

Interview by Gene Aitken

Don't think of Bobby McFerrin as just a singer. He's an entertainer of immense creativity and energy who explores the sounds and spaces of the environment in which he is performing. To expect the unexpected in a concert is commonplace as he interacts with his audience, reaching for something new to share with that particular group of individuals. Using the imaginative elements in both visual and audio communications, Bobby takes each audience on a smooth musical journey to somewhere they've never been.

"I go out with a blank slate and whatever happens, happens. I like to be as open as possible. There are so many sources of inspiration . . . squeaky floors, someone shouting out a name, microphone feedback. I'm open to anything."

Bobby McFerrin was born in New York City to Robert and Sara McFerrin, both classical musicians. Bobby's father was a baritone with the Metropolitan Opera. Among his many accomplishments he dubbed Sidney Potier's singing voice in the film "Porgy and Bess." His mother, a soprano, currently chairs the voice department at Fullerton College, Fullerton, California.

While in college McFerrin concentrated on piano, performing with lounge bands and occasionally singing a few tunes. He accompanied dance classes and then worked for a time with the Ice Follies. In 1970, his musical direction took an extreme left turn when he heard Miles Davis' album, **Bitches Brew**. Later, seeing Davis in performance, he was particularly impressed with keyboardist Keith Jarrett, and traces his decision to do spontaneous solo vocal concerts in part to Jarrett's similarly conceived piano concerts.

It wasn't until July, 1977, that he distinctly heard a voice inside him that told him he was a singer. He immediately got a job as a singer/pianist at the Salt Lake City Hilton piano bar and spent the next six years singing with himself or local bands.



Photo: Nancy Clendaniel

Bobby

Expect Th

Fascinated with the idea of solo singing, he began to develop his unique vocal style, recognizing that he didn't want to sound like anybody else. "First was the vision, then the technique. I knew that if I started listening to other singers, it would take me years to develop, so I shut myself off from other singers for a long, long time.

McFerrin got his break in 1979, when Jon Hendricks (of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross fame) invited Bobby to join his new group. In 1980, Bill Cosby heard Bobby and helped get him bookings in Las Vegas and at the 1980 Playboy Jazz Festival in Los Angeles. His debut album with Elektra/Musician Records in 1982, **Bobby McFerrin**, with instrumental accompaniment, proved to be an auspicious and eclectic introduction to listeners around the world. Since then he has become one of the most sought after singers today.

"Bobby does vocal summits, workshops and clinics, sings on the **Round Midnight** soundtrack, sings on the



McFerrin

Unexpected

Manhattan Transfer's last album (for which he won a Grammy), works sometimes in Europe with George Gruntz, does all kinds of things (yeah, that's him doing that Levi 501 jean commercial), but it's as a soloist — whether spontaneously inventing or improvising on a Beatles tune (from the new Blue Note album, **Spontaneous Intentions**) — that his art shines the brightest." — *Cash Box*.

You have talked about being involved with theatrics and developing yourself as a singer in order to become a broader performer.

"I have been to Brazil and many other countries. These places have had an influence on my performance especially as it relates to movement. Performance is part singing, part acting, part humor and part dancing. As an example, when performing on the Carnegie Hall Stage, I now use the entire stage. My 10-minute condensation of the Wizard of Oz lends itself very well to this type of spacing. Nothing I perform has prepared choreography. It is accomplished improvisationally. The visual is an important part of my performance. Although I don't consider myself a dancer, I do a lot of movement which accentuates the music. The important part of my performance is communication, and movement facilitates that.

When making use of an entire stage, there is an adjustment on my part especially where miking technique is concerned. I wear a wireless mike that fits around my head . . . thus I do not have the usual advantage of using mike tech-

nique to control some of the sound . . . I have to use my voice to control this. The trade-off is that I'm not limited to staying within the confines of a certain area dictated by the stationary P.A. microphone. I now have freedom."

Now that you've found and experienced this new freedom, is there a way high school and college vocal jazz choirs can use movement that will accentuate their performances?

"It is very important for the jazz choir to use communication and visual and musical creativity in their performance. One suggestion would be to take away the choir risers . . . they really seem to inhibit a group's movement. Another element, improvisation of the moment, needs to be explored or at least incorporated into a segment of a concert. For instance, two directors in Columbia, California, Mike West and Rod Harris, use creativity in every performance . . . students don't know what to expect on performances. They teach their students to really think. I would like to see something similar added to vocal jazz festivals. Most festivals have groups sing at the festival for 15-20 minutes on prepared numbers. The adjudicator then works with the choir or makes comments for the remaining 10-15 minutes. Today's vocal jazz festival needs more than this. I would like to see each festival have a requirement for the choir to really improvise something creative on the spot, something that will make the students really think.

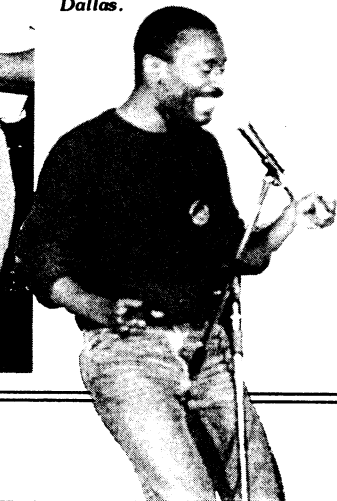
Last week I conducted a workshop in San Luis Obispo, California. A lady shared with me the trouble she was having trying to have her students sing a particular tune that required a concept of singing in a large church. For whatever reason she couldn't get this concept across to her students. While on the way to the performance, she passed through a town in which she saw this large church. She had the bus driver stop and had the students go into the church and sing the tune. It worked. They sang it wonderfully at the concert. This is the kind of creativity I'm talking about."

