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JAZZ PIANO MASTER

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A MUSIC PLAYER PUBLICATION

FRED HERSCH

*“I feel like this particular set is my best trio work to date,” says jazz pianist and composer Fred Hersch, referring to his new double album *Alive at the Vanguard*. “It’s a thrill to work with musicians who bring a sense of danger and respect to the bandstand.”*

On Success, Survival, and the Search for a Singular Sound

BY JON REGEN

DANGER AND RESPECT MIGHT SEEM LIKE OPPOSITES, but they’ve been key ingredients in Hersch’s career for the better part of three decades. From his myriad of recordings and performances in nearly every conceivable musical format, to his acclaimed work as a teacher, to his battle with AIDS and the two-month coma he suffered in 2008 (artfully documented in his mixed-media piece “My Coma Dreams”), Hersch has proven time and again that he’s a ferocious fighter both on and off the stage.

With the release of *Alive*, the five-time Grammy-nominated Hersch returns to New York’s famed Village Vanguard for a celebration of the art of musical surprise. With elastic support from bandmates John Hébert on bass and Eric McPherson on drums, Hersch delights on a varied set of cunning originals and standards. *Alive* finds Hersch at once challenging and reaffirming the power and possibility of the jazz piano trio.





MARK NISKANEN



There's a striking amount of interplay on the new record. How did you put this particular band together?

Well, I've always had pretty interactive trios—going back to my first one with Marc Johnson and Joey Baron, and my longest running trio with Tom Rainey and Drew Gress, and later Drew and Nasheet Waits. I always loved John Hébert's playing. But just like Drew Gress, I wanted a bass player who *really* knew harmony and who had done their homework, because I do care about chords. A lot of bass players can get away with playing ostinatos and odd time signatures, but they don't actually know nuts-and-bolts harmony very well. I'm surprised, actually—I've played with some young bassists, and when I played an *obvious* substitute chord, they missed it. It's like if it's not on the page or in *The Real Book*, it doesn't exist.

There's an elegance and clarity about Eric McPherson's drumming that I really appreciate. When we first rehearse a tune, he'll record it, take it home, and really think about ways to come up with something unique. That happened on our studio CD *Whirl* with the song "You're My Everything." My instruction to Eric was, "Poinciana, but not!" [*Poinciana* is a jazz classic popularized by pianist Ahmad Jamal. —Ed.] I wanted the backbeat that Vernel Fournier played on that tune, but I didn't want to rip it off. So Eric came back with a very unique beat where instead of drumsticks, he used these weird implements. He's just that kind of drummer.

Unlike many live shows where the "show" part eclipses the music, there was a tremendous amount of humility on the bandstand.

You've seen me play—I mean, I close my eyes 95 percent of the time. I'm reasonably self-effacing, and I just make a couple of comments to the audience about the tunes and how I or whoever else wrote them. But once we start playing, I'm really just *music*. I don't need to look at the band, except for the odd cue now and then. Occasionally I will look up at Eric or John and have a little friendly contact, but we're really just all about playing the music that's in front of us. Not that we don't experiment—I *welcome* input from my band. Sometimes they'll drop out unscripted, or do things they've never done on a tune we've played a lot. I like to be surprised.

The night I heard the trio, the Village Vanguard was filled to the rafters on a weeknight. Does that make you feel that

even in this age of reality TV, people respond to heartfelt music?

Yes. I joke about being an overnight success at age 56, but it *can* be done, and I've always stuck with that. There are a lot of pianists out there, including some young ones who are real fire-breathers technically and very sophisticated in their musical language. I admire them—sometimes I think it's too much, or it needs more seasoning, but I check people out all the time. That's why I live in New York City. I still



*If music is played by "hip cats" playing hip s*** for the other 3,000 or so hip cats in the world, it becomes insular.*

have the same values about music that I have always had. I played with Joe Henderson for ten years, and in that time, we probably played the same ten tunes. But every night, it was new. Some nights, Joe would start his sax solo and I'd think to myself, "Okay, I've heard that before. It's Joe Henderson 101." But at a certain point, he'd launch out and it was like, "Wow." I'd be trying to follow him. Joe and his bass player Sam

Jones had a huge influence on my playing. Sam was a master rhythm bass player who taught me about swing time in a very deep way. Point being, they were great technicians, but it was always in service of communication.

The way you, John, and Eric interact on *Alive* reminds me of Bill Evans' classic trio, where the rhythm section seemingly plays everything but what you expect them to. . . .

Yeah. John Hébert doesn't just hold down the fort, so to speak. He's constantly adding something to the mix, but he can "walk it down" when called for. I've been thrown in the "Bill Evans bin" more times than I can think of, and I certainly take a lot from the spirit of his early trio, and I'm not alone. But I play nothing like him at all. People see a white guy who plays ballads in a trio and Bill Evans is the first thing they compare you to. They stuffed Brad Mehldau and Keith Jarrett into that bag. It's not offensive, like being compared to Yanni or something, but it's just not accurate.

