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# Dreaming





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By Gary Fukushima Photos by Erika Kaplan





"It's difficult to name any pieces written in the past three decades that one might add to the jazz canon," said Fred Hersch.

**Fred Hersch was in good spirits, appearing relaxed on the video screen from his New York City loft. The pianist turned 67 just the day before, and celebrated in his usual fashion — by playing at the storied Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village, this time in a trio with bassist Drew Gress and drummer Johnathan Blake.**

“I feel like this week at the Vanguard,” he said, matter-of-factly, “I’m pretty much at the top of my game. I really feel like, you know, a different level.”

Hersch has been around the highest levels of jazz for more than four decades, as an innovative pianist, composer and educator. “Fred was a big figure for me shortly after I arrived in NYC in 1988, in a few respects,” said Brad Mehldau, perhaps his best and most famous student, in an email to *DownBeat*. Mehldau detailed how Hersch and he “focused on using the whole piano, getting away from the normative way of small-group jazz piano playing.” One can hear how Mehldau developed, in part, his own intricate contrapuntal approach to the piano in the way Hersch has expanded the possibilities on the instrument in his own playing, especially in solo or duo settings.

Hersch’s last duo project featured a recent

tour and recording in Europe with trumpeter Enrico Rava, who said to him, “It doesn’t matter what you play, it’s how you play it.” Hersch expounded, “It doesn’t have to be a new tune to be new. I mean, there is theoretically, possibly a mind-blowing version of ‘Autumn Leaves’ that has not been played. So, I’m just trying to concentrate on not getting wrapped up in having to do new this, that and the other — you know, just calling things that feel fun to play.”

As if on cue, his phone chimed, signaling the arrival of a third party for this conversation, someone whom Hersch said he has more fun playing with than just about anybody. Within seconds, a screen popped up labeled “irma,” for *irma nejandro*, derived from the Spanish phrase “*ir manejando*” — translated, to drive toward. *irma* is also known as *esperanza* spalding, the vocalist, bassist and composer, who once shocked the music world by becoming, in 2011,

the first jazz artist to win a Grammy for Best New Artist (over Justin Bieber, among others), the first of six Grammy awards she has received thus far. Chatting from the airport in her hometown of Portland, Oregon, spalding was about to embark on a trip to Brazil to attend Milton Nascimento’s 80th birthday party. “It makes me want to cry, saying that to you, Fred,” spalding gushed. “I know you are a fan of him.” They talked about their shared love of Brazilians and their music, noting how it seemed like everyone in that entire country could play an instrument and sing.

Even through the screens that connected them from thousands of miles apart, the fondness Hersch and the 38-year-old spalding have for each other shines. It’s a friendship that began a decade ago, when the pianist first invited the singer/bassist to share the stage with him during his long-standing duo series at the Jazz Standard in New York. Since then, they have reprised their duet performances, including in 2018 at Hersch’s 63rd birthday bash at the Vanguard, an event he had the prescience to document. “I just had a feeling,” he said. “It’s lightning in a bottle.” Four years later, that bottle has been uncorked with the release of *Alive At The Village Vanguard* (Palmetto) featuring Hersch on piano and spalding on vocals. They were scheduled to return to the Vanguard in January before heading out on



a three-week U.S. tour.

The recording marks the sixth live appearance by Hersch at the Village Vanguard. “Maybe tied for the most with Kenny Burrell,” he guessed. “Probably, check that out.” (We did, and Burrell recorded seven albums there, although two of them were recorded on the same night, so Hersch might have a claim.) But the album also serves as the first extended documentation of spalding as a singer of traditional jazz standards (along with several original compositions by Hersch).

As of this writing, spalding has eight albums to her name. Every single one prominently features original compositions by herself or co-written with collaborators. There are only a handful of pieces one might recognize, along with a few Brazilian standards (including the Egberto Gismonti tune “Loro,” reprised on the new album with Hersch). The most well-known jazz song she has recorded is Johnny Green’s classic “Body And Soul,” (sung in Spanish by spalding

as “Cuerpo y Alma”). In every case, these songs are rearranged and adroitly produced in the spirit of spalding’s compositional vision.

With that perspective, hearing spalding sing “But Not For Me” — with only her voice and Hersch’s piano — transforms the potentially mundane into a revelation.

After an elegant rundown of the melody, spalding begins to ad-lib — not by scat-singing, but by singing an entirely improvised counter-storyline over the form and harmony of the original tune.

“Oh me, oh my,” she croons, “What a sad case I seem to be / It’s my fault, letting love to lead the way / I should know that there’ll be skies of grey / I can’t say that I’ve seen too many, but they say a Russian play is to boast of many grey skies, alright / And then some words that I don’t really understand / [*speaks to the audience*] Because it’s like Old English heigh-ho, alas and lack-a-day? / That’s how I feel, confused about the whole situation.”

