking at music. One is to study whatever has already happened. For instance, Charlie Parker's bebop style of music: when we study and play that kind of music we want it to stay in its bag. We don't want that music to move forward, we want it to stay right where it is and we want to play it for what it is. A second view is to always have progression forward. That's one thing about Chick Corea that is a lot of fun to experience: he always, no matter what, moves forward—every night, let alone every recording. And the evolution of his music is very evident with each recording just because it's so different. It's fun to buy a new Chick Corea record because you never know what you're going to hear next. So hopefully, as the years progress, I'll be able to do both: embrace the good things about music that have already happened: bebop, swing, modern jazz, Coltrane; also take those styles and move forward. I don't view the music that's already happened as the "end-all." Hopefully we will evolve other great styles of music.

I was once asked to do a "blindfold" test for a music magazine. The interviewer wanted me to rate everything, one to five, five being best. Everything I heard I rated a five. Soon, he asked me, "What would it take for you to give somebody a one?" I replied, "My opinion is that as long as people are putting their hearts into it, who are we to say that it's good or bad? I personally may prefer one thing over the other, but if you're asking me to judge whether or not it's musically valid, I think it's all very valid." I feel that as long as music comes from the heart it shouldn't be criticized. §