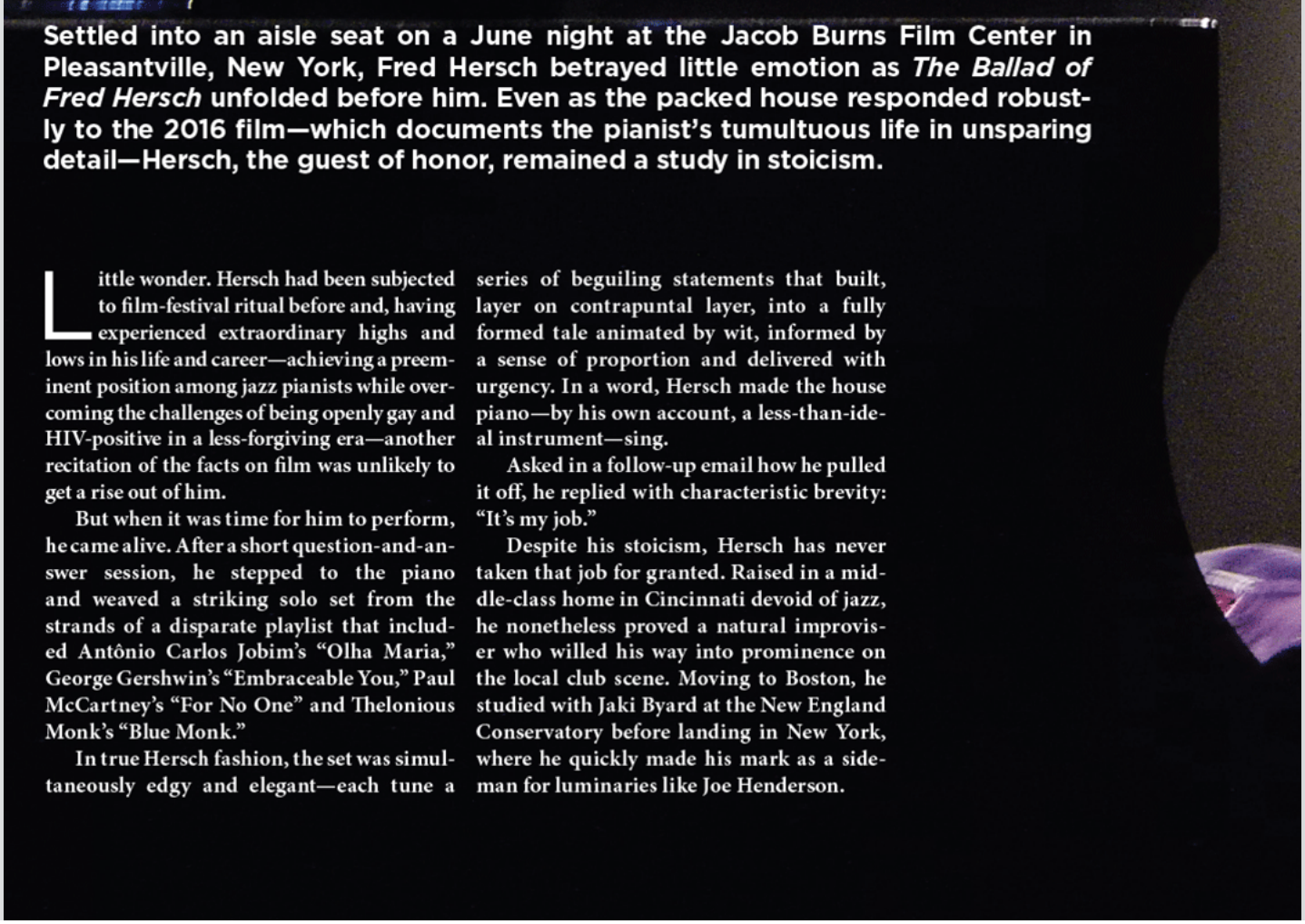
FRED HERSCH

TRUTH TELLER

By Phillip Lutz | Photo by Jim Wilke



Settled into an aisle seat on a June night at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, New York, Fred Hersch betrayed little emotion as *The Ballad of Fred Hersch* unfolded before him. Even as the packed house responded robustly to the 2016 film—which documents the pianist's tumultuous life in unsparing detail—Hersch, the guest of honor, remained a study in stoicism.

Little wonder. Hersch had been subjected to film-festival ritual before and, having experienced extraordinary highs and lows in his life and career—achieving a preeminent position among jazz pianists while overcoming the challenges of being openly gay and HIV-positive in a less-forgiving era—another recitation of the facts on film was unlikely to get a rise out of him.

