

Tony Bennett, best friend of the Great American Songbook

Anthony Dominick Benedetto (born 1926), known professionally as **Tony Bennett**, is an American singer of traditional pop standards, big band, show tunes, and jazz. He is also a painter, having created works under his real name, Anthony Benedetto, that are on permanent public display in several institutions.

Born and raised in Astoria, New York, to an Italian-American family, Bennett began singing at an early age. He fought in the final stages of World War II as a U.S. Army infantryman in the European Theater. Afterward, he developed his singing technique, signed with Columbia Records and had his first number one popular song with “Because of You,” in 1951. Several top hits such as “Rags to Riches” followed in the early 1950s. He then refined his approach to encompass jazz singing. He reached an artistic peak in the late 1950s with albums such as *The Beat of My Heart* and *Basie Swings, Bennett Sings*. In 1962, Bennett recorded his signature song, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” His career and his personal life experienced an extended downturn during the height of the rock music era.

Bennett staged a comeback in the late 1980s and 1990s, putting out gold record albums again and expanding his reach to the MTV Generation while keeping his musical style intact. He remains a popular and critically praised recording artist and concert performer in the 2010s. He has won nineteen Grammy Awards (including a Lifetime Achievement Award, presented in 2001) and two Emmy Awards, and was named an NEA Jazz Master and a Kennedy Center Honoree. Bennett has sold over fifty million records worldwide.

He attended New York’s School of Industrial Art where he studied painting and music and would later appreciate their emphasis on proper technique. But he dropped out at age sixteen to help support his family. He worked as a copy boy and runner for the *Associated Press* in Manhattan, and in several other low-skilled, low-paying jobs.

Benedetto was drafted into the United States Army in November 1944, during the final stages of World War II. Processed through the huge Le Havre replacement depot, in January 1945, he was assigned as a replacement infantryman to the 255th Infantry Regiment of the 63rd Infantry Division, a unit filling in for the heavy losses suffered in the Battle of the Bulge. He moved across France, and later, into Germany. As March 1945 began, he joined the front line and what he would later describe as a “front-row seat in hell.”

Upon his discharge from the Army and return to the States in 1946, Benedetto studied at the American Theatre Wing on the GI Bill.

In 1949, Pearl Bailey recognized Benedetto’s talent and asked him to open for her in Greenwich Village. She had invited Bob Hope to the show. Hope decided to take Benedetto on the road with him, and simplified his name to Tony Bennett. In 1950, Bennett cut a demo of “Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” and was signed to the major Columbia Records label by Mitch Miller.

In 1962, Bennett released his recording of “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” a decade-old but little-known song originally written for an opera singer. Although this reached only number nineteen on the Billboard Hot 100, it spent close to a year on various other charts and increased Bennett’s exposure.

The next decade brought the British Invasion, and with them still more musical attention to rock and less to pop, standards, and jazz. Bennett’s musical fortunes were clearly starting to decline.

The decades of the 1980s saw a reversal of Tony’s decline with his son becoming manager of the “business.” He was booked on television with a younger and “hip” audiences. Bennett played a series of benefit concerts organized by alternative rock radio stations around the country and the plan worked: Tony said, “I realized that young people had never heard those songs of Cole Porter, Gershwin, and the like.”

Today, Tony Bennett is still going strong entering his 90s. Currently at age 91, Bennett has also found success as a painter, done under his real name of Anthony Benedetto. He has exhibited his work in numerous galleries around the world. ■ (Article Source: Wikipedia)



Tony Bennett, 2013.

PHOTO BY PETER CHAPPER/WIKIPEDIA



Senior Moments Book Review



Tony Bennett: *Life Is a Gift*

In front of a canvas or audience, Tony is loving it all.

BY BRUCE MENZIES

About halfway through his memoir, *Life Is a Gift*, Tony Bennett presents us readers with a word of wisdom: “If you want to learn something, go to someone older than you, because they’ve lived longer.”

This suggests all of us ninety-one years and younger ought to pay attention to the writer, who after so many years in show business, just might know a thing or two about life.

These days, Tony Bennett is in the midst of activity that could tucker out entertainers half his age. How does he do it? By staying centered on what the great pianist Bill Evans told him before his passing: “Think truth and beauty. Truth and beauty.” Today, Bennett says what he does always leans towards truth and beauty.

So, when you’ve been as successful as Tony Bennett, you acquire some wisdom along the way. He has sold millions of records, won countless awards, and earned the respect of his peers. His book implies his secret to success is sticking to his core beliefs: love of family, passion for what he does, and a pursuit of excellence in all he puts his hand (or voice) to. Each chapter of his book focuses on a different facet of his career and his take on life. Bennett doesn’t have much to say about artists who put profits before integrity. Instead of copying popular trends, Tony has recorded classic songs that stand over time and appeal to all audiences.

About quitting, Tony says this: “I have no desire whatsoever to retire; if I’m lucky, I just want to get better as I get older. Through the years, you shed the idea of competition and the desire to be the best; instead, you just want to get better for yourself. And if you do what you’re passionate about, the material things will come. I never need a vacation because I have a passion to sing and paint, and I get to do both every day. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve never worked a day in my life.”

At 270 pages, *Life Is a Gift* is an easy read. The book can be found in libraries or purchased from Amazon for .98 cents.

Tony Bennett, thanks for making the music of your life the music of my life. ■

(Image of *Life Is a Gift* courtesy of HarperCollinsPublishers)

