

PRESSTEXT**“Let Yourself Go”****The Lives of Jazz Pianist Fred Hersch**

A Production of Aha!DVD and Katja Duregger

**ABOUT FRED HERSCH**

"Downbeat", the renowned jazz magazine, crooned several years ago that jazz pianist Fred Hersch (53), who comes from Cincinnati and has lived in New York for over 30 years, is one of the most diverse and best pianists and composers of contemporary jazz. He belongs to those musicians who are in constant development, who are continually rediscovering their playing style in search of the most diverse forms of expression. In his music, Hersch merges elements of Swing, Bebop, the US American song tradition, the avant-garde, newer music and classic with a truly individual and unique artistic depth and maturity.

In 1986 Fred Hersch received the conclusive diagnosis he had already been expecting for a long time: He learned that he is HIV positive.

Throughout the following few years, he presumed that every new CD he released would be his last, that it was pointless to plan long-term. As he says today, he never let himself dream that he would live to reach 50.



Fred Hersch with monthly regiment of medication

Following his studies at the New England Conservatory in Boston, Hersch came to New York in 1977. However, it was not only New York's reputation for having the most exciting jazz scene in the world that attracted him. Fred, like so many gays at that time, relished the new, completely carefree and liberated gay scene there which in other words meant: Lots of sex, lots of parties and lots of drugs. For him, it was only a brief amount of time- lasting just seven years in which he was able to enjoy this great gay party – a time that ended abruptly in 1983/84 with the first reported AIDS. Freddy Mercury also became infected at this time in New York, as did other artists. Many of them are no longer alive today. During those first years, AIDS victims died at an indescribable rate, including many of Fred Hersch's friends. At that time he expected the disease to break out in him every single day – a disease for which there was no treatment at that time.

"HIV changed everything, absolutely everything. It forced us gay men to grow up in a very short time. Before that we were just having a ball, 24 hours a day, like children, not thinking about any consequences. So, AIDS forced us to think about the consequences in a very cruel way."

Although he had outed himself to his family, friends and colleagues by then, he had not yet done so publicly. It was only in 1994, the year he received his first two Grammy nominations, that he made a double public outing: With his homosexuality and with his HIV infection. Up till then, not a single jazz musician had dared to open himself up to the public in such a direct and open manner. The result was a huge media storm. Over night he became the leading figurehead for those infected with HIV and gay activists, and the secret spiritual advisor to many gay and lesbian musicians.



"I never wanted to have this role, but till today I'm still the first one people call when they have questions about this subject. I just came out because I was tired of thinking: Who knows and who doesn't. This takes away so much energy and I wanted to use this energy for my art and to be free from that."

He began to produce benefit albums for the organization "Classical Action - Performing Arts Against AIDS". The first one, entitled "Last Night When We Were Young: The Ballad Album", was released in 1994. All the songs were duets with, among others, Gary Burton, Andy Bey, Mark Murphy, Toots Thielemanns, Phil Woods and Jane Ira Bloom. By now he has produced four such duet albums, which have earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for the AIDS Foundation.

In 1997 one of his duet albums featured, among others, such jazz greats as Diana Krall, Jim Hall, Lee Konitz, Kenny Barron, Tommy Flanagan and Joe Lovano.

Hersch is deeply committed to the concerns of AIDS victims and is worried by the increasing rate of AIDS infections throughout the world. His partner Scott heads an AIDS help project in South Africa, while Fred himself gives talks at universities and to homosexual organizations.

"People start to forget about AIDS. Especially young gays in the US and in Europe ignore it. The young gays don't practice safe sex anymore, which is really a catastrophe. They believe now that we have the 'cocktail', the special AIDS medication, it's not so dangerous anymore to get the virus. They have no idea about what it means to take the pills. It's not like taking vitamins. It can make you feel terrible. And you don't know how you react on it. And besides that: Only the medication costs 40,000 dollars a year, doctor's visits not included. That's why it's so important to keep reminding them of the danger of AIDS and I want to do the best I can as long as I can."

