



FRED HERSCH

# Don't Turn Out The Stars

Text and Photography by Michael Jackson

There is a scene in David Lean's 1965 epic movie *Dr. Zhivago* when Omar Sharif stares at snowflakes on a window of the icebound dacha he will later escape to with Julie Christie. The image comes to mind while listening to Fred Hersch's tune "Snow Is Falling . . .," which the pianist composed at the Pennsylvania woods getaway he shares with his life partner, Scott Morgan. Not only is Hersch's piano touch crystalline on the piece—which is included on his recent album *Whirl* (Palmetto)—but so is the thinking behind it. Although all the tracks on *Whirl* have the perfectly balanced formation of a Louis Sullivan architectural motif or a honeycombing confection of mother nature's snowflakes, beyond his compositional conceits Hersch improvises from moment to moment.

"My music can be programmatic, have strong associations," Hersch says. "'Skipping' from *Whirl*, for example, is about just that act, just as the title track derives from my impressions of dancer Suzanne Farrell. But it's not overly worked out. I play phrase to phrase, let one voice lead to another, and before long I've played a chorus."

The ingenious communication between right and left hand in Hersch's playing is deceptively sophisticated, and since he does not give off a bombastic performance style with excess body movement, some may sleep on the brilliance of his conceptions.

Hersch's discography runs past 100 titles at this point, with three of his own works Grammy nominated. The consistency and variety of his output reveal a driven artist with a singular vision that can be traced back to the very beginnings of his career.

Originally from Cincinnati, Hersch studied at Grinnell College in Iowa for a semester (the same school Herbie Hancock, one of Hersch's acknowledged influences, attended) and later attended the New England Conservatory during a storied phase when Jaki Byard and Gunther Schuller were on faculty. But he wasn't one to dwell in academia (despite his later reputation as a mentor), and Hersch moved to New York's Greenwich Village a week after graduating NEC in 1977. He hung out from day one at Bradley's, the intimate jazz spot run by Bradley Cunningham on University Place, eventually securing a week's duo residency there, for which he hired legendary bassist Sam Jones. "I was the first young cat who played there," Hersch remembers. "Sam recommended me to Art Farmer, then I did a forgettable record date with Art and Joe Henderson, and then Joe hired me." Hersch re-

fers to his years backing Henderson whenever the tenor giant was in New York (between 1980 and 1990) as his "graduate school." Once he became established with that association, "The real gigs started rolling in," he says.

Hersch had the wherewithal to involve himself proactively with important progenitors of the music in his formative years, spurred perhaps during lessons and hang sessions with the idiosyncratic piano master Byard at NEC. Hersch pays tribute to Byard with a rendition of the latter's jaunty blues "Mrs. Parker of K.C." on *Whirl* and credits Byard with helping him see the possibilities of solo pianism. Eventually Hersch superseded Byard's teaching post at NEC, where he has taught during three separate periods, up to the present. "I was stepping into big shoes when I replaced him," says Hersch, still relatively young for a veteran at 55. "He was great fun to be with, a wonderful musician and a positive guy. He got me into the older stride pianists, and sometimes I would play in his Apollo Stompers big band while he conducted and played sax."

Hersch credits Farmer for his taste, discerning setlists (including music from Tom MacIntosh, Paul Bley and Billy Strayhorn) and subtle arranging touches—and also for encouraging him to compose. Henderson was laconic but once advised Hersch when he solicited approval for his sporadic habit of laying out during the set: "If you feel it, that's probably right; if you 'think' it, it probably isn't right."

Despite a wealth of sideman experience—encompassing stints with Toots Thielemans, Jane Ira Bloom, Stan Getz, Billy Harper and Gary Burton, plus accompanying singers such as Norma Winstone, Janis Siegel, Luciana Souza and Nancy King (respective recordings with the latter three

receiving Grammy nominations in 1989, 2003 and 2006)—a crucial element in Hersch's oeuvre has been solo play, for which he has become renowned. Perhaps second in number only to Keith Jarrett, Hersch has many solo piano releases to his credit, including tributes to Thelonious Monk, Johnny Mandel and Antonio Carlos Jobim and a couple of superb live sets: one at NEC's Jordan Hall (Nonesuch, 1999), another at Amsterdam's Bimhuis (Palmetto, 2006).

