

mcferrin long bio 1/16/10

WARNING!

Listening to Bobby McFerrin sing may be hazardous to your preconceptions. Please be advised that, should you choose to subject yourself to this man's vocal alchemy, everything you thought you knew about the possibilities of the human voice will be challenged, discarded and rearranged. Those who are reluctant to surrender to such consistently inventive music may find themselves wondering why it took so long to discover something so thoroughly awe-inspiring and resistant to categorization. Side effects may include utter and unparalleled joy, a new perspective on creativity, permanent rejection of the predictable, and a sudden, irreversible urge to lead a more spontaneous existence.

Bobby McFerrin is a restless seeker who knows no bounds; his story is one of ceaseless self-discovery and generosity of artistic spirit. He has continually redefined not only his own music but the very role of the artist. In a world where others push product, Bobby McFerrin promotes experience. His concerts are not about supporting his latest release, but about the release of creative energy. This is go-with-the-flow music, created on the spot, never to be repeated.

Bobby McFerrin is genre-defiant and pigeonhole-o-phobic. His palette is every style of music he's ever heard, a genuine cross-cultural cross-breed. It's jazz, pop, R&B, classical and world music—or, more accurately, out-of-this-world music—all rolled into one, sometimes within the same song.

And yet it's also none of the above. Bobby adopts and adapts to musical vocabularies of any and every kind, and from them he invents new ones.

Those who have never been to one of McFerrin's performances may have heard that he's something special, he's different, that his gift is his own. But still, they arrive as skeptics: What can this man possibly do that they haven't heard before? They soon find out.

Many have tried to describe the Bobby McFerrin experience, but there's simply no way to explain a voice that—like the Starship Enterprise—goes where no man's has gone before. How can one define, using mere words, the wordless? How can something so emancipated and unpredictable be reined in?

Bobby's vocal technique is often non-verbal, a construction of his own invention. When Bobby McFerrin engages in song he surrenders to his creative mind, not to the whims of the marketplace. He may have won 10 Grammys, but he exists outside of the music industry's self-imposed parameters, beholden only to a constant state of musical inquiry.

What Bobby McFerrin does is not an act. Rather, as one of his CD titles put it, it's spontaneous invention. Always looking forward, never backward, he is all about adventure through music. He peers over the edge of the cliff, acknowledges the void

below, and dives head first, buoyed by the element of surprise. A master of unpremeditated art, Bobby is brave and courageous, reverent *and* irreverent, serious *and* witty—he begs the question: When was the last time music was this much fun?

At Bobby's concerts, audiences witness the rarest of qualities, something almost never found anymore in contemporary art: real-time invention. His wholly improvisational approach to singing provides deep nourishment, something of sustaining value. He engages his audience, making them a part of the creative process, taking them on an expedition. Bobby McFerrin is the place where virtuosity fuses with off-the-charts technique, emotion, humor, adventure, communication, personality and play.

McFerrin's four-octave vocal abilities and capacity for constant invention are on par with those of the greatest improvising instrumentalists, yet simultaneously the power, sophistication and soulfulness of his singing place him in a class of its own—there's an unquestionable poetry to his freeform flights that is his and his alone. Bobby is at once funky and smooth, meticulous and carefree, elegant and feisty. It's almost as if the liberties of Miles Davis and John Coltrane, the grace and class of Duke Ellington and Mozart, the funk of James Brown and Sly Stone, the cool of Bob Marley and the silky soul of Marvin Gaye, the miraculous command and range of Aretha Franklin and Ella Fitzgerald, and the ethereal, otherworldliness of African field hollers, austere chants and primal blues, were all put into a blender and poured down Bobby McFerrin's throat just as an experiment. Somewhere along the way, those categories dissolve so completely they cease to have meaning.

Bobby McFerrin is the source of an endless volley of ideas, as if the collective, encyclopedic musical DNA of the universe had landed in his brain. When the legendary funk god George Clinton of Parliament-Funkadelic fame watched McFerrin in the act of creating in the studio one day, all he could do was to shake his head with envy and proclaim, "Licks for days."

Attempting to transcribe the improvised vocal utterances of Bobby McFerrin would be a most daunting task—at times it's almost as if a symphony orchestra, choir and rhythm section have lodged in one human being. Constant rhythmic and melodic ingenuity, and an infinite exploratory zeal, are hallmarks of every Bobby McFerrin performance. What Bobby does with his voice technically—the way he incorporates dense rhythms, extraordinary scales, tricky intervals and such—is complex enough that many accomplished musicians and educators have studied and dissected it. Yet his music is also accessible and inviting—despite the undeniable uniqueness of his art, there is an amiable Everyman quality to Bobby McFerrin. When he invites his fans to sing along, as he nearly always does, few hesitate. Inclusiveness and the universality of voices combined in song are at the heart of his art.