His music:

In addition to the duets, for which he has a very high regard, Fred Hersch also likes playing as frequently and regularly as possible with jazz singers. Albums were recorded with Norma Winstone and Nancy King, among others. He loves and continues to play in the classic jazz trio which constantly develops his musical skills. His last trio album "Night and the music" received fantastic reviews and earned him the reputation of being one of the best jazz trio performers alive. As a composer he has set music to several poems by Walt Whitman's including the series "Leaves of Grass" and has performed them with an



eight- person jazz ensemble and the singers Kurt Elling and Kate Mc Garry. Besides that, by now Hersch has released as many solo piano recordings as Keith Jarrett. He has elevated this art form to a level that hardly any other jazz pianist has ever reached. The same is true for his latest solo release "Live at the Bimhuis" on which the critics have piled praise, while at the end of February 2006 he became the first jazz pianist ever to be booked for a complete solo week

at the Village Vanguard Jazz club in New York. In 2007 he received for the third time two Grammy Nominations, one for the best Jazz composition and one for the best Jazz Singer recording with Nancy King.

In spite of his illness, which among other things has prevented him from undertaking long tours abroad, his creative powers remain unbroken. Over the last eight years alone his performing style has matured enormously, and with each new project it leaves a clearer, more diverse and freer impression. Beyond question, Hersch is one of the best and most important jazz pianists and composers of our time, an outstanding artist and person.

Particularly due to of his illness, I believe it is vital with this film that he receives the attention and honor he has long earned.

“Let Yourself Go”



Content of the DVD

The DVD “Let Yourself Go” – The Lives of Fred Hersch” offers more than just the half hour main portrait film “Let Yourself Go”. There are some additional features that offer a more detailed view into particular parts of Herschs life and work. Besides Fred, his partner Scott Morgan and his brother Hank Hersch, it features musicians such as Norma Winstone, Nasheet Waits, John Herbert and Christopher O’Riley, his long time sound engineer Michael Mac Donald, his teacher Sophia Rosoff and the head of the organisation „Classical Action - Performing Art against AIDS“, Charles Hamlen.



Module 1: “Let Yourself Go”, Main Movie, 28.30 Min.

Here we follow different aspects of Fred Hersch’s life – an overview which will be deepened in the other sections.

Module 2: “Listen” – The musician and composer Fred Hersch, 18.30 Min.

This film focuses on Fred’s music and his approach to Jazz. It is about Fred as an composer, as a piano player and as a musician who feels comfortable with all

kinds of musical styles. What does Jazz mean to him? Where does his style come from and what is he searching for?

Module 3: "To Tell a Story"- The Jazz Teacher Fred Hersch, 15.30 Min.

This film shows Fred Hersch as a teacher. He teaches regular master classes in the most reputable music schools in the US and Europe. We show his teaching philosophy and how he connects his students with their own musical language and their own particular voice. He makes them understand how important it is to tell a story that really matters to them.

Module 4: "Always There" - Life with HIV and AIDS, 17.30 Min.

This is a film about Hersch's life with AIDS. It concentrates on how he has been living with HIV for over 20 years. One question is: how could have Fred survived that long, for he was one of the first infected by the Virus.

Module 5: In Concert

Special feature with a lot of live music to see.

- With his Trio Live in Antwerp 2007
- Solo at the Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo 2006
- Solo at the Bimhuis in Amsterdam 2006



Links:

www.aha-dvd.com

www.kduregger.de

www.fredhersch.com

The idea of the Modular DVD

When making documentaries, we experienced again and again that interesting material didn't make it into the finished film. In a linear movie, certain aspects of the subject come to the foreground, while others have to be dropped - in order to create a strong narrative. But sometimes, a subject holds more than one story.

At the same time, we realized that DVD as a medium has a whole set of its own possibilities. It can be much more than a distribution tool for a film with added bonus material.

On the "Modular DVD", we approach a subject, a person, or a story by presenting several films on the same subject. Each of those "Modules" is devoted to a certain aspect and tells a story of its own, whilst being part of a bigger whole. This way, we explore the subject in a new and more comprehensive way.

We hope that Aha!DVD will give you an experience that goes beyond informative entertainment and leads you into an exciting journey of discovery!