



■ fred hersch

## a whitman sampler

**Fred Hersch**, one of jazz's most poised and poetic pianists, has adapted the poems of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) into a passionate song cycle called *Leaves of Grass*. Due February 22 on Palmetto and based on Whitman's book of the same name, the 20-part oratorio showcases **Kurt Elling** and **Kate McGarry** singing Whitman's rhyme-free, rhythmically challenging verses against a jazz octet setting that blends the intimacy of chamber music, the drama of Broadway and the majestic sweep of classic Americana.

"When you hear words sung, they do make a different impact than when you read them in a book," Hersch tells **ICE**. "I have a number of close friends who are poets, and they've all said that, as well as they know these words, hearing them sung makes them resonate in a different way. I'm sure scholars will not like that I only set certain parts of certain poems to music. But this is not a scholarly exercise, nor did I feel obligated to do 'Whitman's Greatest Hits.' I wanted to do stuff that pulled my chain and let it wail."

Far from sounding arty or bookish, *Leaves of Grass* soars with a melodic grace that never gets overwhelmed by the ambitiousness of the project, thanks to the tasteful playing of Hersch, trumpeter **Ralph Alessi**, trombonist **Mike Christianson**, clarinetist **Bruce Williamson**, saxophonist **Tony Malaby**, cellist **Erik Friedlander**, bassist **Drew Gress** and percussionist **John Hollenbeck**. "I didn't want it to be pretentious, but by the same token I didn't want people to think 'Let's swing, Walt Whitman!'" Hersch says. "I have this extraordinary ensemble of musicians. Whatever I wrote, wherever it went – if it went left and further out, if it became fairly lyrical, as it turned out to be – I knew they would be able to play anything."

Anchoring the album is a 31-minute distillation of "Song of Myself," presented as a mesmerizing 11-movement suite that hinges on Elling's ability to convincingly deliver such lines as "I celebrate myself and sing myself!" and "The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows."

"He [Elling] was the only person I considered for this part," Hersch says. "He's a very fine poet himself. Largely everything he sings is written. There's very little improvisation, but he takes a turn of phrase from time to time. His diction is very strong. I didn't want to write this piece for unmiked classical singers. I wanted people ... to get the words."

Although the homosexual undertones of Whitman's writing have been explored by academics through the decades, Hersch – who is gay and

has been living with HIV for 18 years – says he had no intention of turning *Leaves of Grass* into a political statement.

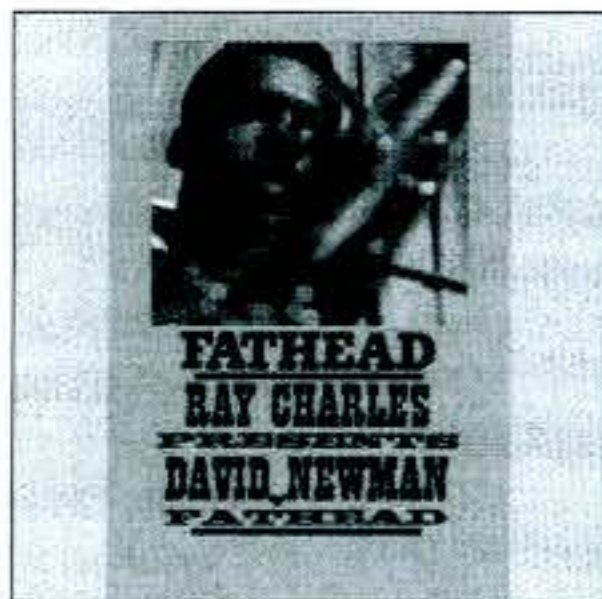
"That's not where I wanted to go with it," Hersch says. "This is more like the universal Whitman, the Whitman that is more the transcendentalist, like Thoreau and Emerson – it's about being mindful of the present, appreciating nature, loving all beings unconditionally ... These are important words that need to be heard."

## news and notes

After 24 years, **Paul Motian** returns to the ECM fold on February 8 with *Have the Room Above Her*, an atmospheric collaboration with **Joe Lovano** and **Bill Frisell** that finds the trio mixing new Motian tunes with gorgeous covers of **Thelonious Monk's** "Dreamland" and the **Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein** title cut ■ On February 15, Concord Jazz issues *The Classic Concert*, an unreleased June 29, 1982 Carnegie Hall performance by **Mel Tormé**, **George Shearing** and **Gerry Mulligan** that marks their only recorded collaboration. The hard-swinging set brackets **Duke Ellington**, Thelonious Monk and **Count Basie** favorites with Mulligan's "Walkin' Shoes" and "Jeru" ■ **Jason Moran** gets back in touch with his Texas blues roots on *Same Mother*, due February 1 on Blue Note. With help from **Cassandra Wilson** band guitarist **Marvin Sewell**, the innovative pianist and his trio expand **Albert King's** "I'll Play the Blues for You" with a frenetic bop breakdown and bring out the rollicking urgency of **Mal Waldron's** "Fire Waltz" ■ *Magic Sun*, the surreal 1968 film about **Sun Ra and His Arkestra** by avant-garde artist **Phill Niblock**, will make its DVD debut February 15 via Music Video Distributors. On the same day, the company issues **Al Di Meola's** *One of These Nights*, filmed in May 2004 at Scala in Germany ■ Columbia/Legacy continues mining the CTI vaults on February 15 with upgrades of **Nina Simone's** *Baltimore*, **Stanley Turrentine's** *Don't Mess with Mister T* (augmented with the unreleased "Mississippi Strut" and "Harlem Dawn"), **Astrud Gilberto's** *Astrud Gilberto with Stanley Turrentine* (with the unreleased "Polytechnical High" and **Harry Nilsson's** "The Puppy Song") and **Deodato and Airto's** *In Concert*. Making its stateside CD debut is **Idris Muhammad's** *House of the Rising Sun*, a 1976 all-star session featuring **David Sanborn**, > page 27



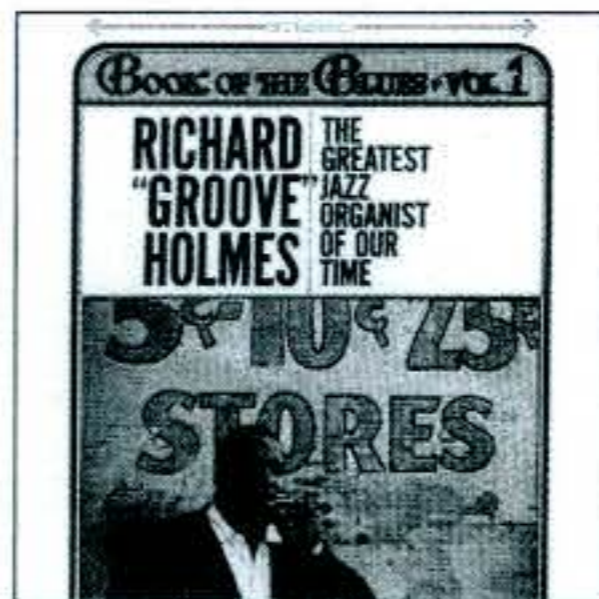
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