What about the literature being done with vocal jazz groups today?

"I'm not very excited about what I hear being done



Opposite page, left: Bobby McFerrin standing with Jon Hendricks on the evening of the 1987 Grammy Awards. Bobby received the award for Best Male Jazz Vocalist. Opposite right: Bobby McFerrin solo shot. This page, left: Bobby McFerrin, far left, performing with, l to r, Jon Hendricks, George Benson and Al Jarreau. Below, Mr. McFerrin performed at the 1985 NAJE National Convention in Dallas.



with vocal jazz literature today. Jazz choirs, the name meaning a group performing a restricted type of literature, don't advance much from where they begin. As a result, much of the literature performed is not really very good jazz. In addition, the jazz choirs use a very limited amount of creativity. Jazz Choirs seem to stay at about the same level at which they begin, performing the same literature in the same way."

It has been interesting to watch the development of groups such as The Four Freshman, Hi-Los, Singers Unlimited, Manhattan Transfer, Rare Silk and more recently a cappella performers such as yourself, the Nylons, Terra Nova and certain a cappella vocal jazz groups at Berklee School of Music. Do you see any trends?

"I don't see anything yet, but that could be because we are at the beginning of such a movement. I certainly could understand a trend toward a cappella music and performance. The beauty and flexibility of the human voice plus the opportunity for performers to explore creativity and communication through the use of their body makes a cappella music a potential area of development."

There have been rumors that you have started a vocal group in the San Francisco area.

"The group is named VOICESTRA and is already performing. It started out as a fourteen-member vocal ensemble. That was too large to handle. I have since cut it down to eight singers. The group usually performs in a circle with the audience around us. When the concert begins, it can sound like chanting. The piece could last 45 minutes or longer. My responsibility in the concert is that of the instigator or better yet, the facilitator. I feed the group ideas, notes, rhythms and in turn they interact with me. The group is totally improvisational and is not rehearsed. However, there are some performances coming up with the Tandy Beal Dance Company that will require certain staging. The staging, however, will come from an improvisational base."

When you are getting ready for a concert, what do you do, how do you select the literature, how do you give your performance a uniqueness?

"I never plan what I'm going to do on a concert. For instance, before a performance I may place a suggestion box out in the foyer and use the suggestions for my show. I remember that when I was in Brazil I was talking with my manager and someone else before a performance. We were talking about how long it had been since we had heard music of the 60's. Well, my show for the entire evening was made of music from the 60's. Spontaneity. I consider the

stage my romper room and from there I learn and plan my performances."

Do you do a lot of singing during the day, warm-ups, etc.?

"This may sound strange, but I believe one only needs to sing for about 10 minutes a day to keep the voice in shape. I sing very soft when I practice. Other than that, unless I am learning a new tune, that's enough. A few years back I didn't talk or sing for two days before a concert. The first number on the concert was horrible . . . it was badly out of tune. Needless to say I don't go without singing or talking for any length of time."

How do you select and learn some of the prepared tunes you do?

"I select music that is challenging, such as Freedom Jazz Dance because of the interval complexities, or a piece like Spain just because it is difficult. I remember learning Donna Lee. When I first heard Jaco Pastorius play Donna Lee, I didn't understand it, but I liked it. I played the recording at least a hundred times, listening over and over again to the same head until I had it securely committed to memory. After listening to the tune that many times, I still had not sung it. I committed it to memory first. I found the ability to think and to use the mind in this way facilitated the learning process."

Over the past years and before you earned the recognition due, you were a lounge singer and pianist. How did you keep from getting discouraged when no one listened?

"When playing in cities like Salt Lake City and New Orleans, I figured it was part of the dues I had to pay. But what kept me going was the original vision I had. I knew what I wanted to do, I was committed to it and knew it would take a lot of hard work. In the lounges, nobody listened to you . . . but I just kept my vision. I believed what I was doing I could use someday . . . and I did."

Do you have any advice for the young jazz singers or the young vocal jazz groups who want to make music a part of their lives?

"The most important ingredient is to have a vision . . . and spend some time each and every day visualizing what it is you want. A vision requires commitment, it requires practice and development of technical skills and being honest with yourself.

Most people thought since I came from a very musical family, music was very easy for me and that I had gifts like perfect pitch. My intonation used to be really bad. I used to sing way under the pitch. I had good ears, but when I recorded myself and listened back, I was singing flat. Well, I worked on this problem for years. I sang, I recorded myself, I sang, I recorded myself until I corrected the problem.

Finally, I believe perseverance is essential. I recall coming to San Francisco and having a friend tell me about a club at which I should sing. I called the owner, and he said I didn't have a name and thus no following. Next month I called him again . . . and the next month . . . and the next. Finally he said that if I believed that much in myself and was that persistent, he would give me a chance."

With those words of advice, Bobby, along with son Jevon who just turned 2 in May and had contributed some new sounds to our phone conversation (and probably to Bobby's next concert), said goodbye and much love to everyone.



Bobby McFerrin performing a solo in his now-famous saxophone pose along with guitarist/singer George Benson.