

Bobby McFerrin

By Nora McCarthy

*"The people will delight in the joy of him who delights in their joy."
-Mencius (c. 371-289 B.C) Confucian philosopher*

Jazz at Lincoln Center brings 10-time GRAMMY®-winner and vocal virtuoso Bobby McFerrin to Rose Theater for the first time on November 12 & 13, 2010, at 8pm with music from the critically-acclaimed 2010 album *VOCAbuLarieS*. This massive and complex project has been described as "groundbreaking" and "a new kind of choral music" and has played to sold out houses and standing ovations in Munich, Prague, Vienna, San Francisco, and London, and at festivals including Schleswig-Holstein, Ravinia, Oregon Bach and Montreal Jazz.

VOCAbuLarieS took over 7 years to make and after having listened to it countless times, the auditory magnificence of each composition and its technological wonder continues to open up as freshly as the first time I heard it, which makes it a living body of work. I am thrilled that it is being presented at Rose Theater for there is nothing quite like it anywhere and to have the opportunity to hear the music in this capacity will be an unforgettable experience. The performance will contain elements from Mr. McFerrin's trademark solo work as well as audience interaction.

So who is the man behind the music and the motivating force of this stellar production? And what is the underlying energy that propels Bobby McFerrin's unique and otherworldly talents that allows him to tap into the hearts of people at every performance around the globe? *It is pure joy.* Having had the honor of interviewing this outstanding artist, it was apparent from the onset of the interview that Bobby McFerrin comes from a place of absolute self realization, peace, truth and happiness. In a world and profession that requires constant vigilance, dedication, commitment and values to stay above the fray, it appears that he has mastered those qualities and is tuned into the highest art of all: life itself. It comes through everything he does and it is transforming, hence his ability to lead 65,000 people in spontaneously composed harmony at the Ruhr Festival of Song in Essen, DE. And that is just one amazing performance out of a lifetime of such incredible performances.

In the liner notes of his *Circlesongs* CD [1997] he says, "I've always felt that singing a song without words makes one song a thousand songs because the people who hear it can bring their own stories to it." It is this singer's belief that we could have peace on earth if we took the words away and communicated from heart to heart through music the way he does with his spontaneously composed "Circlesongs", and I think

Hear Bobby perform at Jazz At Lincoln Center,
November 12-13
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Bobby McFerrin could be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work bringing people together in harmony through music which transcends language, religious, racial, political, national and social barriers.

Bobby McFerrin is living proof that excellence as an artist can coexist with excellence as a human being. In the same way that he performs solo, singing all the parts, filling in all the rhythmic spaces, he balances his entire life in harmony with self and the world around him, incorporating and using everything available to him in the moment as creative fodder and giving back beauty, joy and happiness as his gift to the Creator and world. He has done more for the art of singing and the voice as an instrument than any other singer in jazz and contemporary musical history. By expanding the possibilities of the voice and exposing its limitless potential he has gained respect for singers everywhere and led them like a guru to finding their individual voices and the spirit within. Like an alchemist, he has crossed over many genres of music and transformed all into a mystical experience.

Talking with Bobby McFerrin was like talking to an old friend: warm, gracious, kind, and without pretense or ego—the truth here being that what you hear on his records and see in his performances is who he is and that is why he is so great. Yes, I think anyone who hears him and witnesses his performances would agree that he possesses amazing skills as a singer, musician, improviser, conductor, composer, arranger and innovator—that is undeniable—but what makes him truly great are his values, his character and how he lives his life and his art. The following interview reveals the spirit, generosity, humility and humanity of this exceptional artist as he candidly shares his thoughts on his upcoming performance at Rose Theater, his recent CD *VOCAbuLarieS*, the creative process, the art of improvisation, music education and gratitude.

JJ: Bobby, your upcoming show at Rose Theater in Frederick P. Rose Hall at Jazz at Lincoln Center will consist of 3 elements, your trademark solo performance, songs from your recent *VOCAbuLarieS* CD and your audience interactive *Circlesongs*. You have the ability to instantly capture your audience's attention with your solo performances and transform the atmosphere to where it becomes your own personal intimate space. You make it look so easy. What initially inspired you to work in solo and what would you suggest to the singers out there who are interested in developing this aspect of their art?

BM: Keith Jarrett is primarily responsible for me doing solo concerts because I, as a pianist, was really



Courtesy Jazz At Lincoln Center

enamored with his challenging the audience [by] just simply walking on stage, sitting at the piano and just playing it and playing anything that came into his mind. So I thought, wow, that's kind of interesting. It took me about a year to convince myself that it was possible, that I could actually do it. And then I worked on it, the technique, for about six years before my first solo concert.

