



He's back to playing like Fred Hersch

'There's a power to music that's beyond notes and grooves,' says the acclaimed jazz pianist and composer

By MORDECAI SPECKTOR

In his exemplary 2017 memoir, *Good Things Happen Slowly: A Life In and Out of Jazz*, acclaimed pianist and composer Fred Hersch writes about his early life in Cincinnati, his musical career, and discusses his near death experience: in 2008, a case of septic shock put him in a coma for two months.

Hersch, who will turn 64 this month, describes his health crisis in graphic detail — it's not for the squeamish reader. He was in a coma for about a month, he relates, when his companion, Scott, asked the physician, Dr. Astiz, about when a change in his medical status could be expected.

The doctor replied, "In a case like this, good things happen slowly. But bad things happen fast."

Hersch came out of the coma and began a long period of rehab. He received physical therapy at an outpatient facility near his home in New York's SoHo district. He had tried to play piano previously at another rehab place, a "demoralizing experience." Then he tried again at home: "I did better than I had at the rehab center, but I was no Fred Hersch."

Fortunately for jazz fans, Fred Hersch has recovered and is once again a dazzling pianist. His talent will be on display Oct. 16, when he plays a duo show with guitar ace Julian Lage at the Dakota in Minneapolis.

Hersch recently talked with the Jewish World. He was at the MacDowell Colony, a retreat for musicians, visual artists, writers, etc., in New Hampshire.

"I'm working on composing some material for my next album — I'm not sure what that will be," he commented, regarding his ninth residency at the haven for artists. "I'm just trying to write."

Over the past two years, Hersch said that he hasn't had much time for composing. He's been on the road performing, and also had "a couple of hip replacements" and some other health problems that put his songwriting on the back burner. So, a month at the MacDowell Colony "is just about me jumpstarting my composition process again."

I've been a fan of Hersch's music — his trio, duo and solo recordings — for many years, but have never seen him play live. I wondered if he'd played the Dakota before, and he mentioned a date "many, many years ago." It was a duo with the singer Janis Siegel, who's best known as a member of the jazz vocal group Manhattan Transfer. The gig, sometime in the 1980s, was at the old Dakota space in St. Paul's Bandana Square.

"It's almost like I never played there," Hersch noted. In any case, he hasn't played the new joint on Nicollet Mall.

And Hersch did recall playing a show at Orchestra Hall, which took place after a symphony concert. "They had a late-night recital series and I played a solo concert."

On Oct. 16, Hersch will play in a duo with Julian Lage, who is a true veteran of the jazz world at the age of 31. In 2013, Hersch and Lage released an album, *Free Flying*, which is mainly Hersch compositions.

Asked how this musical pairing originated, Hersch explained that every

May for the past 13 years he performs a duo series at the Jazz Standard in New York City. "I do a week, which I call my 'invitation series.' It started out as, and it still is... six nights, six different duo partners."

Hersch said that he met Lage in Boston, around 2011, and the guitarist asked if he could take a composition lesson from him. "He came over and brought his guitar and we played; and the next year I invited him to play with me at the Standard, and we just hit it off. It was really fun."

Then Hersch and Lage went into the studio to record an album; "and it didn't really work... no blame or anything, it just didn't work." So, Hersch booked three nights at a small New York club called Kitano. "They had a nice piano, and I said, 'Can we do a live recording there?'"

So that's where *Free Flying* came from." Since then, Hersch said that he and Lage "try to find time to do these duo gigs." In addition to the Dakota show, they will play Grand Rapids, Mich., and at the Logan Center at the University of Chicago.

"It's kind of an ongoing special project," Hersch remarked, regarding the duo shows with Lage. "I did the same thing with [Israeli-born clarinetist] Anat Cohen. I invited her to the Standard, we ended up doing a live album [*Live in Healdsburg* in 2018],

and occasionally played together on the road. Same thing with [bassist and vocalist] Esperanza Spalding, same thing with [vocalist] Cécile McLorin Salvant. [Alto saxophonist] Miguel Zenón is another one."

Getting back to Lage, Hersch said, "Julian is a total pleasure on every level, personally, musically. He's a really talented guy and fun to be around."

I recall seeing Lage play with Gary Burton's group about 10 years ago, headlining the Twin Cities Jazz Festival

has been prolific as a recording artist. His most recent album is *Begin Again* (Palmetto Records), which features Hersch playing his own compositions backed by the Cologne, Germany-based WDR Big Band, arranged and conducted by Vince Mendoza. Hersch said that, in addition to the album, he played several European concerts with the WDR Big Band.

"It turned out to be a very nice survey of different kinds of things that I've written over the past 35 years," Hersch commented about the album. "There's not a lot of super-punchy, typical big band stuff — it's much more orchestral, which kind of suits what I do. I think it was a very successful project."

And a brief profile of one of the most intriguing figures in contemporary jazz should mention that Hersch, as he writes in his memoir, came out of the closet in 1993, and also disclosed that he'd been treated for AIDS since 1984. In the intervening years, Hersch has performed on benefit recordings for groups including Classical Action: Performing Arts Against AIDS and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. He also has been a keynote speaker at medical conferences in the U.S. and Europe.

On a related tangent, Hersch also is a jazz educator who has taught at New England Conservatory, The Juilliard School, The New School and The Manhattan School of Music. According to the bio on his website, he currently is a visiting artist at Rutgers University.

Like Julian Lage, who requested a composition tutorial, prominent jazz pianists like Brad Mehldau, Ethan Iverson and Jason Moran have studied

with Hersch.

I'm not a scholar of music theory — it's hard to verbalize what it is about a musical performance that truly moves me — so I asked another one of Hersch's piano students about what makes this artist so special.

In response to an email query, Adam Birnbaum, a respected jazz pianist and composer who recently was hired as an assistant professor of jazz studies at Purchase College, State University of New York, replied, "I'd be happy to contribute, as Fred has been a big influence on me and one of my most influential mentors. Fred's basic approach to teaching is to help you find ways to push boundaries, break rules and learn to trust your own internal instincts as you find your own voice as a jazz artist. He is also probably the greatest living practitioner of improvised counterpoint in the jazz world, and his ability to demonstrate how to practice improvising in two, three or four voices was truly revelatory for me in my own development."

This stuff quickly gets beyond my understanding; however, Fred Hersch is one of the great storytellers in the jazz scene. He explained his accessible approach in an interview with Leo Sidran, on the Third Story podcast, earlier this year.

"There's a power to music that's beyond notes and grooves," Hersch said. "You want to challenge an audience, but you also want to take them with you... People can basically hear what I'm doing. I don't think it's stupid — it's not stupid; but I've got to trust that that audience is going to hear that phrase and then they're going to go with me on my little journey... I want to take them with me; I don't want to hit them over the head or impress them."

Fred Hersch and Julian Lage will perform in concert 7 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 16 at the Dakota, 1010 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis. For tickets, go to: dakotacooks.com or call 612-332-5299.



Vincent Soyezy

Fred Hersch (above) will make his virtual Dakota debut Oct. 16, in a duo concert with guitarist Julian Lage.

in St. Paul. He was about 21 at the time — a relative youngster playing next to one of the legendary vibraphonists in jazz. A short film, *Jules at Eight*, which documents the guitar chops Lage had as a young child, was nominated for an Oscar.

"He was a certified prodigy," Hersch testified.

Despite his health problems, Hersch

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Fred Hersch & Julian Lage
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