

**An Interview with Eric Marienthal**  
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**Interviewed by Shannon West**

Eric Marienthal is one of the most multifaceted musicians in contemporary jazz. Within just the last year he has been a key player on 4 major releases, each with a totally different approach to contemporary instrumental music. Besides his latest, ***Got You Covered***, he is also a part of Chick Corea's Elektric Band, which just released their reunion CD, ***To The Stars***. He is also featured on the Rippingtons' ***Wild Card*** and Lee Ritenour's tour de force CD/DVD ***Overtime***. Besides touring as a solo act he has been playing the majority of the Rippingtons' live dates and touring with the Elektric Band. And that's just recent history. If you look through your CD collection you'll probably see his name in the credits on a lot of your favorites including Dave Grusin, David Benoit, Phil Perry, Patti Austin, Gregg Karukas, Steve Oliver, the GRP All Star Big Band, Jeff Lorber, Rick Braun...pretty much everyone.

Marienthal started with the best. His first high profile gig was when Chick Corea invited him to join the Elektric Band in the early '80s. When GRP signed him to a solo deal a few years later, Corea produced his first album. He has recorded 11 albums and every one stands up to repeated listenings years later. To cover his whole career would require days of conversation and more pages than a short novel. So we talked about ***Got You Covered***, which finds him exploring more new territory: recording live in an acoustic setting with a stellar group of musicians including Russell Ferrante, Russ Freeman, Luis Conte, Chick Corea, Dave Carpenter and Peter Erskine. The words that kept popping up during this conversation were "joy" and "fun." That should be enough to lure you into wanting to experience this music.

***SmoothViews (SV):*** ****Got You Covered*** is a bit of a departure for you both in terms of style and the way it was recorded. Tell us a little about it.*

**Eric Marienthal (EM):** I really wanted to do something different. I had always been excited about doing a record that featured more acoustic instruments and I really wanted to get into an environment where we were all together playing live. There's a different dynamic musically when you're all playing live in the studio together, not only from a musical standpoint but from a creative standpoint. You play differently. There's more at stake because if everyone else is playing great and you have a bad take, then you've messed up the whole group thing. You're in it more and what you are playing is inspiring what the drummer plays, who in turn inspires what the keyboard player plays. There's a nice live energy that occurs, and a lot of musical communication that you can only get when you're playing together

***SV:*** *You played on the sessions for Lee Ritenour's ***Overtime***, which was also live, right before you started working on this CD. Did that inspire you to think about doing something live or were you already thinking about that before?*

**EM:** Oddly enough it was Lee Ritenour who gave me the original idea. Before my last record, *Sweet Talk*, he and I were talking about ideas for possible projects and that was his thought. The original idea was to maybe do something with strings or more orchestral, but to record live in any event. I had already written some other songs that were going to be more in line with my smooth jazz type records, and I sort of put that idea off until this past record (*Sweet Talk*) was done. Seeing what Lee had done with *Overtime* and just how wonderfully everybody played, and seeing what it felt like to be involved in a live recording like that was something I was very excited about and very intrigued by. I was very motivated to do something along the same lines myself

**SV:** *In the Ritenour project you were sitting in a circle playing to each other and you can feel that intangible connection even just listening without seeing the DVD.*

**EM:** Yeah, the audience was to one side and we were set up in a circle. It was so cool! We were in a circle and Lee was in the middle of the circle. Plus Don Murray recorded it and his work with sound is legendary. That was a very fun record to do and it sounds magnificent

**SV:** *So how did you decide to do covers instead of originals in this setting?*

**EM:** I knew that the record was going to be very different from anything I had ever done. I had never done a totally acoustic record. Even though some of my first records were live in the sense that we were playing together, we'd go back in and sweeten it up and add parts. We did not do that on this record. The idea was to create a more intimate record, a more "jazzified" record, and basically a record that was quite different. I thought one way to bring it back around and keep it from being too obscure would be to do tunes that people are familiar with. At the same time I wanted to do some songs that were going to be a little off the beaten path. Songs like that Bach "Two Part Invention in B Minor." We did "Moody's Mood for Love," the jazz song written by James Moody, and "I Got the World By A String," the standard, just to do some things that were a little jazzier. At the same time doing songs like "I Will," "New York State of Mind," and "You've got a Friend" which are very familiar tunes. They were favorites of mine when I was growing up and songs that really worked in that acoustic setting.