To many people, Bobby McFerrin will always be associated first with a certain unpretentious, fun little feel-good ditty with an inspirational, universal message: "Don't Worry, Be Happy." The song, which features no other instruments but Bobby's voice, opens his album, *Simple Pleasures*. When released in 1988, the tune, written by Bobby in a few hours during a break in a recording session, caught on like nothing he had ever

done before, rocketing to number 1 on the charts in America—the first a cappella song ever to reach the top—and many other countries around the world.

Not a conventional artist to begin with, McFerrin suddenly had a hit single on his hands. Folks in the music biz, who before didn't know what to make of him, now started calling him a superstar and expecting him to behave like one. The video of the song was played everywhere; people sang it on the street, at home, at work, in the shower—they couldn't get enough of it. "Don't Worry, Be Happy" became an anthem and, ultimately a catchphrase that is still ubiquitous today. Bobby and his song took home four Grammy awards that year, including Song of the Year and Record of the Year.

But Bobby, although realizing he could ride the song to continued success if only he would capitalize on it, stopped singing it altogether. One reason was because the song was a studio invention, McFerrin overdubbing his own voice seven times—although it gave the impression that Bobby was accompanied by a group, it was all him, and therefore it could not be successfully reproduced live. But more importantly, Bobby did not want to become pigeonholed artistically. He was (and remains) a pure artist, not one who seeks hit records and self-promotion, and he felt that being tied to one trademark song would restrain him, keep him from progressing. Repetition and stagnation were not for him—he was not interested in running in place.

So, while "Don't Worry, Be Happy" was still on the charts, Bobby chose to move on and let the song live its own life without him. He even refused to sing it on the Grammy awards telecast! But that wasn't all: For the next two years, McFerrin virtually disappeared from the music scene while deciding where to head next. When he finally returned, his job description had expanded: Bobby not only performed duet concerts with the masterful jazz pianist Chick Corea and assembled an improvisational vocal troupe he called Voicestra—still going strong today—but he began a second career as a conductor of the world's finest orchestras.

"Bobby went from performing completely improvised solo vocal concerts to 'What is the most opposite thing I could possibly do?'" says Linda Goldstein, McFerrin's manager and producer for more than 30 years. "Hey, why don't I stand in front of a hundred musicians doing 200-year-old written music?!' There's an antithesis for you. What happened was 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' brought an avalanche of attention that was almost unattractive. Bobby's path was a deeply spiritual one, a deeply creative one and a deeply artistic one, and the song's success was overwhelming to him. It wasn't that he was ungrateful for it; he really appreciated it. It was just very draining, and something he never asked for! That was the irony."

The expansion into conducting wasn't as far-fetched as it might seem: Classical music was as much a part of Bobby's background as anything. Born in New York in 1950, his parents were classically trained singers; his father, Robert McFerrin Sr., was the first African-American male to perform solo at the Metropolitan Opera, and provided the singing voice for Sidney Poitier in the movie *Porgy and Bess*. When Bobby was 8, his family moved to Hollywood and music came into Bobby's own life, first in the form of

the clarinet, then the piano. “I knew that I was a musician early,” Bobby says. “I knew that I was very interested in music.”

He became immersed in it, his ears pointed in every direction. “My dad loved Count Basie and Joe Williams and Dinah Washington and the jazz singers,” Bobby remembers. “So I would hear Verdi and Duke Ellington and George Gershwin. Then there was Top 40 radio. They would play James Brown and then the Carpenters and Marvin Gaye and Led Zeppelin. And then they’d play Sergio Mendes and Brasil ’66. There were movie themes, instrumentals—it was amazing.

“I grew up exploring what they called Third Stream music and the Beatles bringing India into their music and Miles Davis exploring electric instruments with jazz, hooking up his trumpet to a wah-wah pedal. Then I’d go to the Metropolitan Opera and see my dad singing *Rigoletto*. When you grow up with that hodgepodge of music, it just comes out. It was like growing up in a multilingual house.”

Bobby started a high school jazz band and later continued to play piano while attending college. Following graduation, he toured with various bands, cabaret acts and dance troupes. But it wasn’t till later, when he was nearly 27, that Bobby McFerrin found his true calling.