Someone once said, "Jazz is the sound of surprise." If that isn't happening, I can stay home. I don't just want to hear a pre-arranged jazz show. I want *danger*. And this trio to me has the requisite amount of danger, and at the same time, the requisite amount of respect and depth, in equal parts.

Jazz tunes can sometimes descend into what seem like rapid-fire technical exercises, but your songs resonate with fans of all kinds of music. Why do you suppose that is?

If music is played by "hip cats" playing hip s*** for the other 3,000 or so hip cats in the world, it becomes insular. A lot of new jazz compositions have pages and pages of shifting meters and other technically challenging things, but I still believe in *song form*. Each tune I write needs to be *about* something. It should be about a rhythm, or a feeling, or a melodic idea. A lot of jazz tunes I hear have chords and a melody, but they don't really seem to have a *payoff*. They don't ever really get "off the page."

Do lyrics help with that?

I *love* words. Norma Winstone has written fantastic words to a bunch of my songs. There's a tune of mine I often do as an encore called "Valentine" that I wrote in 20 minutes and then sent to Norma in London. She usually takes her time writing lyrics, but for this one, she sent them back to me a few days later. And she

said, “The funniest thing happened—I wrote these lyrics in 20 minutes!” We were completely on the same page. Now, when I play that tune instrumentally, I hear her words. “American Songbook,” or whatever you want to call that tradition, is *very* deep.

As a teacher, how do you help students find their own musical identities?

When I teach, the first thing I work on with anybody—even advanced professionals—is *sound*. How you get a sound, where it comes from, how to play from your center to the periphery and not get hung up in your fingers. If you look at the way drummers play, they’re constantly shifting their weight. They sit on a seat that swivels—on purpose! So I try to get my students to approach the piano bench more in that way. It’s about helping them find that sweet spot in terms of the mechanics of producing sound. That’s what I think gives me my own identity.

Can you give us an example of this “mechanics of producing sound”?

If you look at Herbie Hancock’s eighth-note versus Chick Corea’s eighth-note, Chick’s is much *thinner*, probably owing to his background in Latin music, as well as being influenced by early McCoy Tyner, as far as I can tell. Herbie’s a much fatter sound, and I hear his antecedents as Wynton Kelly and Bill Evans. So just like a drummer can tell from hearing someone play a ride cymbal, “Oh, that’s Tony Williams,” or “Oh, that’s Billy Higgins,” it’s a rhythmic signature. So the way I play eighth-notes—whether I’m playing a rubato ballad or straight time—it helps create my personal sound.

So, what are the mechanics or physics of your sound?

For me, the key has to do with posture at the piano. Instead of leaning backwards, I put my left foot back, almost on the ball of my foot, and that brings me forward so that I’m over the keyboard. Then when I go up to the top of the keyboard, my left foot *pushes* me up there. When I go down it balances me. The point is always to be adjusting to the keyboard, because it can’t adjust to you. I use the principles

developed by Abby Whiteside, through my own teacher of 30 years, Sophia Rosoff.

Were there particular piano players that sparked your investigation into tonality?

The first was Duke Ellington. You can listen to a Duke Ellington recording from the 1930s or ’50s—one in mono and the other in stereo—and he always had the same sound. The second was Ahmad Jamal’s early trio. His clarity and the way he used the upper register of the piano really inspired me. Earl Hines is also huge. His playing is about as “out” as anybody’s, but the way he can mess with the time and always come back to the right place is remarkable. Paul Bley was a big influence as well.

There are a number of musical dedications on the new album. Is that simply to pay homage, or does it also serve your creative process?

For me, it’s just sort of a way *in* to writing a tune. That’s all. The title track of my album *Whirl* was written for the ballerina Suzanne Farrell. Another tune of mine called “Miss B” was written for my partner’s dog. I’ve written tunes for everyone from Bill Frisell to Lee Konitz and others. I never want them to sound imitative, but I want to capture something about that person’s *spirit* in the music I write. “Sad Poet,” the tune I wrote for Antonio Carlos Jobim, doesn’t sound like him, but there’s something of his vibe there, especially in the way we play the time.

What would you tell jazz musicians who have trouble making the leap from playing standards to writing originals?

I started writing late in my career. Growing up in Cincinnati, you had to know a lot of tunes. I avoided writing because I thought to myself, “I’m never going to write anything as good as Monk or Billy Strayhorn or Wayne Shorter, so why bother?” Later, when I was working with Art Farmer and Sam Jones, they both said, “You should write!” So I started giving myself assignments. I said to myself, “I’m going to write a 32-bar ballad in the style of Billy Strayhorn.” Or, “I’m going to write a post-bebop tune in the style of Sam Jones and Oscar Pettiford.” It was just a way out of thinking, “Oh my God, what am

I going to write?” Over the years, my tunes have taken all kinds of twists and turns.

