



Wednesday, April 5, 2015, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

An Evening with Bruce Hornsby



Bruce Hornsby's new live album, Solo Concerts, will be included with the purchase of each ticket. The CD can be picked up in the lobby.

Tonight's program will be announced from the stage.

Cal Performances' 2014–2015 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

BRUCE HORNSBY's work displays a creative iconoclasm that has been a constant in the artist's two-and-a-half decade recording career. His commercial stock soared early on, when "The Way It Is"—the title track of his 1986 debut album—became one of the most popular songs on American radio. Despite his early mainstream successes, Mr. Hornsby has pursued a more personal, idiosyncratic musical path, focusing on projects that sparked his creative interest, including collaborations with the Grateful Dead, Spike Lee, Ricky Skaggs, Don Henley, Ornette Coleman, Bob Dylan, Bela Fleck, Bonnie Raitt, Pat Metheny, and Robbie Robertson. Mr. Hornsby's performance will offer a glimpse of a restless spirit who continues to push forward into exciting new musical terrain.

A decade after Mr. Hornsby established his global name as the creator of pop hits that defined "the sound of grace on the radio," as a *Rolling Stone* reviewer once wrote, the Virginia-born pianist, composer, and singer-songwriter found himself compelled by two ostensibly separate areas of music. "One passion of mine was old-time American roots forms—hymns, blues, country, bluegrass, old folk, shape-note religious songs, on and on," Mr. Hornsby says.

That tracked with an artist who from the beginning of his career played accordion and fronted a band featuring fiddles, banjos, and dulcimers. The other area—modern classical music—did not. Yet the cranky dissonance and expressive chromatics of 20th-century twelve-tone inventors like the Austrian composers Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, as well as the work of an American modernist like Elliott Carter, a Hungarian like György Ligeti, or a French mystic like Olivier Messiaen, ultimately fed Mr. Hornsby's sense of raw challenge.

He was turning 40. He was wondering whether he'd stay gracefully put as an artist—or not. "It's generally about a pattern in the left hand," Mr. Hornsby says of what he champions as "two-handed independence." The phrase describes an elevated sonic state in

piano performance where one hand doesn't just accompany a melody played by the other but rather, as in boogie-woogie, simultaneously achieves a parallel compositional and musical life and vitality of its own.

"It's this situation where you're playing that pattern but you've developed your brain-splitting expertise to the point where you can play very free rhythmically. I'd always admired Keith Jarrett's hand independence on the early records he made. He had the independence of a drummer. 'Oh, my God,' I'd think, 'how can I do that?' Before, I'd never wanted to deal with that area of piano; it was always a door I would open then close right back up again—because I knew it was a deep area that involved untold amounts of practice." But, just into his fourth decade, Mr. Hornsby went for it. Staying put proved no option.

Solo Concerts, an emotional musical merger of American history and European daring, is a two-disc demonstration of all this and more in which the various elements of Mr. Hornsby's songwriting and instrumental styles align in highly personal ways. The album's 21 tracks are culled from Mr. Hornsby solo concerts performed in the United States during 2012 and 2013; together, they fuse a wide variety of what Mr. Hornsby considers different "information" from musical languages often thought to be opposed: U.S. roots music, folk-pop, film composing, and modern classical. Much of the work on the album involves what Mr. Hornsby calls an "unholy alliance" of comforting Americana and daunting composition. The result, however, sounds effortlessly like one tremendously ambitious, and equally capable, piece.

"I think I've found a middle ground," Mr. Hornsby says. "I think it's very easy to be straight down the middle, to write and play the very straight, simple music. I think it's also easy to be completely out there, very obtuse and obscure, saying oh, they don't understand. For me, the difficult thing is to find a middle ground where you're reaching and broadening your language but still connecting with someone perhaps used to hearing—for an entire

lifetime—only those seven white notes and those simple chords.”

Here is Mr. Hornsby on the album’s opening tracks, which provides an idea of how *Solo Concerts* proceeds as a whole: “For years people asked me to describe my style. I came up with this facile, quick way of doing it, just to have an answer for them, and it was Bill Evans Meets the Hymnal,” he says, citing the renowned U.S. jazz pianist famous for his impressionistic range. “‘Song E (Hymn in E-flat),’ which opens the record, really is a perfect example of that: It’s from a Spike Lee score I wrote a couple of years ago. And then the second track, which isn’t an instrumental but a song, is ‘Preacher in the Ring.’ It’s a boogie tune, an old pattern I was shown by a longtime cohort of mine. So I wrote a song based on that pattern, which illustrates two-handed independence very well.

“But there’s this other language on top—the Webern second variation from his three-movement *Variations* for piano. And the in the end I work in an excerpt from the late Carter piece I play, *Caténaires*. I think it goes with the content of the lyrics: When you’re singing about a snake-handling congregation, that’s a very strange area, a strange part of American religious life, really out on the fringes. An electric guitar player, I guess, would make it a little more angry and overdriven and distorted. For me, this modern piano music is my way of doing it.”

Mr. Hornsby recognizes that modern classical’s often atonal language—which rocked the classical music world in the middle of the 20th century as decisively as punk shook up

pop music in the late 1970s—is not always easy for listeners. “My wife,” he laughs, “can’t stand *Caténaires*.” So *Solo Concerts* weaves in songs like “Invisible,” a searingly melodic folk-pop plaint, and “Continents Drift,” a performance that taps Mr. Hornsby’s vintage Moog Piano Bar to give silvery cinematic balladry fine modernist edges, as well as a breath-stopping minor-key version of “Mandolin Rain.” “My standard line,” Mr. Hornsby says of his solo concerts, “is: I’m not the vehicle for your nostalgic night out. But I will be kind.”

Still, the album teems with Mr. Hornsby’s sensuously engaged yet clear-headed playing of passages from Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto, Messiaen’s *La grive musicienne*, Ligeti’s Étude No. 5, and more. Sometimes the “information” these pieces offer turns up in different new ways in Mr. Hornsby’s own songwriting, as in “Paperboy,” “Where No One’s Mad,” “Life in the Psychotropics,” and “Might as Well Be Me,” whose lyric is by Robert Hunter, Jerry Garcia’s noted lyricist-collaborator in the Grateful Dead, which whom Mr. Hornsby toured for two years.

The pop world, Mr. Hornsby knows, obsesses over virtuosity less than style or chart positions or sales figures. But his sane view is: Why shouldn’t it be part of the mix? “There’s often a bias in the rock or pop world against virtuosity. I understand that mindset: expression over virtuosity. But my feeling is, why not both? This is not clinical, what I do. This is really emotional. It’s what I call the pursuit of the unattainable.”