“It was a light bulb moment,” he says, “sort of like, ‘Aha! I get it!’ I was living in Salt Lake City and I was an accompanist in the dance department at the University of Utah. I was walking home during a lunch break when, all of a sudden, I knew I was a singer. I called the Hilton Hotel to ask for an audition. I sang five tunes and the guy hired me on the spot. I started working as a singer right away, at the piano bar.”

In 1979, after moving to San Francisco, Bobby met Goldstein, who was then a booking agent and jazz singer. Having worked with such jazz greats as Chet Baker, Dianne Reeves, Joe Henderson and Bill Evans, and such individualists as Laurie Anderson, Béla Fleck, David Byrne, Astrud Gilberto, Cyndi Lauper, and Raffi, Linda was accustomed to finding niches where none existed.

She encouraged Bobby’s eclecticism and set out to create what she terms a “safe space” for him within the jazz arena and the progressive art world. In her more than three decades with Bobby, Goldstein has continued to circumvent established practices and accepted preconceptions in guiding Bobby’s career. “Bobby is so different than anyone else,” she says. “The Germans call him *Wunder Stimme*, which means Wonder Voice. He is such a unique artist that I felt he had more in common with a one-of-a-kind performer like the mime Marcel Marceau than with other vocalists. So from the start I worked to create a niche for him, rather than attempt to fit him into an existing one. I call it managing the unmanageable.”

Bobby’s first big break came in 1980, when Bill Cosby witnessed the aspiring singer and arranged for him to perform at the Playboy Jazz Festival. The following year he was a hit at the Kool Jazz Festival in New York, which led to a contract with Elektra Records. On Bobby’s self-titled debut, released in 1982, he was accompanied by a full complement of musicians, singing original compositions as well as covers of pop and jazz classics.

The album was well-received but somewhat conventional, and playing by the rules was not an option for Bobby. Inspired by Keith Jarrett’s solo jazz piano concerts, McFerrin had an epiphany. “I thought it would be the greatest thing to be onstage as a soloist and disappear into the music,” he says, “by using everything around: the

environment, the acoustics in the hall, the audience. It's not just 'Let's have fun together,' though it's always fun. It's that the audience helps to expand my instrument and the colors of the instrument."

In 1983 Bobby tested the waters by touring Europe as a vocal soloist. The shows were received enthusiastically, and Bobby released some of the music from the German concerts on the tour as his next album, 1984's *The Voice*, acknowledged as the first solo vocal jazz album recorded with no accompaniment or overdubbing. On original songs such as the clever "I'm My Own Walkman" and radically rearranged covers of classics by the Beatles, James Brown and Duke Ellington, Bobby astounded listeners with his versatility and resourcefulness.

With his solo concerts Bobby gave new meaning to the term one-man band. He not only sang the multiple vocal parts himself, he filled in where the instruments would have gone. "He doesn't imitate instruments but assumes what might be their roles," says Linda Goldstein. "He breathes the percussive role—nothing is wasted."

Indeed, Bobby soon learned that he could use not only his mouth but other parts of his body to provide percussion. "I was singing but I felt empty," he says. "So I instinctively brought my hands up to my chest and started playing. It was like, click, that's what I've been missing all this time. I use my body as much as I can to explain visually to the audience where I'm trying to go." A classic example of Bobby's incorporation of this technique is when he Bobby performs his own one-man version of *The Wizard of Oz*, providing the sounds of the tornado, munchkins, witches, and scarecrow himself, running around the stage and acting out the roles by himself.

Bobby's art flowered in the coming years. *Spontaneous Inventions*, recorded in 1985 for Blue Note Records and for a video release (that is now on DVD), mixed both unaccompanied songs and tunes with backing. Because Bobby sought to avoid repetition, he eschewed rehearsals and met his collaborators—among them Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and the comedian Robin Williams—right in the studio, in front of the cameras, having nary a clue what might result. For the album, Bobby picked up his first two Grammys, for his collaboration with Jon Hendricks and Manhattan Transfer on the track "Another Night in Tunisia."

Bobby racked up further Grammys for his 1986 recording of "'Round Midnight" with Herbie Hancock and 1987's "What Is This Thing Called Love?" That same year McFerrin teamed up with no less than Jack Nicholson for an album on which the latter read Rudyard Kipling's *Elephant's Child* while Bobby provided his particular vocal brilliance, adding yet another Grammy to his growing collection.