It often sounds as if there’s a continuous conversation going on between your hands. Who inspired your sense of inner motion and counter melody?

Bach, Bach, and more Bach. I have recordings of my playing way back when I was 18 or so, and I was using my left hand a lot even then. I just honestly felt like, “Okay, we have two hands, and only the piano can really *do* this,” that is, allow contrary motion from one end of the instrument to the other. So I felt like, “Why not?” Two things have been ingrained in everything I do. The first is that in Cincinnati, I studied piano with the wife of the cellist of the LaSalle String Quartet. So from a very young age, I listened to a lot of string quartets. The second is that from third to around eighth grade, I studied theory with a composer who was getting his doctorate. For both those reasons, the majority of the way I play traces back to my use of *four* voices.

Can you shed some light on this approach to harmony?

Sure. The only books I ask my students to buy are the Charlie Parker *Omnibook*, so that he or she learns how to shape those classic bebop “heads” in a relaxed and sparkly way, and the book of harmonized Bach chorales. I have them play one a day, and there are 371 of them. The chorales teach you how to pass notes between different fingers, and to me, they’re the Bible of voice leading. By contrast, the standard jazz method is to learn voicings first and then learn lines—which are based on scales that relate to the voicings. Often, this reduces pianists’ left hands to what I call “the claw,” which is just this stupid stabbing formation.

Now, I may do that myself at fast tempos, but I’m very *aware* of what I’m playing down there. I don’t want to put my right hand in a box because of what my left hand is doing. So what I try to do is build things up from the *bottom*—from the roots with that clear four-voice structure. Then, when you add higher degrees of harmony, it has a solid foundation. Even when I improvise freely, many times it’s using just four voices.



Videos of Fred Hersch’s performances.

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In one way it means that I don't play a lot of ultra-modern, extended harmony. But I find continual fascination in *conventional* harmony. I'm constantly saying things like, "Okay, you have four bars and you have to go from here to there. What are ten ways you can get there?"

Did you play a lot of classical music as a young student?

Yeah, but I knew from the age of about 13 that I wasn't going down that path. I didn't really have the kind of discipline or hunger to tackle big romantic pieces or Chopin études. So I spent most of high school playing James Taylor and Joni Mitchell and Stevie Wonder tunes by ear, playing in shows, playing violin, and singing in musicals. Later, I got bitten by the jazz bug and ended up in Cincinnati where I was lucky enough to learn in the greatest way possible: on the bandstand.

How do you approach practicing?

I set a timer for 20 minutes or more. I'll play a tune, and I'll keep stretching it—pushing it, modulating if I get bored, but I don't stop

until the buzzer rings. Then I'll give myself ten minutes to check email or have a coffee. Then I'll go back for another 20 minutes and I'll do something else.

Often, I see young musicians getting overwhelmed by what they don't know. It's like going to the gym and worrying about the other 68 machines you're *not* doing. You have to do the one you're doing if you want to get anything out of it. You have to be *present*. When I first got into meditation, I realized I'd actually been doing it my whole life, just on the piano bench. It's an active meditation—I'm focused on sound and how things feel, and when lapses of concentration come across my screen, I'm very quick to get back to sound and rhythm.

Your playing is marked by a continuous sense of challenging musical convention at every possible opportunity. How conscious is that?

Well, if I'm playing on the edge—phrase to phrase, honestly trying to improvise, then a listener who can follow along will hopefully be interested. The musicians who are my heroes are the ones who still practice. Like Sonny Rollins,

who's still trying to get better. I look to those guys for inspiration. That's something—to be 70 or 80 and still be vital and challenging yourself. To be a seeker. I think the job of an artist in society is to make things. I want to keep making things, and hopefully by now, I've earned enough trust that people will come along with me.

The thing is, I was in a coma for two months in 2008 and I nearly died. I couldn't eat for eight months and I couldn't even *think* of playing piano. I weighed 106 pounds and all kinds of terrible things happened to me. Fortunately, my technical facility came back—in some ways even better than before. In fact, my general health is better now than it's been in 15 years. I've been dealing with HIV and AIDS for more than a quarter-century, so I've always had that cloud hanging over me. But after coming out of all that, I think I'm playing much *looser* than ever. My perspective has changed. If I play a chord I don't like, nobody will die—I've been *there*. I'm not advising anybody to have a near-death experience to get better at his or her art, nor is it necessary, but something in me just gave and a certain amount of freedom just happened. I'm a very lucky guy. 🎵

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