

A Life Played by Ear

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN SLOWLY

By Fred Hersch

Crown Archetype, 307 pages,

BY TED GIOIA

Fred Hersch never wanted to be a medical case study. I don't blame him. At the age of 61 he ranks among the finest jazz pianists of our time, and deserves acclaim for his artistry. That said, his return from a near-death experience, described in this newly published memoir, may inspire as many people as his music.

Mr. Hersch survived a health crisis that, if you saw it on a TV medical drama, would elicit disbelief. After being diagnosed HIV-positive in 1986, he maintained an intense schedule of performances and recordings for the next two decades through a winning combination of dedication and medication. But in June of 2008, Mr. Hersch came down, in short order, with pneumonia, delirium, a collapse in blood pressure, kidney failure and septic shock.

In a last-ditch effort to save his life, doctors put Mr. Hersch into a medically induced coma. For weeks he lingered at the brink of death. His coma lasted almost two months, and when, against all odds, he recovered consciousness, he still couldn't talk, breathe on his own, eat food or even swallow. And, of course, couldn't play piano.

To rebuild a life, let alone a demanding jazz career, from this setback required nothing short of a miracle. At an early stage of rehab, Mr. Hersch asked his partner, Scott Morgan, to push his wheelchair to a piano. He tried to play "Body and Soul," a song he had performed countless times in the past. "My fingers could barely move," he recalls, "and I couldn't remember the chords to the bridge."

Yet Mr. Hersch not only returned to the bandstand but also somehow reached a higher level in his music. I've followed his career ever since I saw Mr. Hersch in Toots Thielemans's band in the 1980s and have long admired his work. But Mr. Hersch's music of the last half-dozen years is at the pinnacle of the jazz idiom. In my opinion, jazz piano doesn't get any better than this.

So I would have read this autobiography, crafted with guidance from music writer David Hajdu, even without the back-from-the-brink drama. Over the last few years, I've wondered how Mr. Hersch reached the peak level of performance demonstrated on albums such as "Alive at the Vanguard" (2012), "Floating" (2014) and "Solo" (2015). I hoped this volume would give me a glimpse of that inner process, even more elusive than the hard work of physical rehab.

The glib answer is that Mr. Hersch's near-death experience pushed him on to a higher artistic plateau. That has been my hunch from afar, and the pianist himself seems to share this impression. "I think my playing is better in many ways today than it was before I got so sick. I have found my left-to-right-hand independence to be looser and more interesting, and my general facility is much improved. Most important, I



INSPIRATION Fred Hersch performing in the Purcell Room of London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, in 1999.
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

believe I am playing with more freedom and creativity and less judgment," he notes. "After my recovery I took more satisfaction in playing than I had ever taken in my life." You can hear this sense of joy and freedom in the music.

Long before the crisis of 2008, Mr. Hersch had faced more than his fair share of adversity. As a gay man working in jazz, he belonged to two marginalized subcultures. And they espouse values and rituals that seem to have very little in common. Jazz may be the most macho music idiom of them all, too macho at times for my tastes. I've participated in jam sessions that felt like gladiator battles in a Hollywood movie. For better or worse, that's the legacy of the idiom.

So I'm hardly surprised that Bay Area music writer Grover Sales wrote an essay back in 1984 entitled "Why Is Jazz Not Gay Music?" That question seems extremely narrow-minded nowadays, but Sales wrote during a time when no gay jazz star was yet out of the closet. Who can blame Mr. Hersch and others for holding back given the ethos of the idiom, with all its ultra-masculine aggression and ritualized strutting?

But just a few years after Sales's proclamation, Fred Hersch and vibraphonist Gary Burton took the brave step of coming out. These were genuine leaders in the jazz world, and in the midst of the AIDS crisis their example toppled stereotypes and changed attitudes. Jazz is still a combative music, but there's more tolerance and slightly less testosterone on display nowadays. That's not only good for the musicians but for the music as well.

"I never wanted to be the gay jazz poster boy," Mr. Hersch admits. But when he saw the ways he could make a difference as an AIDS-education activist, he embraced this new role with the same dedication he had long brought to music. To further the cause, he signed on for concerts, events, compositions, interviews and TV appearances.

Given these dramatic incidents in Mr. Hersch's life, readers might be tempted to skip over the portions of this book dealing with the craft of music. That would be a mistake. Mr. Hersch belongs to that last generation of jazz performers

who came of age learning the old-fashioned way, on the job and in the presence of the living masters instead of from a textbook or classroom assignment. In these pages, he tells about gigging with Jo Jones Jr. in Greenwich Village, traveling on the bus with big-band star Woody Herman, partying with trumpeter Chet Baker and other rites of passage the likes of which do not exist for twentysomethings nowadays. He also writes splendid impressionist essays on the essence of Thelonious Monk, the importance of rhythm in jazz, and the difference between an eighth note as played by Chick Corea (thin and bright), Herbie Hancock (fat and solid) and Fred Hersch (discrete, with space on each side, and with a distinctive pianistic color all its own).

I must add a warning to music teachers. They will be horrified by this book. "I didn't practice much and never went to my lesson fully prepared," Mr. Hersch explains at the outset. Even in later years, he avoided the rote playing of scales and exercises: "I'm never sure what or how to practice, so I rarely do. But I seem to pull it together when the lights go up." That may seem like a bad attitude for a professional musician, but I have a hunch that much of Fred Hersch's greatness stems from avoiding over-preparation and embracing the risk-taking attitude jazz improvisation demands when played at a high level.

"Great jazz has to have the element of danger," he contends. He has lived that motto to the fullest. And that same attitude propels this powerful autobiography. Again and again, Mr. Hersch shares details—about drugs or sex or the music life—that others might have held back. Yet that raw honesty and immediacy is probably why so many of us find his music so compelling. By the same token, that's why this book earns a place as one of the great contemporary jazz memoirs.

—*Mr. Gioia is a pianist and a writer on music, literature and pop culture. His most recent book is "How to Listen to Jazz."*