**SV:** *I loved the sequencing of the songs because the way it is set up it could lure some people into listening to some music that they might not ordinarily listen to. "I Will" is very familiar, "New York State of Mind" is familiar, but jazzier. "Love and Liberte," "Compared to What," and "I've Got the World On A String" are each a little more improvisational and will be more adventurous listening for listeners who are familiar with the smooth jazz side of your work. The process draws you in and they'll enjoy it when they hear it.*

**EM:** I sequenced this record and that's the reason I really pushed hard for the songs to be in this order. The idea was to put some songs that are very familiar up front. If I put the duet Chick and I did upfront, even though that's my personal favorite, it might have turned some people away. So hopefully

the way it is sequenced will draw some people into something a little different from the things they are used to hearing.

**SV:** *Out of all the songs you know and have enjoyed over the years, how did you choose "I Will," "You've Got A Friend," and "Emotion" to be the familiarity benchmarks on the CD.*

**EM:** I spent a couple of months listening to a lot of music from my own collection. I loved the Beatles and I wanted to do something I haven't heard that much in terms of instrumental covers. "Emotion" was one that Russ brought to the table. He produced the record and thought that would be a cool song to do and he arranged it. "You've Got A Friend" is another one from my own collection that I just love and it was just perfect for the acoustic environment. Luis Conte, who did percussion also plays with James Taylor so he had some cool insight into what James kinda dug. It was great to have that.

**SV:** *Can you elaborate on that? Doing the session with a guy who has played a classic song with the person who wrote it is a fascinating situation.*

**EM:** Whenever you do a cover song it's important to do something unique so it doesn't sound stale or like you're rehashing something that everyone has already heard. At the same time it was really fun to talk to Luis and hear his input as to what the composer of this classic tune liked in terms of the tempo, the groove, even the arrangement. That's another thing about recording live. About a third of the record was first takes. Like the duet with Chick, "My One And Only Love." We got to the studio, talked about what song we wanted to do, figured out the key, sat down and played it one time and that was it. The entire recording session took about 10 minutes. That was the first time we played the song together and there was no editing or fixing. My wife, LeeAnn, was there and she filmed it, so we have the whole thing on film. While we were doing the rest of the record, we would play the arrangements then say "that sounded good but why don't we try this or change this section," so songs would sort of mold themselves right on the spot. It was the exact sort of recording I was always afraid of. I always wanted to go into sessions knowing exactly what was going to happen at the end. That is great, but another way to do it is to do it more spontaneously and see what happens. When you put a great group of musicians together like Peter Erskine, Russell Ferrante, Russ Freeman, David Carpenter and Luis Conte good things are gonna happen. We were open to trying new things. That was another exciting thing about doing it live. As far as "You've Got A Friend" is concerned, we played it the way we originally intended to do it and Luis came up with some suggestions that we incorporated into the arrangement. With the insight he got from playing with James Taylor it obviously worked wonderfully.

**SV:** *So you're basically used to going in with a game plan knowing you can tweak it afterwards and this time you were just going to go in and play.*

**EM:** Exactly. When you play live the problem with trying to go in and redo parts or overdub is that a lot of what you play has a lot to do with what

everybody else plays. You do something rhythmically and Peter may pick it up on the drums or Russ may answer it on keyboard, so if you try to put parts in after the fact you hear the answer to something where you don't hear the question. It's like a patchwork quilt, it all kind of works together. We record Elektric band records with Chick Corea in much the same way. That's what has always given me the inspiration to do a record like this. I learned that from Chick that when you record it's just like playing a concert. What you play affects what everybody else plays and it affects the overall impact of the music

**SV:** *So the Elektric band CDs were recorded pretty much in this type of setting?*

**EM:** Those records are different than the record I just did, but the main playing of the record is very much live. Chick orchestrates a lot so he has these other synth and keyboard parts that he adds as part of the orchestration. In that case it's a matter of only having two hands so he has to add the other parts later, but those are written parts so they don't really affect what happened when we recorded the tracks originally.

**SV:** *The songs on **Got You Covered** cover a lot of territory. How did you choose such an eclectic group of songs?*

**EM:** It is an eclectic collection of songs but they all seemed to fit. It all felt like it was going to work. I think what made it work was the instrumentation. At first glance the songs themselves seem to not go together...I mean we went from "Stand By Me" to Bach! (laughs) They were all fun tunes to play. Because of the instrumentation and the group of guys who were playing, we felt all along like it's going to have a lot of glue, it's gonna work.