Not unlike one of his classical heroes, Glenn Gould, whom he describes as "intermittently brilliant and frustrating," Hersch houses an innate self-sustaining momentum in his playing, as well as an expansive imagination that manifests without undue force. As Gould insisted that art is not a "momentary ejection of adrenaline" but "the gradual lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity," so Hersch commented in *Let Yourself Go*, a recent film about his life directed by Katja Duregger, that if jazz closes in on itself and becomes overly self-referential, it loses its substance: "Jazz can be hip guys playing hip music for other hip guys, and that doesn't work, except for the four thousand hip guys around the world. If you want it to have something to do with life, you have to understand what life is."

These words carry added import for a man whose own existence was held in the balance recently. Hersch, who came out about having contracted AIDS in 1985, experienced a nasty bout with pneumonia in 2008 that forced him into an induced coma for two months and brought him close to death. The dreams Hersch experienced while in his coma are the source for a major new work from the composer, with a multi-media presentation set to debut in May 2011 at the Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, N.J.

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Hersch's recovery from the coma was far from instantaneous. "I was totally helpless, couldn't eat anything for eight months, couldn't speak for quite a while since one of my vocal chords was paralyzed by a feeding tube," he said. "I had to undergo extensive physical therapy before I could play—or even walk—again."

Remarkably, Hersch, who managed to overcome an earlier bout with dementia related to his disease, made a full recovery from his pneumonia nightmare. He continues to battle the HIV virus with a monumental diet of pills that he takes with unerring regularity. In the meantime, in tandem with Morgan, he continues as an activist and money-raiser for AIDS awareness and related causes.

Due to the trepidations of his condition, though under control due to effective meds, Hersch claims he doesn't tour internationally as extensively as he might. But he has played almost all the states in the U.S. and has a steady relationship with two top jazz clubs in his hometown, the Jazz Standard and the Village Vanguard.

This spring, DownBeat caught up with Hersch's latest trio at the short-lived Bluejazz club in Chicago. Drummer Eric McPherson, who has taken over Nasheet Waits' chair in the group, and bassist John Hébert proved acutely attentive to the pianist's peregrinations. Hersch's Bluejazz set included, as it nearly always does, a Monk tune ("I Mean You") and

land's ICP Orchestra or even Spike Jones, and after all, this is a pianist who appreciates the playfulness of Monk. "Stuttering" from *Fred Hersch Pocket Orchestra Live At The Jazz Standard* (Sunnyside, 2009)—featuring his quartet with Alessi, singer Jo Lawry and percussionist Richie Barshay—could be interpreted as an updating of Monk's clanky, unapologetic metric dicings and free-ranging aesthetic.

Not to overlook a happy partnership with the Jazz Standard (where he selected the piano and has launched his more innovative aggregations, including several high-wire duo invitation series), Hersch has a special relationship with the Vanguard, evidenced by three weeklong bookings there this year alone (in January, July and December). "I was the first pianist booked to play solo there for a whole week," Hersch states with understandable pride.

Bassist Hébert was delighted to accompany him in the hallowed room. "Some of the best moments for me with Fred were during two weeks at the Vanguard, both trio weeks, one with Eric McPherson and the other with Billy Hart," Hébert says. "Standing so close to Fred, nearly playing acoustically, I was able to really hear his touch. Even at his weakest, not having played the piano in weeks, he is able to draw a sound out of the piano that is unique to him.

"There are so many pianists who can 'play' the instrument, but not many who can get a sound out of it, on whatever piano is available, like Fred," Hébert continues. "It goes beyond the great content of what he plays. It is that *sound* I am attracted to. Lush and beautiful, seemingly effortless."

some Wayne Shorter, in this case "Black Nile" and Hersch's original "Still Here," written with Shorter in mind but now vested with pertinence to Hersch's own survival. Ballads, unsurprisingly, were in abundance, including "The Man I Love" and Hersch's "Close Of The Day," which he composed as part of his expanded work in celebration of Walt Whitman, *Leaves Of Grass* (Palmetto, 2005), plus "Sad Poet," his paean to Jobim. More surprising was a rambunctious take on Ornette Coleman's "Forerunner," plus a conflation of "Lonely Woman" and Bill Evans' favorite set-closer, "Nardis."

Hersch has drawn from a deep well of repertoire over the years. A self-confessed tune freak, he is as likely to take inspiration from the ideas of horn players as pianists. He played a set of tunes associated with Sonny Rollins at a ceremony celebrating the tenor saxophonist's award of the MacDowell Medal over the summer, a brief respite from five weeks' seclusion at the MacDowell artists colony in New Hampshire, where Hersch focused on music to match the visuals and libretto for his *Coma Dreams* project.