But when it was time for him to perform, he came alive. After a short question-and-answer session, he stepped to the piano and weaved a striking solo set from the strands of a disparate playlist that included Antônio Carlos Jobim's "Olha Maria," George Gershwin's "Embraceable You," Paul McCartney's "For No One" and Thelonious Monk's "Blue Monk."

In true Hersch fashion, the set was simultaneously edgy and elegant—each tune a series of beguiling statements that built, layer on contrapuntal layer, into a fully formed tale animated by wit, informed by a sense of proportion and delivered with urgency. In a word, Hersch made the house piano—by his own account, a less-than-ideal instrument—sing.

Asked in a follow-up email how he pulled it off, he replied with characteristic brevity: "It's my job."

Despite his stoicism, Hersch has never taken that job for granted. Raised in a middle-class home in Cincinnati devoid of jazz, he nonetheless proved a natural improviser who willed his way into prominence on the local club scene. Moving to Boston, he studied with Jaki Byard at the New England Conservatory before landing in New York, where he quickly made his mark as a sideman for luminaries like Joe Henderson.

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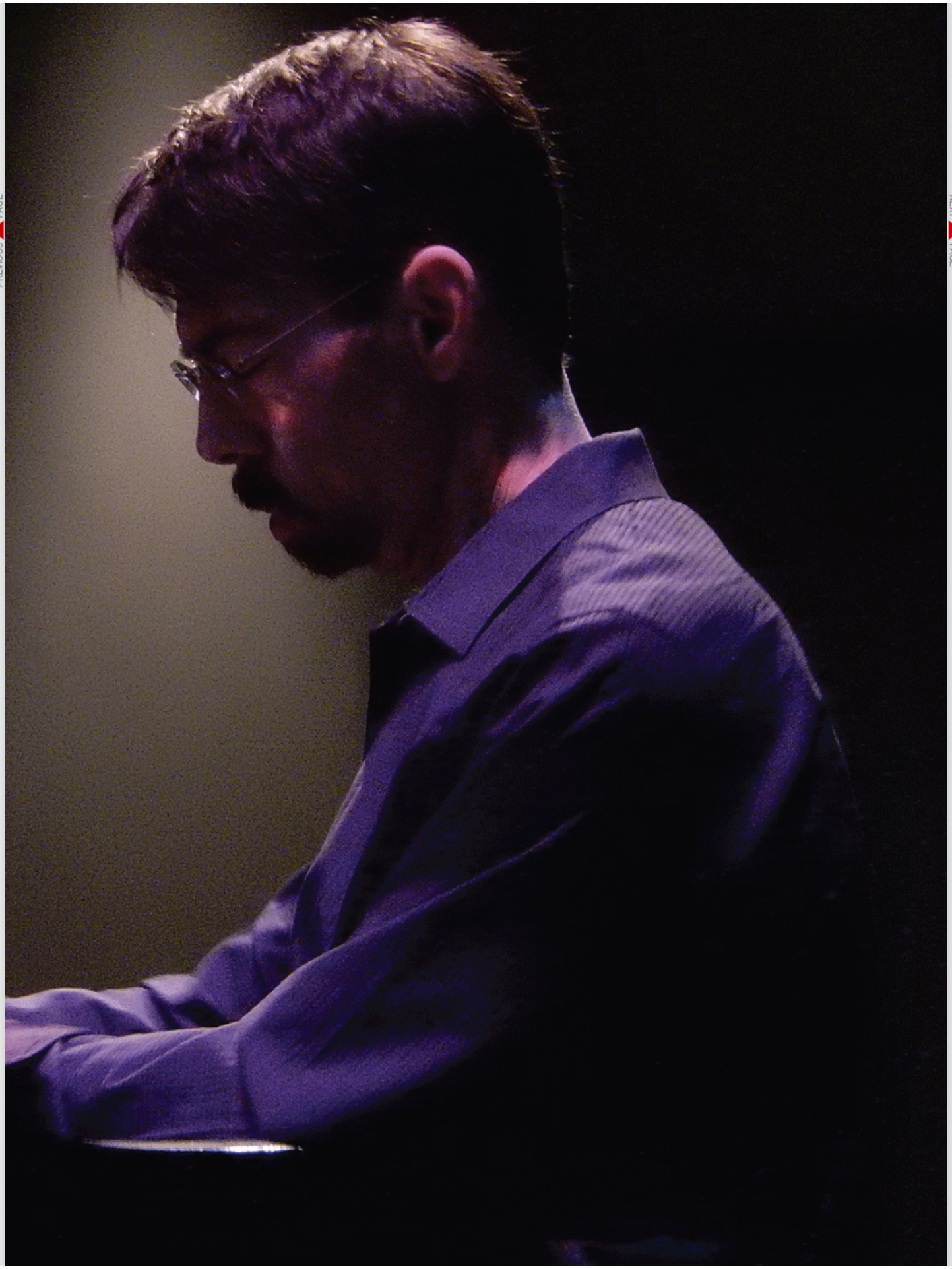

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Hersch's new memoir is titled *Good Things Happen Slowly: A Life In and Out of Jazz.*

'The catharsis of doing a book is not going to freeze me in a time capsule.'

