

# JazzTimes

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## [JT]Notes

### More Than Jazz

by Evan Haga

I can't say with certainty that jazz is more concept-obsessed than it's ever been, but it sure seems that way. It isn't enough to carefully choose or compose music and then unspool improvisations on top of dynamic rhythms. Do you want that arts grant and an alt-weekly preview? Well then you'd better incorporate an oration, or modern dance, or a silent film, or projected abstractions, or an overwrought ensemble filled with obscure world instruments.

If my cynicism isn't apparent, let me say that I'm more a fan of small working bands. I also tend to like music that is about itself, and I find that quality in styles like electric blues, hard bop, postbop, soul-jazz and jazz-rock. But there are more exceptions to those rules than there are actual rules, and jazz musicians with extramusical aspirations have floored me of late. One of those figures is our cover subject, Maria Schneider, whose new collaboration with soprano Dawn Upshaw, *Winter Morning Walks*, blends jazz and classical elements with poetry in remarkably unaffected, human ways. The other example, which I'll detail a bit here because Geoffrey Himes already has Schneider's story covered, is the New York City premiere of pianist-composer Fred Hersch's *My Coma Dreams*, held March 2 at Columbia University's Miller Theatre.

The show's title is a very literal one: In 2008, Hersch, who is HIV positive, contracted pneumonia and lay for two months in a medically induced coma; after he awoke, he was able to recall his dreams with rare clarity. Actor and singer Michael Winther portrays both Hersch and his partner, Scott Morgan, detailing the story of the pianist's illness, dreams and the start of his recovery, as well as Morgan's saintly devotion, with a colloquial, sympathetic delivery. The nature of dreams—their whimsy and terror and absurd non sequiturs—allowed Hersch to write a program that plays to his impressively versatile roster of strengths; his malleable onstage resources, a large ensemble comprising notable jazz players and a string section, grant him a mighty range of expression. From Hersch's expectedly lyrical solo piano to avant-garde textures, sweeping orchestral landscapes, nimbly swinging Monk and purposeful schmaltz, the music is wondrous.

But the tone of the thing, and an acute self-awareness in terms of scale, is why this show could play Off-Broadway if not for the personnel's mercurial schedules. *My Coma Dreams* is scary and sad and beautiful and damn funny in parts. It argues that there are places in the heart that jazz, by itself, can't touch. **JT**