



PORTRAIT

Concerto for Voice and the Rest of the World Bobby McFerrin talks about his Art of the Moment

Bobby McFerrin, who celebrated his 60th birthday earlier this year, is perhaps one of the world's most versatile musicians, and his favorite instrument is his own voice. He is also a composer, pianist, conductor, voice actor and educator who has won ten Grammys and numerous other national and international awards. His biggest commercial hit *Don't Worry, Be Happy* is one of only a handful of a capella hits in the history of pop, and probably one of the best-known songs of the last three decades. But McFerrin was not content with being a pop artist and moved on to more challenging musical projects, cooperating with classical cellist virtuoso Yo Yo Ma, jazz inventor Chic Corea and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, to name but a few. He should probably also be mentioned in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for performing the *Ave Maria* with over 50,000 singers on the occasion of Johann Sebastian Bach's 250th birthday.

Although McFerrin himself humbly calls the recording merely a "journal" and his art a "very simple" one, his new album *VOCAbuLarieS* is already being hailed by many critics as one of his – if not the – best ever. It is both a collection of complex vocal collages, with parts in Latin, Italian, Sanskrit, Zulu, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, Portuguese, Mandarin, Japanese, French, Arabic, German, English and Gaelic as well as McFerrin's own invented language; and it is a simple and passionate celebration of the infinite musical potential of the human voice.

As a musician and ambassador for *Hear the World*, Bobby McFerrin helps raise awareness about the importance of hearing, emphasizing that even for him as a singer "being able to hear well is more important" even than the ability to sing. And he also reveals, quite unexpectedly, his next big musical (dream) project.

Hear the World Presents:

Bobby McFerrin at Menuhin Festival Gstaad, Switzerland

Bobby McFerrin will be playing in Gstaad, on August 14, 2010, at the Menuhin Festival. In addition to the evening concert, *Hear the World* presents a live talk with Bobby McFerrin in the Chapel of Gstaad at 1:30 pm. Admission is free.

For more information on the festival, visit www.menuhinfestivalgstaad.ch

Bobby McFerrin Exclusive Portrait Auction!

In connection with Bobby McFerrin's concert on August 14, 2010 in Gstaad, the *Hear the World* Foundation is auctioning an original portrait of the artist photographed by Bryan Adams. Proceeds from the auction will benefit the Arabkir Children's Hospital in Yerevan, Armenia in support of a project for the rehabilitation of children with hearing loss. The buyer will not only obtain a unique piece of photography, but also an exclusive meet and greet with Bobby McFerrin himself after his concert in Gstaad.

Visit www.hear-the-world.com

Photo: Bryan Adams

“IT WOULD BE KIND OF TRAGIC BEING ABLE TO SING, BUT NOT BEING ABLE TO HEAR IF I WAS SINGING IN TUNE OR NOT, SO I THINK BEING ABLE TO HEAR WELL IS MORE IMPORTANT.”

What do you prefer to call yourself – singer, musician, conductor or maybe something completely different? (Laughing) Well, I’m not a conductor, that I know, I would never call myself that. I’m certainly a musician, because that’s what my practice is, so when people ask me what I do, I say I’m a singer. I don’t say: “I’m a jazz singer, a blues singer or a folk singer”, just a singer.

How did you conceive the *VOCAbuLarieS* project, how do you actually “write” a complex piece like *Baby* or *Say Ladeo*?

Well, the project was conceived because I kept getting a lot of inquiries from choirs to write material for them, and that goes back into the nineties. I don’t remember exactly when Roger (Treece) and I started working together, but it was ten, eleven years ago. It took us a couple of years to figure out how to work together, and then we devoted the last eight years to working on this project – which involved a lot of writing and rewriting, recording and re-recording over the years. The idea was mainly to put down on paper my thoughts, musically, and also try to translate as best as we could the sounds that I use, the language that I employ, when I’m singing. People are always asking: “what scat syllables do you use when you sing?”, and I tell them that I make it up as I go along. So this album is sort of a lexicon of the language and sounds and rhythms that I employ when I’m doing solo concerts, and we expanded them for choirs.

For this album, you recorded with over 50 musicians over several years, creating way over 1,000 vocal tracks in 15 different languages. Where do you start, where do you stop and how do you avoid getting lost along the way?

Well, I kept from getting lost, because I would just dip into the studio from time to time, because with my touring schedule, it was difficult for me to be in the studio all the time, so I basically did all my parts alone with Roger. I would come in every couple of months or so to record, and in the meantime he would continue working, orchestrating the harmonies and things like that, and then he would call to tell me “I need you for two days to work out a couple of spots”, or “I’ve changed my mind about a particular passage and we need to redo it”, that kind of thing, and that’s why it took so long. And then, of course, he employed about fifty singers, most of them from New York, a lot of them from VOICESTRA, my improv vocal group, Lisa Fischer, Luciana Souza, and Janis Siegel from Manhattan Transfer, so getting all these people together took a lot of time, but it was worth it, and I am very pleased with the outcome.