Au fait with the work of Egebeto Gismonti and a fan of Argentinian classical pianist Martha Argerich, Hersch is also a Joni Mitchell geek. He recorded Mitchell's "My Old Man" years before Herbie Hancock zeroed in on the Mitchell canon and hasn't enough good things to say about the singer. "Nobody sets text like Joni Mitchell, peri-

land's ICP Orchestra or even Spike Jones, and after all, this is a pianist who appreciates the playfulness of Monk. "Stuttering" from *Fred Hersch Pocket Orchestra Live At The Jazz Standard* (Sunnyside, 2009)—featuring his quartet with Alessi, singer Jo Lawry and percussionist Richie Barshay—could be interpreted as an updating of Monk's clanky, unapologetic metric dicings and free-ranging aesthetic.

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The individuality of Hersch's approach, not grandly posterized, is something blue-chip musicians are more attuned to than the cursory listener. "It's the way Fred phrases and the rhythms that he uses," says pianist Kenny Barron, who identified Hersch in a live DownBeat Blindfold Test presented at this year's Detroit International Jazz Festival. "That's what gets me—how he plays the rhythms in his left hand."

Ambidextrous ability in contrary motion is deftly demonstrated by Hersch to an incredulous student at Western Michigan University in the *Let Yourself Go* DVD; it is something he has taught, by example, at the various academic institutions with which he has been affiliated.

Hersch students who have gone on to acclaim include Brad Mehldau and the Bad Plus' Ethan Iverson. Mehldau's contrapuntal left-hand facility is a feature of his playing that could be attributed to the Hersch influence. After teaching Iverson privately for several years during his time at NYU, Hersch referred him to Sophia Rossoff, his own mentor, now 90 but a continuing source of wisdom and insight.

"I'm sure many of Fred's fans react immediately to his touch, which is connected to the piano, not with just his fingers but his whole body," said Iverson.

Subtle physical responses guide Hersch forward in his improvisations. It's what Jarrett recently termed a kind of "bio feedback" from the hands. Hersch prefers an analogy to tennis. "It's like Roger Federer when he is in the zone, and unstoppable," Hersch says. "There's nothing between you and 'it,' the game; you are totally connected."

od," Hersch says. "She is one of the great poets as well as an incredible singer; you get every note, every nuance. She's a goddess, pretty much."

The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition, Hersch wrote a gorgeously melodic bop contrafact on the changes to "You Stepped Out Of A Dream" in honor of alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, dubbed "Lee's Dream," which can be heard on both the highly creative duo album *This We Know* (Palmetto, 2008) with saxophonist Michael Moore and the quintet outing *Fred Hersch Trio + 2* (Palmetto, 2004). The latter recording features Hersch's then-trio of Waits and bassist Drew Gress augmented with trumpeter Ralph Alessi and saxophonist Tony Malaby. It's a good place to get a handle on Hersch's writing concepts for small group, since the CD contains nine originals drawing inspiration from such musicians as saxophonist/educator Allan Chase and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler. There is the deployment of onomatopoeia, as in the case of "Snow Is Falling . . ." with the dancing precipitation of the keys and dripping bass ostinato behind "Rain Waltz," odd-measured blues played in the round, tunes composed of exclusively minor chords or perfect fifths—lots of ideas, all evidence of Hersch's curiosity and ongoing musical research.

Those who bracket Hersch as an incorrigible romantic might be surprised at his dabbings with humor. "Nostalgia" from the 2006 Chesky compilation *Personal Favorites* sounds like Hol-

Hersch hasn't regarded himself as an artist exclusively. For a while he was a "player" or a sideman, and in the pre-MIDI 1980s he ran his own recording studio out of his downtown apartment, invoicing for sessions, making coffee for clients, taking the console apart, even ejecting the odd junky musician from the bathroom.

Nowadays he can pick and choose the nicer gigs and say "no" when the circumstances aren't right, a great privilege for the jazz professional.

He realizes he lacks the looks, the showbiz acumen, the X-factor to command big outdoor festival stages like Joe Lovano, the Yellowjackets or Esperanza Spalding—or at least he is not snowed with such offers—but Hersch is more than content with the second lease on life that has afforded him a deeper focus on personal and universal essences. He's far from ready for the lights to go out again.

"I certainly feel a lot more grateful than entitled," he says. **DB**