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Good Things Happen Slowly: A Life In And Out Of Jazz



Synopsis

Jazz could not contain Fred Hersch. Hersch's prodigious talent as a sideman — a pianist who played with the giants of the twentieth century in the autumn of their careers, including Art Farmer and Joe Henderson — blossomed further in the eighties and beyond into a compositional genius that defied the boundaries of bop, sweeping in elements of pop, classical, and folk to create a wholly new music. *Good Things Happen Slowly* is his memoir. It's the story of the first openly gay, HIV-positive jazz player; a deep look into the cloistered jazz culture that made such a status both transgressive and groundbreaking; and a profound exploration of how Hersch's two-month-long coma in 2007 led to his creating some of the finest, most direct, and most emotionally compelling music of his career. Remarkable, and at times lyrical, *Good Things Happen Slowly* is an evocation of the twilight of Post-Stonewall New York, and a powerfully brave narrative of illness, recovery, music, creativity, and the glorious reward of finally becoming oneself.

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Customer Reviews

“Two powerful forces are at work in this engaging memoir — the personal rise of Fred Hersch from obscurity to undisputed prominence in the world of jazz and the devastating advance of AIDS into the neighborhoods of gay America. That these two disparate phenomena could be braided so evenly into a vivid, forward-rolling narrative is the passionate wonder of *Good Things Happen Slowly*. — Billy Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate

“A motif running through *Good Things Happen Slowly* focuses on the power of self-confidence, an attribute that has long helped to define Fred Hersch's music. It is a quality no less evident in this brave

memoir: a coming of age book about jazz, sexual identity, and creative authenticity that is also one of the shrewdest portraits of the New York club scene ever written. — Gary Giddins, author of *Visions of Jazz* and *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams* — “Honest and well-wrought — | Hersch wonderfully captures the experience of ensemble-jazz improvisation — — — almost sex — — — as well as the colorful characters throughout — | Hersch — — — narrative really grips during his agonizing recovery from a two-month, near-death coma resulting from AIDS complications, an ordeal that lends depth and pathos to this candid memoir. — — — Publishers Weekly — — — “Boundaries are made to be broken. In Fred Hersch — — —’s stunning memoir, those boundaries arise on the bandstand, backstage, in relationships, with HIV, in recovery, and in activism. Storytelling becomes yet another way of pushing through them. — — — Hersch tells his story as only a great pianist can, unfolding it like a Bach chorale, giving attention to each voice, each love, each heartbreak, and — — — each triumph. — — — Through jazz, a performer shares both his virtues and flaws, offering a reflection of the world we live in; improvisation, jazz — — —’s key principle, empowers a musician to recover from wrong turns, transforming misfortunes into guiding lights. — — — *Good Things Happen Slowly* is a powerful evocation of those ideas made real in life, brilliantly mapping Hersch — — —’s progress toward freedom. — — — — — Jason Moran, pianist, composer, Artistic Director, Jazz at the Kennedy Center “To the acclaim Fred Hersch has rightly earned as one of America — — —’s great jazz pianists, one can now add accolades for his abilities as a riveting story-teller. *Good Things Happen Slowly* flows with the sensitive pacing and lyricism of Hersch’s music as it traces two contrapuntal coming-of-age tales: growing from child prodigy to jazz master; and finding self-acceptance, courage, and love as a gay, HIV-positive man. The two lines come to harmonize beautifully in this frank, vivid, and moving account of a creative life lived to its fullest.” — — — — — Alisa Solomon, author of *Wonder of Wonders* “In *Good Things Happen Slowly*, pianist and composer Fred Hersch has written — — — a remarkable human document, the record of a supremely gifted person — — —’s insistence on leading a full life both as an artist and as a gay man brought, more than once, to the brink of death by HIV. The story makes gripping reading, alternately exhilarating and harrowing, full of the love of music and life itself. Brave, wise, and honest, this is an inspiring — — — — — and, finally, awe-inspiring — — — — — book.” — — — — — Tom Piazza, author of *Devil Sent the Rain* and *Why New Orleans Matters*

Jazz pianist, composer, activist, and educator FRED HERSCH is a ten-time Grammy nominee and the recipient of a 2003 Guggenheim Fellowship in Composition. He was named a 2016 Doris Duke

Artist and has twice been awarded Jazz Pianist of the Year by the Jazz Journalists Association. He concertizes worldwide as a solo artist, as a collaborator, and with the Fred Hersch Trio. He was a longtime member of the Jazz Studies faculty of the New England Conservatory and now teaches at Rutgers University. He is the subject of the feature documentary *The Ballad of Fred Hersch*. He lives in New York City and Pennsylvania with his partner, Scott Morgan.

