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CELEBRATING THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF TONY BENNETT

Over a seven decade career, he grew from a sentimental jazz artist to a cross-generational American treasure.



The legacy of Bennett lives on through his exceptional contributions to American popular music. Photo credit: Chester Higgins Jr.

On July 21st, 2023, the illustrious Tony Bennett passed away in Manhattan at the age of 96. His publicist Sylvia Weiner confirmed his death to the Associated Press, giving no specific cause. Though he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease almost a decade ago, Bennett continued to weave his talents into the fabric of the music industry up until 2021. As a true savant of the arts, the jazz and pop singer leaves behind a rich legacy of notable accolades and world-renowned tracks to carry on his name. During a career that spanned roughly seventy years, Bennett dedicated himself to the mastery of his vocal craft, legendary collaborations, and an array of philanthropic pursuits.

"Music can take you places that words alone can't," Bennett liked to say, and he knew how to guide his listeners on a journey to far off places through vocals alone. He projected in a way that demands your full attention, decorates your arms with goosebumps, then wraps you up in a warm hug right after. Strong, inspiring, resonant, invigorating, and almost otherworldly. His voice is a glass of lush, full-bodied, velvety red that leaves you longing for another taste.

Mr. Bennett was humble, charming, graceful, fun, adaptable, accomplished, and kind. His actions expressed exemplary character. Jazz composer and bandleader Duke Ellington once wrote that Bennett "is the most unselfish performing artist today. He gives credit to everybody with him, including the fourth triangle player." Bennett was the people's artist: "when you sing, you are not just singing for yourself, you are singing for everyone," he stated.

Born on August 3rd, 1926 during the peak of the Jazz Age, Tony Bennett, otherwise known as Anthony Dominick Benedetto, grew up in the neighborhood of Astoria,

Queens. He spent his formative years in a loving Italian-American home with his mother, Anna, and two siblings, John Jr. and Mary. His father John Sr. died when he was 10. "The family story was that he used to sing on the top of a mountain [in Calabria] and the whole valley would hear him," Bennett revealed of his dad. Music wasn't just a learned talent for the famed singer—from the moment he was born, it coursed through his veins, waiting to be released.

Anna ensured that their household often buzzed with the lively presence of visitors—in particular, their extended family. These relatives played a vital role in the cultivation of Bennett's two main passions in life: music and painting. "Every Sunday, all my aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews would invade our house. They all said, 'We love the way you sing' and, 'We love the way you paint flowers.' I remember very clearly saying to myself, 'This is who I am,'" reminisced Bennett in an interview for *JazzTimes*.

As a teenager at Manhattan's High School of Industrial Arts, Bennett's adoration of creative expression took off. It was there that his passions were free to grow, mold, bend, and twist in the name of self discovery. He enjoyed listening to the radio, as many folks of his era did. His love of music cemented itself while hearing the captivating talent of influential artists such as Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong glide over the sound waves. In 1936, his talents earned him the honor of performing at the opening of the Triborough Bridge. Bennett's singing carried him through waiting tables as a teen, and he later performed with military bands in Europe after enlisting in the army during World War II.

Following his discharge from the army in 1946, Bennett entered the American Theatre Wing School under the GI Bill of Rights. There he learned many aspects of the arts, including the bel canto method of singing, which solidified the definition, expressivity, and technicality characteristic of his voice. That same year, he performed in a nightclub for the first time with trombonist Tyree Glenn. He recorded a handful of tracks under the stage name Joe Bari, but they were met with little success.

A pivotal moment in Bennett's career came in 1949, when he opened for actress and singer Pearl Bailey's revue in Greenwich Village. One evening, comedian Bob Hope came to the show and spoke with "Bari" before his set. Hope didn't find the alias "Joe Bari" to be suitable, and after discovering that Tony was really called Anthony Benedetto, he offered up a substitute: Tony Bennett, which eventually became solidified as a household name. Hope granted the newly titled singer a chance to perform with him at the historic Paramount Theatre. From then on, Bennett's career was set off on its rightful track.