He was already selling out major venues like Carnegie Hall, even before "the hit." Then, in 1988, it came, altering the public's perception of who Bobby McFerrin was. The album, *Simple Pleasures*, was itself a masterpiece, and would have been recognized as such even if the single had not emerged as such a phenomenon. Half of the album served as something of a tribute to Bobby's own coming-of-age years, the 1960s. The other five tunes were originals.

Bobby's subsequent dive into conducting opened a new chapter for him. He learned the nuances of the craft from giants like Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa and then, on his fortieth birthday, Bobby made his conducting debut, with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

“The conducting came up only because I was very curious about the art of it,” Bobby explains. “I also wanted to experience Mozart and Beethoven. What is it like to stand in front of a group of musicians and have this kind of musical experience? What is it like to stand in front of an audience with your back to them?”

McFerrin went on to conduct dozens of the world’s great orchestras—among them the Chicago Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic—and in 1994 was named creative director of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. There, as a passionate advocate of music education—Bobby has volunteered as a guest music teacher and lecturer at public schools throughout the U.S.—he developed a program called CONNECT (Chamber Orchestra's Neighborhood Network of Education, Curriculum and Teachers).

Even in his conducting work, Bobby—who “hears orchestrally,” as Goldstein puts it—approached the art with an open-mindedness and flexibility rare to that musical genre. Critics piled on the plaudits. “Conductors of mesmeric power are rare, especially in the 20th century,” wrote the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. “Bobby McFerrin... is intimate with every inch of the music he conducts, knows how to give vibrant voice to a score and energizes the musicians at hand.” McFerrin’s conducting work received praise from other, more established conductors, among them the German Carlos Kleiber—called by some the greatest conductor of his generation—who wrote Bobby a fan letter.

“I want to clarify that I am not a conductor,” says Bobby today. “It took me a long, long time to realize that. I am a singer who conducts. I’m kind of a chameleon. I like to put myself in situations that are going to twist my brain up in ways that keep it interesting for me.”

Bobby never actually stopped singing, even during the height of his most intensive period of conducting. The first of his two albums with Chick Corea, *Play* (recorded in 1990, released in ’92), featured McFerrin vocalizing alongside the jazz legend’s piano. Said Corea about the experience, “We admired each other’s offerings with no reservations. But the real magic was that the audience was part of the creation the whole way. Bobby’s command of artistic communication is magnificent and inspiring. I learned a great deal from him about the art of performance.”

Bobby also utilized his post-“Don’t Worry” time to create Voicestra, a dozen-strong group of a cappella vocalists with widely varying backgrounds. Originally a packaged group, Voicestra—like Bobby himself—evolved over time into a purely improvisational vehicle.

“Voicestra came together to explore the dynamics of vocal ensemble performance,” Bobby explained. “It encompasses all kinds of material from world music—African chants and Indian ragas—to storytelling, new songs based on the alphabet and contemporary vocal compositions.”

Bobby has continued working with the ever-evolving Voicestra since its formation and has recorded with the choral group on occasion as well. *Medicine Music* (1990) featured Voicestra on two tracks. Some seven years later, Bobby and Voicestra came together again on the Sony Classical *Circlesongs* album, a meditative masterwork comprised of eight spontaneous improvisations based on African and Middle Eastern traditions and created entirely impromptu.

Each of Bobby's recordings has spotlighted a different aspect of his talent. On 1992's highly successful *Hush*, Bobby collaborated with the celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma on a set of McFerrin originals and classical standards. McFerrin's first fully classical recorded endeavor came in 1995 with *Paper Music*, which featured him both conducting and singing with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. The following year Bobby and Chick Corea met up again for *The Mozart Sessions*, bridging the worlds of jazz and classical with improvisations on the composer's works. The year 1996 also saw Bobby teaming with the jazz fusion outfit the Yellowjackets on *Bang! Zoom*. His 2002 CD, *Beyond Words*, produced—as all of Bobby's albums have been—by Linda Goldstein, was one of his most thrilling ever, a trans-global excursion through Asian, African, Middle Eastern and European influences, with accompaniment by Corea, bassist Richard Bona, drummer Omar Hakim and others.

Beyond Words was also the title given to the incisive Bravo Channel documentary on Bobby, also released on DVD. An inside look at the creative process of Bobby McFerrin, it included commentary from some of his most high-profile advocates, among them Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Yo-Yo Ma and Robin Williams.