Did you learn anything new in the process?

Well, I learned a lot about the discipline that it takes to set these ideas down and be committed to them, and I think that’s one reason why Roger and I work so well together, because we’re the complete opposites of one another (laughing). I am totally immersed in the mystery, the profundity of the improvisational moment, things that only happen one time, I am engrossed in that, music that you only hear once, and you never know how to begin or how it’s gonna end. Roger on the other hand is a composer, and – like Beethoven or Mozart – part of the pleasure they get from music is the visual aspect of it, the theoretical aspect of it, seeing their music on paper and realizing that it can be repeated, it can be done again. So what I learned is what it takes to compose in that way, and he’s been learning from me how to capture the improvisational moment. So we were good for each other, you know, we were like bookends.

How do you think your music should best be heard?

Live – in concert

So the recording is merely...?

...a journal to document where I am right now as a musician. This is what I’m exploring. This is what I have to say to you, my public – whoever you are that’s listening. This is where I’m at on my musical journey at this point in my life.

Would you describe some of your music as religious?

For example the piece *Brief Eternity* on *VOCAbuLarieS*? All of musicmaking, for me personally, is like a religious experience. It is food for my soul, and I value singing as a spiritual doorway that takes me to some levels of emotion and knowledge and understanding that I cannot access any other way.

Do you experience this only when you perform, or is there also music by other people that conveys a similar feeling?

Well, when I first heard Miles Davis back in Los Angeles, February 1971, that was a religious experience, I was never the same after that. I walked out of the club, a completely changed man. When Keith Jarrett started doing his solo concerts, this was another experience for me that changed my life. And then of course, Weather Report in 1976 or 1977, when Jaco (Pastorius) was in the band, Alex Acuña and Manolo Badrena. Jaco was like the Jimi Hendrix of the bass. The first time I heard them, I was completely stunned. I remember at the end of the concert, everybody leapt to their feet and gave them standing ovations, and I couldn’t budge, I couldn’t move. Those three experiences overwhelmed me. And the first time I heard Charles Ives’ music, again I was deeply moved by this man’s music and what he heard and how he understood music. But nowadays, there is so much music out there, it’s hard for me to know which way to turn.

Do you think in the age of downloads and mobile devices, music has lost some of its aura or its value?

I don't think it has lost its aura, but I haven't been startled by things in a long time, because there's too much music. We become so used to it. It's become sort of a background noise to our lives. So we don't really pay attention to it the way that I did when I was growing up. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, buying an album was one of the most important things in my life. I would rush home, put the album on the turntable, listen to every single cut, read the liner notes over and over again, read the lyrics, if they were printed on the inner sleeve. Sometimes I would light candles, it was almost like a religious service in my home. And nowadays, music is so prevalent that we hardly even notice it.

Is there anything that can be done about it?

Yes. One thing, I think that school children should have music as part of their daily routine. Teachers should expose them to pretty much everything that there is, but basically classical music like Mozart and Igor Stravinsky, some jazz and some classic rock like Eric Clapton or James Taylor. When I was in third grade, I had a teacher who would actually tell us to close our books and he would give us percussion instruments, and we would have jam sessions during the day. I think it would be great if a teacher said to his class: "close your books, close your eyes and listen to this," and then play Bach or Mozart to them, or he could say: "Close your books, stand up and dance" and play James Brown for them. I think that'd be great.

Coming back to *VOCABuLarieS*, which sounds like

"World Music" in the true sense of the word, do you

think you've finally found a universal musical language?

Oh, I don't know. I know what I do is very, very simple. It's something that we're losing, and that is just the art of spontaneous music making with other people. You know, people coming over to your house, gathering around the piano and spontaneously singing music together. Nowadays, we just listen to music...

Is there anything you haven't done, musically, and that you would like to do in the future?

I would very much like to work with Eric Clapton. I'd like to get into that world. I'd love to put together a band with Eric, James Taylor, Alison Krauss, Steve Gadd. I love his playing, I love his music. I would love to be involved in it one way or another, even if it meant just being a background singer. That would be enough for me.

What seems more important to you – being able to sing or to hear well?

(Sigh!) It would be kind of tragic being able to sing, but not being able to hear if I was singing in tune or not, so I think being able to hear well is more important. Eventually my voice is not going to be as strong as it is now. Who knows how long God has planned for me to be a singer on this earth, but I really want to be able to hear the birds singing, the water in the creek and the wind in the trees.

Interview by Christian Arndt

www.bobbymcferrin.com

Ave Maria live in Leipzig:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmdDmnHKQvk

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