Gradually, in more than 40 albums and continuous touring as a leader, he established himself as a singular voice in jazz and beyond—all while battling illness, which, for two months in 2008, prompted doctors to place him in a coma. He emerged in a debilitated state, but regained his faculties and turned the experience into a groundbreaking piece of jazz theater, *My Coma Dreams*, which raised his profile.

Now, asserting that he feels better than he has in years, he is on the brink of extending his fame further. Crown Archetype will publish a new memoir, *Good Things Happen Slowly: A Life In and Out of Jazz*, on Sept. 12 (see sidebar on page 38). Palmetto will release an album of Hersch's solo performances, aptly titled *Open Book*, on Sept. 8, and Jazz at Lincoln Center will revive *Leaves Of Grass*, his setting of Walt Whitman's poems, on Sept. 15–16.

"I'm an overnight success at 60-something," he said on a June day at his loft in New York's Soho neighborhood.

The book and the album represent a new degree of candor—even for an artist who has been remarkably candid for years. "I talk about closets and musical closets," Hersch said, "and I think my closet has been wide open for a very long time. I've been out about everything for 25 years now in a big way; to my friends far longer than that."

The book, hammered out over two years in collaboration with journalist David Hajdu, explores Hersch's life and times before and after his coming out—repeatedly focusing on his struggle to reconcile his identity as a gay man with that of a jazz musician at a time when disclosing the former could make it difficult to find acceptance as the latter.

"My fear for the music had kept me closeted," writes the 10-time Grammy nominee. That fear is illustrated in anecdotes ranging from the farcical (he once scrambled to hide a second toothbrush from a visiting Stan Getz, lest it reveal he had a male partner) to the disconcerting (he was told in Bradley's, the onetime Greenwich Village haunt, that the late bassist Red Mitchell had accused Hersch of coming on to him—an accusation Hersch denied).

The book also details at considerable length his battles with illness, though Hersch, on reflection, posits a kind of creative upside to them. "My whole career as a bandleader has been under the cloud of HIV, which was pretty much a death sentence for many years," he said. "I had many years of ill health. But I decided that I was just going to do what I did musically and not think about the hipness factor, or what I could do to get over, or what current trends are. It forced me to be more true to myself."

Ultimately, the worst of the health crisis—the coma—has had a liberating effect on the emotional state he brings to his playing. Though it took time and no small amount of therapy for his chops to return after he emerged from the coma and left the hospital in late summer 2008, he said, "The thing I could still do—in fact do better than ever now—was feel."

The coma also appears to have had a salutary effect on his facility at the keyboard. After the coma, Hersch explained, his always-active left hand has enjoyed greater independence from his right hand than it had in the past—enlivening his countermelodies and enriching the textures of his sonic tapestries. The neurology behind the change remains a mystery.

The changes are amply showcased on *Open Book*. The album begins with the most personal piece in the program, "The Orb," a haunting take on a dream Hersch said he recalled from his coma. In the dream—one of eight such recollections that constitute the raw material for *Coma Dreams*—the smiling, radiant face of his partner, Scott Morgan, appears in a glowing orb. Obviously inspired, Hersch draws from the piano the shimmering, round sound that has become a signature.

"It has a great significance," he said of the piece. "It's sort of a valentine to my partner."

Jobim, a longtime favorite, is represented with a treatment of "Zingaro" that eschews an overt bossa feel for a turn toward the classical. "I merged it with the same kind of feel as the last Chopin nocturne," he said.

Hersch, whose improvisations make full use of the keyboard, often evokes the sensibility of a latter-day Chopin even when he is on a more traditional jazz footing, as he is in his kinetic interpretations of Benny Golson's "Whisper Not" and Monk's "Eronel." Monk, like Jobim, is a go-to composer for Hersch, though he came late to "Eronel," having picked it up at one of his residencies at the MacDowell Colony, an artists' retreat in New Hampshire.

The album's chief revelation is "Through The Forest," a loosely structured 20-minute dive into atonal abstraction recorded live at the JCC Art Center Concert Hall in Seoul, South Korea, in November 2016. The improvisation has no precedent in Hersch's discography in terms of length, form or, perhaps, mood in which it was rendered.

