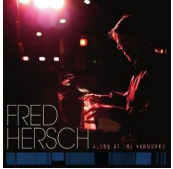


Fred Hersch – Alone At The Vanguard (2011)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 22 September 2011 18:42 - Last Updated Sunday, 26 October 2014 17:52

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01 – *In The Wee Small Hours of the Morning* 02 – *Down Home* 03 – *Echoes* 04 – *Lee's Dream* 05 – *Pastorale* [play](#) 06 – *Doce de Coco* 07 – *If Ever I Would Leave You* 08 – *Work* 09 – *Encore Doxy*
Fred Hersch - piano

Alone at the Vanguard follows a set pattern: alternating ballads and swingers (four originals, five standards) on solo piano. If that sounds routine, note that it's made by a master craftsman, Fred Hersch, whose ability to refresh jazz routines is unsurpassed. This live set, the last from his weeklong December 2010 Village Vanguard residency, is a stunning achievement. It is also unpredictable.

For example, don't look for typical jazz ballads. "Echoes" and "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning" are downtempo, lush and gorgeous, but Hersch keeps a fast left-hand trill hovering beneath both, raising them to roiling storms—power ballads, if you will. "Pastorale," dedicated to Robert Schumann, pays such faithful homage that it's practically a classical sonata; only its chordal flourishes keep it grounded in jazz. Only "Memories of You," with its gentle swing and delicate upper register, matches the ballad template.

The upbeat pieces hew closer to expectation, though that's a relative notion. The infectious original "Down Home" swings breezily, but can its Western-inspired melody and giddy-up groove (dedicated to Bill Frisell, but just as salutary to Gene Autry) really be "expected"? Ditto for Monk's "Work," on which Hersch merely nods in passing to its author's skewed pacing and plays with the elegant flow of a river. And with his encore, a half-ballad, half-gospel arrangement of "Doxy," expectation becomes irrelevant.

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Even overlooking these stylistic upsets, however, Hersch's playing is wondrous and inspired, his Evans-isms always apparent yet blended into his own lyrical tack. Let's hear the rest of that week at the Vanguard. --- Michael J. West, jazztimes.com

Pianist Fred Hersch almost cashed out back in 2008, when he fell ill with AIDs-related complications and spent seven weeks in a coma. The recovery was arduous, the resumption of his wide-ranging and top-level musical artistry uncertain—an uncertainty erased without a trace by Whirl (Palmetto Records, 2010), a trio set so assured, vibrant and beautiful that it would surely show up in any knowing top ten list of the best piano trio sets of the new millennium's first decade.

There was a subtle change in Hersch's sound, post illness. It's what Hersch's fellow pianist, Jessica Williams (who has suffered her own health problems), calls "illness as a teacher," a focusing of intent and approach from the washing away of the peripheral and unimportant.

Alone at the Vanguard is Hersch's solo piano offering, recorded on the last night of a six-night stand at the hallowed New York club where innumerable jazz greats have held court and recorded performances, resulting in classic albums. Hersch opens his set on a shimmering introduction to "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," an old American Songbook jewel that gets buffed up often. Hersch has what it takes to ignore the "never open with a ballad" advice: a supple and exquisitely-refined touch; a sharp focus on the melody; a deep sense of classical harmony; and a magical ability to get inside the tune and make it his own. Hersch's sound here has a uncommon fragility/strength dynamic, and it is serious and cerebral, with an opposing simplicity buoyed by a rich complexity, born of a lifetime's immersion in the music.

On this nine-tune set, Hersch offers up four masterful originals: "Down Home," dedicated to guitarist Bill Frisell, has a jaunty, fun, light-stepping feel; "Echos" is an inward journey, hopeful and lushly harmonic; "Lee's Dream," for alto saxophone legend Lee Konitz, has a sunny, sparkling, playful vibe; and "Pastorale," dedicated to Robert Schumann, draws on Hersch's classical background.

Hersch gives Jacob de Bandolim's "Doce de Coco" a sense of frisky, devil-may-care grace, and

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he slows down the standard "Memories of You" and turns it into a ruminative prayer.

Almost all jazz pianists like to get lost inside the idiosyncratic tunes of Thelonious Monk, and Fred Hersch is no exception, but few do it as well. His study of Monk's "Work" sounds like joyous play, full of very erudite Hersch-ian turns, fun and at the same time stately, a closer that demanded an encore: Sonny Rollins' "Doxy." Hersch delivers that tune at a measured pace, drawing the sound into a timeless and bluesy wee hours mood, a majestic wrap-up of an exceptional night of music at the Village Vanguard. ---Dan McClenaghan, allaboutjazz.com

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