NM: So, you started by experimenting with the freedom.

BM: Yes, right. I would take songs...my first solo song was a piece by Joan Armatrading called "Opportunity" and I knew what the task was—that I had to somehow make the audience hear the music, hear the harmony, hear the rhythm, hear everything. So I had to figure out how to do that. It's like the power of suggestion. You give them enough information and then trust the audience to fill in the blanks. So I worked on that for quite a while and I knew I had figured it out when a really well-respected drummer by the name of Allen Dawson, who was on the faculty of Berklee College of Music—I was working with John Hendricks at the time and he was in the band— and [Allen Dawson] was just this unbelievable drummer; some of the things he was doing were awe inspiring, gave me a ride one night after the gig back to the hotel and he said, "I hear everything: I hear the music, I hear the melody, I hear all the harmonies and things like that; I hear what you're doing." So, hearing that from him, out of his mouth, made me believe I was on the right road--on the right track.

NM: It gave you the confidence to know you could do that.

BM: Exactly.

NM: I think what it is with a lot of singers is that they have fear. They are afraid that they are going to

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JJ: What do you do to recharge your batteries?

DK: I just spent a whole month in New York City. It's the first time that I've ever done this! And boy did I have a good time! I love to travel, I love to get out of my normal comfort zone. I spend a lot of time with my family when I'm home. It's important for me and my nieces. I love wine. I love going out to good diners. I love movies – probably my *biggest* passion.

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leave out one of the missing pieces, like you said, that connects the whole thing. I think singing the bass line while keeping the rhythm is the most difficult part of what you do, while simultaneously singing the melody and parts of the harmonies--accompanying yourself--that's pretty amazing to sing all the parts like you do--in time.

BM: Well I worked on it for a long, long time.

NM: I saw your performance in Peekskill at the Paramount Theater and you have this ability to just walk out on the stage and pull everyone into your world in about one second--that is mesmerizing to observe. As a singer, I know how difficult it is to just walk out there cold and the people are like, Well OK, entertain me.

BM: Well, I know. I've been through that. In my earliest solo performances I was wracked with doubt and the audience was quite fearful. You know, it was like this beast--pretty consuming. Because first of all I was doing something that I really didn't have any models for. And in the beginning people thought I was some kind of musical comedian, and they would laugh. I can't tell you how many performances in the beginning, when I would go to auditions, or go to clubs to just sit in, I'd do a solo piece and people would end up laughing because they just didn't know how to respond to what I was doing--they had no reference.

NM: I know. Anytime you make a sound that is just a little off center, it tends to make people laugh or make a silly comment, and I think it's just that they don't want to appear ignorant to something they don't understand, like they are missing out on something. So they'll laugh at it because they are self conscious of what they don't know. But I noticed that you use that fun in your performances. You turn the whole thing into a big fun game for everybody.

BM: Well I use everything. Everything just becomes fodder for improv. It's just material. Instead of deflecting it, I reflect it, absorb it and just give it back.

NM: You use improvisation as a vehicle to communicate the language of music--it's actually just the language of being human and being comfortable with ourselves. But what have you discovered about that art? What's the one thing that sets the stage for the magic to occur?

JJ: What have some of your favorites been recently?

DK: Well, that social network movie. It's really a movie for our times. You know, as long as I've got popcorn and a cup of soda, I'm pretty happy!

JJ: Are there any quotes or fragments of wisdom that you could share with our readers that would be inspiring, or motivating?

BM: Well I'm always really fascinated with the art. I never know how things are going to turn out. My first two pieces as a rule are always improvs. That's just a rule I set up for myself because I don't want to fall back on a tune, to do something I've done before. It used to be the rule that just the first piece was improvised, but then I realized that the most difficult piece of the night was the second one.

NM: It's like where are you going to pull the ideas from if you've given the audience your very best with the first piece? How do you top yourself?

BM: Exactly. And sometimes that first piece is 20, 25 minutes long of improv. I mean, what do you do after that? Anyway, I love to improvise. I love discovering what's out there because it's all a mystery, like stepping into a mystery.

NM: Let's talk about your new CD *VOCAbuLarieS*. I reviewed that CD and it took me about two weeks of intense listening to do the review. I have noticed that some reviewers use a lot of superlatives and they don't get into analyzing the compositions or into what might have motivated or inspired the work itself. I read some of the reviews and it has been described as a deeply spiritual, magical masterpiece, which I totally agree with. But delving deeper into the technological aspects of it and the intricacies of the work itself...what do you think makes this CD a masterpiece, if in fact you would categorize it as such?

