Tony Bennett (1926–2023): An artist who combined jazz and the American Songbook to elevate popular culture

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Monday, August 3 was the centenary of the birth of Tony Bennett, the great interpreter of the American Songbook and jazz classics. We are reposting here an obituary of Bennett that was originally published on July 24, 2023.

The death on Friday of Tony Bennett, the consummate exponent of what is known as the "American Songbook," has triggered tributes by artists, singers and colleagues from all over the world. One senses in the statements of affection, admiration and grief from singers and musicians who worked with Bennett or simply enjoyed his decades-long output a genuineness and honesty that were hallmarks of the man himself.

Bennett's death, less than two weeks from his 97th birthday, was confirmed to the Associated Press by his publicist Sylvia Weiner. No specific cause of death was given, although the singer had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2016.

Alongside an Instagram photo of the two men performing together onstage Billy Joel wrote, "[He] was a unique voice that made the transition from the era of Jazz into the age of Pop. I will always be grateful for his outstanding contribution to the art of contemporary music."

Saying Bennett "was a joy to work with," Joel added, "His energy and enthusiasm for the material he was performing was infectious. He was also one of the nicest human beings I've ever known."

Michael Bublé wrote:

> Tony Bennett is one of the greatest vocalists, storytellers and interpreters of all time. To say he was an important part of who I became is an understatement. My grandpa was constantly playing Tony Bennett records when I was growing up, and it was the honor of a lifetime to learn from him. Having my hero take me under his wing was one of the greatest moments of my life… Tony, I'll never stop learning from you, and I promise you I'll do my best to keep the music we cherish alive.

Singer, author and American Songbook archivist Michael Feinstein told Budd Mishkin on 1010 WINS AM Radio in New York City:

> Tony was a person who lived and breathed the music and lyrics he performed. He went very deep into the meaning of a song and he worked hard on bringing the truth and passion out of his music, and that is the thing that sustained him for so long. A fundamental truthfulness and reverence for this material, because he knew it was timeless.

Country music star Keith Urban said: "Just heard about the great Tony Bennett passing. What a legacy of not only superb timeless music, but a class act study in cool, grace and elegance."

In the course of a career that spanned more than 70 years, Bennett entertained and moved millions of people in the US and around the world, spanning multiple generations, with his powerful yet sensitive voice (he called himself a tenor who sang like a baritone) and his meticulous attention to the meaning of the lyrics to which he gave voice.

In February 2021, Bennett's family, which includes his wife Susan, daughters Johanna and Antonia, sons Danny and Dae and nine grandchildren, revealed that Bennett was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Despite this handicap, Bennett continued to perform, making his final appearances on August 3 and 5, 2021, at Radio City Music Hall, together with Lady Gaga.

An astounding body of work

Bennett's output, quantitatively and, more importantly, qualitatively, was astounding. He released more than 100 albums (61 studio albums, 11 live albums, 33 compilation albums, three video albums) and 83 singles. He won 19 Grammy Awards (17 of which came after 1990, when he was well into his 60s) and received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

In 2014, at age 88, Bennett broke his own record as the oldest living performer with a number one album on the Billboard 200 chart for *Cheek to Cheek*, his album with Lady Gaga. Three years earlier, he topped the charts with *Duets II*, featuring such contemporary stars as Gaga, Carrie Underwood and Amy Winehouse, in the latter's last studio recording.

Bennett won his first Grammy in 1962 for "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," which became his signature song. Bing Crosby once called him "the best singer I ever heard." In 1965, Frank Sinatra told *Life* magazine, "For my money, Tony Bennett is the best singer in the business. He excites me when I watch him. He moves me. He's the singer who gets across what the composer has in mind, and probably a little more."

Bennett did not consider himself a "pop" vocalist. He preferred to be called a "jazz interpreter of the American Songbook." And throughout his career he did seek to bridge the gap between the two genres, recording, beginning in the 1950s, with many jazz greats, including Art Blakey, Nat Adderly, Dave Brubeck, the Count Basie Band, Stan Getz, Phil Woods, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Elvin Jones, Wynton Marsalis and Bill Evans. He toured and recorded with small ensembles including pianists

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Bill Charlap and Ralph Sharon. The latter for many years was his music director.

During the low point of his career from a commercial standpoint, in the 1970s, Bennett made two albums with the great jazz pianist Bill Evans. They were not commercially successful, but Bennett considered them his finest recorded work.

