

Fred Hersch lives life through the music he creates. He is a musician's musician, delving into introspective places that few artists can, and having a vision that transcends the boundaries of any one musical genre to produce colorful and vibrant movement. With 14 solo recordings and more than 60 collaborative recordings to his credit, the jazz pianist has won praise from his peers for his innovative genius and prolific style. He has also

Music

earned himself two Grammy nominations.

"Music is the focus for everything in my life. It's the thing that means the most to me," says the 41-year-old composer/pianist. "As a pianist I'm more in the jazz realm than anything else. But I also play classical and work with various vocalists. I also pull from various other places like R&B, Motown, The Beatles. I compose a fair amount myself, in different idioms. Jazz piano is just the hub of the wheel."

Though he has been playing professionally for nearly two decades, Hersch gained substantial media attention two years ago when he disclosed that he was HIV positive. "I'm a folder within a folder. I'm a pianist who happens to be gay who happens to be HIV positive—in that order," he says. "I decided that if I am going to be an artist with any kind of integrity, I couldn't waste energy in any closet—gay or HIV. But I'll always be a musician before anything else."

These days, Hersch is enjoying the success of two recently released and critically acclaimed recordings, the stellar *Passion Flower: Fred Hersch Plays Billy Strayhorn* and *Fred Hersch Plays Rodgers and Hammerstein*, both on Atlantic/Nonesuch Records.

A master technician, Hersch sparkles on both sets, which he produced, arranged and orchestrated. Much of his impact stems from tonal nuance, his gift for improvisation, and a unique vision to unearth a totally original, poetic jazz sound.

On *Rodgers and Hammerstein*, Hersch interprets 12 of the famed songwriting team's classics and makes them very much his own, with a jazzy twist. From shows such as *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *Cinderella*, Hersch brings the songs back to life. *Passion Flower*, which was released earlier last year, is one of Hersch's most powerful and passionate releases to date—and one of the most satisfying jazz releases of 1996. On the sterling opus the versatile pianist interprets the work of Strayhorn—a popular 1950s jazz composer—with his impermeable tonal palette of solo piano, trio and string orchestra.

Strayhorn and Hersch have a lot in common. Both are pianists. Both compose and arrange their own music. And both use strong classical influences in the music they write and perform (Hersch himself draws much of his lyrical approach from

PASSIONATELY FRED

Pianist Fred Hersch may be the HIV "poster boy" of jazz—but for him the music comes first

by Jeffrey L. Newman

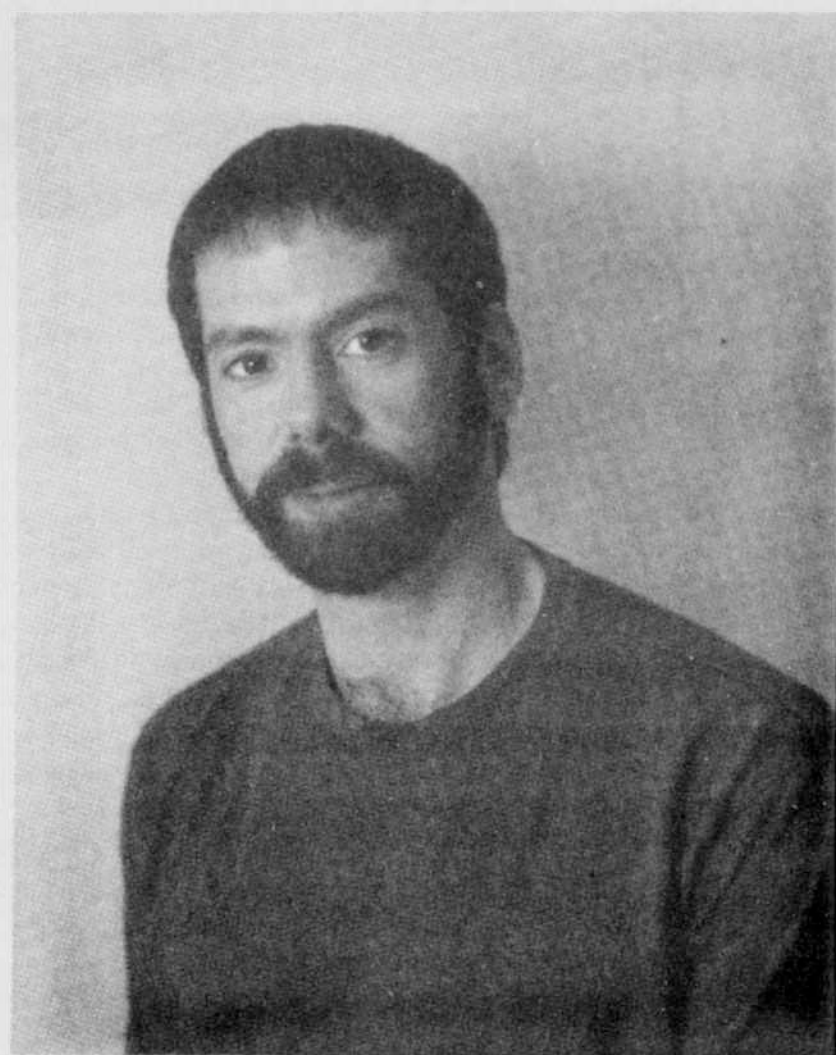


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Bach and Ravel). Both men happen to be gay, too.