BM: It was taxing, for one. It was a lot of work--seven, eight years in the making. Sometimes I would be a little bit anxious for it to come to an end, but Roger Treece is an amazing composer. I was a composition major in college and the difficulty I had as a composer--and I can say this because I think Roger has a little bit of the same quality, I guess you could call it--is that I had the hardest time making decisions about where I wanted the music to go sometimes. I would get to a junction of some kind and there would be a fork in the road and I might go to the left side, and I'd find some really interesting stuff on the left side. Then I'd go back to the beginning point and I'd take the right fork in the road and I'd find some really interesting stuff down there too. So I'd find myself scratching my head sometimes asking, well which way do I go? And this happened a lot of times in the process of putting this album together. Roger would go down these roads where he would find interesting stuff everywhere, so we'd go down a road and we'd finish it. I thought we'd be finished with the piece, and then Roger would say, "Wait a minute, I've got some more ideas," and we'd go back

DK: Well, there was a closet, that served as a dressing room, in a tiny little club called the Pizza Express in London, in SoHo. The club is great, by the way. So I'm in this closet [dressing room]. People had written a bunch of complaining bullsh*t. But there were these three little sentences and "Wow!" they stuck with me. I don't know who wrote it, but here is what it was "Need nothing. Want everything. And, choose your way in life" ■

into the studio and try out some new stuff. So it would take a long, long time for the pieces to be finished, but it made sense because he is a perfectionist. Even now, though it's funny, because I asked him after the album was done, did he feel there were any places he would have liked to have gone and he said, "Of course. I listen to it now and I ask myself, well why didn't I go there, why didn't I write that down?" So, I think that's one of the reasons why the album took such a long time. The other is my touring schedule. Also, the amount of ideas that I would give Roger because he would say, "Today I want to work on some bass lines. I'm not satisfied with the bass line that I wrote." So I would go in and give him 30, 40, 50 different bass lines and he would have to pull them all apart and decide which one to do. I can remember very, very vividly one night in the studio, he just basically put this 32 bar section on a loop, and I just went on and on and on and I think for like 28 times, over 32 bars, and then he would go back and he would just pull all this stuff out and say, "OK, I'm going to use this, I'm going to use that." You know, that's how it worked.

NM: That's amazing. How did he keep track of all those different tracks?

BM: Well, yeah, he did. He had it set up so that he would have everything and he would just go back and just put it all together.

NM: I never heard about him before I heard your CD and read your liner notes, and now I'm hearing more and more about him. It's kind of the way it works.

BM: Yeah, that's the way it works.

NM: So, do you consider it a masterpiece?

BM: Yes it is.

NM: I would say so, and that's nice to know that you feel that way. *VOCAbuLarieS* was such a huge undertaking that required a mind-boggling amount of work: 7 to 8 years in the making; over 100 gigs of digital space; recording and editing over 1,400 vocal tracks, that were recorded individually and in groups over those years. So that having been said, with this unprecedented musical statement being made, how does one bring something of this magnitude to a live performance? And what can the audience expect to hear that may be different from the CD itself?

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BM: Oh, it's actually not that difficult because a lot of the singers that were on the LP--most of the recording was done in New York--are out here and they're going to make up the chorus. I think there's going to be around 40 singers on stage, something like that.

NM: The songs, are they going to be like they are on the CD? I mean it seems kind of hard to translate that for me, with so much of what is done in the studio with regard to editing for instance that doesn't occur in a live performance.

BM: No, it still sounds great.

NM: I'm sure it's going to be celestial. Are you in rehearsals now?

BM: No, I'm only attending the last one before the performance.

NM: So Roger takes care of everything?

BM: Yes, he does. He works out all the choirs. And when we do a performance, he's there at least a week in advance because these tunes are really complex.

NM: Do you want to divulge what songs you will be doing from the CD or is that a surprise?

BM: I don't know, in the past we've done "The Garden", "Messages", and "Wailers", but that's Roger's call.

NM: Let me ask you about your collaborations outside of Roger. I know you've worked with a lot of people, the best in the world. Is there anyone you haven't worked with and would you ever consider working with Cecil Taylor or Ornette Coleman?

BM: Well, Ornette and I have played together, we never really worked together. But we did something recently, maybe a year and half ago in England.