She takes the spirit of Ira Gershwin’s original lyrics, elaborating on them and offering snarky commentary — all while offering spell-binding improvisation on multiple levels.

“The kind of improvised word stories that are on the album,” Hersch said, “were different all the time, as I recall. Those were really off the cuff, those were not scripted — is that correct, am I right?”

“Yeah, they came from whatever was happening, you know?” spalding replied, speaking between mouthfuls of a giant burger. “I like that dangerous stuff. ... When you’re truly on the edge of your capacity is when you set yourself up to do things that you don’t know if they’ll work or not, and I like that sensation of like, ‘Whoa, how do I get out of this?’”

On Charlie Parker’s “Little Suede Shoes,” after scattering her way through the head, she sings to the audience, “See, it’s not lost on us / It’s technically a Saturday night / And you generously, or foolishly, have chosen to spend that night in a jazz club sitting cramped behind a table / Bless you.” Then, she continues over the bridge, “But since there may not be any dancing in your evening / just imagine yourself in an old Whitney Houston music video / and you’re the only one / with suede shoes on.” One can almost hear the lightbulb ding as the audience suddenly realizes the connection.

A kind of hybrid of Ella Fitzgerald-meets-Amanda Gorman, this is certainly not common to most jazz singers, maybe not even to spalding, whose body of work is markedly different from this, running the gamut from her own eclectic solo projects to composing an entire opera (*Ifigenia*) with friend and mentor Wayne Shorter to performing later this spring at Walt Disney Concert Hall on a double concerto for bass and flute by composer Felipe Lara.

“It all kind of seems like the same milieu,” she said. “It just depends on what area of the pond you’re looking at ... but it’s all kind of the same body of water. There is this kind of through-line of some essence of that type of form, those types of melodies, those types of progressions. To quote Wayne Shorter, he says improvisation is composition sped up, and composition is improvisation slowed down. So, [maybe] other people haven’t heard me do this. But to me, it’s just like, how else would I get to all the other shit that I may be able to do sometimes, without this kind of language or foundation or palette?”

“I don’t want to embarrass esperanza here,” Hersch proffered, “but [because] she has done so many successful and marvelous other kinds of projects before now, I think people are really going to perk up their ears when they hear what an absolutely fearless, awesome jazz singer she is. And I think it’s really nice that we’re just putting this out there as evidence of her amazing talents in so many directions and making a statement that all she needs is a stool and a mic and a lyric.”

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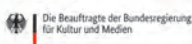
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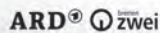
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“Thank you, Fred. I love you, and I admire you so much, you know that,” Spalding replied. “I [would] just complicate that a little bit by saying for some people, everything I do sounds like jazz. I feel like everything I’ve done is ‘jazz singer.’ ... Maybe people have an affiliation with a [particular] version of what being a jazz singer is, and so people who are orienting from that edition will recognize this in that dimension of my expression of this lineage. But, this isn’t any more or less [of] me being a jazz singer. It’s just a particular flavor of it, and I don’t want to feed into any sort of narrow stereotype of what it is to be a consummate jazz singer or not. I don’t need to prove that to anybody. ... If people who didn’t recognize [it] before dig this [album], that’s cool, but this isn’t what makes me a jazz singer.”

“You know, Joni Mitchell was a jazz singer ... and you are, you’ve always been a jazz singer in all your projects,” Hersch affirmed, clarifying that he felt what they did together was “the most pared down, I suppose.” Spalding brought up how most people can appreciate poetry without knowing the register of that poem, or even what “register” (the level of formality) in writing is. “It’s a luxury to not have all the associations of what ‘this register/that register’ means,” she said, “because you maybe [then] have more space to just receive what the human is offering [with] this thing called ‘music.’”

Spalding’s analogy to poetry sheds some light on her fascination with words and language, and how she is able to weave poetry into her conversations, musical or otherwise. “I also do this a lot in jam sessions,” she explained. “I like to do with language or story what we’re doing with the music, you know what I mean? It’s the same thing — I mean, it’s literally what we’re doing when we’re soloing — it’s just maybe there’s more room for abstraction or interpretation when it’s melody versus word, but it feels like the same muscle.

“Sorry, just to say — rap artists are doing that all the time. Sorry, let’s just name the lineage.

“I still play with the hip-hop people in Portland. Maybe the difference [between rapping and melodic improvising] is there isn’t a shifting harmonic environment that they’re responding to, but they’re responding to everything else.”

