Bobby McFerrin

LYRICAL & SPIRITUAL

By Allen Morrison *Photography by Adam McCullough*

For years he's sung mostly songs without words, or in improvised languages of his own invention, as if mere words were inadequate to express what was in his head and heart. Now, 11 years after releasing an album titled *Beyond Words* and after many albums in which formal lyrics were the exception, Bobby McFerrin has returned to singing the type of songs in which the lyrics are as essential as the music, with words that express his deepest yearnings: spirituals.

On the exhilarating new album *spirityouall* (Sony Masterworks), he has reinvented seven classic Negro spirituals and composed five new songs. There is also one cover, a moody, searching version of Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released." The songs, McFerrin writes in the album's liner notes, "are based in my Christian faith but acknowledge and reflect the spirit of *YOU*ALL, wherever your particular faith and journeys may take you."

The album represents another significant departure: After many discs in which McFerrin expanded his musical palette to incorporate styles beyond jazz and pop, including classical, Middle Eastern, African and Indian, his new offering is, in the truest sense of the word, Americana. It embraces folk songs, country blues, swampy blues rock, and church music of both the African-American and Anglo variety. And there are two bluegrass-flavored tunes, including "Rest," an irresistible hoedown in 11/8. Despite plenty of jazzy grooves and changes, as well as some typically inventive and acrobatic scat-singing, this album is not about jazz. It's about the songs—the faith, courage and wisdom embodied in the spirituals, which are, after all, a uniquely American invention. McFerrin explores this tradition with joy and reverence.

The album also honors the legacy of his father, the great baritone Robert McFerrin Sr., the first African-American to sing a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera House; he also dubbed the singing voice of Sidney Poitier as Porgy in Hollywood's version of *Porgy And Bess*. In 1957, the elder McFerrin recorded *Deep River*, an album of classic spirituals that he learned from the famed choral conductor Hall Johnson.

Bobby McFerrin has previously recorded and performed with Chick Corea, Yo-Yo Ma and Yellowjackets, among many others. But for this project he has assembled a band he can call his own, with the help of arranger and co-producer Gil Goldstein, who plays keyboards and accordion throughout. Actually there are two bands, one on the album and one for the tour, both led by Goldstein and both impressive. On the recording, the group includes Esperanza Spalding, who sings and plays bass, alternating with Larry Grenadier; Ali Jackson and Charley Drayton on drums; and Larry Campbell, who delivers exceptional performances on acoustic and resonator guitars, fiddle, pedal steel, mandolin and cittern.

The touring band, meanwhile, includes Goldstein and other top-shelf players: David Mansfield on assorted strings, Armand Hirsch on acoustic and electric guitar, Louis Cato on drums and percussion, and the 30-year McFerrin veteran Jeff Carney on upright bass. McFerrin, who started out in 1979 as a singer/pianist, plays keyboards on one track and, as the spirit moves him, in concert.

Before McFerrin arrived on the scene, there were jazz singers, there were singer-songwriters, there were scat singers and there were band singers. But when he rose to prominence in the early '80s, his four-octave range and uncanny ability to sing all the parts of a tune simultaneously—bass, melody, harmony and percussion—instantly put him in a category by himself. Still, he was mostly a jazz phenomenon until 1988, when "Don't Worry, Be Happy" became the first a cappella song ever to reach No. 1 on the Top 40 charts, winning three Grammys, including Record of the Year. What may have struck some initially as a kind of jazz vocal novelty act—the beatboxing, radio dial fiddling, backwards guitar effects, muted trumpet, gargling, and kazoo sounds, all of which were in evidence on his 1984 solo tour de force *The Voice*—was just the initial flash of an exploding talent that has since then radiated more profound musical invention and joy in singing.

Goofing around at a soundcheck at Long Island's Adelphi University recently, the athletic McFerrin, 63, bounds around the stage like a kid in a playground. Dressed in jeans and a charcoal sweater, he looks like a man in his forties. A grandmaster of microphone techniques, he scats and makes various sound effects (cars, trains, toy trumpets). He uses his torso as a drum, frequently striking his upper chest just below the clavicle—a

Bobby McFerrin onstage at the Adelphi University Performing Arts Center in Garden City, N.Y., on April 16

trademark percussive technique that accompanies his vocals. Warming up with the great gospel song "Every Time," he interrupts himself to emit a high-pitched bark at a little dog sitting in a visitor's lap in the front row. He goes back to scatting, his fingers plying imaginary holes in the microphone.

Backstage in his dressing room, eating a plate of strawberries and kiwi slices, he reflected on his musical journey, speaking in quiet, even tones so as not to tax his voice before the nearly two-hour concert he would deliver.

DownBeat: Spirituals are obviously a very important part of your childhood and musical identity. Tell me about your relationship with these songs, and with the Bible.

