

Bobby McFerrin Short Bio - January 2010

To some people, Bobby McFerrin will always be the guy who sang *Don't Worry Be Happy*. And he is that guy; he wrote and sang that global number one hit more than twenty years ago. But if that song is all you know about Bobby McFerrin, we suggest the following: Go to YouTube, type in Bobby's name, sit back and prepare for a serious boggling of the mind.

There you'll find many delights and some astonishing statistics. You'll join the millions who have marveled at Bobby's stunning rendition of the Bach prelude "Ave Maria." You'll find Bobby's shockingly inventive appearance on the NBC music program *The Sing Off*, his unparalleled interpretations of Beatles songs, his collaborations with everyone from cellist Yo-Yo Ma to pianist Chick Corea to comedian Robin Williams, and his condensed version of *The Wizard of Oz*. You'll see him conducting the Vienna Philharmonic and consorting with the muppets on *Sesame Street*. You'll be awed by the way McFerrin brilliantly uses audience participation, most recently to demonstrate the power of the pentatonic scale at the World Science Festival in a performance that became a viral internet phenomenon, seen by over four million people. And that just scratches the surface.

Bobby McFerrin is an eternal seeker, always defying the music industry's practical impulse to pigeonhole artists. His diversity and range are incomparable. Drawing on all genres, demonstrating matchless improvisational skills and an ability to create new vocabularies on the fly, he never fails to dazzle. Yet his music is always accessible and inviting. What is most telling about the journey through his YouTube entries are the comments from fans old and new. "Beautiful—there's no other word to describe this music," said one viewer, while another employed some 30-plus adjectives all meant to convey joy and wonderment. "He is the Johann Sebastian Bach and the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart of today!" wrote yet another, impressed by Bobby's endless creativity. Perhaps the statement that sums it up best is this one: "Bobby McFerrin makes me happy!"

VOCAbuLarieS (Universal Jazz and Classics), Bobby McFerrin's first new recording in eight years, harnesses all that wildly joyful creativity and searching musical curiosity. The culmination of all that McFerrin's music has embodied thus far and simultaneously a bold step forward, *VOCAbuLarieS* is a collaboration with the composer/arranger/producer Roger Treece, a member of Bobby's improvising vocal ensemble *Voicestra*. The sophisticated, complex compositions and densely produced, multi-dimensional textures on *VOCAbuLarieS* are an expansion into new territory.

Never a conventional artist, Bobby McFerrin was exposed to a multitude of musical genres during his youth—classical, R&B, jazz, pop and world musics—and all of them have since been absorbed and assimilated into his own unpremeditated art. "When you grow up with that hodgepodge of music, it just comes out. It was like growing up in a multilingual house," he says. Bobby spent his earliest days as a professional musician in

jazz and cabaret bands, and it wasn't until age 27 that he experienced what he calls his "light bulb moment" and realized that his true calling was singing.

A couple of short years later, Bobby was touring with the Hendricks Family. One night the audience included Linda Goldstein, a young singer who had opened a booking agency and was working with many legendary jazz musicians. On the night they met, Bobby performed a solo a cappella version of Joan Armatrading's song "*Opportunity*," singing the melody, outlining the harmony and adding basslines and percussion, all at the same time. "I saw myself onstage alone with nothing but my voice, improvising, like a Keith Jarrett solo piano concert," says McFerrin. "At that time, I had no idea how to pull it off." Goldstein became Bobby's manager and producer, helping McFerrin forge an unconventional path through the worlds of jazz, classical music, performance art, and the record industry. "Thirty years later," explains Goldstein, "Bobby was conducting at La Scala, experimenting with multi-track recording, touring with *Voicestra*, and still doing his legendary solo show. I wanted to find the intersection of these pathways." With *VOCAbuLaries* they have begun another phase of an incredible journey.

