

Jazz On Campus >



On June 10, 2008, pianist Fred Hersch was placed into a two-month long, medically induced coma, where he dreamed of Thelonious Monk, tango dancers and a beautiful concert hall in Brussels. The visions would become *My Coma Dreams*, Hersch's moving stage production that he performed at Columbia University's Miller Theatre in New York on March 2.

Peppered with improvisation and Monk-inspired compositions, *My Coma Dreams* featured Hersch accompanied by a 16-piece ensemble that included drummer John Hollenbeck, trumpeter Ralph Alessi, saxophonist Adam Kolker, bassist John Hébert and trombonist Mike Christianson. Presented by Columbia University's Program in Narrative Medicine, the program was written and directed by Herschel Garfein and sung by actor Michael Winther, who portrayed both Hersch and his partner, Scott Morgan.

"These dreams stuck with me for months until I was able to write them down," Hersch said. "I don't usually remember dreams, so this was unusual. As it says in the script, 'I could have dreamt these in the five seconds before I woke up or in the five seconds after I woke up.' You don't just wake up after something like this, pop your eyes open and there you are. Your consciousness takes a while to come back together."

Though it took months of rehabilitation, Hersch continued to compose after coming out of the coma. He and the ensemble, complete with a surreal video presentation, have performed *My Coma Dreams* throughout the United States, often to the medical community.

"It's helpful to see from a medical point of view because intensive care doctors tend to see people as their disease," said Hersch, a longtime

AIDS/HIV survivor. "This helps doctors see both sides of the story clearly, in a way that maybe they didn't before. At Miller Theatre, there were people from Alaska and Europe. It has a wide reach. We'd like to do a broader theatrical run, but it's an odd piece. It's too much theater to be a jazz event, and not enough jazz for jazz fans. That's why we call it 'jazz theater.'"

The locomotion of Hollenbeck and Hébert provides supple support to the pianist's pristine, swinging, stately and beautiful playing, and the paired impact of the visuals with Winther's performance is a revelation. One of the show's most humorous moments centers on Hersch's dream of Monk.

"I am in a cage, 5 by 5 feet, so that I cannot stand straight up nor lie down all the way," Hersch described. "I have to crouch or be in a fetal position. In the next cage over is Thelonious Monk; he is in a similar 6- by 6-foot cage. A man bursts into the room and orders us to write a tune, and the first one who finishes gets released. I am frantically trying to write as fast as I can so I can get the hell out of there. I look up and Monk is taking his time while smiling enigmatically and beatifically."

Apart from the production, Hersch continues to pursue a busy schedule, which includes three upcoming releases: *Free Flying* (Palmetto), a duo with guitarist Julian Lage; *Only Many* (Cam Jazz), a duo with Alessi; and *Fun House* (Songlines), a recording by the Benoît Delbecq/Fred Hersch Double Trio.

"I am enjoying a lot of career momentum," Hersch said. "I am busier than I've ever been, and [any] ill effects from the coma are certainly gone. I'm feeling good about my playing, about being busy, and enjoying the collaborations and lots of trio and solo work. It's all kind of miraculous."

—Ken Micallef

School Notes >

Piano Lessons: Key-

boardist **John Medeski** has joined the faculty of Creative Music Studio's 40th Anniversary Workshop, which will take place at Full Moon Resort in Woodstock, N.Y., on May 20–24. Medeski will conduct intensive master classes and conduct jam sessions alongside a star-studded faculty that includes trumpeter Dave Douglas, saxophonist Don Byron and pianist Marilyn Crispell.

creativemusicfoundation.org

Cuban Cuisine: Percussionist Bobby Sanabria and the Manhattan School of Music Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra paid tribute to East Harlem and the roots of Afro-Cuban jazz on March 28 at the MSM's Borden Auditorium. Along with new arrangements of compositions by Mario Bauza, Duke Ellington, Juan Tizol and Billy Strayhorn, the program included the world premiere of saxophonist Eugene Marlow's composition "Let There Be Swing!" and trumpeter Kyle Athayde's "Que Viva Harlem!" msmny.edu

Original Art: The Juilliard Jazz Ensemble performed original, student-composed works during a concert titled "My Point of View, Part 3" on April 16 at the school's Paul Hall. The performers were coached by two of Juilliard Jazz's esteemed faculty members, pianists Xavier Davis and Frank Kimbrough. juilliard.edu

N.Y. State of Mind: The University of Kansas Wind Ensemble premiered *In The Shadow Of No Towers*, a work commissioned by composer Mohammed Fairouz, at New York's Carnegie Hall on March 26. In addition to recording the piece for release on the Naxos label this December, the group reprised the performance at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lawrence, Kan., on April 2. ku.edu

Pass Dues: Frank Potenza, chair of the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music StudioJazz Guitar program, has recorded a CD tribute to his friend and colleague, guitarist Joe Pass. The album, *For Joe*, includes the same personnel that Pass had on the 1964 album *For Django*. The recording will be accompanied by a documentary film to be released on DVD. usc.edu