

Get Happy THE VOICE OF BOBBY McFERRIN

"Don't worry ... be happy." A mindlessly simple refrain, that like from a most unlikely number one hit seems to take on a mantra-like quality with repeated use.

It's also become an effective foil for other people's bad tempers and for Bobby McFerrin it's become a goldmine. Sung over an ingenious acappella reggae beat, it's sunshiny sentiments appear to have touched plenty of hearts. In the tradition of many hits, it began by chance.

"The words came up in a spontaneously improvised piece, which came out of the blue about four and a half years ago," explains McFerrin by phone from California. "I was doing a club date in New York at the time. It wasn't by any means finished, it was just a thing I would improvise, and something I just decided at the last moment to put on the record. It had sort of been running around in my mind for years."

This is no Bobby-come-lately talking. At 38, McFerrin already has an established pedigree in the jazz field and a classical background that remains with him, courtesy of his parents. His father was a professional opera singer, his mother a singing tutor, and McFerrin sang in church choirs as a youth before deciding to make his career as a pianist. He played for modern dance classes and in cocktail bars in Salt Lake City, where audiences also enjoyed his singing. As he played piano, McFerrin would often hum notes *sotto voce*, a common habit among jazz pianists from Thelonius Monk to Keith Jarrett. It was Jarrett who made such vocalisms a part of the overall performance and who became a major influence on McFerrin.

Another formative figure was Jon Hendricks, of the seminal jazz vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. McFerrin worked with Hendricks in the early 1980s and it was this experience which cemented his desire to switch to singing fulltime. He'd already made something of a reputation with his unusual habit of half-humming, half-singing notes, accompanied by percussive thumps on the chest. Some wrote it off as a novelty, but McFerrin stuck to his guns and let the audiences decide.

They loved it. Participation and improvisation played a big part of McFerrin's performance, as he invited the audience to suggest songs he could embellish with his unique vocal style. Just as John Coltrane made magic with 'My Favourite Things', McFerrin dressed up standards such as 'The Wizard Of Oz', 'Feelings' and 'Misty'. The process continues on the LP *Simple Pleasures*, where McFerrin gives the treatment to favourite rock hits of the 60s. The jazzy leanings of the Beatles' 'Drive My Car' are brought to the surface, giving the song a new tilt, while Buddy Miles' 'Them



Changes' could have been written for acappella singing. But it's on Cream's 'Sunshine Of Your Love' that McFerrin really cuts loose. A virtuoso violinist (whose name escapes me) once said the ultimate aim of the player was to imitate the sound of the human voice. McFerrin reverses the process, capturing the essence of Eric Clapton's classic guitar solo, albeit he admits, with the aid of some engineering trickery. The high camp rendition of the Rascals' 'Good Lovin' required eight or nine overdubs.

Simple Pleasures was originally meant to be all cover versions but McFerrin changed his mind in the studio and added some of his own compositions. They turned out to be the easiest to record.

"'Good Lovin' and 'Sunshine Of Your Love' gave me some incredible problems to overcome, also 'Suzie Q'. Those three tunes I had to re-do over and over again. There were just some things I couldn't get right. If I'd had an arrangement for a band we probably could have done it in two or three takes. They were very difficult to do vocally. On the other hand, songs like 'Simple Pleasures' or 'Come To Me' only took a couple of takes. They might have been a little difficult for a band to do ... not that they're difficult musically, but just the kind of feel and attitude I was looking to convey."

McFerrin describes himself as an "upbeat kind of guy," and it's that sort of spirit which *Simple Pleasures* conveys. There's a refreshing sense of optimism that directly reflects its maker's outlook, although McFerrin himself was somewhat surprised by its success. It took consistently enthusiastic feedback from friends to convince him that he had a hit on his hands, even though he's certain that it's the best thing he's done to date.

"The others that I've done I've liked, but not as much as this one. I think that kind of spirit that went into the record comes across on vinyl, because I was having so much fun with it. There's a light, infectious atmosphere throughout the record."

Be that as it may, it looks as though

Simple Pleasures is a one-off effort. "There are lots of other songs I'd like to cover, but I'm not going to do any more covers for a long time. I'm more intent on working on my own original versions, producing those on my next record. I think I'm going to stick pretty much with that. My next record will have all-original material."

McFerrin has been dubbed many things, from "a living beatbox" to a rhythmic one-man orchestra. "While he accepts such labels, he bristles at the suggestion that he's an imitator of sounds."

"I don't try to imitate instruments at all. There are a couple of examples where instruments become characters, like the guitar sound on 'Sunshine Of Your Love.' I discovered that sound in the studio as I was singing, with the help of the engineer, but there was never any conscious effort on my part to reproduce instruments."