Fred Hersch has had a remarkable musical career in music. While it may seem from his early recordings that he has always known who he was from the very beginning, this autobiography reveals his struggles to find and express his true identity, not just as a creative jazz pianist and composer, but also as a gay man in a predominantly straight field. Ultimately, this is a book about being true to oneself. Not that Fred had much of a choice: his is a fiesty and strong spirit- it appears he was driven from the get-go to be himself- it was really only just a matter of time before he would develop his unique sound at the piano. And it was also just a matter of time before he would come out in the male dominated, heterosexual world of jazz. Fred alternates between telling his story of paying his dues as a young jazz pianist with his initiation into the gay scene. The latter eventually led to addictive sexual behaviors and substance abuse during the late 70s and early 80s, resulting in an eventual HIV diagnosis. He tells his story without being overly dramatic or sensational. His voice alternates between humbleness to the point of being self deprecating, and grandiosity, even a bit of arrogance at times (he knew how good he was,) all the while being brutally honest and emotionally raw. What eventually emerges is a portrait of a musical and personal maverick, at once vulnerable yet surprisingly tough. But then, one would have to be incredibly strong to have survived the ordeals Fred has endured. And Fred has done far more than survive his near death experiences: (One doctor called him his "Lazarus Patient",) Fred has thrived. The book is also laced with little music lessons, but one doesn't have to be a musician to get something out of them. There's a chapter on how to jumpstart one's writing, with useful tips for overcoming creative blocks. Another section focuses on ideas about technique, which came from working with a brilliant teacher. His teacher's ideas about using the whole body, not just the fingers, and his obvious mastery of the technique shows in his crystalline tone production. This is a well written bio that I couldn't put down - I read it in a matter of hours. This is partially because I love Fred Hersch's music, but also because it's such a compelling story, It's satisfying to know Fred found both artistic and personal fulfillment on his life journey. It's also wonderful to know that at 63, he's still going strong and continues to make beautiful, vital and relevant music today.

The title of Fred Hersch's memoir "Good Things Happen Slowly" is doubly apt, both in his personal and professional life as a jazz musician. A self-described "scrawny, nerdy little kid," with unconventional interests, growing up in an upper-middle-class Jewish home, Hersch spent a lot of his youth feeling as if he didn't quite fit in. However, his gift for music shone through early, and his parents provided him with piano, violin and music notation lessons. Though he didn't practice as much as he might have, Hersch developed his talent for improvisation and performed in choir and bands. After attending the New England Conservatory with a newly-designed major in jazz studies, Hersch began playing as a sideman in bands around the Boston area. At this time, he also began coming-to-terms with his identity as a gay man in the late seventies shortly before the AIDS epidemic would occur. Determined to avoid being pigeonholed either as gay or in his profession, Hersch took an unconventional route to becoming the man he is today: a multiple Grammy-winning musician who has performed with many of the most distinguished players (himself among them), as well as recording many successful albums. Oh, and he's also survived being HIV+, as well as surviving a (medically induced) coma, which left him with damaged vocal chords. I'm not familiar with the jazz world that Hersch describes so intimately, but by the end of "Good Things Happen Slowly," I was. With an admirable lack of self-pity, Hersch describes his journey as a man and musician with honesty and heart. Some of the book gets a tad technical, but there are many insights to be found here, as well as a unique take on being a pianist. Hersch does not shy away from portraying himself in a less than complimentary light in sections, but overall, he emerges as a courageous and sympathetic man.

It feels like the title *In and Out* might very well be code though it doesn't have to be. This memoir describes an important life because it is the life of a survivor of the raging epidemic that affected a significant group of people that I suppose seems mostly clustered around the show business crowd. In Fred's case it was jazz. In and out of jazz perhaps because of his illness which took him out but when modern meds kicked in he made it back in to jazz again. This direct description of growing up, realizing he was gay, figuring out what that meant, and then immersing himself in that life at the same time playing and writing his music and creating his albums, and working with others familiar to the jazz scene, the two aspects of his life weave in and out one another leaving you wondering about the significance of that relationship too.

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