

Bobby McFerrin: Gimme 5 Circlesongs

Start times: 7.30pm

Running time: 90 minutes – no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Kevin Le Gendre reflects on Bobby McFerrin's career and the formation of *CircleSongs*

CircleSongs is a landmark in vocal improvisation. First conceived and performed by Bobby McFerrin for a group of 12 singers over twenty years ago, the music was borne of spontaneously composed lines that were then rhythmically repeated so as to give the sense of an open, never ending narrative arc. The process of chanting and creating patterns according to both the emotional impulses and technical agility of the band epitomized McFerrin's *raison d'être*. The circle in sound came on the spot.

Since the late 70s, McFerrin has been a visionary musician whose limitless imagination has enabled him to produce thrilling work that draws on anything from blues and jazz to African folk and European classical traditions. While collaborations with Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock and Joe Zawinul are among the highpoints of a remarkable C. V, McFerrin comes into his own when he walks calmly on stage with nothing but a microphone, a head full of songs and heart ready to find tunes that unveil previously unfamiliar sounds rather than familiar lyrics. Tones rather than texts open new doors.

'It's primal, unadorned singing. I've always thought that singing a song without words makes one song a thousand songs because the people who hear it can bring their own stories to it.'

McFerrin said of *CircleSongs* in 1997 'One of the simplest and most direct ways of praying and meditating is through singing, and singing in community is especially powerful. You get people together in a room and get them singing, and you instantly knock down all the walls—the creeds, the gender, age and racial differences, everything. You're all one at that point, lifting your voices.'

McFerrin's Voicestra is just that, a collection of skilled singers drawn from many backgrounds who cohere as a whole. Featured on the original *CircleSongs* album were such as Nicholas Bearde, Joey Blake and Sussan Deyhim, who all provided a wide range of stylistic and cultural nuance. McFerrin's phenomenal ability as an improviser, epitomized on his 1984 masterpiece *The Voice*, which captured the magic of his work as a soloist brave enough to perform with no backing band. Is supplemented by his sensitivity to those with whom he does work. His crystalline, delicate but strong timbre, which can swing low to a gutsy spiritual or soar high to a Gregorian chant in the space of a bar, frames the ensemble without overpowering it. Tonight several of the UK's finest singers, including Fini Bearman, Paola Vera, Sam Chaplin, Pete Churchill and Cleveland Watkiss, join McFerrin's Voicestra. His goal is clear.

'Just about every project I've done people say I feel your spirit,' reflects McFerrin. 'I think artists want to be told that, they want people to be moved, generally changed. I think that regardless of how you came into the concert hall at the beginning, you'll leave differently. I think that's part of my job description as an artist. It's moving people to make important changes in their lives. You know if you came in angry you'll leave forgiving. If you came in bitter you'll leave merciful. One of the best compliments I think I ever had, in my entire career, was a woman standing up in the audience and saying I feel so good now. I just thought that was great. I'm not so much into people being wowed

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over my technique or what I can do, stuff like that; it's just a vehicle for my spirit. If there's one thing I want it's for people to have that sense of joy, the joy I feel just being able to sing.'

That pleasure may also stem from McFerrin's awareness of hard fought gains. Born in Manhattan, New York in 1950 he grew up at a time when access to the rarefied world of classical music was not a given for people of colour, and his father Robert McFerrin Snr. was the first black man to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. Fittingly. Bobby, who has scooped no fewer than ten Grammys, broke new ground as a conductor of prestigious orchestras in Europe and America. Successes notwithstanding, McFerrin has sought to present music as a healing force in a world still marked by the iniquity evoked in the Bible, whose chapter *Psalms* remains one of his touchstones. 'I've always felt that artists have a huge responsibility because the culture looks at them as a way of interpreting what's going on,' he says. 'It's important for artists to be for things that are redeeming, things that are gonna lift people, encourage them so you do have to be careful with what you say and what the material is.' Keeping others bound to you in song may help the cause. The circle will not be broken.

Performers

Voicestra are

Bobby McFerrin vocals

Joey Blake vocals

Dave Worm vocals

Judi Vinar vocals

Rhiannon vocals

A cappella choir

Fini Bearman soprano

Yvette Riby-Williams soprano

Natalie Williams soprano

Paola Vera alto

Emma Smith alto

Liz Swain alto

Ben Barritt tenor

Tommy Antonio tenor

Sam Chaplin tenor

Pete Churchill bass

Matt Featherstone bass

Cleveland Watkiss bass

Produced by the Barbican in association with EFG London Jazz Festival



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