"I have my limitations. I have close to a four-octave range, I can't sing any lower or higher. I've been accused of being able to make any sound I want, which is not true. There are lots of things I can't do. I guess I give the illusion that I can do so many things. I'm aware of my own 'vocal pallet', I'm aware of the 'rainbow sound,' what the voice is capable of doing. But I think it's all exaggerated. There are many things that haven't worked, and I fail more times than I succeed. But it's all part of the process, it's my way of getting things to work for me."

McFerrin recently completed a 35-city tour, promoting *Simple Pleasures*, and has now decided it's time to sample some himself. He's called a halt to live performances, to spend some more time on new projects, and with wife Debbie and sons Taylor and Jevon.

"It's a tremendous strain, being on stage. All the agility and effort that goes into it is really taxing, so is the travelling. I've been off the road now for a couple of months, and I feel healthier now than I probably have in the last three years. I feel great, just sitting around my house and sleeping late. So I just plan to stay home and write for the next couple of years, write choral music, get together a choral group of about eight to 12 voices, work with that for a while, before I do solo work again."

Time is almost up, but there's still one burning question to be answered. Fans of the TV series *WKRP* may remember when newsmen Les Nesman created the impression of reporting from the non-existent *WKRP* news helicopter by thumping rapidly on his chest while talking. He finally had to abandon the practice on medical grounds. Does the old thorax ever get sore, Bobby?

"Only when I'm wearing my spiked gloves."

Here's a little song I wrote,
You can sing it note for note,
Don't worry ... be happy ...

Duncan Campbell

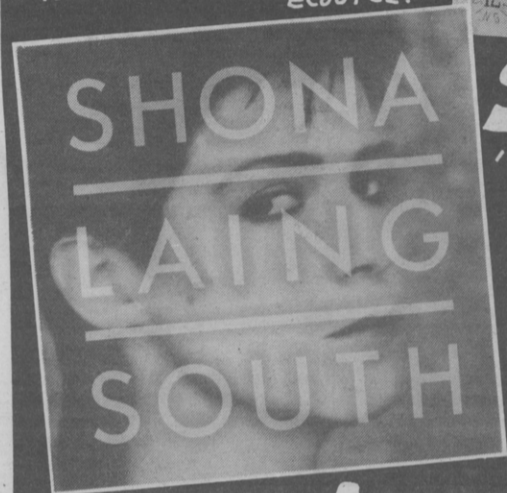
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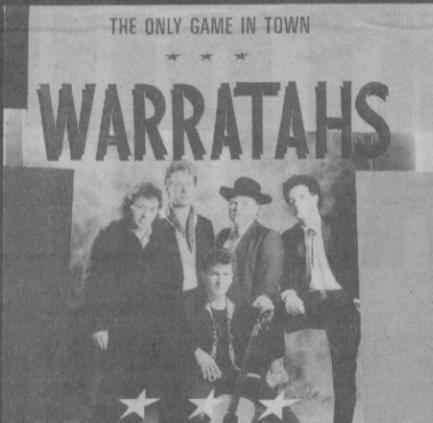
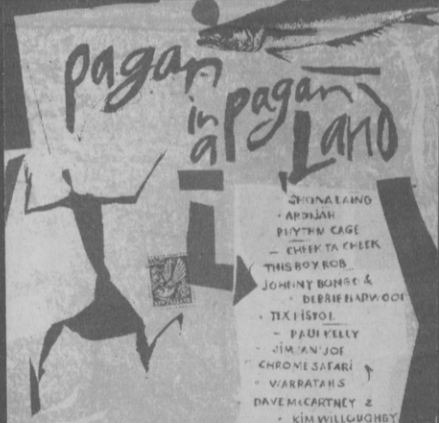


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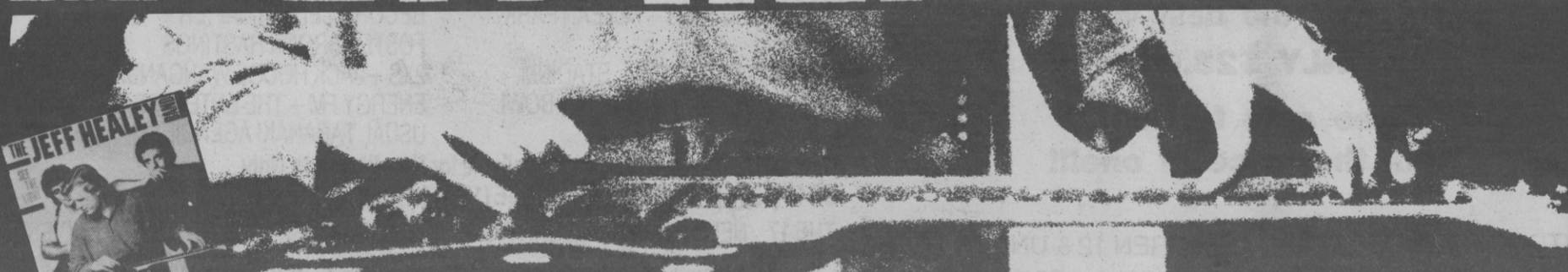


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