



# a most happy fella

BY ZAN DUBIN SCOTT

At the end of an interview with Bobby McFerrin, the one-of-a-kind musical wonder described how content he is these days: He gets to conduct classics by composers he reveres; work with Voicestra, his longtime vocal ensemble; and perform the improvised solo vocalizations that continue to delight ticket-holders worldwide.

Then, the man who will do all but the ensemble work in Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, said it: "I'm very, very happy."

This interviewer, normally loathe to re-trample territory any uber-

famous artist has undoubtedly trod ad nauseam, couldn't resist. McFerrin had given such a generous interview, after all ... In fact, he practically volunteered the genesis of "Don't Worry, Be Happy," his joyously infectious ditty that hit number one on pop charts around the globe in 1988.

"There's an Indian guru, Maher Baba," McFerrin says, "and that's something he said. So I took that saying. I was walking down the street in Manhattan and I saw a poster with his face on it. I just started singing it."

## “I have what I call an ‘accidental career,’ but I’d always been fascinated by the art of conducting,”

Whether McFerrin will sing it again in Costa Mesa remains to be seen. But he will conduct Pacific Symphony in Prokofiev’s Symphony No. 1, *Classical*, and Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 4, *Italian*.

The son of the Metropolitan Opera’s first African-American soloist, Robert McFerrin Sr., first took the podium on his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, almost as a lark. He’s since presided over the likes of the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony and the Vienna Philharmonic. He led the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra as creative chair for seven years.

But there’s more. McFerrin, who’s also collaborated with jazz greats Chick Corea and Herby Hancock, will join Pacific Symphony’s Timothy Landauer for Vivaldi’s Concerto for Two Cellos. No, McFerrin doesn’t play cello. Yes, he will sing the missing part, as he did with “astonishing evenness, range and agility,” as the *Los Angeles Times* wrote of an earlier rendering.

To cap the program, McFerrin will deliver the a capella solo vocalizations that inspired *Newsweek* to call him “almost superhuman” in range and technique, sounding, by turns, “like a blackbird, a Martian, an operatic soprano, a small child and a be-bop trumpet.” He’ll engage the audience at this point in the concert, too, for some collaborative music-making. Without a word of instruction, “they know what to do,” McFerrin says. “I just show them” with voice and body.

All of this vocalizing will be improvised, of course. “Just whatever comes to mind at the time,” McFerrin says.

Indeed, in an industry increasingly reliant on sequels and other tried-and-trues, McFerrin still succeeds by celebrating spon-

taneity with one-of-a-kind, stream-of-consciousness offerings that are neither notated nor rehearsed before curtain time.

As warm and friendly over the phone as his playful music and kind eyes might lead you to imagine, McFerrin says that Voicestra, the 12-member troupe he founded in 1986, assembles only for a quick sound check prior to performances.

“We never have any tunes, nothing is ever planned in advance, written down or discussed. We literally walk on stage and improvise for one or two hours, and it’s interesting to me how most people don’t quite get that. It’s probably the world we live in. Everything is sort of pre-planned, or designed for TV, and we’re so used to things having their place. The whole concept of not knowing what’s going to happen is difficult to grasp. It’s the same concept with my solo voice, I never know really what’s going to come out when I sit and sing.”

After stints playing clarinet and piano, McFerrin started singing professionally in 1977. Inspired by Keith Jarrett’s improvised solo concerts and trained at Juilliard, he began to develop his solo vocal career. One of his early breaks came courtesy of Bill Cosby, who arranged for his 1980 performance at the Hollywood Bowl Playboy Jazz Festival. Next came a triumph at New York’s Kool Jazz Festival, and soon after the native New Yorker released his first album.

He continued to develop his solo improvisation and audience interactions through the ’80s and won his first of 10 Grammys in 1985 for *Another Night in Tunisia* with the Manhattan Transfer. By the time he’d released “Don’t Worry,” he’d toured through Europe and Asia and across the U.S. But instead of riding the celebrity rocket, he took a sabbatical to study conducting. After lessons with the likes of Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa, he got his first gig with the San Francisco Symphony.

“I have what I call an ‘accidental career,’ but I’d always been fascinated by the art of conducting,” says the father of three. “As my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday was approaching, I wanted to give myself a special present. I was living in San Francisco at the time and had started attending the symphony. I was backstage one night and sort of thought out loud, ‘boy, it’d be great to conduct you guys one day.’”

That day happened sooner than later, as symphony management phoned McFerrin shortly thereafter with an offer. When he learned that March 11—his birthday—was open, the deal was sealed. After that, while he had “no fantasies” of becoming a full-time maestro (a word that made him cringe), the phone kept ringing with similar requests.

“Next thing you know, I was doing it all the time,” says McFerrin, who simultaneously continued to record LPs such as

*Hush*, the popular collaboration with cellist Yo-Yo Ma, his friend. He further studied conducting, as well, whenever he could. After four years at the podium, however, while he may have been helping beleaguered American orchestras build audiences, he tired of “one-rehearsal, one-shot deals.” So when the opportunity with St. Paul Symphony arose, he jumped.

“I wanted to learn how to really do it, how to talk to an orchestra, how to rehearse, how to get your point across,” says McFerrin

Today, the singer’s classical repertoire consists of dozens of compositions, from Haydn’s Symphony No. 102, to Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro* Overture, to Ravel’s *Tombeau de Couperin*. But he’s glad to be back on his own. He gets to conduct the music he adores (“I love Mozart, love him, love him, love him”), work with Voicestra (which may soon be the subject of a long-awaited documentary), and continue to explore his solo vocalizations, his four-octave range dazzling audiences as always.

As McFerrin says, “I have a really wonderful, wonderful well-rounded career. I’m very, very happy.”

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