



## Bobby McFerrin

Saturday, September 11, 2004, 8 pm  
Zellerbach Hall

*Tonight's performance will be approximately 90 minutes in length.  
There will be no intermission.*

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**Bobby McFerrin** is one of the natural wonders of the music world. A 10-time Grammy Award winner, he is one of the world's best-known vocal innovators and improvisers, a world-renowned classical conductor, the creator of one of the most popular songs of the late 20th century, and a passionate spokesman for music education. His recordings have sold over 20 million copies, and his collaborations with Yo-Yo Ma, Chick Corea, the Vienna Philharmonic, and Herbie Hancock have established him as an ambassador of both the classical and jazz worlds. Yet McFerrin's reach extends well beyond musical circles: he has worked with actor Jack Nicholson, comedians Robin Williams and Billy Crystal, the Muppets, and audiences around the world.

With a four-octave range and a vast array of vocal techniques, McFerrin is no mere singer—he is one of music's true Renaissance men, a vocal explorer who has combined jazz, folk, and a multitude of world music influences (choral, *a cappella*, and classical music) with his own ingredients. As a conductor, he is able to hear orchestrally, and with this gift has expanded his singing to include more imaginative territory than most; he might extend his vocal repertoire to sing trumpet-inspired parts in the jazz standard "Round Midnight" or to interpret the flute and cello parts in works by Fauré and Vivaldi, or to simply create entirely new sounds.

Born in 1950 to opera singer parents in New York, where his father, Robert McFerrin Sr., was the first African-American male soloist at the Metropolitan Opera, his family moved to Hollywood in 1958 when McFerrin Sr. was hired to be the singing voice for Sidney Poitier in the movie *Porgy and Bess*. McFerrin's first love was the clarinet, but he switched to the piano when the onslaught of braces forced the aspiring reedman to abandon his first beloved instrument. As a teen, he also aspired to be a priest, but that too was shelved when he could no longer deny that music was in his blood. McFerrin went on to form the Bobby Mack Quartet in high school, followed by a cross-country tour with the Ice Follies and a stint as a pianist in a lounge band.

In 1977, McFerrin decided to come out from behind the piano to test his skill as a vocalist, and in 1978, he started singing with the group Astral Project in New Orleans and then toured with legendary jazz vocal pioneer Jon Hendricks. He also met jazz vocalist (turned music entrepreneur) Linda Goldstein, who has been his manager and often producer since 1979. Inspired by the completely improvised solo concerts of pianist Keith Jarrett, McFerrin and Goldstein conspired to develop his innovative career as a solo vocalist. This was a considerable challenge since it went against conventional career-building wisdom in the music world, built on prepackaged expectations. Bill Cosby arranged for McFerrin's 1980 performance at the Playboy Jazz Festival, and a year later, McFerrin made a triumphant appearance at the Kool Jazz Festival in New York. Shortly after that, McFerrin released his first album while working toward his goal of wholly improvised solo concerts. In 1983, he made his first tour of Europe as an unaccompanied vocalist, performing without any prepared material. Audiences were bewildered at first, and then blown away. Tapes of those concerts were made into the album *The Voice*, a landmark recording that served notice of the arrival of a major musical talent the German critics called *Stimmwunder* ("wonder voice").

Throughout the 1980s, McFerrin continued to develop his amazing solo improvisations and audience interactions. With a comedian's sense of timing, an unrestrained zany streak, and an infectious love of every genre of music, he created a new kind of concert—not a "performance" but a communal sharing and celebration of music. At the same time, he began a wide range of collaborations, winning his first Grammy in 1985 for *Another Night In Tunisia* with the Manhattan Transfer. Further Grammy Awards came for Bernard Tavernier's *Round Midnight* (1986) and *How The Rhinoceros Got His Skin*, with Jack Nicholson (1987).

By 1988, he had taken his unaccompanied improvisations from the Hollywood Bowl to Carnegie Hall and to the premiere concert halls of Europe and Asia, thus solid-

ifying his reputation as a musical phenomenon. He then released the album *Simple Pleasures*, which was his homage to the music of the 1960s. A joyous ditty created on the spot in the recording studio became the phenomenal hit "Don't Worry, Be Happy." *Simple Pleasures* was nominated for a 1988 Grammy for Album of the Year, while "Don't Worry, Be Happy" won both the Record of the Year and the coveted Song of the Year awards. It might just as well have been named Song of the Decade, as "Don't Worry, Be Happy" hit the No. 1 spot on pop charts in almost every country in the world.

Given this taste of pop superstardom, which was completely unexpected in the midst of his burgeoning career based on solo vocal experimentations, McFerrin seemed to suddenly switch gears. Instead of seizing upon the deluge of offers for concerts and events brought on by his sudden popularity, he decided to take a sabbatical and to begin a serious study of conducting, including lessons with Leonard Bernstein, Gustav Meier, and Seiji Ozawa. The enthusiasm, infectious joy, and virtuosity that characterize his solo performances have made McFerrin a successful communicator in the classical music world as well. In 1990, on his 40th birthday, McFerrin was given the opportunity to conduct the San Francisco Symphony. He then recorded *Hush* with friend and famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, which stayed on the *Billboard* classical charts for over two years and went gold. By 1994, McFerrin had been named creative director of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and released the album *Paper Music*, the critically acclaimed collection of classics that marked his first recording as a conductor.

In recent years, he has combined his love of improvisation with his conducting skills, extending his vocal journeys to larger groups of singers—whether trained or not. McFerrin's solo concerts have always included audience participation; he sees them not as "sing-alongs" but as a genuine collaborative process of making music in the moment. McFerrin has also developed that idea in more sophisticated settings with his long-time vocal ensemble Voicestra in the albums *Medicine Music* and *Circlesongs*, and in a

forthcoming project of choral works in collaboration with composer Roger Treece.

Before Bobby McFerrin, the idea of a career of solo improvised vocals would have been unthinkable. Now, critics routinely praise talented new vocalists with terms like "the next Bobby McFerrin." But there is only one Bobby McFerrin, who, during his unparalleled career, has been ABC's Person Of The Week, and the subject of a *60 Minutes* profile and an entire edition of Ted Koppel's *Nightline*. He maintains a dual career as a conductor and a solo performer, and continues to bring music to children, whether in his own improvised concerts or in special orchestral programs. In spite of all this activity, however, his greatest ambition is to spend as much time as possible at home with his wife of 25 years, Debbie, and their three children.

"Unconventional" is a good way to describe the career of Bobby McFerrin. Those familiar with McFerrin's shows, whether he appears as a conductor or a vocalist, know that each one is a unique event that resonates with the unexpected. He is that rare artist who has the ability to reach beyond musical genres and stereotypes for a sound that is entirely his own. As one of the foremost guardians of music's rich heritage, he remains at the vanguard with his natural, beautiful and timeless music that transcends all borders and embraces all cultures.

For more information on Bobby McFerrin, please visit [www.BobbyMcFerrin.com](http://www.BobbyMcFerrin.com).