This cross-generational conversation (“I could be her father, easily, that’s not a stretch,” Hersch quipped) seems to represent the evolving perceptions — and realities — of what it means to be a jazz musician in our current time. “I first started playing jazz in 1974, which is sobering to think,” Hersch remembered. “Basically, you just showed up to the gig and they called tunes. So, the job was know tunes, be able to swing, know how to comp, show up on time. That was basically all you had to do. Now, young musicians are expected to be composers, they’re expected to be bandleaders, they’re expected to manage their own careers, in some cases book their own gigs.”

Hersch has not withheld his opinions on what he sees or hears from that new crop of jazz artists. “I think with a jazz education — which I was sort of blessedly not involved in, except as a teacher,” he said, “everybody is transcribing solos, learning all this advanced theory, a lot of stuff in odd meters, and everybody has access to notation programs, so it’s easy to put stuff on a page. But, compositionally, does it stick? Is it interesting? Does it move you? Would you want somebody else to play it? Could you imagine playing it again for years and years?” Granted, it is difficult to name any pieces written in the past three decades that one might add to the jazz canon, that Great American Songbook.

For Hersch, those hallowed songs are still the gold standard to unlocking the true potential of a jazz artist, both compositionally and improvisationally. “A lot of young musicians, they just sort of get through the melodic material in order to shred ... but often there’s a disconnect between what the actual thematic and harmonic material is and what is played afterwards,” he said.

“Fred really opened up a lot of what makes certain jazz compositions tick compositionally, by doing some motific analysis, particularly on Thelonious Monk tunes,” Mehldau said while speaking about Hersch,

the teacher. “It was all new to me and [it] stuck, as I went forward, thinking about writing and improvising motivically. That is to say, taking a certain melodic germ — maybe only three or four notes — and letting the music grow organically out of that limited amount of material, which acts as a blueprint for everything else.” Mehldau, a prolific composer, has nevertheless performed and recorded many jazz and popular music standards, and he has a similar outlook to Hersch on those tunes. “It’s not just learning the standards — that’s easy enough,” he said. “It’s learning how to find a way of playing on them that’s compelling, and a way of collectively improvising with your musical colleagues that is fresh and has meaning.”

Hersch has demonstrated this ability time and again, often with younger artists: Julian Lage, Ambrose Akinmusire, Miguel Zenón, trumpeter Avishai Cohen and, especially, Cohen’s sister, Anat Cohen, are his particular favorites. “The good ones, they understand what it’s about and don’t feel weird about playing what we would loosely call a standard. But if all you’re doing is playing [a tune] to just crunch the changes ... maybe there’s a piece missing. Just because you’re a great player does not mean you’re a great composer, and vice versa. It’s hard to do all of it.”

Spalding has proven that she can do it all. “I remember when I met esperanza,” Hersch recalled. “I was playing at the Vanguard, and she was in with Leo Genovese, and they were sitting in the corner. Back then she had a famous Afro. She just came up to me and she said, ‘Hi, I’m esperanza,’ and I said, ‘Yes, I know, thank you for coming,’ and I just thought to ask her to play with me at the Jazz Standard.”

Genovese has known spalding since they met as students at Berklee back in 2003, and he has been her friend and pianist in her band for the past 20 years. “We did play duo many times over the years,” Genovese said in a message to DownBeat. “We’d play her songs, some of mine, some of Wayne Shorter’s, some standards and a lot of open improvisations.” He might know best how deep her traditional jazz roots run. “She sounds like she has been singing standards for the whole of eternity, the way she makes them her own songs,” he said, noting she diligently studied many masters of song. “From Ella to Joni and everyone in between. She is a fantastic rapper, too.”

Everything spalding does might be, as she inferred, coming from the same pond, but did she experience anything new as she worked with Hersch? “I was talking about [this] water feeling with Fred the other day,” spalding said, in reference to some dolphins she saw in the ocean during a trip to Los Angeles. “Where every direction you move, there’s this substance around you that’s holding you. ... You can go up, sideways, down, twist, any possible

three-dimensional range of motion is available when you’re in the water.

“That was [the] sensation that emerged from our dynamics,” she said of their duo playing, “and it was such a joy to be in that with Fred.”

“Sometimes I want to be sort of like a warm bath,” Hersch replied, “and maybe other times it’s a little more turbulent — more waves and surf — but I think water is a good image for both of us. There’s a crash once in a while, and I love that. If there’s one of those moments, nei-

ther one of us backs down. There’s a beautiful thing where it’s all synchronicity, and occasionally we both go in different directions and meet somewhere else. I mean you could make all kinds of visual diagrams, but we’re really swimming and having a good time — crashing of older and newer songs, styles and attitudes, finding a common equilibrium, relishing in the joy and fun it is along the way.”

“I wanna see those visuals,” spalding laughed. DB



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