Most recently, in early 2010, Bobby released *VOCAbuLarieS* (Universal Jazz and Classics), his first new album in eight years. The culmination of all that McFerrin's music has embodied over the years, and simultaneously a bold step forward, *VOCAbuLarieS* (partially based on material that first surfaced on *Circlesongs*) is a collaboration with the composer, arranger, producer and vocalist Roger Treece, a longtime member of Voicestra. The sophisticated, complex compositions and densely produced, multi-dimensional work shed new light on this uniquely talented artist who, since his arrival on the scene in the 1980s, has continually extended himself into new areas and consistently redefined the potential of the human voice.

Bobby has also collaborated, either live or in the studio, with dozens of other diverse artists of every stylistic stripe, and has appeared in numerous films and television programs—most recently on NBC's *The Sing Off*. He has been the subject of profiles on such TV staples as *60 Minutes* and Ted Koppel's *Nightline*; served as a regular on Garrison Keillor's wildly popular *Prairie Home Companion*; sang the themes for *The Cosby Show* and *Son of the Pink Panther*; and has even appeared in several commercials.

McFerrin also continues to tour rigorously throughout the world—he has played everywhere from Russia to Japan—sometimes solo, sometimes with collaborators. No two shows, of course, are ever the same. In early 2008 alone he curated and headlined a seven-concert series as part of Carnegie Hall's Perspectives series, each tied to a different theme. The final performance found Bobby and some 20 vocalists, of various national and stylistic backgrounds, woodshedding for five days and then creating a spontaneous “Instant Opera” based on the tale of the Tower of Babel.

That idea, the improvised opera, was further explored with a new show called “Bobble,” whose wordless libretto, using 16 stylistically diverse singers, explores the quandary of the people of the biblical city of Babel. How, it asks, did we communicate before we shared common languages? The program, spontaneously composed and conducted by McFerrin, has played in Europe to ecstatic audiences.

At another performance, at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center in 2008, Bobby hosted a show at which he was joined by several other vocal groups, including South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Bulgaria's Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares.

Bobby McFerrin finds his creative spark in a place many artists would find exceedingly frightening: having no clue what's going to happen next. Ask him where he went to school, and he just might tell you that he is a graduate of MSU: Making Stuff Up.

Critics have long praised Bobby's consistent creativity. The *New York Times* credited him with sparking a revival of a cappella music, giving the form a new life by purposefully ignoring the rules that had been set out for it, while the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "The hyperkinetic, superpersonable, wide-ranging singer... does more than vocalize, conduct and produce music. He lives it." *Newsweek* opined, "There is something almost superhuman about the range and technique of Bobby McFerrin. He sounds, by turns, like a blackbird, a Martian, an operatic soprano, a small child and a bebop trumpet."

Some have called him a "one-hit wonder," but while it's true McFerrin never again scaled the hit record charts the way he did back in 1988, that phrase doesn't really apply because he never tried to have a second hit. "What 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' gave Bobby was 'the luxury of experimentation,'" is how Linda Goldstein puts it. "It allowed him the freedom to explore. He is a man of infinite, unfathomable, boundless voices and everything he has ever heard has gone into his brain, from the Mickey Mouse Club theme to the Metropolitan Opera."

More than 20 years later, Bobby still regularly sells out nearly all of his performances. His loyal fans know that, when one becomes a part of his audience, something will happen that has never happened before, and never will again. McFerrin is the rare artist whose continued success is based solely on his daring artistry and immense flexibility.

For the humble and modest Bobby McFerrin—a married father of three (his oldest son, Taylor, is emerging as a popular performer in his own right) who has lived in the Philadelphia area for some years—music-making is a quest, a means of communicating and spreading joy, not a competition or a business. He operates outside of the star system, his only care for the integrity of the music and his only desire to become a deeper musician.

"Music for me," says Bobby, "is like a spiritual journey down into the depths of my soul. And I like to think we're all on a journey into our souls. What's down there? That's why I do what I do."

Adds Linda Goldstein, "Bobby brings all the ingredients of life to his music, in audiences, in time and space, all the colors and all of the cells and molecules, and light and history—then everything gets supercharged in Bobby's presence. He can create something out of nothing, the way the alchemists would try to create gold out of lead."

So where will this ever-evolving artist go next? "I think there's still some stuff in there," is all he will say.

Whatever he does, you can be sure that no one else in the world will be able to say "Been there, done that." There is only one Bobby McFerrin. He's got that market covered.

Visit www.bobbymcferrin.com for more information, interactive games, sheet music, and Bobby merchandise.