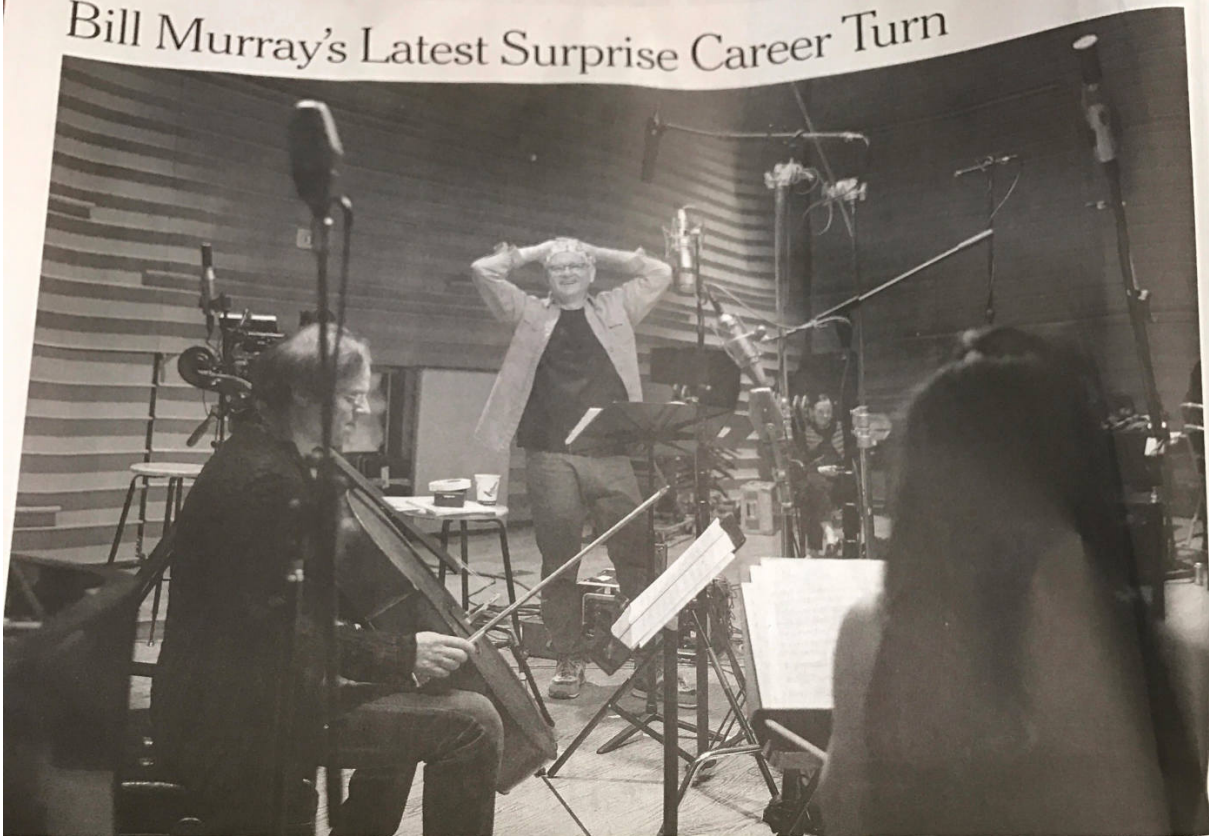


# Bill Murray's Latest Surprise Career Turn



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

project blends Gershwin, chamber music and literary readings, fruits of a friendship with the cellist Jan Vogler.

By BEN SISARIO

Watch this.  
Bill Murray stepped back from the microphone and closed his eyes in bliss, as his pianist and violinist began a bluesy melody. When he began singing, in a brassy growl, it *aaaaain't* necessarily so....

Yes, it was that Bill Murray, the actor and comedian. And yes, he was singing Gershwin with classical accompanists, as part of a rehearsal and recording session in a Manhattan studio last week for his latest unexpected project: "New Worlds," a program of songs and literary readings paired with chamber music led by the cellist Jan Vogler.