In the early 1950s, Bennett signed with Columbia Records and made his first number-one song “Because of You,” which remained on the charts for 32 weeks. Under Columbia, he released a multitude of dazzling singles met with much success, including “Rags to Riches,” a sonic story of the wealth that love brings told through Bennett’s spunky, sonorous tone, as well as a remake of singer-songwriter Hank Williams’ “Cold, Cold Heart.” Bennett’s early discography offers no shortage of smashing tunes like “I Wanna Be Around,” “The Good Life,” and “Who Can I Turn To (When Nobody Needs Me).” He is one of the few artists to have created charting albums for every decade from the 1950s to present day.

Tony Bennett - I Left My Heart in San Francisco (from MTV ...



Over the course of his professional life, Bennett received a grand total of 19 Grammy Awards and 41 nominations. The first was a product of his 1962 Columbia single “(I Left My Heart) In San Francisco,” one of his most well regarded songs to date, which claimed its spot on the national charts for nearly nine months. In it Bennett yearns for the Golden City: “High on a hill, it calls to me / To be where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars.” The track earned him a sold-out gig at Carnegie Hall as the first male pop solo performer to grace the famous performance space with his entrancing vocals.

After he moved from Columbia to MGM Records in the early 1970s before forming his own record company Improv that same decade, Bennett’s delivery of acclaimed vocal gems remained ever so consistent. His son and manager Danny helped usher his father into the next phase of his career, defined by the admiration of younger listeners. By the mid-80s, Bennett had re-signed with Columbia and released *The Art of Excellence*, beloved for its intelligent production and timeless tracks graced with crystalline vocals. The album was his first to hit the charts in 14 years—audiences (and the market) were eager for more.

In an effort to capture a new generation of fans, Bennett released *MTV Unplugged*, which featured recordings of acoustic live performances from the hit 90s show of the same name. The album went on to become the 1995 record of the year and fulfilled his goal of ushering in a fresh wave of supporters. With millions of records sold worldwide and a multitude of platinum and gold albums to his name, Tony Bennett is nothing short of a global icon who has strategically drawn in followers across all age groups.

Bennett shined as a glimmering soloist, but when he sang alongside other artists, the results were pure magic. His 2006 release *Duets An American Classic* featured collaborations with Barbara Streisand, Elton John, Paul McCartney, and more distinguished figures in music. After the album resulted in three Grammy Awards and became one of his best selling records, Bennett went for another round with *Duets II* five years later. Gleaming duos with Amy Winehouse, Michael Bublé, Aretha Franklin, and others earned the album a spot at number one on the Billboard 200 (making Bennett the oldest artist to receive the honor).



Gaga and Bennett's collective musical genius is highly regarded. Photo credit: Frazer Harrison

One cannot speak of the marvel of Mr. Bennett without mentioning his friend and esteemed collaborator Lady Gaga. The pair debuted *Cheek to Cheek* in 2014, which soared to number one and broke his previous record as the oldest artist to rule the charts. Their relationship lasted until the end of Bennett's life. "He is my musical companion...[and] a remarkable human being. I love him very deeply," Gaga shared on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. The two released a second album, *Love For Sale*, in 2021.

Bennett has been named a Kennedy Center honoree, an NEA Jazz Master, and a Citizen of the World. Besides the constant allure of music, he pursued other artistic ambitions with fervor and delight. He wrote five books and starred in various films and television shows. His devotion to the creative arts manifested in his love of painting and sketching—activities that Bennett carried out daily for years. His contributions to the visual arts included a range of styles such as still life, landscapes, scenes, portraits, and

abstractions. Color in his works was often soft and muted, his shapes and lines delicate. Bennett's creations are featured in various museums, art institutes, and clubs, including three of his paintings which made it to the Smithsonian's permanent collections.

As a man often characterized by his capabilities, some may be led to believe that years of receiving intense adoration from fans would have the potential to go to Bennett's head. If anything, his heart only grew alongside his fame. He marched with Dr. King in the Selma-to-Montgomery Civil Rights movement, founded a non-profit, Exploring the Arts, and started the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts with his wife Susan Benedetto, which provides free tuition for inner city kids to receive artistic education and moral lessons aligned with Bennett's generosity. His humanitarian efforts extend far beyond the brief list provided, and each has left a distinct mark on the betterment of society at large.

As Mr. Bennett profoundly expressed, "life is a gift, and it offers us the privilege, opportunity, and responsibility to give something back by becoming more." He leaves behind his wife, four children—Danny, Antonia, Dae, and Joanna—and nine grandchildren.

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