**SV:** *You are covering a lot of styles with your own music, plus you're touring with the Rippingtons and you're about to do some more Chick Corea gigs. And you do a lot of sessions and live gigs with other artists. Doing all these different types of music in different types of settings, how do you juggle all of that and how do you maintain your own voice?*

**EM:** Music is music, and it's very related. It's a matter of having a feel for communicating on different levels musically. It's sort of like if you had several different groups of friends who were into different things and when you were with each group you talked about the things you had in common. You are still carrying on conversations; it's just that the content is very different. For me, it's more about who you are playing with than the style you are playing because what it comes down to is creating that communication with one main intent, which is to pull off the song.

**SV:** *Have you ever had to play a song that you really don't like and put it across.*

**EM:** Absolutely (laughs). There are certainly songs that I like more than others and songs that I don't particularly like. The advantage to being a leader of your own group is you can choose music that you like and you don't find yourself in that situation. Obviously when someone else is the leader you

don't have that choice. In that case you think about the elements of the music that you like, try to emphasize those, and do your best.

**SV:** *Within the last few months there have been a lot of cover-driven CDs. Is there a pressure to do this or is it just that a lot of people decided they wanted to do songs they liked that had been done before?*

**EM:** To tell the truth, I started working on this record a long time ago so I didn't realize that. If I knew then what I know now maybe I would have done more original music, but it wasn't my intention to do a cover record because everyone else was. It was coincidental in my case. I did it because I had never done it before and to take a record that was going to be a little bit unusual in terms of the instrumentation and setting and do something that brought it back into the mainstream. It's fun to do an instrumental take on a vocal tune. I love the saxophone because it is so much like the human voice and it's really fun to play these songs; it's like you're singing the song when you're playing it on the sax. For me it's a lot of fun to interpret a Beatles tune or a Billy Joel tune and play it on a horn and see how it comes out.

**SV:** *The list of producers you've worked with is basically a who's-who of contemporary jazz. What is it like to work with such gifted and respected artists?*

**EM:** It's been awesome. To be able to work with musicians like Chick Corea, like Dave Grusin, and I got to work with Brubeck. Some legendary musicians. If you take a collection of 20 guys and have each one of them play a song you're going to get 20 different versions. I have had the luxury and good fortune to make music with so many great musicians. Getting the chance to do this has been incredibly educational for me, and obviously a lot of fun. It's a great joy to make music with them and there's going to be a lot to learn from how they make music, write music, and how they produce music.

**SV:** *Do you think about producing yourself?*

**EM:** I hope so someday. ***Sweet Talk***, my last one, was about the closest I've come to sort of taking the reins. Jason Miles was the producer and he was open to a lot of the things that I did. I did quite a bit on my own, but I do enjoy collaborating. It's fun to bounce ideas off of people and I've always done that.

**SV:** *So it's stepping out of a comfort zone when you go in with a new producer isn't it?*

**EM:** Yes, but that's good! One of the great things about jazz music is that it changes a lot. It morphs, it evolves, and it's fun to work with other people because it does teach you new things and helps perpetuate your own ideas

**SV:** *You've kept a very individualized voice through these recordings, how do you keep that and not morph back and forth into other people's processes yourself?*

**EM:** I think everybody is born with their own voice. If somebody loves, say, Kenny G and really wants to emulate him you can study him for 10 years, but you can't sound like him. You may play a lot of the same notes in a similar way, but you won't sound exactly like him. In the same respect you're not going to sound like Miles Davis or Herbie Hancock. We are influenced by what is being played around us, but in the end we are going to interpret what we learn and are influenced by individually. By what God gave us, our own creative personality.

**SV:** *You've been doing benefit concerts for High Hopes every summer. Tell us about the concerts and how you got involved with them.*

**EM:** High Hopes is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people with head injuries and this past summer was our 7th annual charity concert for them. The director, Mark Desmond, is a friend and 7 years ago he asked me if I would do a small concert. We pulled it off and raised about \$40,000 on a grassroots level. Over the years we've had Patti Austin, Rick Braun, Lou Rawls and a lot of other major artists. This year Lorber did it, Rick Braun played, and Howard Hewitt sang. Debbie Boone has a nephew who is in the program so she is involved too. It's been a great thing to do and over the course of the time we have raised over a half million dollars for them. We'll be doing it again next July

**SV:** *What's ahead for you? Any chance of touring in an acoustic setting?*

**EM:** We're heading out in February. I am about to go on a tour in Poland for two weeks and then I'm going to Italy at the end of the year. I have some gigs with Brian Culbertson and there's a lot going on in January, then we'll start the tour in February.

Eric Marienthal's website: [www.ericmarienthal.com](http://www.ericmarienthal.com)

Peak Records: [www.peak-records.com](http://www.peak-records.com)

For more Information on High Hopes and the "Evening of Hope" benefit concerts go to [www.highhopes.ws](http://www.highhopes.ws)

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