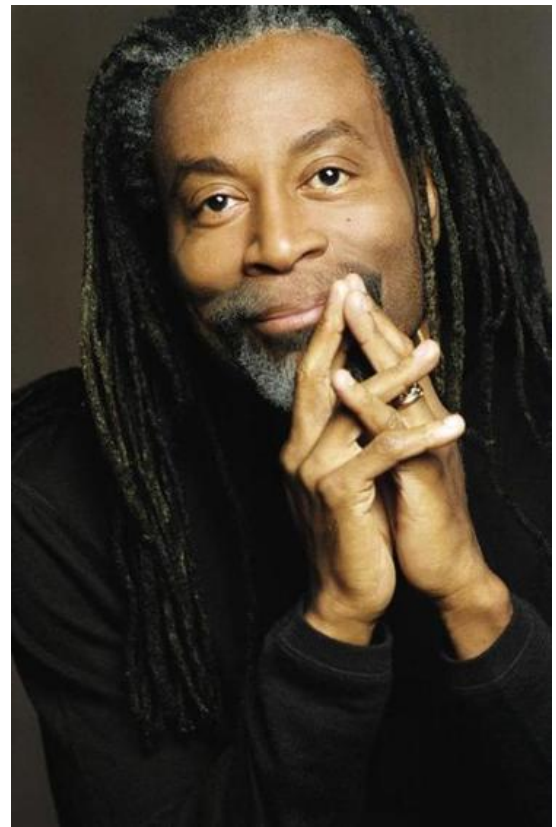


Bobby McFerrin's 'spirit you all' at Symphony Hall

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 13, 2013

With his latest recording and concert project, “spirit *youall*,” Bobby McFerrin reconnects to the faith of his childhood. The ten-time Grammy Award-winning vocalist reinterprets seven of the spirituals he heard growing up in a house filled with music, and adds six of his own original tunes and a cover of Bob Dylan’s “I Shall Be Released” to the mix. While Sony Masterworks isn’t scheduled to release the recording until May 14, Boston audiences get a preview when McFerrin and his band present the concert version of “spirit*youall*” in a Celebrity Series engagement April 14 at Symphony Hall.

At the heart of “spirit*youall*” is a tribute to McFerrin’s father, Robert McFerrin Sr. The first African-American to become a member of the New York Metropolitan Opera and the singing voice of Sidney Poitier in the film of “Porgy and Bess,” the great baritone was celebrated for his renditions of classic Negro spirituals. His interpretations, characterized by their warmth and authenticity, were influenced by the teaching of his mentor, Hall Johnson, whose grandmother was a slave.



CAROL FRIEDMAN

“I think music is such a powerful tool for communication and brings people together, says Bobby McFerrin, “Even strangers can create a heavenly sound together.”

“My father always had a set of spirituals when he did recitals,” McFerrin recalls. “I wanted to use spirituals that my father recorded, but the hardest part was trying not to hear him sing them. Nobody sings like that, and I didn’t want to copy his phrases. But it was hovering in the back of my mind.”

Instead, McFerrin takes a distinctly different, cross-genre approach to the material, including such familiar tunes as “Glory,” which the vocal innovator transforms into a jazzy, foot-tapping romp with scat embellishments, and the up-tempo “Joshua,” with vocals evoking Cab Calloway. On the recording, “Whole World” is a bluesy duet with Berklee-trained vocalist/bassist/composer Esperanza Spalding. Gil Goldstein, the project’s arranger and pianist/accordion player, says, “Bobby can take material we’ve heard 10 million times and filter it in such a way that we hear it fresh. Very few people can do that.” Original tunes range from the folk-tinged lightness of “Gracious,” with its florid vocal arpeggios, to down-and-dirty Southern blues with twangy steel guitar.

BOBBY McFERRIN

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For McFerrin, the title “*spirityouall*” is not just a whimsical play on words, but an invitation to listeners reflecting his belief that we are all spiritual beings. He often asks audiences to sing along, believing that music has healing power. “Yeah, I like to get folks singing,” he says. “I can’t help myself. I think music is such a powerful tool for communication and brings people together. Even strangers can create a heavenly sound together. It’s a little selfish on my part — after doing solo work for so long, I love the sound of many voices coming back at me.”

Music has always been in McFerrin’s life. Not only was his father a renowned performer and teacher, his mother was also a musician, teaching and sometimes accompanying the operatic baritone. He recalls hiding under the piano as a youngster

while the two coached students. He studied composition, was an accomplished clarinetist and pianist, had his own jazz groups, and spent a fair amount of time as a teen standing on the coffee table conducting classical records.

But McFerrin, 63, says some of his most valuable education came at church, singing in the Episcopal choir at St. John's Cathedral in Los Angeles. Fans of McFerrin's iconic feel-good ditty "Don't Worry, Be Happy" might be surprised by the depth of his religious nature. He remembers discovering his family's Bible at the age of 7 or 8. "It was huge, very heavy. I was very attracted to it and remember flipping through the pages with all the colored pictures. I fell in love with the book. It brought deep religious feeling to my heart. I didn't understand why, but it moved me. At one point I thought I wanted to be a monk, and to this day I love quiet. I'm an introvert, and my relationship with the Bible is very intimate. I read it every day."

But on July 11, 1977, McFerrin had an epiphany. He describes walking home from accompanying a dance class and having this sudden realization that he was meant to be a singer. The next day, he auditioned for a job as a lounge singer and, using the discipline instilled by his father, learned a song a day until he had three full sets under his belt.

McFerrin worked on his technique for six years before doing his first solo concert. He says his style of spontaneous invention was directly influenced by the groundbreaking solo piano improvisations of Keith Jarrett and credits his affable performance presence to his father. "My father was very easy onstage, very relaxed," he says, "and I think got a lot of my stage skills from him. It's my second home, a platform for adventure, and I have a good time — whatever happens, happens."

Though McFerrin shares some of his genre-bending musical adventures with his group Voicestra and has made a serious stab at conducting, he is best known for his wordless solo improvisations characterized by a sweet falsetto and a virtuosic technical facility over a four-octave range, including his signature lyrical beat boxing. "Bobby is completely unique as a performing artist," says longtime colleague and occasional collaborator jazz pianist/composer Chick Corea. "I don't know of another performer who can just walk onstage as a solo performer, with just his voice, in front of a very diverse audience, and take that audience on a fine arts adventure with a spontaneous improvisation. It's magical to behold."

“*Spirit you all*” marks a real departure for McFerrin, the first time he’s worked consistently with a band of his own since the ’80s and the first time the bulk of the material has actual set lyrics. “It’s fun,” he says with enthusiasm from a recent tour stop in Utah. “The musicians are really talented, and it gives me a chance to stop and rest for a moment, to sit back and listen. And the way we perform is very interesting — we’re getting more loose and jazzy.”

Nonetheless, there is nothing casual about McFerrin’s intent. “Singing these songs is very personal to me,” he explains. “They’re a prayer not only for myself, but for the people in the audience. I want them to embrace the message in the songs. We need to have reverence for life. Just existing is a holy experience, and I hope the audience picks up on that.”

Every creative moment offers a way of giving thanks. “I’m just grateful for every day God gives me to open my eyes, look at the sun, and make music.”

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