

American MASTERS

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Tony Bennett Bio

AMERICAN MASTERS Tony Bennett: The Music Never Ends

Tony Bennett is an artist who moves the hearts and touches the souls of audiences. He's the singer's singer and has received high praise from his colleagues through the years, including Frank Sinatra, who stated unequivocally, "Tony Bennett is the best singer in the business." He is an international treasure who was honored by the United Nations with its Citizen of the World award, which aptly describes the scope of his accomplishments.

The son of a grocer and Italian-born immigrant, Anthony Dominick Benedetto was born on August 3, 1926, in the Astoria section of Queens. He attended the High School of Industrial Arts in Manhattan, where he nurtured his two passions – singing and painting. His boyhood idols included Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole, both big influences on Bennett's easy, natural singing style. Bennett sang while waiting tables as a teenager, then performed with military bands in the Army during World War II. He later had vocal studies at the American Theatre Wing school. The first time Bennett sang in a nightclub in 1946, he sat in with trombonist Tyree Glenn at the Shangri-La in Astoria.

Bennett's big break came in 1949 when comedian Bob Hope noticed him working with Pearl Bailey in Greenwich Village in New York City. As Bennett recalls, "Bob Hope came down to check out my act. He liked my singing so much that after the show he came back to see me in my dressing room and said, 'Come on kid, you're going to come to the Paramount and sing with me.' But first he told me he didn't care for my stage name (Joe Bari) and asked me what my real name was. I told him, 'My name is Anthony Dominick Benedetto,' and he said, 'We'll call you Tony Bennett.' And that's how it happened. A new Americanized name, the start of a wonderful career and a glorious adventure that has continued for 50 years."

With more than 50 million records sold worldwide and platinum and gold albums to his credit, Bennett has received 15 Grammy Awards, including the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. The MTV generation first took Bennett to heart during his appearance with the Red Hot Chili Peppers on the 1993 MTV Video Awards ceremony. He appeared on *MTV Unplugged* and the resulting recording of the same name garnered the singer Grammy's top award, Album of the Year. "Tony Bennett has not just bridged the generation gap," pointed out *The New York Times*, "he has demolished it. He has solidly connected with a younger crowd weaned on rock. And there have been no compromises." Bennett credits his son and manager, Danny, for his success in capturing a whole new generation of listeners.

His initial successes came via a string of Columbia singles in the early 1950s, including such chart-toppers as "Because of You," "Rags to Riches" and a remake of Hank Williams' "Cold, Cold Heart." He had 24 songs in the Top 40, including "I Wanna Be Around," "The Good Life," "Who Can I Turn To (When Nobody Needs Me)," and his signature song, "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," which

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garnered him two Grammy Awards. Bennett is one of a handful of artists to have new albums charting in the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, and beyond. He introduced a multitude of songs into the Great American Songbook that have since become standards for pop music. He has toured the world to sold-out audiences with rave reviews whenever he performs. Bennett re-signed with Columbia Records in 1986 and released the critically acclaimed *The Art of Excellence*. Since his 1991 show-stopping performance at the Grammy Awards of "When Do the Bells Ring for Me," from his *Astoria* album, he has received a string of Grammy Awards for releases, including *Steppin' Out*, *Perfectly Frank*, and *MTV Unplugged*. In celebration of his unparalleled contributions to popular music with worldwide record sales of over 30 million, Columbia/Legacy assembled *Forty Years: The Artistry of Tony Bennett*. The four-CD boxed set, released in 1991, chronicles the singer's stellar recording career and documents his growth as an artist, inspiring *Time* magazine to call the collection "... the essence of why CD boxed sets are a blessing."

Tony Bennett became a Kennedy Center Honoree in 2005, and in 2006 was named an NEA Jazz Master and recipient of *Billboard Magazine's* prestigious Century Award, in honor of his outstanding contributions to music.

Tony Bennett has also received an Emmy Award and a Cable Ace Award for his groundbreaking television special, *Live By Request...Tony Bennett*, which featured a unique interactive format in which the viewing audience called in song requests to the performer live during the program, a concept created by Bennett that has become a regular special on the A&E network. Bennett has also authored two books, *What My Heart Has Seen*, a bound edition of his paintings published in 1996, and *The Good Life*, his heartfelt autobiography released in 1998. He won another Grammy Award in 2006 for *The Art of Romance*.

Tony Bennett is a dedicated painter whose interest in art began as a child. He continues to paint every day, even while touring internationally. He has exhibited his work in galleries around the world and was chosen to be the official artist of the 2001 Kentucky Derby, creating two original paintings celebrating this historic event. The United Nations has commissioned him for two paintings, including one for its 50th anniversary. His original painting "Homage to Hockney" is on permanent display at the Butler Institute of American Art, while the landmark National Arts Club in New York is home to his painting, "Boy on Sailboat, Sydney Bay." Most recently his oil painting, entitled "Central Park," was accepted to the Smithsonian's American Art Museum's permanent collection in Washington, D.C.

Throughout his career, Bennett has always put his heart and time into humanitarian concerns. He has raised millions of dollars for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, which established a research fund in his name. His original paintings each year grace the cover of the American Cancer Society's annual holiday greeting card, proceeds from which are earmarked for cancer research. He is active in environmental concerns and has performed at fundraisers for both the Walden Woods Foundation and the Save the Rainforest Foundation. The Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta bestowed upon him its Salute to Greatness Award for his efforts to fight discrimination. He conceived and spearheaded the effort to honor his great friend with the establishment of the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, which opened its doors as a New York City public high school offering an extensive arts curriculum in September 2001.

In the 1950s, thousands of screaming bobby-soxers surrounded the Paramount Theatre in New York, held back only by police barricades, to see their singing idol Tony Bennett. Today, the children and grandchildren of those fans are enjoying the same experience. Perhaps what sums

up Bennett's legacy and longevity best was the observation *The New York Times* made in a review of *MTV Unplugged*. "What accounts for the Bennett magic? Artistry certainly. The repertory is indeed classic...But perhaps more important is his ability to convey a sense of joy, of utter satisfaction, in what he is doing."

Tony Bennett turned 80 on August 3, 2006, an event that generated a wide range of tributes and celebrations. In addition to the release of *Duets – An American Classic*, RPM Records/Columbia Records/Legacy Recordings is launching a monumental and definitive reissue project, *The Tony Bennett Master Series*. Executive produced by Tony Bennett and Danny Bennett, the first five releases in *The Tony Bennett Master Series* include expanded editions of three Grammy-winning titles – *I Left My Heart In San Francisco* (1962), *Perfectly Frank* (1992), and *MTV Unplugged* (1994) – as well as two brand-new 16-song collections: *Tony Bennett's Greatest Hits of the '50s* and *Tony Bennett's Greatest Hits of the '60s*.

Bennett was the subject of a major television special, *Tony Bennett: An American Classic*, which aired on NBC in November 2006. The special featured musical guests Elton John, Michael Bubl , John Legend, k.d. lang, Diana Krall, Christina Aguilera, Stevie Wonder, Barbra Streisand, Chris Botti, and Juanes. Segment hosts for the program included Robert De Niro, Bruce Willis, Billy Crystal, John Travolta, and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Notables from the worlds of music, stage, screen, and politics were on hand to help Bennett celebrate his 80th birthday at a star-studded party at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The evening included heartfelt tributes from Harry Belafonte, Bruce Willis, Katie Couric, and former President Bill Clinton.

As the world's most boyish octogenarian, a vital musical artist at the peak of his powers, Tony Bennett is living proof that fairy tales can indeed come true when you're young at heart.

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