McFerrin's highly eclectic debut album was released in 1982. But it was 1984's *The Voice* that first introduced Bobby's unprecedented vision of the singer as a solo artist, and began to convey the atmosphere of sacred joy he created in concert. Bobby loved the freedom of solo performance, the ability to reach for any and every influence, follow every impulse. He began to draw attention with his unusual arsenal of vocal techniques, especially the percussive sounds he made with his mouth and by drumming on parts of his body. He was interested in experimentation and feedback from live audiences, and was reluctant to return to the recording studio. Goldstein suggested a live recording, and they began work on *Spontaneous Inventions* (1985), a compilation of improvised solos and collaborations with surprise guest artists from Robin Williams to Wayne Shorter, all recorded live for both audio and television. *Spontaneous Inventions* earned Bobby the first of his 10 Grammy Awards. He was filling major concert halls around the world. Things seemed to be going well. But neither the industry nor the public knew exactly what to make of Bobby McFerrin. He was frequently compared to other singers like Al Jarreau, or described as an imitator of instrumental styles. But Bobby wanted to remain on his own iconoclastic path, exploring the limitless potential of the human voice.

Bobby had long experimented with overdubbing, layering his voice in the studio. *Simple Pleasures* (1988) was the first recording to document the results. The smash hit single from that album, "*Don't Worry Be Happy*," made McFerrin a household name. One of the defining songs of that era, it remains popular today. But for the singer it quickly became yesterday's news. Rather than capitalize on his success, McFerrin looked for new inspiration. He created *Voicestra*, explored collaborations with the classical cellist Yo-Yo Ma and jazz pianist Chick Corea, and began incorporating unexpected treasures like Gounod's Ave Maria into his repertoire. He decided, as a fortieth birthday present to himself, to take on the challenge of conducting. Since then he has led dozens of the world's great orchestras. "I'm kind of a chameleon," McFerrin says. "I like to put myself in situations that are going to twist my brain up in interesting ways."

Meanwhile, for the very first time in his career Bobby had a label hoping for a follow-up hit. With a generous recording budget, he experimented for months in the studio. The result, *Medicine Music* (1990), contained some lasting gems but didn't sell many copies. (The song *Baby* from *Medicine Music* appears, re-imagined and transformed, on *VOCABuLarieS*.) Unexpectedly, his duo recording with Yo-Yo Ma, *Hush* (1991), became an international best-seller. *Play* (1992) and *The Mozart Sessions* (1996) document the chemistry between Bobby and Chick Corea, and *Paper Music* (1995) demonstrates the fantastic rapport between Bobby and the musicians of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

But Bobby's refusal to fit neatly into any musical category still confounded the recording industry. 1997's *Circlesongs*, a meditative masterwork comprised of eight spontaneous improvisations based on African and Middle Eastern traditions, provided some of the inspiration for *VOCABuLarieS*. *Beyond Words* (2002) is a trans-global excursion through Asian, African, Middle Eastern and European influences, with accompaniment by Chick Corea, bassist Richard Bona, drummer Omar Hakim and others. An incisive Bravo Channel documentary on Bobby, also entitled *Beyond Words*, was released in 2003 and is still available on DVD.

Bobby continues to explore the musical universe, known and unknown. He never seems to run out of new ideas, repeatedly discovering the creative spark within. He loves 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. "There is something almost superhuman about the range and technique of Bobby McFerrin," says *Newsweek*. "He sounds, by turns, like a blackbird, a Martian, an operatic soprano, a small child, and a bebop trumpet." What Bobby does with his voice – the way he incorporates dense rhythms, extraordinary scales, and tricky intervals - is complex enough that many have studied and analyzed his work. Despite the undeniable uniqueness of his gift, there is an Everyman quality to Bobby McFerrin. When he invites his fans to sing along, as he almost always does, few can resist. Inclusiveness, play, and the universality of voices raised together in song are at the heart of Bobby's art.

"Music for me," McFerrin says, "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."