NM: What about Cecil Taylor?

BM: That would be a serious challenge because he's all over the place. I don't really know how I'd fit in with that.

NM: How does your experience as a conductor influence your vocal composition since many of them are written in the moment?

BM: First off, I don't do much conducting anymore. And I don't write much anymore [laughter].

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hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

NP: Yeah, that's really true, and it has to be a solemn reward for you. You can't necessarily do it expecting that this or that will happen necessarily. A lot of people, a lot of times just won't get it. Often times you will suffer a great deal, because it'll make other people feel

NM: Your Voicestra deals with wordless songs. Conversely, have you ever thought of working with poets and dealing with the words?

BM: Oh, I have many times. I thought about doing that myself. In my early twenties I wrote a lot of poetry, I was writing all the time. I thought at some point I'd like to come back and write some more, you know, start with the words, which is really difficult for me to do, because usually I start with the music and then find the words in the melody or something. But to actually start with words would be really challenging for me.

NM: Start with the words and break it down and digress into sounds. That would be very cool. I know you're an advocate for music education. What do you think of the current jazz educational programs?

BM: I really don't know much about that aspect of it, because I don't spend a lot of time going to schools, so I don't know what's really happening. But I can tell you this: it seems pretty obvious that the arts are not as funded as well as sports or other aspects of education. When I get a chance to speak to teachers I tell them they are in a large part responsible for musically educating their students by simply making music a part of their class environment. Most people sit back and wait for some kind of government funding. They say, "Well if we only had \$10,000 to buy instruments." So they wait for the government to fund some kind of music program when in a lot of ways music education simply requires exposure to music. Teachers can really get a handle on that one and decide that they're going to bring music into the classroom by just simply playing music in the classroom. You introduce music into the classroom as students are walking in at the beginning of the day, particularly for young people, you play music during nap time, you play music during some study time, you play music when they're coming in from recess, and even at the end of the day. You talk about, if you're studying history, what was the music of that time period?

NM: How did you find the singers you used on the CD and for Voicestra?

BM: Roger found them. There are a lot of singers from my group Voicestra, which is sort of like the spine of the project, and then he hired everyone else. Most of the singers are from New York, I believe - 80% of them easily.

NM: What role does gratitude play in your day to day life?

BM: It absolutely and positively does. First of all I'm

uncomfortable about their ineptitude; their unwillingness to be authentic. If you speak about what's true and how things really are, that can make people very uncomfortable, and you run a risk of not necessarily being too liked. It's another thing entirely to deny what you felt to be true in your heart, to do something for someone else's sake for some kind of other gain, be it monetary or whatever, and then to not have to come through ... also having to deal with the fact that

grateful for just waking up in the morning; grateful that I have work that I enjoy; grateful that I've been married to the same wonderful woman for thirty-five years and have three fabulous children. Hugely grateful that my heart beats and my lungs breathe, that I live out in the woods and it's very, very quiet, like a retreat. So I'm grateful for nature and I'm grateful for the gifts God has given me. Gratitude plays a huge part in my life.

NM: Your appeal to the youth is extraordinary and the joy of what you do is very contagious to audiences of all ages. At one of your recent performances, I was attentive to some of the comments around me from a group of young men who were taking great delight in explaining to some of their companions who you were, which was basically summed up in two words as *the man*. I noticed the same magic taking place when I watched the Sing Off video on YouTube and saw the smiling faces, rapt attention and exuberance of the young singers surrounding you. How do you explain your appeal to the younger generation?

BM: [Laughter] I don't know, I can't explain it at all.

NM: They love you and you really get them going. And when I saw in particular one of the young men get up on the stage with you and dance, you were loving him so much, and isn't that what it's all about? They are truly the best of us.

BM: Yes, that's what it's all about. It's amazing.

NM: What is your legacy, then?

BM: It's all about joy and just making music. The joy of having fun together, the joy of being real, accepting of one another. All of that is what it is all about; just being regular, normal. No frills, no thrills, nothing glamorous; it's just all about the music, just being real, just being true.

NM: This is your first time at the Rose Theater. How do you feel about that?

BM: I'm looking forward to it, a new space. I'm excited.

NM: Would you be interested in doing something in the future with your music as an ambassador for peace?

BM: I'd love to. Sure, if I was asked. ■

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you weren't true to who you were. You know, that's something I'm just not willing to do. I don't care how rough it gets. I've dealt with a lot of stuff.

JJ: Talk about your commitment to quality and integrity.

NP: For me good enough is not good enough. I'm al-

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