In the Key of Life

Grammy-nominated pianist Fred Hersch just can't be bothered

August 1, 1994 By Steve Doppelt

Fred Hersch doesn't care to dwell on the whole AIDS thing. He prefers to concentrate on his music, and he bristles at the notion of being known only as "the jazz artist with AIDS."

"I don't want to be a single focus guy," he says. "It's just one facet of who I am. I'm a musician who happens to be gay, who happens to have HIV."

But as the 38-year-old pianist sits on the couch in his apartment/recording studio, he knows it will be discussed, and he accepts it graciously. "Me not talking about HIV," he says, "is like having a polar bear sitting in the room with us and us not talking about it."

For years, Hersch didn't talk about the polar bear. Though he participated in a variety of AIDS fund-raising concerts, it was not until 1992 that he revealed to the public that he had tested positive in 1986. It was a decision he made despite warnings that he would be shooting himself in the foot. "I had to show people I'm not afraid of this," he says. "We'll see if it is a sacrifice or not."

So far there has been no sacrifice. If anything, Hersch says, his openness about HIV has freed him creatively because he now cares less about what people thing. The challenge, then, has been to not let the disease entirely define who he is. "There's Fred the activist and Fred the musician," he says. "I have to keep them separate sometimes."

As a musician, Hersch is on a roll. His 1993 album, *Dancing in the Dark* in which he and his trio performed a collection of classical jazz standards, was nominated for a Grammy. And he has released more than six albums this spring, including a follow-up jazz disc with his musical trio.

As an activist, he avoids lengthy diatribes and prefers to lead by example. He can be heard on the recently released *AIDS Quilt Songbook*, and he was one of five musicians with HIV to perform on *Memento Bittersweet*.

The project that he is most excited about, however, is *Last Night When We Were Young: the Ballad Album*, a recording that should raise big money for Classical Action: The Performing Arts Against AIDS. Hersch not only conceived of and produced the project, but he also performed on it with other top jazz artists.

Still, Fred Hersch remains leery of pseudo-activism which may be more self-serving than helpful. “I’m sick of red ribbons,” he says matter-of-factly. “I think they can have an impact, but to put on a red ribbon just to go to an AIDS benefit, it doesn’t really have much of an impact. I think either wear it all the time or not at all.”

He is also troubled by the way certain people react to the news that he has HIV. Recently he told a date that he had tested positive, to which the date glibly responded, “That’s OK, we can use a rubber.”

“There was no, ’Gee, how are you?’ or ’Do you want to talk about it?’” recalls Hersch. “Right then I knew that I didn’t want to go any further with this man. It lets me know who people are and who you can count on,” says Hersch. “All in all, though, life is more interesting now.”

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/In-the-Key-of-Life-16012-5907