Fred Hersch Bio

As of 2.1.25

A member of jazz’s piano pantheon, Fred Hersch has been an influential creative force over more than three decades as an improviser, composer, educator, bandleader, collaborator, and recording artist. He has been proclaimed “the most arrestingly innovative pianist in jazz over the last decade” by *Vanity Fair* and “a living legend” by *The New Yorker.* A seventeen-time Grammy nominee, Hersch has garnered jazz’s most prestigious awards, including a Doris Duke Artist (2016), Jazz Pianist of the Year from the Jazz Journalists Association (2011, 2016, 2018), and the *Jazz Magazine* (France) International Artist of the Year (2021). The Fred Hersch Trio was voted the #1 Jazz Group in the 2019 *DownBeat* Critics Poll.

An acclaimed and influential solo pianist, he has twelve solo recordings in his catalog including the 2024 release, *Silent, Listening* which is a collaboration with legendary producer Manfred Eicher for the ECM label. *All About Jazz* has remarked that “when it comes to the art of solo piano in jazz, there are two classes of performers: Fred Hersch and everybody else” and *The New York Times* simply calls him “a master who plays it his way”.

Through more than twelve albums, the Fred Hersch Triohas remained at the pinnacle of modern jazz, venerated as the epitome of thrilling interplay and dynamic spontaneity. The *Wall Street Journal* calls the trio “one of the major ensembles of our time,” while *The New Yorker* has applauded it for playing with “high lyricism and high danger.” They were named the #1 Jazz Group of the Year by *DownBeat* magazine. and appeared at major jazz festivals throughout Europe and the US and have regularly headlined at the legendary Village Vanguard since 1997. His next trio album for ECM Records, *The Surrounding Green* with Drew Gress and Joey Baron, will be released in June of 2025.

Hersch has more than sixty albums to his credit as leader or co-leader. His 2022 *Breath By Breath* features him playing his own compositions inspired by his insight meditation practice with his trio and with the Crosby Street String Quartet. A 2022 duo project with Italian trumpet maestro Enrico Rava, *The Song Is You* (ECM), was followed by the 2023 release of *Alive at the Village Vanguard,* a duo with dazzling jazz vocalist esperanza spalding that was named a 2023 Top Ten Jazz Album by *DownBeat* and was nominated for two 2024 Grammy Awards. His last album with his long-standing trio, 2018’s *Live in Europe* (Palmetto), documents one remarkable evening in Brussels and has been hailed as its best to date.

An exceptionally responsive and intuitive collaborator, Hersch has engaged in duo partnerships with a number of spirited artists, including clarinetist Anat Cohen; guitarists Bill Frisell, Gilad Hekselman and Julian Lage; saxophonists Chris Potter, Joe Lovano and Miguel Zenon; trumpeters Avishai Cohen and Enrico Rava; and vocalists Kurt Elling, esperanza spalding, Kate McGarry, Audra McDonald, Cécile McLorin Salvant, and Renée Fleming. His many sideman credits include Joe Henderson, Art Farmer, Stan Getz, Charlie Haden, Toots Thielemans and other jazz legends.

Hersch’s memoir, *Good Things Happen Slowly* (Crown Archetype), compellingly reveals the story of his life in music along with a frank recounting of his health struggles and triumphs as the first openly gay, HIV-positive jazz musician. The book was named one of 2017’s Five Best Memoirs by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, and acclaimed as 2018’s Book on Jazz of the Year by the JJA. His story has also been told in a feature documentary by filmmakers Carrie Lozano and Charlotte Lagarde, *The Ballad of Fred Hersch,* which premiered to a sold-out house at the Full Frame Film Festival in 2016 and is now streaming. His acclaimed jazz/theater piece *My Coma Dreams*, created with librettist/director Herschel Garfein for actor/singer, eleven musicians and immersive video, premiered in 2011 and is also available online.

While widely renowned for his playing, Hersch has earned similar distinction with his composing, garnering a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition, among other awards. His large-scale setting of Walt Whitman’s poetry for two voices and instrumental octet, *Leaves of Grass,* was selected to open the 2017 Jazz at Lincoln Center season at the Appel Room. He has received commissions from Roomful of Teeth, Igor Levit, the Lucerne Festival, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, the Doris Duke Millennium Fund, and the Gilmore Keyboard Festival. He has been awarded ten composition residencies at MacDowell and one at Bellagio.

HIV-positive for almost four decades, Hersch has been a passionate spokesman and fundraiser for AIDS services and education agencies. He has produced and performed on four benefit recordings and in numerous concerts for charities; to date, his efforts have raised more than $300,000. He has also been a keynote speaker and performer at international medical conferences in the U.S. and Europe. In 2020 he raised $50,000 for the Jazz Foundation of America with a live duo EP with vocalist esperanza spalding and *Eight x 88,* a streaming event featuring eight of New York’s greatest jazz pianists in solo and duo formats.

A committed educator, Hersch has taught at New England Conservatory, the Juilliard School, the New School, Rutgers University and the Manhattan School of Music and has given master classes around the world. Hersch’s influence has been widely felt on a new generation of jazz pianists, from former students Brad Mehldau, Sullivan Fortner, Dan Tepfer and Ethan Iverson to his friend and piano colleague Jason Moran, who has said, “Fred at the piano is like LeBron James on the basketball court. He’s perfection.”

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