"I'd overslept," he said. "I wasn't in my usual frame of mind to play a solo concert. I walked out and I saw this sea of young Korean faces and I just sat down and started improvising. I was really in this place of not editing it, or judging it or controlling it.

"They sent me a recording of it. I remembered it as being something special that I wanted to check out. And when I listened back to it with a friend I said, 'Is this crazy or is this as good as I think it is?' He said, 'This is really awesome and you should do something with this.'"

That he did. The improvisation became the album's literal centerpiece when it was slotted as the fourth of seven tracks, most of which were recorded on a three-day return trip to Seoul in April of this year. The additional tracks, he said, were laid down amid conditions as similar to those of the original concert—same hall, engineer, piano and microphone setup—as could be

arranged, sans live audience.

In its spirit of free association, the piece provides something of a window into the kind of mindset Hersch maintains in his private moments—playing for himself on his meticulously prepared Steinway grand in his fifth-floor digs far above the din of Broadway and surrounded by the fastidiously organized LPs and CDs that line his walls.

The improvisation could have import for Hersch's future solo outings. While he conceives of repertoire in terms of tunes—he is one of the few pianists to play extended solo engagements at the Village Vanguard, for which he creates a written list that is divided into slow, medium and fast pieces—he said he might be motivated to do more free playing.

"I can't re-create that moment," he said of the Seoul concert. "But there may be other moments. It gives me the courage to do it." He's booked for six solo nights at the Vanguard in November.

For all the praise lavished on his solo playing—his 2011 Palmetto album *Alone At The Vanguard*, for one, was widely lauded, garnering Grammy nominations for best instrumental jazz album and best improvised jazz solo (for "Work")—Hersch may be just as renowned for the empathy he brings to the duo format.

Notable among his recent pairings have been those with guitarists Bill Frisell and Julian Lage, which are of interest for, among other things, the ease with which they rise above the inherent challenges of merging two unaccompanied chordal instruments without a sign of turf wars. That, Lage said, owed in large part to Hersch's "all-encompassing sensitivity." (Both of those duo projects generated albums.)

Hersch's fondness for bandstand twosomes has also focused of late on clarinetists like Jane Ira Bloom, with whom he has recorded in duo, and Anat Cohen, with whom he has not, though in moving about the scene in New York the two players have occasionally experienced what Cohen called "spontaneous encounters."

That is what happened in March at the nightspot Mezzrow, where, Cohen recalled, the atmosphere was casual enough that Hersch came to the bandstand armed and ready to run through freshly minted tunes with little rehearsal.

"With Fred, we are constantly experimenting," she said. "I'm always surprised where the music is going and how in-the-moment it is."

Cohen and Hersch have in fact recorded together. He was a featured soloist on *Tightrope* (Anzic), the 2013 album by 3 Cohens, the trio Anat maintains with her brothers Yuval on soprano saxophone and Avishai on trumpet. The album includes a bewitchingly sinewy take on Hersch's "Song Without Words."

That tune could be reprised in duo format if an album documenting their joint appearance at last year's Healdsburg Jazz Festival in California comes to pass.

"The show was magical," Cohen recalled, expressing enthusiasm about the prospect, still in the talking stage, of releasing the recording.

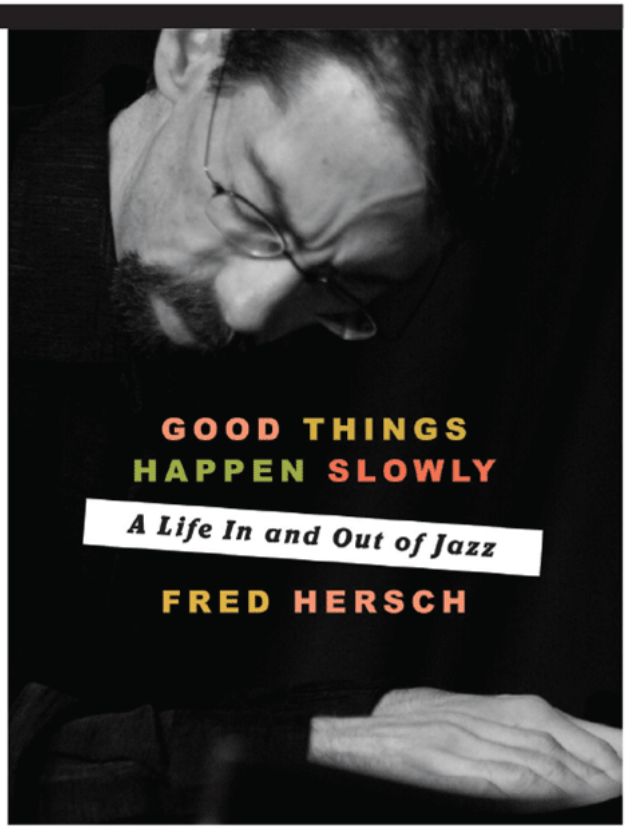
For now, Hersch is looking toward revisiting old projects that involve vocalists. Among them are his Pocket Orchestra, which features singer Jo Lawry, and *Leaves Of Grass*, with singers Kate McGarry and Kurt Elling interpreting his settings of Whitman.