Bobby McFerrin: My father had a deeper relationship with them. But I love these pieces, and I love what these songs say. They say it simply, beautifully. Sometimes it's very difficult to sing them because a lot of them came from slavery. But a song like "Every Time I Feel The Spirit" is a wonderful reminder for me to pray. Sometimes I use them as prayers. And when I sing them, I *mean* them. I'm not just being a singer singing a song, trying to entertain people. In fact, the difficulty for me is trying to get the focus away from me and onto the pieces. Being a performer on stage, everybody's looking at you and thinking about you as a performer. A lot of times, they don't think about what you're actually singing about. So my difficulty with these pieces in a concert setting is making sure that God gets the glory and I don't.

There's always a special moment for me in every performance that's unique and authentic. The spirituals are authentic pieces of music. I can remember when I was a kid, probably about 8 years old, my father was studying these spirituals with Hall Johnson, who did arrangements of some of them. His grandmother was a slave. So he heard them sung in the genuine renditions: how the phrasing went, the pronunciation of the words, stretching and singing over the bar lines. I can see Hall Johnson leaning over my father at the piano and teaching him how to sing these pieces. So my father got the authentic sounds down into his voice, the authentic feeling. He sang them with deep, deep feeling. He meant every single word that he sang. He always ended his recitals with a set of spirituals. I went to many of them, and at some of them my mother was my dad's accompanist.

It's hard to find the recordings of your father singing spirituals, but his singing on the soundtrack of *Porgy And Bess* was magnificent.

Best baritone ever, as far as I'm concerned. Rich tone, very round. Whenever I work with choirs, I always go for his sound. I try to get them to sing with that rich, warm tone that my father had.

As a child, did you try to emulate that sound?

No, I don't think I ever tried to sound like my dad. In performances I do sing in an operatic voice from time to time, just as a form of entertainment—sing the baritone, the soprano.

Did you have a feeling that the world of opera wasn't your world?

Oh, I knew it right off. Instinctively, I just thought, "Oh, this is lovely, it's wonderful, my dad's great at it, but it's not for me." I knew that in my teens. I started playing in bands when I was 14, and got into jazz when I graduated from high school.

What kind of songs were you playing between ages 14 and 18?

We'd do Top 40 things at high school dances; anything that was on the radio. We played "96 Tears" [*imitates organ riff*] "Dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee." We played "House Of The Rising Sun" by The Animals; we even did Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone." I was in three bands. I had my own jazz quintet, The Bobby Mac Jazz Quintet. And two rock bands that played the Top 40, *The* Viscounts and *The* Fascinations. I've been a working musician since I was 14 years old; we're talking almost 50 years.

Did your parents have an opinion about you becoming a musician?

Just be a good one.

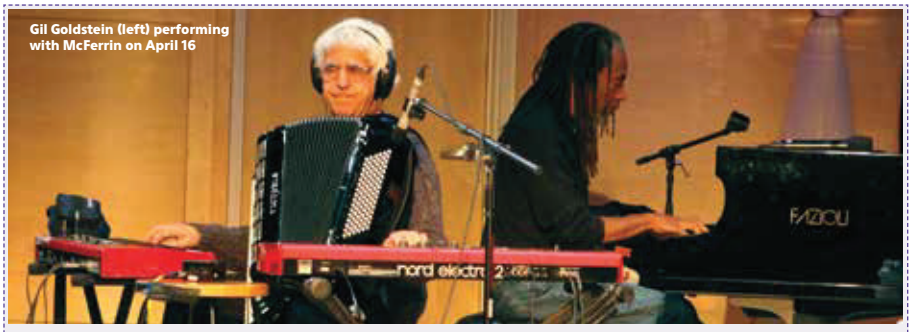
You had the idea for this album of spirituals 20 years ago.

Oh, at least 20 years ago. But at the time, I wasn't thinking about including the spirituals. I was thinking basically about doing original material of mine. I did different experiments, going into the studio with various musicians to try things out. But it just never panned out.

Why?

It seemed like something was blocking it, or some other gig opportunity would come up and mess with the timing. And also, I was just experimenting—I think I wasn't quite focused enough to complete the idea of [what became] *spirityouall*.

When did you get the idea to include the old songs,



Gil Goldstein (left) performing with McFerrin on April 16

Making *spirityouall*

Bobby McFerrin's *spirityouall* is an album of spirituals old and new. Co-produced by the singer's manager/producer Linda Goldstein and arranger/keyboardist Gil Goldstein (no relation), the album contains inventive arrangements of historic Negro spirituals—such as "Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"—alongside McFerrin's original compositions, like "Gracious" and "Jesus Makes It Good." McFerrin, who sings much of the material in his soulful baritone register, went into the studio with a brilliant, handpicked acoustic band that covers a wide variety of Americana styles, including blues, folk and Appalachian fiddle sounds.

Gil Goldstein recalls that McFerrin had very specific ideas about what he didn't want. "We met—Bobby, me and Linda—and did a quick session together about a year before we recorded. I had already done a couple of arrangements. I played one of them for Bobby, and he said, 'Um … I don't think so. Too jazzy. This is not a jazz record.' I said, 'I just thought these would be nice changes for you to solo on.' And he says, 'I don't want any nice changes to solo on—that's jazz. This has to come more from the material.' He also wanted everything to sound 'made up.' I had to arrange with an open-ended spirit so that it could seem improvised."