Later, Bennett made a series of duet albums with a wide range of rock, country, pop and blues artists, particularly during the post-1970s phase of his career, when he gained a new surge in popularity and new generations of fans following his "MTV Unplugged" album of 1994 (at age 67). His duet albums included (besides Lady Gaga and Amy Winehouse) tracks with Barbra Streisand, Celine Dion, Diana Krall, K.D. Lang, Christina Aguilera, Aretha Franklin, Queen Latifah, Elvis Costello, B.B. King, Willie Nelson, Bono, Paul McCartney, Billy Joel, Stevie Wonder and Elton John.

In an industry increasingly dominated by huge corporations run by billionaire investors and bureaucrats, and a systematic effort by the ruling class to pollute popular culture and consciousness with backwardness and mediocrity, Bennett remained true to his standards. And his vast audience, including new generations of young people who first heard him in the 1990s, demonstrated that there was a real hunger in the population for music and lyrics of quality, artistry and honesty, in contrast to the "gangster rap," synthetic show tunes and banal "hits" by celebrity performers pumped out by the entertainment moguls.

Depression, World War II, Dachau, Racism

Bennett's commitment to popular music of quality and lasting value, and his sense of responsibility for bringing such music to the public, were bound up with his working class roots, his experiences growing up poor in Depression-blighted New York City, and the mass murder and racism he encountered as a soldier in World War II. Serving in Germany in the infantry at the end of the Battle of the Bulge and the first months of the US occupation, he was among the troops who liberated the prisoners at the Landsberg concentration camp, a subcamp of Dachau.

Bennett later described his wartime experience as "a front-row seat in hell" and "a nightmare that's permanent." He told an interviewer, "The main thing I got out of the military experience was the realization that I am completely opposed to war." He remained a vocal opponent of war for the rest of his life.

He also became a lifelong and active supporter of civil rights and opponent of racism, antisemitism and all forms of discrimination. In his 1998 autobiography *The Good Life*, Bennett described another life-changing experience he had while serving in US-occupied Germany after the war.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1945, in Mannheim, Bennett unexpectedly bumped into a fellow Army soldier whom he knew from his high school days in New York. Delighted to meet up with an old friend, the young Anthony Benedetto (Bennett's birth name) invited Frank Smith, with whom he had sung in a quartet at the School of Industrial Art in Manhattan three years earlier, to a holiday dinner at the Army mess.

However, Smith was black, and in the segregated US military, fraternization between the races at military functions was strictly forbidden. At the entrance to the building, an irate officer denounced the two soldiers.

Bennett wrote in his autobiography: "This officer took out a razor blade and cut my corporal stripes off my uniform right then and there. He spit on them and threw them on the floor, and said, 'Get your ass out of here!'"

Bennett was transferred from Special Services to Graves Registration, where he dug up the bodies of American soldiers killed in combat for reburial in military cemeteries. The experience "was just as bad as it sounds," he recalled.

Rabid racism was the rule, not the exception. In *The Good Life*, Bennett wrote:

> Our sergeant was an old-fashioned southern bigot, and he had it in for me right from the start because I was an Italian from New York City. I wasn't the only one who experienced prejudice—it was just as bad for other ethnic groups, especially the Blacks and Jews.

1965 Selma to Montgomery march

In 1965, at the invitation of singer and actor Harry Belafonte, Bennett marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in one of the Selma to Montgomery marches against Jim Crow segregation.

When the marchers reached Montgomery on March 24, they held a "Stars for Freedom" rally that night and Bennett performed the show tune "Just In Time." At the conclusion of the march, Viola Liuzzo, a volunteer from Detroit, drove Bennett to the airport. While driving her car later that day she was shot dead by members of the Ku Klux Klan, one of whom was an FBI informant.

In *The Good Life*, Bennett wrote of the Selma march:

> I kept flashing back to a time twenty years ago when my buddies and I fought our way into Germany. It felt the same way down in Selma: the white state troopers were really hostile, and they were not shy about showing it.

Anthony Dominick Benedetto was born on August 3, 1926, in the working class neighborhood of Astoria, part of the borough of Queens. His father Giovanni, who had emigrated to the US from Podargoni, Italy, and worked as a grocer in Manhattan, died at the age of 41, when Anthony was 10. His mother Anna was born in the US soon after her parents arrived from Calabria. She worked as a seamstress to keep the family, including Tony's sister Mary and brother John Jr., housed, clothed and fed.