Beyond these projects, Hersch said he has new music he wrote at MacDowell that he'd like to document with his long-standing trio of John Hébert on bass and Eric McPherson on drums. With his health relatively good and a full schedule of performances on tap—he and Cohen will hook up in 2018 for duo concerts in the Western states—new chapters in his life story will be written.

"The catharsis of doing a book is not going to freeze me in a time capsule," he said. "There's going to be more that's going to develop as things go on. I'm always looking for the next thing." **DB**

Jazz Epiphany

In this excerpt from Fred Hersch's forthcoming memoir, *Good Things Happen Slowly: A Life In and Out of Jazz* (Crown Archetype), the pianist recalls his introduction to jazz.



I had my jazz epiphany on wintery night near the end of 1973. I had recently returned to my hometown of Cincinnati after one term at Grinnell College. There was a small club in town called the Family Owl, and I went in expecting to catch some bluegrass in the basement. At the entrance I noticed a sign that said "Live Jazz Upstairs." On a whim, I climbed the stairs to the second floor, where a local saxophone quartet was playing.

The leader was a tenor saxophonist named Jimmy McGary, a fiery little man in his forties with a reddish-gray beard. He was a strong player with a full tone and a hard-swinging feel. The bassist was a wiry guy of indeterminate age named Bud Hunt—a solid player not quite on McGary's level. The drummer was a hulking, mad-looking bear of a man named Grover Mooney. He played in the mode I would later associate with Elvin Jones, with a kind of rolling approach to time. The pianist, who didn't make much of an impression on me, was playing a Fender Rhodes.

There was no sheet music on the stage. The musicians seemed to be creating the music out of thin air. I was mesmerized.

On the break at the end of the set, I worked up my courage, went up to McGary, and asked if I could sit in. He said, "Know any tunes?"

I said, "I think I can play 'Autumn Leaves.'" McGary nodded, and when it was time to start the second set, he waved me on. I took a seat at the Rhodes, trying to look casual about it, and played "Autumn Leaves." Actually, I overplayed it and messed up the form without knowing it. Adrenaline rushing, I went back to the bar.

After the set, McGary came up to me and said, "Come with me, kid." He brought me to a small break room in the back of the club. There was a table in the corner that held a portable record player and a few LPs stacked next to it. Jimmy lit a joint and passed it over to me. While I was taking my hit, he put the record on the turntable. "Now listen to this," he said. "Don't talk—just listen."

The LP was *Ellington At Newport*, the live recording of Duke Ellington and His Orchestra at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival. Jimmy picked up the tone arm and dropped the needle on the second track of the second side: "Diminuendo And Crescendo In Blue," the number that made the performance a sensation, with 26 improvised choruses by the tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves. The energy was extraordinary, building with every chorus Gonsalves played. People were hooting and hollering like it was a rock concert. It was absolute hysteria. But beneath it all you could hear the fabric holding it all together, the shared sense of swing rhythm that brought the musicians together—the basic rhythm of jazz. At the end, Jimmy picked up the needle and looked me in the eye. "That's *time*," he said.

"Now, you have to have *time*. And you have to know some tunes. So, as soon as you've done some listening and you've worked on your time and you know some tunes, you can come back and play."

Later that week, I went to Mole's Record Exchange, a cluttered store in the university area that sold used albums for a buck or two. I rifled through the jazz bins, working my way from A to Z, and bought every album that had a version of "Autumn Leaves" on it: records by Miles Davis, Ahmad Jamal, Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Erroll Garner, Stan Getz, Chet Baker, Cannonball Adderley—more than a dozen. I brought the pile home and played each version of the tune, skipping all the other tracks. Then I played them all again, one by one. It was a revelation. Some were subtle, some virtuosic, some brisk, some meditative. Each version was unique, and all of them were all great.

It struck me: In jazz it's individuality, not adherence to a standardized conception of excellence, that matters most. Difference *matters*—in fact, it's an asset, rather than a liability. There is no describing how exhilarating this epiphany was for me, as a person who always felt different from other people.