Mr. Murray, 66, may always be recognized by his fans as one of the world's greatest comedians. But for nearly two decades, he has been breaking down every expectation of the career path of a Hollywood comedy star, playing moody and haunted characters in films like "Lost in Translation" and "Broken Flowers," indulging his love of poetry and thrilling fans with unexpected encounters.

With "New Worlds," Mr. Murray is pushing further into surprise territory. The program has him singing Stephen Foster's

"Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair" and songs from "West Side Story" and reading Whitman and Hemingway while Mr. Vogler's trio — which includes Mira Wang, his wife, on violin, and Vanessa Perez at the piano — plays Schubert, Bach and Piazzolla. It will have its United States premiere at Festival Napa Valley in California on July 20, followed by a North American tour that will come to Carnegie Hall on Oct. 16.

In an interview after the rehearsal, Mr. Murray described the group's interaction in a way that sounded more Yoda than Dr. Peter Venkman, his wisecracking character in "Ghostbusters."

"When they start playing," he said, "the demand is so great that if you are attending to who you are right now, it brings out something that you couldn't have visualized or planned for. You hear all those other voices saying, 'That didn't sound like Tony Bennett,' or, 'That B flat's not going to break a light bulb.' But they're receding. They're gone."

The project had its origins in early 2013, when the two men sat across from each other on a flight from Berlin to New York. They struck up a friendship, mingled in each other's creative circles, and two years ago Mr. Murray invited Mr. Vogler to Poets House's annual poetry walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. Soon after, they began developing the idea for their project, which is being billed as Bill Murray, Jan Vogler & Friends.

"I still remember those days at your house, sitting around the fireplace with a pile of books and some good music," said Mr. Vogler, 53, looking at Mr. Murray with a boyish smile.

At the session last week, Mr. Murray wore a loose-fitting salmon shirt and a white and black bandanna, and complimented his colleagues by saying that one passage "makes me laugh." At one point, Sofia Coppola wandered in (of course), hugged Mr. Murray and then pulled out her phone to shoot some video of him singing Van Morrison.

Later, Ms. Coppola — who directed Mr. Murray in "Lost in Translation" and his most recent film-musical outing, the 2015 Netflix special "A Very Murray Christmas" — said that Mr. Murray had told her only that he was working on "a music show."

"This is very unexpected," she said, "but because it's Bill, I'm not surprised. He is always surprising. That's what's fun about him."

A classical show with a Hollywood star might naturally draw some skepticism from conservative audiences. But Mr. Vogler, who has played with major orchestras like the New York Philharmonic, lends the project credibility, and Sonia Tolbert, the general manager of Festival Napa Valley, said that since the event was booked and advertised, "Nobody sees it as a stunt of any kind." (The festival did, however, move it to a larger theater to accommodate ticket de-

mand, she added.) Mr. Murray also recently made a vocal appearance on Paul Shaffer's latest album, singing an upbeat song called "Happy Street."

The "New Worlds" recording, planned for release in August, is intended as a memento of the shows.

"I always see it as like, singer-songwriters have a bunch of discs in the trunk of the car," Mr. Murray said. "But I guess this is what they do in the classical racket, too."

With an ensemble that includes members born in the United States, China, East Germany and Argentina, "New Worlds" will explore themes of American history and identity. One setting has Mr. Murray reading a painful passage from "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" as the group plays "Moon River." Mr. Vogler said he first countered the classics of American literature through his father's library in Berlin.

"I grew up with Mark Twain, and we the complete Hemingway at home," he said, "of course in German translation."

Mr. Murray described the idea as collision of America and Europe, in part reflected in the backgrounds of each of four members of his new group.

"We are from four different continents," he said. "And when the continents come together, the music moves right across peninsulas from one to the other. It's a short journey from one continent to another."

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BILL MURRAY ON HIS "NEW WORLDS" PROJECT

APR 20 2017

(IMAGE 1 OF 2)

IMPRESSIONS:

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“ Courtesy of FGPR

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