A mainstay of the *spirityouall* band is multi-instrumentalist Larry Campbell, famous for his work with Bob Dylan, Levon Helm and many others. McFerrin remembers an experimental first session with the band. "There's a solo piece I wrote called '25:15.' It's something I came up with when I was trying to memorize this Bible verse. Most times, when I'm trying to memorize anything, I'll sing it. That's how 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' came about: I saw this phrase while walking down the street one day in New York, and I just started singing it. Same thing. So I went into the studio and started singing [sings], 'You know my eyes are ever on the Lord.' Larry was there, and his ears are incredible—he just picked it up right away. For folk and blues, he's *the* guy."

The Recording Academy, which has given McFerrin 10 Grammy awards, might have a difficult time categorizing *spirityouall*. Linda Goldstein says, "With the previous album, *VOCAbuLarieS*, the [Recording Academy] didn't know where to put it. The New Age people wanted it, and the jazz people wanted it. Eventually they decided to put it in 'Best Classical Crossover.' This one could be [categorized as] Americana, it could be Folk. He is all music and every music. And he has extraordinary freedom. With a lot of jazz singers, you can sort of map their licks. With Bobby, you never know where he's going to go. He loves to play with expectation and surprise." *—Allen Morrison*

the spirituals you heard growing up?

About a year ago … . I'm always trying to think of the next thing that I want to do. Spirituals was always on the list. Then I thought, maybe I should just take some of the spirituals my dad did on his recording and just re-interpret them with a band, and see what that's like. And that's when it just seemed to work.

And these songs veer off in a direction I haven't heard you go before.

Well, they're songs with words, for one thing, which I rarely sing. I rarely spend most of the time [singing] in my chest voice, my baritone voice; it's taken me a little time to get used to that. I'm still learning how to sing this way.

On your 2010 album *VOCAbuLarieS*, the song "Say Ladeo" contains these lyrics: "Time for taking words away/ The melody will tell the story." The new album is your first one to really emphasize lyrics.

Someone once asked me why most of the time I don't sing songs with words. And I said… If I sing a song with words, everyone has the same experience. But with songs without words, people bring their own stories to the song. And I love to improvise, and with my technique, it's a lot harder to sing that way with lyrics, than without. With spirituals, I'm telling a story… but every night I change them a little. I like to play with the form.

You haven't toured with a band of your own since early in your career. How are you enjoying it?

I like it. It's fun. One of the best things about it is that everybody gets a chance to play, and I get to sit back and listen for a while. You know, when you're onstage by yourself, and all you hear is yourself, it's nice to add other colors. The band provides another color palette.

What was it like working with Gil Goldstein as your arranger on this album?

I gave him carte blanche: I said, "Arrange them the way you hear them." And he would. He'd come up with something, and we'd go into the studio. He'd play the arrangement, I'd sing along and say, "Yeah, this works, I like it." But there were other things I didn't like, and I'd say, "Gil, I don't like this" [*laughs*]. No, I didn't say I didn't like it; I'd say 'I don't *feel* it.' And he was totally easy to say that to.

Where does the Americana and even bluegrass influence on the album come from?

I wanted something like that. I wanted an all-acoustic band, a little folksy, bluegrassy, jazzy combination. I wanted a steel guitar, I wanted slide, I wanted fiddle, and Gil knew that when he was putting this together. This is the first band of this sort I've ever worked with, with this kind of sound palette.

You once told an interviewer that your style of improvisation was directly influenced by pianist Keith Jarrett.

I was really moved by what Keith was doing in his solo concerts. It was so vulnerable and so complete. He was going on the most private journey, trying to stay absolutely true to the music he was hearing in his head, to share that with us. I wanted to do that, too.

Some critics seem perplexed when you venture outside the walls of what they consider "jazz," which you do regularly. Obviously you can't please everybody, but do you think those critics are focusing on the wrong things?

Hey, that's their job. I leave it to them to think and talk about what fits where, what's worthwhile, and how it all relates to each other. My job is to make music, and the only way I know to do that is to stay true to what I hear. I've been influenced by all kinds of music. If I have to choose a label it would be folk—I'm influenced by all the folks around me, all the music I've heard.

But of course some of my most powerful listening and collaborative experiences came out of the jazz tradition. The first time I heard Miles live, I felt like my whole body had changed at a molecular level. Seeing Herbie Hancock and the Mwandishi band changed me, changed my whole idea of what improvisation could be. Playing with Chick Corea is one of the joys of my life. And I still like to play rhythm changes—it's exhilarating. I know there are musicians who feel that their mission is to honor that tradition, move it forward. Mine is something else. It's not about genre at all. It's not even about technical virtuosity or using the voice to map out harmonies and rhythms in ways that people didn't expect. It's about communicating. It's about joy and freedom and making stuff up. **DB**