"A lot of people think that I chose to record the works of Billy Strayhorn because he was gay. But I definitely did not. I chose him because he was good," he says. "He's a composer that I thought I could do something with on a personal level. His music spoke to me in ways other composers' never has."

Born and raised in Cincinnati, Hersch began to get the music bug when he was just a tot. Though his mom and dad were not musical by trade, they always had music playing throughout the house.

"I'd always improvise as a kid, but I didn't have a clue was jazz was—not until I got out of high school," he recalls. "Then I started going to jazz clubs and began to learn to play through improvisation." He graduated with honors from the New England Conservatory, and in 1977 he packed his bags and moved to the Big Apple, where he has remained ever since.

Hersch became established pretty quickly in New York, playing with such jazz giants as Joe Henderson and Stan Getz. He later collaborated with Janis Siegel of The Manhattan Transfer and soprano Dawn Upshaw. In 1985 he made his first solo recording. Then in 1993 he earned his first

solo Grammy nomination for his *Dancing in the Dark* opus. Last year he earned his second Grammy nomination for "best jazz instrumental performance" for *Fred Hersch Plays Johnny Mandel*.

But whether by his own design or not, his most notable work has come in the form of the 1994 AIDS benefit album he produced. Entitled *Last Night When We Were Young*, the jazz ballad recording was created as a fund-raising effort for Classical Action, Performing Arts Against AIDS. It featured some of today's top jazz performers, including Gary Burton, Toots Thielemans and Mark Murphy. The album has so far raised more than \$100,000. "I figured I couldn't afford to write huge checks," he says, "but this was something I could do to make a difference."

Promoting the release also gave him a reason to talk about being HIV positive, something he had not previously discussed with the media. "I felt that I had to be honest and tell people about my own status and not hide behind any walls," says Hersch, who has been asymptomatic for more than 10 years. "I didn't want to feel like I was being hypocritical or dishonest in any way. I figured that if I was going to talk, now was the time."

The revelation landed him on numerous talk

shows, on the pages of dozens of magazines from the *Advocate* to *Newsweek*, and propelled him into the national spotlight as the only jazz musician openly living with HIV. "I was pretty shocked by the media avalanche. For 22 years I lived openly about my sexuality. But this was not about being gay. It was about having HIV. Most of the attention was great. The only exception was that I felt like people were looking at me with this poster child mentality. They didn't want to talk about my music, they wanted to talk about my being HIV positive," he says.

"Here I was promoting my music and everyone was focusing on me as a person with AIDS," he recalls. "I became a poster boy for the jazz community. But it was a risk I was prepared to take. Just like Bill T. Jones is the poster boy for the dance world, I'm this for my musical circle. Occasionally it's exhausting. I only wish that people would look beyond that now and focus in on my music."

Coming out hasn't hurt Hersch professionally: He's playing more gigs than ever before, landed a major record label deal with Atlantic/Nonesuch Records and earned his second Grammy nomination. But Hersch hopes people don't buy his music simply because he's gay. He disagrees with the notion that because an artist is gay or lesbian, the gay community should automatically support that artist. Talent, he says, should outweigh sexuality.

"Being gay is not particularly interesting, really. I have a lot of problems about so-called 'gay music.' A lot of it is just not that good," he says. "I don't think that just because someone is an openly gay artist, their music is inherently worthy of support or extra support, unless they happen to be a good artist."

As for the likelihood of other mainstream artists such as himself coming out of the closet, Hersch isn't overly optimistic. He doesn't believe the coming out of Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang will start a trend. "They're all girls, that's the thing. No major male performer has come out of the closet while they are hot," he says. "There are a lot of artists who are gay but are afraid to talk about it. Instead, they become musically constipated. They worry about what everyone will think about them. As a result they are not connecting with the audience with who they are personally. When you are an artist you have to take risks and be prepared that not everyone will embrace it."

In the meantime, the future continues to look bright for Hersch. His next Nonesuch set is due in the spring, and he also plans to pursue projects of original music and collaborative projects with other artists.

Along the way, Hersch hopes to maybe even meet Mr. Right. "I'm single and not a toad," he jokes. "I've had extended boyfriends and lovers. But it's complicated by the HIV thing. If you're with someone who is HIV negative, they might have to go through some unpleasant shit down the road. And you have to be ultra, ultra careful. If both are HIV positive, then you run the risk that either of you could take a turn for the worse. Plus, I'm 41. But I'm always hopeful. It would be nice to meet someone special, but only if it was right."

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