Giovanni sang with the family on Sundays, and his son Anthony grew up singing songs by Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and others. The young Anthony took to painting and initially planned to pursue a career as a commercial artist. However, at 13 he landed a job as a singing waiter and thereafter shifted to pursuing a career as a singer and entertainer.

An accomplished painter

Bennett retained a life-long passion for painting and was accomplished at it. When he went on tour, he traveled with his brushes and paint tubes and often stayed at private homes with good lighting and interesting views, rather than at hotels. When home at his Manhattan apartment overlooking Central Park, he routinely spent the day painting, often from his favorite bench in the park, before performing at night.

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Bennett's portrait of Duke Ellington hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. A Bennett painting of New York's Central Park hangs in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and his portrait of Ella Fitzgerald is displayed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

When he returned from the war to the US, he studied bel canto singing at the American Theater Wing in New York on a stipend provided by the GI Bill. He sang professionally at cafés and bars around the city under the name Joe Bari. In 1949, he was spotted by Pearl Bailey while auditioning for a club gig. Bailey added him to her performance team, where Bob Hope saw him perform and added him to his own act. Hope disliked the singer's stage name and insisted on a shorter and more American-sounding version of his actual family name, coming up with Bennett.

The producer Mitch Miller signed Bennett to Columbia Records in 1950. Bennett's first major hit, "Because of You," was released in 1951. Miller was known for pumping out hits by having his singers do novelty songs or cover versions of hits by others. Bennett resisted doing such low-grade material and had a contentious relationship with Miller.

After "I Left My Heart In San Francisco," Bennett released a series of classic songs in the mid- and late 1960s, including "The Good Life" (originally "La Belle Vie"), Johnny Mercer's "I Wanna Be Around," and Gordon Jenkins' "This Is All I Ask." But his relationship with Columbia Records soured after rock producer Clive Davis took over as president in 1967. Davis demanded that Bennett turn away from show tunes and standards and do covers of hits by the Beatles and other rock performers.

Bennett relented and in 1969 released "Tony Sings the Great Hits of Today!" which was a commercial flop and which, Bennett said later, made him physically ill. Disgusted and determined not to abandon the music he loved and respected, Bennett left Columbia in 1972. He formed his own label, Improv, and continued to seek out new material with interesting and honest lyrics and infuse his singing with jazz elements. But he was unable to get distribution and his career sank. Forced to work in Las Vegas to make a living, he developed a drug habit, underwent two divorces and found himself heavily in debt to the IRS.

In 1979, after losing consciousness in his bath tub, he called his son Danny in a plea for help. Danny took over Bennett's business affairs and became his manager, deftly charting a path to a younger audience while remaining true to his father's passion for popular music of the highest quality. Meanwhile, Tony overcame his drug habit, cleared up his debts and entered a new stage in his career.

In a profile published in the *New Yorker* magazine in the 1970s, Bennett deplored the "money boys, the Broadway wise guys" and "this obsolescence thing in America, where cars are made to break down and songs written to last two weeks."

"A quick buck market"

He continued: "Today, it's a quick buck market—almost like a no-art period. You turn the radio on, and it absolutely blasts you out—two or three chords. You can't believe it. I mean, next to a good Billie Holiday song, it's a joke."

In his autobiography *The Good Life*, he wrote: "I wanted to sing the great songs, songs that I felt really mattered to people."

And that he did! He also sought in some measure to reverse the official assault on art and music education carried out by the American ruling class over the past half-century. In 2001, he and his wife Susan helped start the Frank Sinatra School for the Arts in Astoria, Queens. He frequently visited the school and spoke to the students. He also staged performances there by himself as well as with others, including Paul McCartney and Billy Joel. In 2014, he performed at the school along with Lady Gaga and spoke to the students about music and creativity.

Last Friday, following the announcement of Bennett's death, the *New York Times* published an interview with a young woman, Michele, who graduated from the school in 2012. She told the *Times*, "He didn't feel like a celebrity," adding that she "got the impression that having students be exposed and have access to art" meant a great deal to him.

Bennett was a man of great talent, culture, principle and humanity. He was a genuine "democrat." He was, of course, a wealthy man when he died, but he was not driven by the pursuit of money. One commentator who spent time with Bennett noted that he never owned a car or a residence.

Tony Bennett, in a word, was the real thing.

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